Changes in University Students after Joining a Service Leadership Program in China

Daniel T.L. Shek*
Chair Professor
Department of Applied Social Sciences,
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Hong Kong, P.R. China

Li Lin
Instructor
Department of Applied Social Sciences,
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Hong Kong, P.R. China

Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of a 4.5-day service leadership program for students from Chinese universities using objective outcome evaluation. The participants were assessed before and after the program, with two post-test measurements (immediate assessment and assessment 12 days after the completion of class learning). At pretest and two posttest time points, the participants completed a questionnaire measuring positive youth development, service leadership qualities and beliefs, and life satisfaction. Results showed that students' performance in both the immediate posttest and follow-up test was better than that in the pretest. Despite the limitations of the one-group pretest-posttest design, results suggest that the curricular-based service leadership program was effective to promote students' positive youth development, service leadership qualities and beliefs, as well as life satisfaction, and the effectiveness maintained a short period after the class had ended. While the existing findings are promising, these findings should be replicated in the future.

Introduction

As the notion of youth empowerment becomes increasingly popular (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003), programs that attempt to foster leadership among youngsters are growing. Colleges and universities have offered opportunities to develop students' leadership capacity in both curricular and co-curricular venues (Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, & Arensdorf, 2006; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003; Sessa, Matos, & Hopkins, 2009) with the belief that "the future success of local communities, states, and the country is tied to the development of quality leaders" (Ewing, Bruce, & Ricketts, 2009, p. 119).

Nevertheless, there are two problems in the existing leadership programs. First, few leadership programs are designed with reference to the demands of service-oriented economy in

the postindustrial era (Shek, Chung, & Leung, in press; Rosch & Caza, 2012; Shek, Yu, Ma, Sun, & Liu, 2013). Second, there are few evaluation studies on leadership programs (Posner, 2009; Rosch & Schwartz, 2009), particularly in the Chinese context (e.g., Chan, 2000; Shek & Sun, 2012b). In response to these problems, we incorporated "service leadership education" that fits in the service-oriented economy in a two-year leadership training program entitled ["Global Youth Leadership Programme" (GYLP)] for university students. Additionally, we tracked the students' behavior at three different time points (i.e., pretest, posttest, and follow-up test).

The transformation of economic structure from manufacturing orientation (industrial mode) to service orientation (postindustrial mode; Giarini, 2001; Shek, Chung et al., in press; Shek et al., 2013) demands a paradigm shift in leadership. In particular, leadership theory has transformed from the industrial-orientation that emphasizes control, hierarchy, bureaucratic efficiency, and self-interest to the postindustrial-orientation that focuses on relationship, empowerment, integrity, trust, and service (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006; Lusch, Vargo, & O'Brien, 2007; Rost, 1993). For example, Chung (2011) proposed the notion of service leadership and argued that service leadership "is about satisfying needs by consistently providing quality personal service to everyone one comes into contact with, including one's self, others, groups, communities, systems, and environments".

Viewing leadership as a service fundamentally challenges the paradigm regarding leadership as a means to increase one's frame and wealth. This view holds that the effectiveness of leadership does not only depend on the competencies of the leader, but also on the extent to which a leader is perceived to possess character and exhibit care. Although emerging theories and studies have suggested that authority and competencies are inadequate for being a good leader while care and morality are also crucial (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Chen & Farh, 2010; Fry, 2003; Greenleaf, 1977), most of the current leadership programs concentrate on training leadership skills and abilities. In contrast, service leadership education strongly emphasizes the importance of caring disposition and moral character in addition to competencies. Furthermore, service leadership education holds an assumption that "everyone is a leader", which is similar to the positive youth development perspective that every young person has the potential for thriving (Lerner et al., 2003). It also responds to the shift of focus from hierarchy, individual leadership, unidirectional influence to empowerment, shared leadership, and mutual influence in the leadership process (Kezar et al., 2006). This assumption further implies that leadership qualities can be learnt and nurtured.

