Implementation of Group Endeavours in Service Learning among Teachers in Singapore

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Abstract: The current unstable social, political and economic climate of the world brings a wave of issues that can have adverse impact on Singapore's national development. Since the society is implicated in these issues, their voice must be taken into account when generating solutions. They are the ones who face the reality at the grassroots level and so, they are in a much better position to provide ideas for the solutions. This is the 'whole-society' approach in tackling societal issues. The main ingredient for this approach is strong community engagement as it enables the society to generate bottom-up solutions for resolving complex challenges. However, the recent National Youth Council's Survey 2014 revealed that the youths in Singapore are lacking in community engagement. Hence, education institutions should play a more active role in instilling the significance of community engagement among the youths. Interested education practitioners in Singapore can indeed look upon the vast research of service-learning done in other countries and institutions to elicit the benefits and best practices for the implementation of service-learning in Singapore. However, the contexts of these countries and institutions are different: what works for them may not work for service-learning in the Singapore context. This research was thus conducted to provide a more contextualised understanding of service-learning carried out in Singapore. This research was a case study of how Group Endeavours in Service-Learning (GESL) project was implemented as part of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) program at the National Institute of Education (NIE). This research was guided by Kolb's experiential learning theory which explains theoretically the process of how experiences can be transformed into knowledge for future action. This research explored the experiences and challenges faced by teachers when conducting GESL and developed a profile of the implementation of GESL. Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews conducted with six teachers, and documents related to GESL. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings of this research revealed the major procedures of the GESL implementation were as such: group formation, mass lecture briefings, weekly GESL meetings, reflection, sharing on Service-Learning Day as well as assessment. In terms of experiences, the teachers felt ambivalent towards the overall GESL experience but they agreed that GESL pushed them out of their comfort zone and facilitated the transfer of learning to their daily duties as teachers. A number of challenges were also highlighted: supervisor's frequent absence, the intensity of the PGDE program and ensuring continuity of the GESL project. This research concluded that while the teachers reaped many benefits of active engagement with the community, their experiences were also affected by the way GESL is implemented and the challenges that arose throughout the whole GESL program. This case study research provides stakeholders in the higher education sector an overall understanding of how service-learning brings the youth closer to the community. This understanding is hoped to facilitate advocacy for more service-learning programs to be conducted on a wider scale to give more youths the opportunities to be active members of the society.

Keywords: Service-learning, community engagement, youths, teacher education, Singapore

1. INTRODUCTION

Youths are precious assets for the society. Their energy and potential should be unleashed positively so that they can be trailblazers for social change. However, the lack of motivation, opportunities and capabilities may hinder their engagement with the community [1][2]. Additionally, adultism- which is defined as "the assumption that adults are better than young people and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement" [3]- pushes the youths away from engaging with the community [2]. Thus, this tension must be reconciled so that the youths can work together with the community on various societal issues.

One way to reconcile the tension between the youths and the community is by establishing engagement between both parties. Community engagement practices allow the youths to accumulate social capital which is defined by Putnam in 2000 as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" [4]. The accumulation of social capital, then, fosters the social cohesion between the youths and the community [5] so that they can work together to overcome the increasingly complex challenges that Singapore face in the 21st century.

Education is vital in raising the awareness among youths on the significance of community engagement. Furthermore, the results of the National Youth Council 2014 survey reflected the weak community engagement among youths in Singapore [6]. This finding further underscores the importance of education to play an active role in promoting community engagement among youths.

Realising the need of developing youths with a sense of community engagement, service-learning approach is adopted by some higher education institutions in Singapore. One example is the National Institute of Education (NIE), a teacher training institute. Since 2005, NIE has been integrating service-learning into the curriculum structure of its Diploma, Bachelors and Postgraduate Diploma programmes as a compulsory module named Group Endeavours in Service Learning (GESL) [7]. The GESL aims to help trainee teachers gain a better understanding of their roles as contributors to the society and develop their awareness of the community around them. Additionally, GESL aims to equip the trainee teachers with skills (such as situational leadership and project management) and values (such as teamwork, commitment and sense of belonging to the community) [7] so that they are able to be excellent contributors in schools and the society.

This study focused on a type of community engagement practice i.e. service-learning. More specifically, this research was conducted to explore the implementation of GESL, experiences and challenges of teachers when conducting GESL during their PGDE programme at NIE. A profile of GESL was also developed so that stakeholders of education are able to understand the value and significance of service-learning on the development of youths to be active players in community engagement in Singapore.

2. OBJECTIVES

The research objectives were to explore how GESL being implemented in NIE, the experiences of teachers who had gone through GESL, the challenges that teachers faced when conducting GESL and to develop a profile of GESL.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kolb's experiential learning theory served as the theoretical framework guiding this research. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) emphasises that experience is the basis of learning [8].

