

Service Learning of Nutrition and Dietetics Students in the Community: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The qualitative study described the shared experiences of Nutrition and Dietetics (ND) senior students of the Adventist University of the Philippines in their two-month service learning in the community. Specifically, this phenomenological study answered the following research questions: (1) What have Nutrition and Dietetics students experienced in their community exposure? (2) What are the issues and challenges the participants experienced in their community service learning? (3) How has the community exposure of the participants impacted their professional outlook? Focus group interview (FGI) was used to collect data from six participants selected through purposive sampling. The FGI was conducted by the researchers themselves in a conducive place for 53 minutes. The audio-recorded interview data were transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted. The findings revealed that the community service learning of the ND students did not only focus on applying the knowledge and skills on their specialization but also integration of faith and learning as they shared God's love and other aspects of their learning at AUP including health and hygiene, science, livelihood, and values. The participants found it challenging how to plan meals according to the available local resources and to design programs that suit the needs of their target groups and hold them long for lectures. The participants' actual community experience also taught them how to be flexible in handling various situations; leave their comfort zones to serve the poor and needy; interact with and respect different people of various ages, education level, and economic status; and extend their services to the community not just to comply with university requirements but to show love to the less privileged people. The participants' service learning experience also made them realize their crucial role as ND specialists to promote proper nutrition and good health to the community people.

Keywords: Nutrition and dietetics, community immersion, service learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (Learn and Serve America National Service Learning Clearinghouse as cited in OCESL, 2015). It is also defined as a method in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community (Waterman, 2013).

Kendall (as cited in Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012) stressed that service learning can be characterized more narrowly as a form of experiential education in which students combine the carrying out of needed tasks in the community with intentional learning goals and with conscious reflection and critical analysis.

In addition, it is a method of encouraging student learning and development through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in, and meets the needs of, a community (EPA, 2011).

Service learning can help promote knowledge of human cultures, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning (Sheafer, 2014). Service-related experiences that are not tied to a course curriculum, at least as a mandatory requirement, might have more positive impacts for students in terms of their overall value of civic engagement and feelings of empowerment (Pedersen, Meyer, & Hargrave, 2015).

“True education prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher service in the world to come” (White, 1948, p. 57). This indicates that there is an added element that is vital for life and learning- one that incorporates time, and

space, integrates the social arena and emphasizes service. The fourth element in the Adventist Education is social dimension, after the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions, in which service to humanity is the key component. The concrete concept of SDA Education is shown in the life of Jesus to grow in wisdom [mental], stature [physical], and in favor with God [spiritual] and in favor with man [social] (Luke 2:52). Later in His Ministry, Jesus went to Galilee, teaching, preaching, healing every disease and sickness among people (Matt. 4:23 1984). Here again we see the four facets: teaching, preaching, healing and associating with others- in essence, the cognitive, spiritual, physical and social dimensions.

The responsibility to serve God and humankind is clearly taught in the Bible as mentioned by Paul that through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13). This statement depicts service as a way of life. The Bible showed different examples of service rendered to God and humankind. But the greatest example however, comes from the life of Jesus. His first miracle at the wedding of Cana which showed that the highest position is held by one who serves. Matthew emphasized that if one wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave (Matthew 20: 26, 27).

The best way to incorporate the four dimensions in Adventist Education is by fostering the principle of service in all the instructional settings, according to Taylor (2013). One approach that has proved effective is through service learning as volunteerism provides important service opportunities in many educational institutions but service learning has proved more challenging to implement, Taylor pointed out. Studies on service learning have been conducted such as by Astin, Vogelgisang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000); Seider (2013); Seider, Gillmore, and Rabinowiz (2011) but their focus is more on the social and cognitive aspects of service learning. For example, Astin et al. explored the comparative effects of service learning and community service on college undergraduates' cognitive and affective development. This qualitative study, however, covers holistic educational approach which includes all aspects of Adventist education, i.e., cognitive, physical, social, as well as spiritual domains of learning. This is in line with AUP's philosophy that states, "The work of education and the work of redemption

are one: to restore in humanity the lost image of God through the harmonious development of the mental, physical, social, and spiritual faculties."

Furthermore, previous studies were mostly quantitative while this reported study is qualitative which provides indepth insights and rich experiences of ND students. This is to provide a better understanding of service learning in the community from an Adventist institution perspective.

II. METHODS

This study used the qualitative research design, specifically phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of the participants on service learning in the community. The participants of this study were six senior undergraduate Nutrition and Dietetics (ND) students of AUP who experienced service learning in the community. These students were among the 26 students in their batch who took Community Nutrition as a course. This course is a requirement for all ND students of AUP for them to have community exposure. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling based on the criteria, i.e., should be a senior ND student who experienced community service learning within the academic year 2014-2015.