Service leadership education is offered in a two-year leadership training program entitled ["Global Youth Leadership Programme" (GYLP)]. This program was jointly organized by the [University X] in Hong Kong and the [University Y] in mainland China. Students of both universities who wished to receive leadership training volunteered to participate in this non-credit-bearing program. The [GYLP] started with a class learning of service leadership, which served as a cornerstone for further leadership training. This course was based on a credit-bearing subject "Service Leadership" (Shek et al., 2013). Instead of teaching it over a term with 28 lecture hours, this intensive program lasted for 4.5 days with 30 lecture hours. It covered knowledge on service leadership including core beliefs of service leadership, intrapersonal competencies (e.g., emotional intelligence, adversity quotient, and spiritual intelligence), interpersonal competencies (e.g., assertiveness and active listening), character strengths

(including Chinese virtues), caring disposition, and self-leadership. This course adopted experiential-learning and reflective-learning. Thus, students engaged in self-reflection exercises, class discussion, role-play, drawing, and other class activities. For example, in order to help students practice assertiveness, we asked students to role play a scenario, in which it is difficult to decline a friend's request. In this way, students were guided to learn how to make an appropriate assertion. Another example is the use of debate. We asked students to debate whether it is necessary to practice traditional Chinese virtues such as righteousness ("Yi") and propriety ("Li") in the modern society. In general, students were highly encouraged to voice out their personal opinions in the class, while teachers served as facilitators by engaging students into the reflective and experiential learning process.

As mentioned above, evaluation research in leadership program has largely lagged behind (Rosch & Schwartz, 2009), especially in the Chinese context. As Posner (2009, p.551) argued, "despite the plethora of leadership programs scattered across college campuses, scant empirical investigation has been conducted into the benefits of such education efforts". Computer search using "leadership training" and "evaluation" as keywords showed that while there were 38, five and three articles in PsycINFO, Sociological abstracts, and Social Service Abstract in June 2015 respectively, the number dropped to one, zero and zero, respectively, when the keyword "Chinese" was added.

Amongst the few evaluation studies on youth leadership, benefits of participation in specific leadership program have been reported (Brungardt & Crawford, 1996; Keating, Rosch, & Burgoon, 2014; Posner, 2009; Rosch & Caza, 2012), with the one-group pretest-posttest design commonly used (e.g., Polleys, 2002; Keating et al., 2014). As to the service leadership education in Hong Kong, its effectiveness has been demonstrated via multiple methods, including the one-group pretest-posttest design (Shek, Lin, Leung, Law, & Li, 2014). Two classes of students who took the credit-bearing subject "Service Leadership" experienced significant improvement in cognitive-behavioral competencies, positive identity, and character.

There are several questions we have to ask when further evaluating this service leadership program. The first question is whether non-credit-bearing programs are also effective. On the one hand, as students volunteered to join the program, they were supposed to have a strong intrinsic motivation to learn which is associated with better learning outcomes (Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, 2008). On the other hand, students might not have a serious learning attitude in non-credit-bearing programs. Second, it is still unknown whether mainland Chinese students are ready to accept the notion of service leadership, given that service industry has not become the mainstay of the economy (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012) and the service-oriented mindset of leadership is not prevalent (Yu, 2006; Huang, 2006). The final question is whether the change, if any, can sustain over time. As such, we used two posttest assessments (i.e., immediate posttest and follow-up test) in this study.

In the current study, we conducted an objective outcome evaluation to investigate the effectiveness of the service leadership course in the [GYLP]. Data were collected before and after the implementation of the course at three different times (i.e., pretest, immediate posttest, and follow-up test). We hypothesized that compared to the pretest, students would report better performance at the immediate posttest and follow-up test.

Methods

Participants and Procedure. Forty-eight university students (37 female; Mean age = 19.65 years, SD = 0.76) participated in the [GYLP], with 24 students from [University X] in Hong Kong and 24 students from [University Y] in mainland China. Students volunteered to apply for the program with training in different disciplines. Besides students from Hong Kong and mainland China ($n = 42$, 87.5%), there were three Koreans (6.25%), one Taiwanese (2.08%), one Thai (2.08%), and one American (2.08%) joining the program.

