

SCHOOLink

Lutheran EDUCATION Australia

We Have Souls: Service Learning at the Hong Kong International School

The search for soulfulness

One comment has resonated within me in recent months as I continue to explore and marvel at how and why service activities here at the Hong Kong International School (HKIS) regularly produce life-altering revelations within our students. Following last November's Humanities class trip to an orphanage in southern China, our class was discussing what we had really accomplished in a mere three days of visits. Why, I pushed further, do we not simply give up when we are barraged with the over-whelming needs all around us – when we watch the news, when we pick up a newspaper ... or when we visit a country with an endless number of healthy baby girls abandoned simply because of their gender? I repeated: Why don't we give up? Silence ... a long pause. Then from the right hand corner of the room, Grace broke the silence with a voice of conviction, almost exasperation, *WE HAVE SOULS*. Although the power of the remark did not immediately dawn on me, in the weeks and months since I have often returned to her comment, for it spoke powerfully about not only the answer to my specific question, but to bigger questions I've often pondered: How can I make education a



Humanities students at Fo shan Orphanage.

soulful experience? How can my teaching soul meet the souls of my students?

I've surrendered to the belief that for most students in my classroom I can't; or, more positively, I can do it so much more effectively and almost easily with out-of-the-classroom service experiences. Service brings to the surface that which lies within: our very souls. Let me, then, share with you our school's journey over the last fifteen years.

Growth in HKIS service experiences in the 1990s

Within my first month at HKIS in 1990, a veteran teacher asked me to co-lead

an 'interim' trip – our annual overseas field trips in March – with twenty students to an orphanage in Pattaya, Thailand. I found the experience in Thailand that year and in subsequent March trips extraordinary – I sensed a power at work within our students at the orphanage that I had not sensed before. Determining to find something closer to home, in March 1995, I led my first trip to an orphanage in the southern Chinese city of Foshan. Once again, I noticed the same effect: whether students were life-long residents of Hong Kong or newcomers, Asian or Western, male or female, freshmen or seniors, spending time with orphans for a week was a

transformative event. As a teacher, I yearned to find that 'elixir' – that transformative power that I could pass onto students in my classroom. What I worked so hard to achieve and only very occasionally saw evidence of in the classroom seemed to come to fruition predictably and rather effortlessly in a few days of holding an orphan in China.

While my orphanage work was starting to take shape in China, service at HKIS

We have souls.....	1
Service:	
A mark of the authentic Lutheran school.....	3
Shaken	4
ALWS - Learning service.....	6
Service:	
Valid faith journeys	8
District news.....	10
Faith story	

THEME FOR
THIS ISSUE:

Service
Learning

was also taking a positive turn in 1996. My principal, Jim Handrich, called my wife, Zella, and me into his office one day and suggested that we start an ongoing service program on Saturdays. We reflexively defended our 'Day of Giving' program, a one-day event in which all students went out into the community to participate in some type of service. But the more Jim talked, the more we knew he was right – ongoing programs could be far more meaningful for our students and far more beneficial to our community partners than a one-off event. Thus, Service on Saturday (SOS) was born in 1996 with six programs.

Re-reading the gospels

An essential personal perspective was that I was teaching Biblical Studies day-in and day-out. I daily struggled with the gospels to understand Jesus better and to make his ideas relevant. Now in Asia and working with orphans, teaching about social inequalities, and being confronted with the brokenness of society, I began to explore the human, socially active Jesus. His radical vision of the Kingdom of God announced a new type of spiritual community that would 'preach good news to the poor ... release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed ...' (Luke 4:18-19).

It is no exaggeration to say that my fire and energy for service grew apace with my understanding of Jesus' own fire and energy for the Kingdom of God, which included care for widows, orphans, the stranger, the poor. When I re-read Jesus' words in Matthew 25, 'If you have done it to the least of my brothers, you have done it unto me,' I better understood service as worship. Doing service, the passage suggested, was not simply imitating Jesus, but even experiencing Jesus, the centre of my faith life. These spiritual insights meant that through service I wasn't simply doing good for others; I was following Christ, worshipping Christ, pursuing the mystery of God in Christ through service.

From community service to service learning

By this point in 1997 our school had developed significant service programs: SOS was growing and the number of service-related interims had grown from one in 1991 to eight in 1997. But after a trip to Ateneo, a

Catholic school in the Philippines, I realised that all our programs were *extracurricular*. They were what we call '**community service**' programs. However, what Ateneo introduced to me was a far better way – the integration of service into the formal classroom setting. This intentional attempt for students to study (in the classroom), experience (out of the classroom), and reflect on both ways of knowing is true '**service learning**.'

This insight has led to the introduction of three service learning courses over the last seven years: A senior elective, 'Service, Society, and the Sacred'; a Biblical Studies course, 'Word and World'; and a core double period ninth grade course, 'Humanities I in Action.' In this class students wrestle during the week with the causes of and solutions to injustice, while on Saturdays students teach English at a nearby Hong Kong primary school. The highlight of the year, of course, is the weekend visit to the Foshan orphanage.

The chart below summarises the three stages that have occurred at HKIS in our service programs over the last fifteen years.

While going from step 1 to step 2 increased exposure, frequency, and quality, it wasn't until step 3 that classroom learning was intentionally tied to the service experiences.

Student voices

In the end, the most important measure of success comes from what we see happen in the lives of our students. Here are some comments from our students.

'Service scars you in the most beautiful way possible.'

Bethany, after visiting the Foshan orphanage

'Service is keeping humanity alive through beauty, love, and tolerance.'

Ji E, freshman girl defining service in the Humanities I in Action course

'Service is the art of healing the world and, in healing the world, so too do I heal myself.'



Grace Chang holding a child.



A Mandarin-speaking HKIS student chatting with two streetsleepers.

Yang Ming, senior boy after visiting the Foshan orphanage

For some students, service forces them to re-consider their deepest spiritual assumptions:

'The first time that I realised I truly believed in God was in the Philippines, participating in my very first Habitat for Humanity workcamp ... My soul has been hungry for the last 18 years and by God I'm feeding it.'

Lisa, a senior who started our first Habitat for Humanities chapter

'Something inside of me that had always been in a state of flux is now at rest.'

Yvonne, summarising how her baptism at university brought her peace, a journey that was initiated through service.

Conclusion

Our students yearn for a soulful educational experience – holistic learning opportunities that balance serious study with meaningful service experiences. For us as Christian teachers, such an integral vision of society is deeply rooted in our tradition. When Jesus was asked which of the 613 Torah laws was the most important, he answered with a comprehensive and multi-faceted vision: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ...' But the grand vision had a down-to-earth 'service' application: 'And a second one is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself' (Matthew 22:37,39). This, then, is our calling as Christian teachers. We must look deep within our individual and institutional souls and search out pervasively meaningful and spiritually engaging learning experiences. Our students' souls are very large, if only we can find authentic experiences to match.

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Frequency of service	Role in school program	Examples
1. 1990 – 1997 Short term; episodic	Extracurricular	Day of Giving; a few interims; clubs and fundraising
2. 1997 – 2000 Long term; ongoing	Extracurricular	SOS program; more interims; clubs and fundraising
3. 2000 – Present Long term; ongoing	Curricular and Extracurricular	Service Learning courses in addition to other community service programs