The experiential learning cycle (refer to figure 1) constitutes four types of abilities which any learner must have and execute in order to learn [8]. The four types of abilities can be categorised in terms of two dimensions, each consisting of polar opposites. The first dimension has Concrete Experiences (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) as the polar ends of the grasping-experience dimension while Active Experimentation (AE) and Reflective Observation (RO) are the polar ends of the transforming-experience dimension [9].
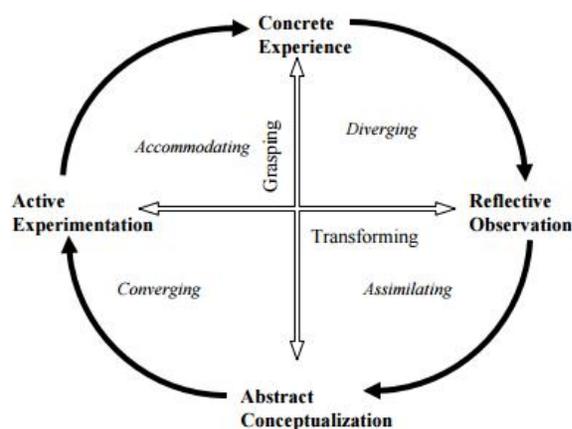

Figure 1. The Experiential Learning Cycle and Basic Learning Styles [9].

Experiential learning is a recursive process. Ideally, the learner should be able to experience, reflect, think and act in response to the learning situation one is in [9]. The first ability (CE) refers to the ability of the individual to be involved fully in new experiences. They also need to engage in reflection and observation of experiences from different perspectives (RO). Concepts need to be abstracted from the reflection to be integrated into logical theories (AC). The learners must also be able to apply the formulated theories to act in new situations (AE). The testing of the theories creates new experiences that will continue the cycle.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The development of the conceptual framework (figure 2) of this research is guided by Kolb's experiential learning theory. The implementation and challenges shape how the

teachers conduct engagement with the target community. The reflecting and thinking on GESL results in experiences i.e. the new knowledge and skills that the teachers have gained.
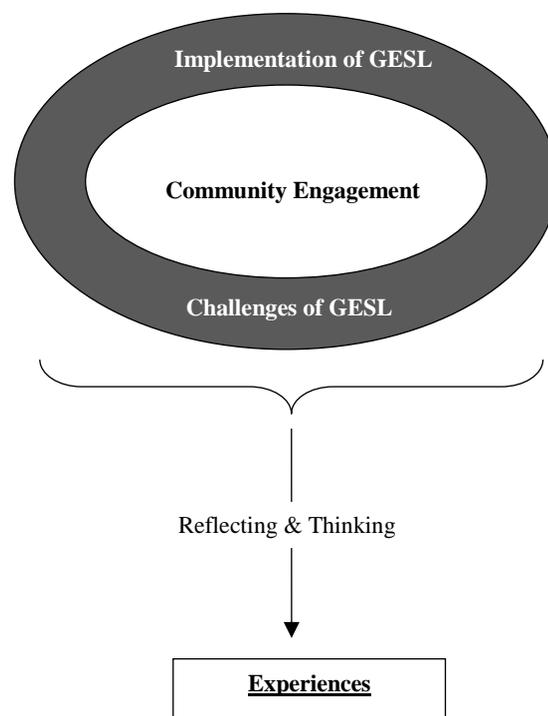

Figure 2 . Conceptual Framework

5. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative approach: more specifically, it was an exploratory design case study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six respondents (pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality) who were recruited through purposive sampling. Additionally, data was also collected from documents related to GESL. Thematic analysis was used in this research to analyse the data. Reflective notes from the researcher's journal were also brought into the process to facilitate a better analysis of the data.

6. RESULTS

The results of the research revealed a number of themes for the first three research objectives. The themes were used to develop a profile of GESL.

6.1 Implementation of GESL in NIE

There were three major themes for the implementation of GESL: a compulsory course in the PGDE program, pre-event procedures and post-event procedures.

6.1.1 As a compulsory course in the PGDE program
All respondents of this interview mentioned that GESL was a compulsory course in the PGDE program that they had to go through. The PGDE Program Handbook also stated that GESL is a core course [10].

6.1.2 Pre-event procedures

The procedures in the pre-event phase referred to the activities required before the execution of GESL. From the interview data, a number of themes representing the different elements emerged i.e. group formation, briefing carried out through mass lectures and weekly meetings with GESL group mates.