Individual informed consent had been obtained before the administration of the pretest. The pretest was conducted before the first lecture. The posttest was conducted right after the completion of last lecture, while the follow-up test was conducted 12 days after the posttest.

Measures. The objective outcome evaluation questionnaire assesses ten positive youth development attributes, life satisfaction and service leadership qualities and beliefs in a 6-point Likert scale. These scales have been employed to evaluate a credit-bearing subject "Service Leadership" with good psychometric properties (Shek, Yu, & Ma, 2014). The internal consistencies of the scales used in this study were good (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of variables*

Variables	Pretest			Posttest			Follow-up			F value	η^2_p
	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α		
Positive Youth Development											
Cognitive-behavioral competencies	4.71	0.55	.82	5.04	0.47	.81	5.11	0.49	.83	13.56***	.38
Positive identity	4.78	0.64	.78	5.07	0.68	.83	5.07	0.64	.78	6.16**	.22
General positive youth development qualities	4.72	0.45	.69	5.03	0.42	.71	5.09	0.40	.71	23.63***	.52
Positive youth development total score	4.73	0.45	.88	5.04	0.43	.88	5.09	0.42	.89	26.56***	.55
Life Satisfaction	4.17	0.82	.86	4.78	0.82	.86	4.78	0.62	.86	17.97***	.45
Service Leadership Qualities and Beliefs											
Self-leadership	4.72	0.48	.61	5.03	0.62	.84	5.12	0.44	.73	22.11***	.50
Caring disposition	4.98	0.58	.86	5.26	0.52	.85	5.20	0.51	.87	7.94**	.27
Character strengths	4.66	0.49	.82	4.94	0.42	.79	5.08	0.43	.87	33.48***	.60
Beliefs of service leadership	5.14	0.65	.91	5.56	0.51	.90	5.49	0.55	.94	8.56**	.28
Service leadership qualities	4.79	0.45	.90	5.08	0.45	.89	5.14	0.41	.93	28.13***	.56

Notes. **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

The items of positive youth development were selected from the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale (Shek, Siu, & Lee, 2007) with revision to fit this course (31 items). Four composite scores were used in this study. Cognitive-behavioral competencies include the subscales of cognitive competence, behavioral competence, and self-determination; positive identity includes the subscales of clear and positive identity and belief in future; general positive youth development qualities include the subscales of social competence, emotional competence, moral competence, spirituality, and resilience; positive youth development total score includes all the subscales.

The items assessing important service leadership qualities were developed according to the service leadership model, which includes self-leadership, caring disposition and character strengths (Shek et al., 2014). In addition, beliefs of service leadership were also examined. One composite score was computed (i.e., service leadership qualities) including the subscales of self-leadership, caring disposition and character strength (28 items).

Life satisfaction was assessed by the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). It was successfully used previously (e.g., Sun & Shek, 2010).

Results

We analyzed the data using repeated measure analyses of variance (time: pretest vs. posttest vs. follow-up test), followed by Bonferroni t-tests for individual data point comparisons. The repeated measure ANOVAs revealed that there were significant time changes in all the indicators of positive youth development, service leadership as well as life satisfaction (see Table 1). Bonferroni t-tests (see Table 2) further revealed that there was a significant enhancement from the pretest to the posttest in each indicator, while there were no significant changes from the posttest to the follow-up test. However, the follow-up test scores were all higher than the pretest scores.

Discussion

The present study examined the effectiveness of an intensive service leadership subject based on the service leadership model (Chung, 2012; Shek et al., 2013) in the ["Global Youth Leadership Programme"]. Consistent with the general hypothesis, the present findings revealed that compared to the pretest, students scored higher on all the indicators at the two posttest time points.