Data were gathered through semistructured focus group interview (FGI). Guide questions were prepared prior to the interview. The FGI was conducted by the researchers themselves in a quiet airconditioned room. Prior to the interview, the participants were briefed on the purpose and conduct of the focus group interview. They were told that since their participation was voluntary, they could withdraw anytime if they wished to.

The interview which lasted for less than an hour was audio-recorded using a MacBook Air QuickTime Player. The recorded interview data were transcribed by an expert transcriber and were analyzed, and interpreted by the researchers themselves following Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) interactive analysis flow model. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

III. RESULTS

The results of the study were

presented according to the themes that emerged based on the following research questions: (1) What have Nutrition and Dietetics students experienced in their community exposure? (2) What are the issues and challenges the participants experienced in their community service learning? (3) How has the community exposure of the participants impacted their professional outlook?

Experiences of ND Students in Their Community Exposure

To answer Research Question 1, “What are the experiences of Nutrition and Dietetics students in their community exposure?” four major themes emerged: planning and implementing a program, application and imparting of knowledge, leaving an impact in the community exposure, and realizations.

Planning and implementing a community program. One major theme that emerged from the data on the participants’ experience in their community exposure is how to handle a community-based nutrition program. For example, Patricia said:

During our community exposure, we had to assess first the community of the things or the problem that has or had to be corrected. (Patricia, Group 2).

Like Patricia, David also shared his experience on what they exactly did in the community during their two-month service learning.

Every Monday and Wednesday, we had visitation. We gave them checklist, of course, and during Tuesday and Thursday we had our lecture and to maximize the time, we had the time for the kids. (David, Group 1)

Alex, from a different group than David, said they visited their clients every day but did similar routines as the group of David did. Alex shared:

We visit them every day, we give them lectures, tips, activities, and games. (Alex, Group 2)

Application and imparting of knowledge. Asked what they have learned in their community exposure that they could not possibly learn in the classroom, Patricia answered:

First of all the application of what we have learned in the classroom because you cannot appreciate what you have learned if you don’t apply it. For example, you learned the

reference value of underweight children you cannot really learn that well unless you experience it in the field. You will understand that or it would retain in your mind that these values represent the underweight children, these values represent the overweight, these values represent the malnourished mothers, the non-breastfeeding mothers, something like that. (Patricia, Group 2)

Patricia shared how she appreciated her learning when she had the chance to apply it in the community. Grace also explained how she gained not only how she applied her learning in ND but also how she shared to the community people the knowledge she has acquired in the classroom.

We taught them how to prepare food for the preschool and the school age because it is a problem for those types of children to eat healthy foods. But we need to emphasize on the healthy foods like how to use their local ingredients, how to turn them into something colorful or creative, about how to hide the vegetable so that the children will not be discouraged in eating it. Then aside from that, we printed the recipes then gave each one to the parent that’s for their use. (Grace, Group 3)

David highlighted the importance of service learning particularly the practical application of knowledge learned in the university to the community. David expressed his desire to apply his community service learning in his own region as he expressed in the following excerpt:

There are a lot of knowledge that we can apply in practical ways and manage in the communities, like I can also apply back in our region. Of course, I have already knowledge in how I can make plans for the community because I was there, so I can be able to make a very good plan for the community. I can also relate because I was once in the place. (David, Group 1)

Developing soft skills and values. Another theme that emerged from the data is the participants’ skills and values development. For example, Raymond developed patience, resourcefulness, problem-solving skills, and flexibility in his community

service learning experience. He said:

Because when you go there [community], they lack resources so you have to be patient. Oh, walang ganito, walang ganyan! (We don't have this or that!) Like one time we had our program in the barangay hall and we cannot use the hall. We cannot plug in our laptop because they are using the extensions and everything and of course it is quite malayo (far) and sometimes we are using our own money so we need to be patient and resourceful. We learn to solve our problems. (Raymond, Group 3)

David portrayed how his experience in the community that developed flexibility in various situations. He said:

We need to adjust or we need to design a program that will really suit or fit in to their [community people's] needs. Then the facilities, the transportation and, of course, the weather we had that even though it's about around December, we cannot be sure the weather would be fair or it would be rainy. It is difficult for us, especially the place or the venue that we will be having or the venue being used by the community but it is big challenge and yet a very happy experience for us that we being senior, we already applied all our skills, knowledge especially handling those situations we need to adjust. (David, Group 1)

David further explained about good communication skills practice in the community.