6.1.2.1 Group formation
The PGDE programme that the teachers underwent was only for a duration of one year and they had to complete their GESL project during that period itself on top of other modules. Thus, right from the beginning of the PGDE program, i.e. during the orientation week period, the trainee teachers were randomly grouped together and they had to remain in that group throughout the whole year for the GESL project. Furthermore, the members of the group are made up of trainee teachers from different subject streams such as Sciences, Mathematics and Humanities. From the researcher's analysis of the GESL group reports obtained by the respondents, there were 18 individuals in each group on average.

> *the group is big, about 20 people in a group and we get together and we will bond through orientation and after that we were told that we are...gonna do...gonna be involved in GESL together...*(Elis)
> *student teachers work in groups of about 20 on a service-learning project...* ([10])

6.1.2.2 Briefing carried out through mass lectures
Thematic analysis also revealed that there were a number of mass lectures conducted for GESL. One of the lectures functioned as an introduction lecture to GESL and there were some lectures conducted by NIE's partner organizations which offered collaboration opportunities for the GESL project. However, GESL groups had the freedom to choose from those partner organizations available or source one on their own.

> *There were a few lectures just to introduce to us I think, there was one main lecture at the very beginning to introduce to us what GESL is all about and what we are expected to do...after that main lecture we are kind of independent* (Ratna)
> *we have to source for the organization we want to work with..i mean there were lectures try to help us in that sense.... telling us what are the problems...*(Sharmila)

6.1.2.3 Weekly meetings with GESL
Since the members in the GESL group had different timetables due to the different subject streams they were in, NIE has set a common slot in their timetable for GESL meeting. However, some respondents who regarded their supervisor as being irresponsible, noted that they did not have to rigidly follow the time allocated. At times, they would cancel some of the meetings or adjust its duration.

> *every week you will have a slot in your timetable usually in the evening 5.30-7.30pm where you meet up with all the other GESL members to discuss on the service-learning you're going to embark on* (Izyan)
> *the good thing of having an irresponsible mentor is that we have a lot of autonomy on our side.. we could just cancel meetings..change our meetings to other days, cut it to a half-hour thing..our schedule become flexible* (Vanessa)

6.1.3 Post-event procedures

The procedures in the post-event phase referred to the follow-up activities after they engaged with their target community in the GESL project. From the research data, a number of themes representing the different activities emerged i.e. reflection, sharing, perceived assessment of GESL and actual assessment of GESL

6.1.3.1 Reflection
Reflection is a deep thinking process to elicit learning lessons from real-life experiences. In GESL, every group member had to write out his/her reflections and there was a group session where members shared their reflection with one another.

> *I remember we had to write the standard lah... we had a form to fill in , the reflection ya, but I think my group also, we had one last session we met up where we presented what we did to our supervisor and then after that we urm all of us sat in a circle and then each shared our ...experience lah, so i think that was how mainly we did our reflection...* (Ratna)

6.1.3.2 Sharing
From the researcher's notes, NIE reported on the Service-learning Day event in NIE news published online in March 2015 (National Institute of Education, 2015c). NIE conducts a yearly Service-learning Day where all groups will set up booths to showcase their GESL projects and share their experiences with the rest of the student population and NIE staff. A few outstanding ones will be selected to present their projects in a mass lecture.

> *at the end of the whole GESL experience, what we all did was all the different groups actually had a kind of exhibition, ya of what we did.. all we had to was to create a poster and then people walk around* (Ratna)

6.1.3.3 Perceived assessment
All respondents reported that they were not informed clearly on the breakdown of marks in the assessment at the beginning of their GESL project. This vagueness of information has then led to respondents to form their own understanding of the assessment.

> *we weren't even told how we are going to be assessed.. they just..I think because a lot of the things in NIE were like pass/fail...so this was a pass...so they didn't really tell us how we were being evaluated.*(Vanessa)
> *I think there was no concrete form of assessment. i think as long as you contributed and learn something from it you can pass this module ya..*(Ratna)

6.1.3.4 Actual assessment
Despite the vague information regarding the assessment details, all interviewees managed to recall and mention the documents that they had to submit for grading such as peer evaluation, presentation, group report along with the attached individual reflections.

6.2 Experiences of teachers who had gone through the GESL

Three themes emerged from the data regarding the experiences of teachers who had gone through GESL: Ambivalence, breaking out of comfort zone and learning transfer.

6.2.1 Ambivalence

In general, respondents expressed through the interviews that engaging with the community was the most meaningful aspect of the whole GESL project. However, GESL implementation process carried out by NIE affected their overall experience.

