Professional Report

A Learning Partner Project in In-service Teacher Education for Personal and Social Development of Students

Pattie Yuk Yee LUK-FONG and Ching Leung LUNG
Department of Educational Psychology, Counselling and Learning Needs
The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

Abstract
This paper reports the implementation of a project designed to involve in-service teachers in peer support for the learning of the core values of personal and social education so as to raise self-esteem, to enhance co-operation, to promote rationality and empathy. Project participants were 27 in-service teachers attending an undergraduate program of the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Project evaluation reveals that the project succeeded in generating for the teacher participants emotional, academic, social, technical, and extended supports, and that the benefits of the project also spilled over to their relationships with their primary school pupils and daily lives. Research and practical implications are discussed.

Peer learning partnership, made up of reciprocal helping relationships between the partners to learn from each other for emotional support and for the completion of learning tasks, has been well discussed in higher education (Boud, Cohan, & Sampson, 1999; Eisen, 2001; Rowland, 2002). However, there is a dearth of research in Hong Kong higher education in this area. Then, the strengths of peer learning partnership - such as emotional support through perspective taking and enhancement of task completions through mutual support and critique, understanding of others' viewpoints, and joint mutual reflection (Webb, Farivar, & Mastergeorge, 2002; Eisen, 2001) - correspond closely with such core values as self-esteem, relationship, and co-operation and such main skills of personal and social education as communication, problem-solving, decision-making and reflection. Indeed, there are empirical research findings documenting that learning partners contribute to the raising of self-
esteem and the improvement of academic performance on both parties (Friend & Bunswick, 1999), of which further echo the above line of thinking.

In view of the above, the authors blended peer-learning partnership with development of teachers in facilitating personal and social development of children in a learning partner project (hereafter the Project). The Project, implemented in the Hong Kong Institute of Education, was to serve three specific purposes: providing a platform for teachers to experience peer supported learning; generating empirical data about how peer supported learning in teacher development can be enhanced; and providing the needed education for teachers in children’s personal and social development. Thus, the Project in effect follows the world trends of explicitly teaching skills and competencies in guidance (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) and of the learning of personal and social education through participation in projects, rather than merely through talking about it (see, e.g., Brown’s peers support code, 2000).

The objective of the Project was to involve in-service teachers in active mutual help and peer support for each other, hoping to help them learn the core values of personal and social education so as to raise self-esteem, to enhance cooperation, to promote rationality and empathy as suggested in the field (see, e.g., Bottery, 1990). This paper is to report the relevant empirical findings for sharing among educators generally and teacher educators in particular. The purpose is to enrich educators’ experiences in formulating and implementing peer-support for teacher development projects, in ways that the participants can have their benefits optimized.

**BACKGROUND**

In 2002, Hong Kong’s primary schools are to implement a guidance curriculum called personal growth curriculum (hereafter the Curriculum), which is recorded in the Comprehensive Guidance System Document being sent by the government to schools (for details, visit www.ed.gov.hk). The Curriculum is composed of four domains: Self, Others, Studies, and Career. The core areas of the child’s development being focused in the Curriculum are self-esteem, relationship with others, and learning. The Curriculum, focusing on personal growth, also encompasses a “life skills and competencies approach” for the child’s present major life role as a pupil in academic matters in schools and the future life role as an active contributor in the economic and social systems.
The Curriculum has been put in place, because guidance needs of children in Hong Kong have become obvious: the children have been suffering from various social diseases - for example, stress due to never-ending examinations and tests, difficulties in relating to peers and parents, and anxieties experienced in the social environment and social political changes in Hong Kong (Lee, 1995; Pang, Pang, & Shing, 1998; Xuejiaotuan, 1997). Other difficulties that make their lives troublesome include needed adjustments at special transitional periods, like entering primary one (Chan, Lau, & Poon, 1999) and leaving primary six (Xianggang Xiaotong Qunyihui, 1994). Some pupils got overloaded and took exit. In the current stressful context, there have been an alarming number of student suicides in recent years; what were once the problems in secondary schools have now become problems in primary schools. The introduction of the personal growth curriculum in primary schools is thus a governmental attempt to use a developmental and preventive approach to address the aforementioned problems.