Table 2. *Comparisons among the pretest, posttest and follow-up test*

Variables	Posttest - Pretest			Follow-up - Pretest			Follow-up - Posttest		
	MD	SE	t	MD	SE	t	MD	SE	t
Positive Youth Development									
Cognitive-behavioral competencies	.32	.07	4.35***	.39	.08	5.03***	.07	.07	1.10
Positive identity	.26	.08	3.43**	.26	.08	3.11*	.004	.06	0.06
General positive youth development qualities	.29	.06	4.92***	.37	.05	6.92***	.08	.05	1.59
Positive youth development total score	.29	.05	5.45***	.35	.05	7.16***	.06	.05	1.25
Life Satisfaction	.57	.11	5.04***	.59	.10	6.00***	.03	.08	0.34
Service Leadership Qualities and Beliefs									
Self-leadership	.30	.08	3.77**	.39	.06	6.33***	.09	.09	1.04
Caring disposition	.29	.08	3.87**	.23	.07	3.34**	.07	.06	1.05
Character strengths	.29	.06	4.42***	.42	.05	8.25***	.14	.06	2.25
Beliefs of service leadership	.39	.10	4.06**	.34	.09	3.56**	.06	.07	0.78
Service leadership qualities	.29	.06	5.12***	.35	.05	7.39***	.05	.05	1.02

Notes. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$; MD = mean difference; SE = standard error.

With respect to the main proposition of service leadership that effective leadership is determined by competencies, caring disposition and moral character, students showed improvement in multiple competencies, caring disposition and moral character. In the present context, we incorporated education about intrapersonal competencies and interpersonal competencies in the curriculum, which helps students improve their competencies. In addition, this class could be regarded as a structured youth activity that has structured content, rules, and goals while grants a high degree of autonomy. Larson (2000) believed that structured youth activities could be used to train young people's concentration and to nurture their initiative, which is conducive to their positive youth development. Our findings generally support Larson (2000)'s argument. Emerging research has suggested that enhancing positive youth development of young people would make them more likely to contribute to the community and society such as demonstrating a desire and responsibility to make social contribution as well as taking leadership and engaging in service activities (Lerner et al., 2005).

Furthermore, students showed improvement in their moral character and caring disposition after the class learning. According to previous literature, these attributes have a strong impact on leadership effectiveness in terms of increased loyalty, commitment, respect and identification of followers toward leaders (e.g., Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010), as well as enhanced organizational commitment (Farh, Cheng, Chou, & Chu, 2006) and prosocial behavior toward the organization (Wu, Huang, & Chan, 2012).

Besides knowledge of service leadership, it is conjectured that the reflective and experiential pedagogy used in the program contribute to the positive findings observed. Reflective and experiential learning has been regarded as critical to maximize leadership learning (Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Roberts & Westville, 2008). According to Kolb (1984)'s Experiential Learning Theory, "knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41). According to this learning model, students can learn by encountering, thinking, reflecting and doing (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Although we delivered service leadership knowledge in the classroom in the initial stage, we highly encouraged students to experience through in-class activities (e.g., role play and debate) and make reflections individually and collaboratively. We used an interactive approach rather than a didactic approach of teaching. Students were divided into small groups to maximize their learning through interaction and dialogues. According to Roberts and Westville (2008)'s survey among university students, five class activities were regarded as having the greatest impact on learning, which included connecting the materials to students' lives, group discussion, watching videos about course concepts, discussion with classmates and lecturers, and leading a discussion. All of these activities were employed in our service leadership class. For example, we often conducted group discussions, and students commonly had debates due to their different opinions. The differences and disagreement would not hamper the learning, but drive the learning process such as stimulating students' thinking and reflecting (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In the present context, we believe that reflective and experiential pedagogy can deepen students' understanding about service leadership and facilitate their personal growth. In fact, from the subjective outcome evaluation findings, students generally appreciated the learning approach and process in this program (Shek & Li, in press).