> *a lot of things are done by NIE are lame...I mean for the lack of a better word..I keep using the word lame because i think a lot of things done are really lame.... lame in the sense that doing for the sake of doing and not meaningful, and not very well thought out..not very well thought through........ I understand all the intentions behind a lot of things we're doing in GESL and whatever..they all come into intentions...I understand why things are done...I understand the good intentions but as in the executing of a lot of things...tsk....sigh (heavy sigh).... (Vanessa)*

> *(GESL) is a process lah and along the way i felt differently about certain things, some things are pleasant, worth it, but some things are like bad....very transition.... (Elis)*

6.2.2 Breaking out of comfort zone

Respondents felt that GESL has pushed them out of their comfort zones to interact people with backgrounds that are very different than theirs. They had to handle the initial uneasiness of interacting with their target communities because of the initial perspectives they had of them.

Izyan had to battle with her overwhelming empathy when interacting with the old folks and residents who were struggling with family isolation and/or facing financial difficulties. Prior to GESL, she thought that such cases were rare in a developed First-World country like Singapore. However, GESL opened her eyes to the actual prevalence of cases of poverty and isolation. She was taken aback because she never encountered that in her daily life considering her family was very close-knitted and supportive of one another and thus the thought of individuals living in poverty and isolation saddened her. She narrated her struggle to put her aside her overwhelming empathy in the service-learning experience.

> *I'm a very emotional person ya... then like I think there is a reason why I don't want to know so much about the elderly, because i know that knowing these things saddens me... I think I took a.....I socially distance myself because I knew I don't think I could be able to handle it so, in a sense after seeing this, and doing this things right, it made me sort of make me firm..make more resilient.. you erm must be strong to admit that these things happen in a society and you shouldn't be so sad about it and them just ignore about it at all ya.... before, I don't want to 'cause I know I would be very sad , I don't know whether I could handle it...but now after this I think it's ok....I don't think...affect me so much until I'm too sad..it was only after this that I know that it is not too much to do something about it... (Izyan)*

Another respondent, Vanessa was cautious of her interaction with her GESL's target community i.e. the youths with mental health issues at Singapore Association of Mental Health (SAMH). She admitted that her apprehension was mainly due to her negative preconceived notions about people with mental issues. Her group was informed by the organization on the dos and don'ts of interaction with the mentally handicapped before her team conducted the activities with the youths. However, she felt that she finally was able to let her guard down only when she began to interact with them through handball lessons conducted by her group as one of the service-learning activities.

> *we were informed on what to expect arh..but the thing is that as much as you are mentally prepared to interact..inform and interact with these people....until you truly meet them and interact with them you're not quite sure what to expect... but the thing is urm some of them were quite normal urm maybe just a bit lower IQ than most people but they're very normal. you can tell that obviously that they're odd in terms of the behavior... but anyway we learn how to interact with them and you know try to understand the kind of stigma they face...and it was very enriching I would say...coz I never had...most of us had never had...never had..urm..interacted with these kids...so it was very interesting to interact with them and learning how to be patient with them..you know...that that..they aren't as scary as....scary I guess...not the best word...but scary as we think they are you know... (Vanessa)*

6.2.3 Learning transfer

Learning transfer refers to the main learning points of GESL that the respondents believed can be applied to their lives. Thematic analysis revealed three subthemes for the theme of learning transfer i.e. spirit of teaching, interpersonal relationship with students and flexibility in teaching.

6.2.3.1 Spirit of teaching

Elis' perspective on the spirit of teaching broadened due to the GESL experience. She initially felt dreadful throughout most of the GESL project as it took a lot of her time and effort. However, she felt touched when the community appreciated her team's efforts during their GESL event. She connected this learning point with the notion of teaching.

> *it reminded me of teaching as well setting aside time and effort just so that..... investing the time and effort into these people and seeing them appreciate what you do...i can eventually see how it is parallel to teaching in that sense even though they are not my students but general public...there's some meaning out of this...ya..it's a bit cheesy...but it is these really cheesy moments that you realise that oh ok, this is why i'm doing this ya... (Elis).*

A similar connection is also found in the group report of another respondent:

> *Through this (GESL), we learn the mindset of service - putting the needs and interests of beneficiaries before ourselves. Such a mindset is definitely transferable to the classroom, and we were reminded of the importance of putting our student's learning needs before our own personal preferences (Vanessa's group report)*

6.2.3.2 Interpersonal relationship with students

Some respondents expressed that their GESL experience provided them with the skills and knowledge in establishing better interactions with their students. For instance, Izyan, who encountered an eye-opening experience with families living in poverty made her realise that the behaviour of some of her problematic students could be attributed to the environment they were living in outside of school. Despite overly empathising with her students, she still had to regulate her emotions in order to better help them and get rid of their undesirable behaviours. She narrated:

> *we have a lot of macam broken families...erm...students who come to school because not because they wanna come but because*

their house, with a 1 room flat with 13 people inside and they can't stand being at home cause it's just too crowded..so when we see this kind of students right, sometimes you just feel eh macam kesian budak-budak ni but even if you kesian budak2 ni and you know that diorang buat salah you still have to marah them...because you know they are like that because of their families but that doesn't give a reason to act they way you are acting in school...so it makes me become more rational to an extent also ...you leant how to separate your sympathy with like what you need to do for the person... (Izyan)

