Title: Students' perceptions of change attributed to a service learning program in a tertiary Adventist Institution in the South Pacific

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Abstract:

The main purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate perceptions of changes of education and theology students. These students participated in an organized service learning program as part of their undergraduate training.

Students who took part in the Service Type Educational Program (STEP) since its re-introduction into the curriculum in 2002 as well as a few individuals who took part in the first service learning educational practicum organized in 1989 were the focus of the study. Exit documents (1,300) consisting of case studies, reflections papers and weekly journals of students (2002-2009) were perused, and 112 STEP participants were also surveyed and interviewed.

The four research questions looked at (a) the kinds of activities involved in STEP, and the participants’ immediate reactions to them; (b) the kinds of perception and attribution of attitude changes seen in relation to STEP as a practicum; participants’ view of themselves, others, and God; and participants’ view of their profession and their world view of service; (c) the similarities or differences in perception between theology and education students; and (d) the kinds of impressions that remained vivid with participants of the first service learning program introduced in 1989.
A qualitative analysis of the study data included the following overall findings. There was a general acceptance of the STEP program as contributing to one’s professional and personal development, despite some initial misunderstandings and negative reactions towards the program. There was a growing sense of appreciation for oneself especially in relation to privileges and opportunities one has in contrast with those whom they served. The faith and spirituality of participants was challenged through service involvement. There was a general change in view of others in relation to previously held stereo-typical views. Respect of human worth and human dignity became evident. There was also openness towards others of different faith and beliefs, and a broadening of perception regarding the boundaries and roles of one’s profession as a teacher or minister.

The study findings indicated a challenge that Christian institutions today be relevant to the needs of their communities. While students attending Adventist institutions may be articulate in their biblical understanding of service, the experiential aspect could be lacking.

A model based on Mezirow’s theory on transformational learning was developed based on the study findings. The model identified factors (cultures) and dynamics involved in the process of perception change in the context of the STEP program. This model may serve as a useful guide when planning for change in perceptions and attitudes through service learning approaches.

Recommendations in this study centered around the value of incorporating service learning into the undergraduate curriculum. These may serve as a vehicle for initiating attitude and perception changes in the lives of future graduates, thus helping the Seventh-day Adventist institutions in the South Pacific region to fulfill their mission statements that seek to integrate education and service.