In reality, the unique and immense guidance needs of pupils in Hong Kong include not only management of developmental problems but as well problems caused by contextual factors (see, e.g., Blustein & Noumail, 1996; Carter, Spera, & Hall, 1992; Gallagher & Millar, 1996; Henker, Whalen, & O’Neil, 1995; Lee, 1995). Research on children’s self-concept in Hong Kong shows that children begin high in self-concept until Primary Three when there is a sudden and abrupt drop in self-concept (Board of Education, 1997; Lau, 1995). This is related to the examination-oriented education system and the high regards for academic achievement in the Chinese culture. The particular stress on academic matters in schools and the relatively harsh evaluations of students by teachers and parents from primary schooling onwards (Chan et al., 1999) are particular contextual problems that need to be coped with in Hong Kong. How teachers can competently relate the two sets of causes of problems and in turn provide quality guidance to their pupils are inevitably important issues that must be addressed.

THE LEARNING PARTNER PROJECT

Basing on the above understanding, the authors considered it paramount to formulate a project that could help teachers learn more effectively in personal that they can optimally perform their professional role. At the project formulation stage, the definition for personal
and social education (PSE) presented by Watkins (1995) was used: that is, PSE refers to "the intentional promotion of personal and social development of pupils through the whole curriculum experience and the whole school experience" (p.118). More importantly, the authors, trying to make the project knowledge-based, had, firstly, followed the propositions made by the National Curriculum Council of Britain – that personal and social development involves "aspects of teaching and learning which should permeate the entire curriculum... It is the responsibility of all teachers and is equally important in all phases of education" (1989, para. 10). As such, personal and social education, to the authors, implies the intentional promotion of personal and social development of students through the overt, permeated, and hidden curricula involving all teachers and in the whole school experience. And secondly, the authors made reference to conceptualization elaborated by renowned scholars in the field: for example, Bottery’s (1990) opinion is that the core values of personal and social development are self-esteem, cooperation, empathy, and rationality, of which is in line with Ryder and Campbell’s (1988) proposition that the core values of personal social education curriculum are self-esteem and relationship while the main skills are communication, decision-making, problem-solving, and reflection.

The learning partner project is designed as part of the curriculum of a PSE minor module taught at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, as it reflects the nature of a pastoral care curriculum for helping teachers enhance a capability to respond to the transitional and developmental needs of students (Best & Lang, 1994; Hamblin, 1978). The participants of the Project were in-service teachers who had opted PSE their minor and who were enrolled in a top-up Bachelor of Education (primary) program in the Hong Kong Institute of Education, which is currently the largest teaching preparation institute in Hong Kong. A total of 27 in-service teachers participated: 27% of the teachers were male and 73% were female; 53 % were in their first year of teaching and 47 % had two to three years of teaching experience.

These in-service teachers had specific transitional needs as novices to the profession and as newcomers to the vigorous bachelor program. For example, many found the academic gap from a certificate course to a degree program a great jump for them – after all, many of them did not have academic attainment that were normally required for admission to a Bachelor’s degree program. Many also found that they were not used to a more independent learning approach and greater academic rigor demanded of them in a bachelor’s degree
program. Being new to the program, some teachers felt alienated and got lost in the new learning environment. As part-time students, these teachers faced other constraints: they had to find time to finish their study on top of their regular teaching duties; and, as these students only came back to the Institute for two three-hour sessions per week, their learning had to be extended beyond the classroom.

It was against the backdrops of these students’ needs and constraints that the learning partner project was envisaged. The rationale was that, when these pre-service teachers felt supported through the Project, they might initiate similar peer support arrangements in their primary school teaching. This echoes Mann’s (1994) notion of “caring for the care givers” so that teacher trainees would be more able to help their school children in the future.

The Project was initiated by the first author, who was the lecturer teaching the module, namely “Personal and Social Education - Theory and Practice.” The Project was to have paired peer support partnership (between two in-service teachers) established so that mutual, professional, academic, technical, social, and/or extended support could be given to each other. In brief, the professional support that one receives includes getting ideas and sharing experiences in teaching with one’s learning partner. Academic support includes getting ideas and sharing experiences in doing personal and social assignments/tasks with one’s partner. Technical support means searching and sharing materials for PSE with one’s learning partner. Social support is to help teacher trainees feel less alienated in large class through the learning partner project. And extended support means to get support from the learning partner to do extended learning outside the classroom.

The Project was implemented in various stages. At the initial stage, each pre-service teacher was asked to voluntarily find a learning partner. The partners were to exchange telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. They were to sit next to one another in each lesson. At the developmental stage, organized to facilitate maximum interactions were such specific tasks as the reading of emotional temperature together, putting up one issue for discussion in the PSE website (for details, visit http://www.ied.edu.hk/pse) set up by the Personal and Social Education Development Project (PSEDP), presenting a lesson plan on an independent/permeated PSE lesson or extra-curricular activity, and critiquing each other’s draft and/or final assignment in ways critical friends would. At the evaluation stage, teacher trainees’ views on values and benefits of
the Project were collected through a survey questionnaire, an in-depth focus group interview, and three individual interviews.