6.2.3.3 Flexibility in teaching

Some respondents also mentioned that the GESL experience made them realise that classroom situations can be unpredictable with about 40 students, each with a different learning need. Thus, being flexible was key to ensure that students were able to learn well in class.

when we go to the classrooms, there's a class of 40 with many different types of people...just like how I deal with my participants in GESL that can be very young participant and very elderly participants and had to cater to their needs....so same with the class, except now it's multiplied by 40 but I think this flexibility is really very important lah... although I've only recently started teaching, I realise it is true that I can come in with a perfect lesson plan but it may not necessarily materialise because of certain things that happen in the classroom..so i think this is important in teaching and schooling life lah... (Ratna)

Another respondent highlighted a similar point in her reflection sheet:

A new skill that I have learnt from working on this project is flexibility. Prior to working on this project, I always have a certain way of doing things and often feel uncomfortable when I have to do things differently. However, after working on this project, I have learnt that flexibility is a necessary skill. I can apply this skill in my work when I have to deal with students. (Izyan's reflection sheet)

6.3 Challenges that teachers had faced when conducting GESL

Throughout the conduct of GESL project, respondents faced a number of challenges that were categorised into three themes: Supervisor's frequent absence, intensity of PGDE program and ensuring continuity of service-learning.

6.3.1 Supervisor's frequent absence

While respondents expected their supervisors to be actively involved in facilitating their GESL project, especially in the first few months of GESL when they felt they needed much guidance with the planning of the GESL project. Most of the respondents were disappointed that their supervisors were not up to the mark.

sometimes we had a bit more problems if you don't know what really is going on and to make that worst was the horrible mentor...ya...he was barely there.. he hardly ask how our progress was..he never asked us... to be honest, hahahahaha...never asked us, he barely turned up, he gave us very minimal information.. ...you see it goes against the whole thing that they're trying to push...as a learning institution, you (NIE) expect people to teach with responsibility but you yourself (supervisor) are not exemplary? (Vanessa)

to be very honest uh, our supervisor wasn't a very good one.. she wasn't someone who was very...someone who you could talk to..she would just come there and she would sit at the back and then she would make sure that we were on track... but otherwise she..her input not really lah..it was more of what we were doing..urm not being able to get a lot of guidance from her...so in that sense we were made to really do everything on our own accord... so that was pretty much the challenge arh..... (Sharmila)

6.3.2 Intensity of the PGDE program

Another major challenge regarding the execution of GESL was the intensity of the PGDE program. The PGDE program was only for one academic year (2 semesters) with heavy workload, so with the already-packed schedule the respondents had during that period influenced them to regard GESL as a struggle they had to go through unwillingly.

in PGDE is a very hectic punya schedule like we had 10 modules in one semester because we are running on a very tight timeline, only one year je kan...and then on top of all the assignments and you have to do your meeting... we just have to make do...and macam make time for things lah..sometimes you have project meetings and in NIE, dia semua project tau, they don't have exam in PGDE so we have group work in almost every module lah ..so macam urm...you have an individual assignment but then you have group assignment and these group assignments the deadlines are so close to each other..so when you wanna do group meetings right, then you are stretched lah (Izyan)

I think a lot of us feel very taxed in NIE by academics already, by our assignments and projects so much that we invested whatever time and energy that invested in GESL was leftover...so they (NIE) should cut down on the modules and let us with more time for the GESL...you know that would have been more ideal... (Elis)

it just felt very tight, the issue of time coz we have to have a lot of modules to cover... a lot of pedagogy module and then on top of this with gesl could be seen as a burden, it was really very rushing (Ratna)

6.3.3 Ensuring continuity in service-learning

Most respondents mentioned that in their planning for GESL, they wanted to do something that could ensure the continuity of service towards the target community; thus, continuity was a major concern and goal in their project. They were afraid that a one-off GESL event would do more harm than good to the target community that they engaged with.