Results showed that the students still performed better after roughly two weeks. There are two possible explanations for this observation. First, the program effect persisted even after the class learning was over. Second, it is due to other activities conducted after the class learning, which included dialogues with the real leaders. Obviously, without a control group, these two explanations are plausible. Another concern is about the short interval between the posttest and follow-up test, which makes our argument of the longitudinal effect less persuasive. Despite these limitations, as there is a paucity of evaluation research with a follow-up test in the previous literature of leadership program evaluation (see an exception, Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999), our research goes a little further than previous evaluation studies on leadership programs. In line with the previous evaluation research on credit-bearing service leadership education using different methodologies (e.g., post-course subjective outcome evaluation, Shek, Lin, & Liu, 2014; process evaluation, Shek, Lin, Liu, & Law, 2014; focus group, Shek, Law, & Liu, in press), our research again showed that it is meaningful to deliver service leadership education even without credits. Together with previous research on short-term leadership programs (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Rosch & Caza, 2012), our findings suggest that short-term programs are also effective to promote leadership development in university students.

There are three important implications of the present findings on leadership education. First, service leadership education is able to enhance university students' endorsement of service leadership beliefs that are consistent with postindustrial paradigm. Paternalistic leadership is prevalent in Chinese organizations, which emphasizes the obedience of followers but benevolence and morality of leaders (Wu & Xu, 2012). However, strong control over followers

and unquestionable obedience of followers are not in line with the postindustrial leadership paradigm. Second, service leadership education is an active response to the developmental issues of the young generation, which is paramount to the prosperity of society (Ngai, Cheung, Ngai, & To, 2012). Previous research highlighting the decline of youth empathy and the increase of egocentrism (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Shek, Yu, & Siu, 2014; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012), heightened materialism (Shek, Ma, & Lin, 2014) and other internalizing or externalizing problems (Shek, Ma, & Sun, 2011) make the service leadership education more imperative. Lastly, service leadership education can be beneficial for learners from diverse background. Service leadership education was proposed primarily by referring to the Hong Kong socioeconomic context (Chung, 2012; Shek et al., 2013). However, the inclusion of non-Hong Kong students indicates the possibility to deliver this course to learners outside Hong Kong.

With reference to the limitations of the single group pretest-posttest design, the present findings should be interpreted with caution. Primarily, we could not exclude other unwanted confounding effects (e.g., post-class activities) in explaining the observed improvement owing to the lack of a control group. Nevertheless, it is an exceptionally useful design to offer preliminary evidence showing how participants/clients change after the intervention/treatment (Royse, Thyer, & Padgett, 2006; Simpson, Evans, & Reeve, 2012). Second, in the interval between the posttest and the follow-up test, students joined diverse activities related to leadership training. To minimize the honeymoon effect (Rosch & Schwartz, 2009), we still need to know whether the effectiveness will fade out after students return to their regular university lives. Third, the current follow-up test design was limited to 12 days, thus constraining the degree to which conclusion about the long-term effect can be drawn. A longer interval between posttest and follow-up test (e.g., three months; Rosch & Caza, 2012) should be used in future. Lastly, it is desirable to conduct a qualitative study to gain students' elaborated feedback and live examples of the learning process. It will help the researchers and practitioners understand the "why" (the reasons) behind the rating numbers (Shek & Lin, 2013; Shek & Sun, 2012a).

Acknowledgements

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Author Biographies

*Corresponding author: Professor Daniel T. L. Shek, PhD, FHKPS, BBS, SBS, JP, Associate
Vice President and Chair Professor of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic
University, Hunghom, Hong Kong, P.R. China. Email: daniel.shek@polyu.edu.hk

Professor Daniel Shek is Associate Vice President (Undergraduate Programme) and Chair
Professor of Applied Social Sciences at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Advisory
Professor of East China Normal University, and Honorary Professor of Kiang Wu Nursing
College of Macau. He is Chief Editor of *Journal of Youth Studies* and *Applied Research on
Quality of Life*; editorial board member of several international refereed journals, including
Journal of Adolescent Health, *Social Indicators Research*, *International Journal of Behavioral
Development* and *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*. He is Chairman of
the Family Council of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Li Lin, Ph.D, is an Instructor in Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong
Polytechnic University. She currently teaches leadership courses for university students. Her
research interests largely involve development of adolescence and emerging adulthood,
particularly parent-child relationship, positive youth development, adolescent risk behavior and
sociocultural influence, and service leadership.