I mean we need also to fit in our knowledge like the words we'll be using. Of course, we need to suit their knowledge because we cannot use scientific or English terms that they don't understand. So, somehow it's kind of challenging.

David also learned to respect others, young and old, in the community. *For me, I had this experiment in the community that if you make yourself trying to be superior you will find out later on that people will not like you. But I tried to respect even small kids and in all ages we respect them and then they just gave back*

the respect. (David, Group 1)

Respect to others was also mentioned by Patricia in the following excerpt.

Say "po" and "opo" even though you are just like almost the same age with them because some of them are still young and then you have to show respect.

Aside from patience, flexibility, resourcefulness and respect, Patricia also highlighted selflessness for service and professionalism. Patricia stated:

For the values, for me, first you have to be selfless to care for others. You have to disregard the things that are making you comfortable. And then, second, you have to show professionalism. Even though you are still a student, you have to be professional, to come on time, and also you have to master your craft.

(Patricia, Group 1)

Professionalism for Patricia means reporting to duty on time and mastery of one's work. She also mentioned that when serving others, one does not have to think of herself or himself alone. Indeed, service learning is a good way to practice professionalism and service to others especially the poor and the needy. Patricia also said that she developed her communication and interpersonal skills in her community service learning experience. She said:

Being in the fourth year, I somehow felt I want to explore more and then also it was a good experience because it is challenging and also with the interaction with the people it help developed good PR.

Public relations (PR) requires communication skills, thus Patricia developed it by interacting with people in the community. Alex also learned how to deal with people and handle various situations in his exposure in the community. Alex said:

I learned how to deal with people, older, young, and new people we meet. Like we have asked them to do what they could do. We learned how to handle those kinds of situations,

how to make them do this or do that without offending them or reprimanding them.

Leaving an impact to the community.

The participants reported how they left an impact to the community where they served. For example, Patricia shared the memorable experience she had on how she made an impact during her community exposure. She said:

I remembered we did an assessment on the children and then when the results came out, there was a child whose name is "Justin" who has an anthropometric measurement and he didn't know it and even the parents didn't know about it. And they were surprised of the finding and they were shocked and then they were like panicking. I thought to myself like it's good that they found out because it is still early like he is still a child we could still save him or make him normal.

(Patricia, Group 2)

Upon knowing the case of "Justin", the participants of this study reported that they did their best to help the parents and the boy to get healed. When Justin became normal, they felt that it was an impact they left to the community especially that the parents were so thankful of the ND students who helped them get normal weight.

Raymond also expressed how he left an impact in his exposure to the community by letting the people learn nutritious vegetables existing in their backyards they were not aware of. They also demonstrated how to cook them which the community people appreciated. Raymond said:

We do demonstrations in-relation to our course because we have a lot of available herbs available or vegetables but some of them don't know that is a vegetable some of them they don't know... that these vegetables can be cooked into a lot of recipes... They have like Chinese malunggay but they don't know that it is vegetable. They thought it's just a flower or like a fence. (Raymond, Group

3)

David also shared how he felt the impact of the service his team rendered in the community during their service learning.

David said:

I noticed that because it is a rural type area and one thing common in the family is that, they have lots of children in every family and sometimes the mother and father are not there to focus on caring in their children. I have noticed that in simple ways we made them fulfil this when we start in our program, the mothers said, "oh, my son they are really like yung parang dati hindi sya nagtotoothbrush ng everyday pero ngayon nagtotoothbrush na 3 times a day." We saw the improvements of the children, their hygiene like that because we taught them how to brush their teeth and the lesson for hygiene.

Realizations. After the two-month community service learning, the participants shared their realizations. Patricia, for instance, described how she realized that she cannot stay in her comfort zone forever as expressed in the following excerpts. Patricia said prior to the service learning program:

I remember that I am [was] not very much excited before we began the community service because I was thinking that we don't usually do it as students of going to barangay. This means that we are going out from our comfort zone because we have to go there every day and it will cost us not just our time but also our money and our resources. (Patricia, Group 2)

Although Patricia was not excited of doing community service at first, she realized that:

When we started our community program, I realized that our purpose to be there is not for ourselves. We are there to be able to help them [community people], to reach them out so I started thinking, I should not focus on what makes me comfortable

anymore. I should think of what would made them comfortable by extending our helping hand, by giving help through nutrition lectures, demonstrations, and different activities that would help them in their daily lives especially in gardening, teaching their children good hygiene and then how they would be able to utilize their garden product vegetables and the fruits that grow. (Patricia, Group 2)