I think for a lot of groups it's a very one off thing like conduct camps conduct this.... then after this GESL is over, then that's it... working with them on a one-off thing, i mean they would be very happy to get people to come and then after that one session no one else come... ya..so i think it's a flaw....it would be nice if there is an opportunity for us to continue in the long run.. 'cause I feel like, it's one-off although...some organisations I think they need to have a longer erm.... like help in the long run... (Ratna)

to ensure that the project is sustainable i.e. continue for a long time (Izyan's group report)

6.4 Profile of GESL

Figure 3 shows the profile of the implementation of GESL which provides an overall view of the relationship between implementation, experiences and challenges of GESL. Firstly, there were a number of procedures in the implementation of GESL. Next, the teachers provided experiences they have gained from GESL. Lastly, the teachers faced a number of challenges when conducting GESL.
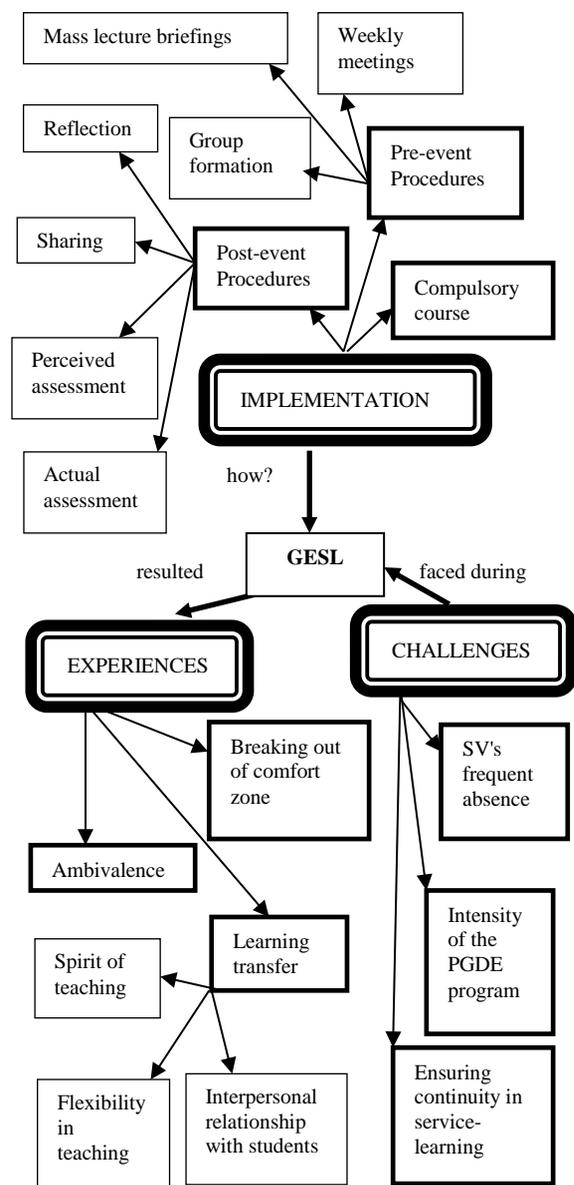

Figure 3 . Profile of GESL

7. DISCUSSION

The discussion of this research is divided into the four research objectives: implementation of GESL in NIE, experiences of teachers who had gone through GESL, challenges that teachers faced when conducting GESL and profile of GESL.

7.1 The implementation of GESL in NIE

NIE's implementation of GESL was very much similar to the phases that were outlined in [11]. The design phase constituted the pre-event procedures i.e. group formation, mass lectures briefings and the GESL weekly meetings which served to provide the teachers a common understanding on service-learning and helping them to generate objectives for their GESL project.

However, the teachers faced difficulties in establishing whether or not they were on the right track as their supervisors was absent from the weekly meetings and on the day when they went to carry out the activities with their target communities. Therefore, the teachers were struggling on their own in the conduct phase.

The evaluation phase referred to the post-event procedures where the teachers underwent reflection, sharing of their GESL projects during NIE's Service-learning Day and assessment. The first two mediums provided opportunities to the GESL participants to "articulate and demonstrate specific learning gained from the design and conduct of the experience" [12]. The assessment process conducted by NIE, too, placed heavy emphasis on the reflection process. Additionally, this provides support to Kolb's [8] emphasis on the role of reflection to develop individual's ability to form meanings from their current experiences and establishing connections with previous experiences, knowledge and ideas.

However, from the data, what seemed to be lacking in NIE's implementation of GESL was the feedback element. In general, teachers felt that their supervisors were taking a hands-off approach by not actively guiding them. While they did understand that GESL requires much independent effort on their part, they would appreciate if their supervisors were present to facilitate the development of their ideas to ensure that the objectives of GESL were achieved.

Another type of feedback that would be useful in the implementation of GESL is feedback from the community. The interviews revealed that the kind of feedback obtained from the community were done informally i.e. through verbal communication between the teachers and the community organizations. This was problematic because the lack of formal documentation of community feedback would make the teachers and the GESL supervisors less aware of some underlying issues that these organizations faced when they took part in GESL. Research has shown that indeed, there are challenges and costs that community organizations had to bear when they take part in service-learning programs [13]. So, if such issues were not taken into consideration seriously, then GESL implementation might defeat its purpose to provide benefits to the community organizations. Therefore, there was a need for the formal documentation of community feedback so that improvements can be done to the GESL implementation to minimize the challenges and costs faced by the community organisations.