THE VALUES AND BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

The survey data collected indicate that the teachers generally felt that they had received strong support from their learning partner: professional support (57.7% gave affirmative responses), social support (53.8%), academic support (53.8%), technical support (46.2%), and support beyond the classroom (46.2%). Data from focus group or individual interviews indicate that the benefits of the project towards the development of core values and skills of personal and social education include mutual support and help, emotional support, professional support, academic support, and technical support. In a nutshell, it is found that the teachers enjoyed the mutual support towards a common goal provided by the project.

Most participants found the emotional support provided by their partners very helpful. Sharing feelings and talking about happy and unhappy things had helped the teachers release pressure. Further, many felt that the professional support from their learning partners were very important in their beginning teaching career. The teachers indicated that they found support in their academic work, which included exchanging viewpoints, critiquing each other’s work, and helping each other. They also found the Project particularly useful when they missed a class and for pulling resources together.

Apart from the rationality or critical thinking they had acquired or nurtured through critiquing each others’ work, the teachers felt that they had internalized core values in PSE, such as enhancing self-esteem and empathy and fostering friendship. They indicated that these values so internalized had extended beyond the classroom to their teaching in primary schools and in their daily lives. Most of the participants felt that what they had learnt in the Project could indeed be applied in Hong Kong primary schools, with adaptation though. The teachers reported that they had learned to communicate with others, get encouragement, and understand others more. They also became aware of individual differences and felt that their own self-esteem had improved. Most had reported that the Project helped them deepen their friendship with their partnership and that they also brought what they had learnt from the learning partner project to their classrooms.
Most participants considered that the Project was adaptable to primary schools, particularly the upper primary schools. In fact, they themselves were doing something along this line, like asking their pupils sitting together to check their counterparts' handbooks and to exchange homework for marking; some even made seating arrangement to have well-performing students sitting next to underachieving students. A few teachers had reported that the peer support learning approach was useful to the students’ learning, while others reported that they had to make adjustments, such as having a group, instead of a pair, as the collaborative learning unit, and that more activities to involve students to participate had to be planned ahead and skillfully implemented.

Participants’ feedback has indicated that voluntary involvement in the peer support learning is crucial. As the participants had reported, most of them chose their friends, those with the same major/minor subjects, or those teaching in the same school. As one participant had underscored, “...if I have to work with a total stranger, I would very likely develop a totally different attitude. I considered that collaboration must be based on mutual trust.” In short, the choice of partner in a mandatory manner would not work, as it could not foster the development of trust.

Then, in the process, there is a need for a clear structure. The instruction given at the beginning of a peer-support learning project is very important. In-service teachers need time and space during class to get to know each other and exchange addresses. The structure of asking learning partners to sit next to each other is helpful in maximizing communication. There is also a need to set specific tasks and activities so as to create opportunities for the learning partners to interact. Most teacher participants of the Project found such specific tasks as posting discussion questions on the Internet, group presentation, and discussion of drafts of assignment useful means in enabling partners to work together. Time set-aside in class for the sharing of feelings using the emotional thermometer, for example, was also found to be useful by the participants.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION**

The Project was designed to help meet the needs of in-service teachers. The project evaluation indicates to a large degree and extent that the Project was a success. The fostering of personal and social values, such as raising self-esteem, enhancing co-operation, and developing rationality and empathy, seemed to be
apparent. To a certain extent, the teacher participants had reported that the Project succeeded in generating for them emotional, academic, social, technical, and extended supports. A big surprise was that the benefits of the project spilled over to their relationships with their primary school pupils and daily lives. The majority of them pointed out that the idea could be used in primary schools with adaptation, while one-third of the teacher participants did eventually try out a modified learning partner project involving their primary school pupils.

From the findings reported in the preceding section, it seems that the qualities of positive peer dynamics for peer partnership identified by Eisen (1999) - voluntary involvement, trust, non-hierarchical status, and duration and intensity of partnership - seemed to apply in the Hong Kong case. If more teacher participants of the Project chose their learning partners voluntarily and had mutual trust and common goals, they might have found the Project more meaningful.

Although the survey results do not show very high percentages, most teacher participants appreciated the essence of the Project. Areas of improvement in the future could include making project aim and content clearer to the participants at the initial stage, using more games/activities to build up trust amongst partners after the commencement of the project, creating more opportunities for facilitating interactions, and allocating more time for interaction to make them meaningful.