Raymond also shared a similar realization with Patricia as follows: *At first I really don't want to be involved in the community. I thought the work there is like you are being exposed in the sunlight, the heat, the pollution but when we already immersed in the situation, I really felt the need of ND in the community. There should be at least one nutritionist or registered nutritionist in every barangay, or every community, or every town to focus or to see to it that their community is already in development or healthy community.*

Realizing the need for an ND in every community, Raymond expressed:

When we were in the community, I felt that I want to work in the community but not to the extent that I will stay there or spoon-feed the parents but I want to adopt a barangay or I want to give a program that would really benefit the parent. So, one thing for sure that I learned that there is really a need of ND in the community, in each community not only in Barangay Hoyo but in the community around the Philippines.

Issues and Challenges the Participants Experienced in Their Community Service Learning

To answer Research Question 2, "What are the issues and challenges the participants experienced in their community service learning?" three major themes emerged, i.e., lack of understanding of community's needs, difficulty of holding the people long, and misconception of people about ND's work.

Lack of understanding of the community's needs.

One of the challenges the participants encountered during their twomonth community exposure was to understand their clients' needs and to adjust their programs to such needs. For example, Raymond said:

Our great challenge is to comprehend the needs of the community if they really need our knowledge or information on healthy foods. If they don't really need those things then they will not be interested to listen and they will take it for granted. So, we need to adjust to really fit the program to their needs.

Alex also shared similar experience as Raymond's in terms of open-mindedness and flexibility to the specific needs of the community people. Alex voiced:

At first when I heard the word community, it sounds like funny or it's kinda easy for us especially we are already in fourth year wherein we have already gained a lot of knowledge, experiences all throughout our stay here in AUP. But then when we went to the community, we found out that there are a lot of challenges faced like you need to adjust yourself, of course, to the people or the target group especially the parents or persons, the target group like, for example, their needs. (Alex, Group 2)

Difficulty of holding the people long.

Another challenge faced by the participants in their service learning was the problem of keeping the people to stay during set activities. David said:

Our target group was the parents and we cannot hold them long especially in giving lectures. Lectures last for two hours or even one hour because they had a lot of activities, and a lot of household chores like they need to plant, they need to wash their clothes and they need to look after their kids. So we cannot really hold them long. We

cannot teach more especially the application part because the time is very limited even though we can spend the whole day in the community but we cannot maximize if some mothers were very busy which is a challenge for us. (David, Group 1)

Misconception of people about ND's work. The participants also considered it challenging when some community people thought of them as medical doctors because they were wearing white uniforms. Patricia reported:

One of the challenge[s] I remember is that some of the family members [they] thought of us as a doctors but we are not really doctors yet. So, we cannot give them prescription or anything else because we are not yet doctors...we cannot give the full information yet but we did a research then we asked our professors how to handle this kind of situation and then they are able to help us. And then when we came back we are able to tell them, "Okay, ma'am/sir, this is what you gonna do concerning this problem..." (Patricia, Group 1)

How Community Service Learning Impacted the Participants' Professional Outlook

Two themes emerged to answer Research Question 3, "How has the community exposure of the participants impacted their professional outlook?" They were: understanding and appreciating the ND profession integration of faith and learning

Understanding and Appreciating the ND Profession

Some of the participants understood and appreciated their chosen career when they were exposed to the community. For example, Joana said:

Personally, I didn't know about my course, or I was confused about my profession because I know the target is about health until I got into the community service which made me feel the idea that people need us. The people need to be informed about

health, about food and that is really important because it starts with us. (Joana, Group 3)

Only during the community exposure did Joana realize her role as a Nutritionist and Dietician. Joana continued:

Good health starts with us and if people don't know the trend of getting diseases being unhealthy will just go on and on. So, it made me realize that role in making change in the world is so important with regard to good health. (Joana, Group 2)

Joana's realization of her role in the community to promote good health is necessary in her career as a nutritionist and dietician. She further explained:

People need to be informed about health, about food and that is really important because it starts with us, and if people don't know the trend of getting diseases and being unhealthy will just go on and on. (Joana, Group 2)

Patricia described her learning experience in the community particularly in direct relation to her career as a future nutritionist and dietician. She acknowledged that the service learning of ND made her gain extra knowledge. For example, she learned how to plan meals suitable for the people in the community. Trisha expressed:

What I learned there that helped me in my profession, is of course, I learned extra knowledge about, for example planning, something like that, planning on meals especially designed for them [community people]. (Patricia, Group 2)

Joana also stated how she developed confidence and appreciation to her chosen career, which is ND. Joana said:

I gained more confidence especially on the part of our main job which is of course to impart to others what we know because after all what we teach them has a great impact on their lives,

it could actually change their lives and it could make me feel like that our profession is really needed not just in community but globally. (Joana, Group 3)

Integration of Faith and Learning

The second theme that emerged from the data that shows how the service learning experience of the participants impacted their professional outlook was how they integrated faith and learning in the community. For example, Patricia said:

The most fulfilling part for me is that aside for sharing the knowledge I have as a Nutrition and Dietetics student is, I was able to share with them [the community people]. First of all, the love of God, especially to their children because there were afternoons that we do children activity, so we were able to teach them about Jesus, about God, and about the Bible so that's the first. Second is the relationship that we have built together with the mothers, the grandparents. I think that is the most special thing that we were able to make relationships and bond with the people. (Patricia, Group 2)

Indeed, Patricia did share God's love and grace by bonding with the people in the community. Other participants also reported that by giving their time and sharing their knowledge about healthy lifestyle, they were able to spread God's love to humanity. Patricia continued:

We are able to share what we have learned in school. We are able to share not just what we have learned but also share ourselves our time because there are days that we went there even though we're not scheduled to give nutrition lectures. We went there just to talk with them. Asking them how are they, how was their family. So, going to the community isn't just that we perform our duties and responsibilities and requirements in school. We went there to be able

to make friends with them. It is one of the good things that we've learned.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results show that service learning is essential for ND students to know the needs of the community people to be the basis for planning and for actual implementation. The participants saw the need to adjust to the people in the community, understand their needs, and realize the purpose of service learning. They found it challenging to be out of their comfort zones and serve the needy people, to become selfless in reaching out to others in the community. They integrated faith and learning by sharing their knowledge on the importance of health and nutrition in their community programs and activities. The participants' reported impact of their community service shows how learning takes place outside the classroom. In this case, the participants did not only apply their ND knowledge but they integrated other learnings in other disciplines such as science and health as they also gave lectures on gardening and hygiene apart from nutrition.

The results of the study is supported by Taylor (2013) who says that service learning is essential in educational institutions in learning various aspects of development including spirituality. In the longitudinal study of college graduates by Astin et al. (2000), 82% reported that the service experience enhanced understanding of the academic materials, better application of class learning to real world situation and students' pursuit on service-related career. Overall, participation in service learning showed positive effects: high academic performance (GPA), writing skills, critical thinking skills, leadership, values, self-efficacy, choice of service career, courage, compassion, love, appreciation, teamwork, humility, and enjoyment by serving others, (Astin, et al., 2000.) The participants of this study reported learning values, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, love for others, appreciation of their career, and fun or enjoyment in serving others.

Ellen G. White in her *Ministry of Healing* highlights the results of service. She notes that service shapes character, develop talents and provides purpose in life. She observes that service learning deters temptation and offers enduring happiness. Most importantly, it deepens one's

relationship with Christ and prepares one for heaven (Child Guidance, 1954). Indeed, the participants of this study developed their love for others without expecting something in return as they went beyond the call of duty or their university requirement.

Service learning changed the perspective of the students who were at first hesitant of going out to the community being unwilling to give up their comfort zone, their comfortable life inside the university. But when they discovered reality in the community, i.e., poverty and hardship in the community, their minds were opened and their unwillingness to serve at first was replaced with enthusiasm. They became willing to share their knowledge, their time, and even their money to the community people and they found joy and fulfillment in giving themselves in service for others.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study's rich and in-depth data provided an understanding of the importance of service learning in the context of an Adventist institution. The actual service learning of Nutrition and Dietetics students in the community proved to be very beneficial than when they will just be learning theories in the classroom. The findings revealed that service learning enhanced the understanding and appreciation of ND students towards their profession. The findings also revealed that the community service learning of the ND students did not only focus on applying the knowledge and skills on their specialization, i.e., ND, but the participants also integrated faith and learning as they shared God's love and other aspects of their learning at AUP including health and hygiene, science, livelihood, and values.

In their community exposure, the participants experienced real situations that challenged them to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills, creativity, resourcefulness, communication and interpersonal skills, and flexibility. The participants actualized their meal planning according to the available local resources. They designed and redesigned programs based on the needs of their target groups. Thus, service learning is a holistic program that caters to the needs of the students to bridge the gap between theory and actual practice. However, for it to be more meaningful, service learning program should involve the students

more closely at the planning stage. Students should be brought to the community first to do the needs assessment including survey of the available resources in the community so that their program implementation will be smooth.

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