7.2 Experiences of teachers who had gone through the GESL

This section provides a discussion on the experiences of teachers who had gone through GESL: ambivalence, breaking out of comfort zone and learning transfer.

7.2.1 Ambivalence
The teachers expressed their feelings of ambivalence towards GESL. They strongly regarded their experience engaging with the community was itself a meaningful learning experience for them. However, they too felt that GESL was a burden despite understanding the noble objectives of service-learning. The possible reasons for teachers feelings of ambivalence towards GESL can be attributed to the challenges that they had to face: supervisor's

frequent absence, the intensity of the PGDE program and ensuring continuity of GESL.

The frequent absence of the supervisor throughout the whole GESL project seemed to be a factor that de-motivated them in GESL. The teachers were not familiar with the nature of service-learning and as revealed by Deeley in 2010 [14], the unfamiliarity of the nature of service-learning might lead to doubts and insecurities. Thus, without the supervisor's attendance, GESL indeed became a struggle for them.

GESL was squeezed into the already-hectic schedule of the PGDE program. The PGDE program spanned a year and the numerous coursework modules that they have to take on top of GESL, made them feel GESL was an extra load on their shoulders. The teachers were passionate about serving the community but their passion was dampened by the intensity of the PGDE program. Thus, they felt ambivalent towards GESL

Continuity of service was something that the teachers wanted to achieve. They were upset thinking that their short-term engagement with the community for GESL might cause the beneficiaries more harm than good. They believed this was not supposed to be happening for GESL which emphasised on mutual benefits on the provider and the beneficiaries.

7.2.2 Breaking out of comfort zone
The teachers expressed that they felt uncomfortable and uneasy during their interactions with the target community. Some respondents remarked that they were emotionally overwhelmed by the first-hand interaction. This is consistent with past research findings which showed that that the transformation of old perspectives and beliefs to new ones did induce emotional discomfort and uneasiness [15]. For instance, service-learning participants may experience overwhelming sadness, fear and anxiety during their interaction with the target community [14]. Discomfort arise as the first-hand interaction challenged personal beliefs and values [14].

Despite the emotional stress the teachers experienced during GESL, they appreciated that GESL broke them out of their comfort zone as they were exposed to communities that they never or rarely come into contact with. Their knowledge and stereotypes regarding the target community were profoundly transformed during the interaction. Additionally, they had a heightened sense of awareness regarding the needs of the target community. This results from GESL was parallel to the findings from past research conducted by [16], [17] and [18] where participants changed their previous assumptions of their target community and integrated their service-learning experiences to construct a new understanding of people who are different from them.

Furthermore, this finding highlighted the significance of Kolb's experiential learning theory [8] in understanding how learning works. In this theory, Kolb emphasized that learning is re-learning: previous knowledge are altered and modified by integrating the new knowledge individuals obtain through new experiences. In the case of GESL, teachers entered the environment of the target community with some pre-conceived notions about the target group. These pre-conceived notions were learned and developed from prior experiences. Thus, breaking out of comfort zone reflected the re-learning that the teachers went through: the new experience in GESL modified the previous knowledge (perspectives and stereotypes) that the teachers initially had of the target community. This new knowledge, then, allowed them to better value and appreciate the target community.

7.2.3 Learning Transfer

The teachers felt that the GESL had a number of learning points that could be transferred to their understanding of teaching and their daily profession

The GESL experience helps the teachers to strengthen their understanding of the spirit of teaching. Through the reflection process, they were able to establish the connections between their GESL experience and their identity as teachers. They achieved a greater awareness that being a teacher is not just about being adequately equipped with pedagogical skills and content mastery that they have acquired in class. To a much greater extent, there is a need to have the human touch in education. This is parallel to Coffey's emphasis that service-learning increases the awareness of the "ethical and community obligations of teaching" [19].

Not only that, the GESL experience that the teachers went through made them more aware of the essential skills required for engaging in successful relationships with their students and teaching flexibly. While the PGDE curriculum does provide with much knowledge on these two aspects but the GESL experience provides opportunities for the teachers to consolidate that knowledge with first-hand experiences with the community. In turn, this consolidation serves as refined knowledge that teachers are able to act upon when carrying out their duties. This outcome reflects the breakdown of barriers between theory and practice in service-learning which is similar to past research [14], [19] and [20].

7.3 Challenges that teachers had faced when conducting GESL

There were three major challenges highlighted by the teachers i.e. the frequent absence of the supervisor, the intensity of the PGDE program and ensuring continuity in service-learning.