Further, “structuring” can be used to explain the purpose of the Project, the role and functions of the learning partners, and the possible discomfort that one would have when working with a stranger at the initial stage. This method of using structuring has been found to be very effective in increasing participation and learning by the first author (Luk-Fong, 2002) in her teaching of the “Lifeskills for Prospective Teachers” module in the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

In the light of the findings, both practical and theoretical implications for teacher educators, primary school teachers, and guidance experts can be drawn. In brief, this paper underscores the feasibility and desirability of using a learning partner approach to facilitate the professional development and support of teachers in their initial stage of teaching, particularly when the teachers are marginal in academic standard and primary schools do not provide
adequate professional support. The paper also highlights the potentialities of using the learning partner model in enhancing the personal and social development of teacher trainees, particularly those who lack confidence in their learning and are low in self-esteem. Thus, for primary school teachers, in the context of primary schooling in Hong Kong where academic studies are stressed and students have low self-esteem, it is likely that the learning partner model can have great potential for helping learning, raising self-esteem, and enhancing mutual support and friendship. It would be of value to study the deployment of learning partner approach in the primary school settings in Hong Kong by the project participants.

For the academics and guidance professionals, this report helps strengthen the argument that some PSE attitudes and skills (such as self-esteem, learning, and friendship) can in fact be “taught,” in addition to the often taken for granted notion that these values and skills are more often “caught.” Suffice to say that teaching “self-esteem” and “enhancing friendship” are unnatural and superficial by many opponents particularly outside of the guidance fields. The “learning through practice” approach seems to provide more opportunities for teachers to acquire personal and social values and skills in actual settings. While Chinese traditions emphasize the “practice” or the behaviors of the students (Luk-Fong, 2001), one may even ponder this: could it be that the learning partner model is particularly suitable for a Chinese cultural context when the students are not too active in participation in discussion in class - a well observed, though undesirable, phenomenon (see, e.g., Stevenson & Stigler, 1992) - and when they are not used to and indirect in expressing personal emotions (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1996; Lam, 1986). All these postulations call for further research in this area.

CONCLUSION

All in all, this paper reports the experiences generated from a learning partner project in the preparation of teachers for personal and social development of students. Factors of successes and failures are explored. Teacher participants had reported their receiving many benefits from the Project. Nevertheless, the Project is only exploratory in nature, even though the findings are meaningful in various ways. In order to help fill the gap in the literature, it is more than desirable to have more similar projects be implemented, involving different teachers with different background and in different subject domains. Finally,
while this paper is essentially about a new Hong Kong experiment, it is hoped that the experience so enhanced will spark off discussion of issues related to peer learning partnerships and personal and social development of teachers and students both in higher education (particularly in teacher education institutions) and primary school settings in other parts of the world in the future.

NOTES

1Until recently, Hong Kong’s primary teachers are qualified to teach by a certificate in education of either two or three year’s training. The achievement of a full graduate profession by the year 2004 (Tung, 1998) gives impetus for upgrading the certified teachers to a degree level by adding two years on top of the certificate program. Many certified teachers therefore come back for their upgrading to B. Ed. level in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. These teachers are mainly in their first year(s) of teaching in primary schools in Hong Kong.

2Emotional temperature is a device to help participants to describe and express their emotions as in the reading of temperature in a thermometer. Other than sharing their emotion, participants may be aware of the reasons behind his/her emotional temperature.

3To quote from Brammer (1988, p. 57), in counseling, “structuring defines the nature, limits and goals of the prospective helping relationship. During the process, the roles, responsibilities and possible commitments of both helper and helper are outlined.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study is supported by a Teaching Development Grant from the Hong Kong Institute of Education. We would also like to thank the students participating in this research.

REFERENCES

433-440.
A Learning Partner Project in In-service Teacher Education for Personal and Social Development of Students


Lee, S. F. (1995). Xianggang zhongxuesheng de shenhuo yali [Life stress faced by Hong Kong secondary school students]. In Xianggang Xinli Xuehui Linchuang Xinli Xuezu [The Hong Kong Psychological Society, Division of Clinical
Psychology] (Ed.), *Yali mianmianguan* [The different aspects of stress] (pp. 28-38). Hong Kong: Xianggang Jidujiao Wuchu [Hong Kong Christian Service].


Xianggang Xiaotong Quyihui [Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong]. (1994). *Shengzhongyi fudao gongzuo ziliaoce* [Information on guidance for students promoting to form one]. Hong Kong: Author.