7.3.1 Frequent absence of supervisor
From the findings, it can be inferred that the teachers expected the presence of the supervisor to facilitate learning in GESL. In other words, while it is encouraged for GESL groups to independently run the GESL event on their own, that experience alone would not guarantee learning to occur. This strengthens Gentry's argument that experience alone would not guarantee learning and thus proper facilitation of by the supervisor or instructor [12].

However, there are a number of possible reasons for the lack of active involvement of supervisors in GESL. Firstly, the supervisor may not be familiar with the service-learning pedagogy. Service-learning as a teaching and learning method is still in its infancy in Singapore's higher education landscape. Thus, supervisors might not be fully be familiar with the ropes of conducting and assessing service-learning [21]; in turn, this may affect their capabilities of providing good supervision support to the GESL groups.

Some other reasons for the lack of active involvement among supervisors in service-learning can be attributed to the lack of institutional support and recognition of supervisors' efforts in conducting service-learning and logistical issues such as time [22].

7.3.2 Intensity of the PGDE program
The intensity of the PGDE program implied that time was a major factor that stressed teachers during their execution of the GESL project. PGDE's curriculum for secondary school teachers were packed with other modules which had coursework as the main mode of assessment. This time factor was indeed one of the most common challenges that

students faced when conducting service-learning, similar to what was concluded in [23].

7.3.3 Ensuring continuity of service-learning

The challenge of time could be a possible obstacle to the third challenge that is ensuring service-learning continuity. The short-term nature of the GESL project caused some of the teachers to be concerned about the possible negative impacts their projects may have on the beneficiaries. Such concerns were not unfounded. Past research concluded that the impact of short-term service-learning on the community is lesser compared to that of long-term collaboration [24]. Additionally, past research like [25] and [26] revealed that some organizations preferred long-term service that extend beyond the semester.

7.4 Profile of GESL

From the profile (Figure 3), it can be seen that teachers have gained, to a large extent, positive experiences during GESL such as breaking out of comfort zone and learning transfer that is valuable to their development as a teacher and as a member of the society. This is possible because, when engaging with the environment, in this case social environment, activates the learning process in three domains i.e. cognitive (academic knowledge), affective (values and attitudes) and psychomotor (skill development) [27]. The integration of these three learning processes through reflection facilitates the holistic growth of the teachers. This supports Dewey's philosophy that by engaging in communal relationships, the individual is able to grow in many aspects of life such as moral, intellectual and emotional [28].

However, optimal benefits can be achieved if improvements are done to tackle the challenges of GESL. Firstly, supervisors must able to provide guidance and create a conducive environment that allow the teachers to have a better understanding on the nature of service-learning. This better understanding will be a catalyst that unleashes their potential to actively contribute to the society. Secondly, NIE also has to play a role in providing support to both supervisors and the teachers. For instance, NIE can invest in the training of supervisors for the service-learning approach. Also, NIE should provide a more flexible schedule for the teachers by rearranging the curriculum structure. These improvements will smoothen and increase the efficiency of the implementation of GESL.

Better implementation of GESL will enhance learning of the teachers which in turn promote their holistic development. With the knowledge and skills obtained through better implementation of GESL, they will be more motivated, confident and capable to engage with the community and lead them towards greater societal progress.

8. SUMMARY

Singapore is facing complex societal challenges in the 21st century. Such challenges require more than just policies intervention; rather, the whole-society must be actively involved to generate solutions for the challenges. However, this approach cannot succeed if the youths felt excluded by the community.

Education plays an important role of instilling citizenship skills. Higher education institutions should conduct pedagogies that provide opportunities for the youths to engage with the community so that they can develop their citizenship skills and be more confident to make contributions to the society at large.

This research was an exploratory case-study to explore the implementation of GESL, experiences of teachers who had gone through GESL and challenges they faced when conducting GESL. Six teachers' were interviewed and documents related to GESL was also obtained from them.

The findings of this research revealed the major procedures of the GESL implementation were as such: group formation, mass lecture briefings, weekly GESL meetings, reflection, sharing on Service-Learning Day as well as assessment. In terms of experiences, research respondents felt ambivalent towards the overall GESL experience but they agreed that GESL pushed them out of their comfort zone and facilitated transfer of learning to their daily duties as teachers. A number of challenges were also highlighted: supervisor's frequent absence, intensity of the PGDE program and ensuring continuity of the GESL project. The results from the thematic analysis were then used to develop the profile of GESL.

This research concluded that while the teachers reaped many benefits of active engagement with the community, their experiences were also affected by the way GESL is implemented and the challenges that arised throughout the GESL.

This case study research provides stakeholders in the higher education sector an overall understanding of how service-learning brings the youth closer to the community. However, more thought has to be given towards the fine-tuning of the implementation of GESL so that the service-learning approach can optimally bear benefits for those involved.

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