The Challenges Faced by Students in Six-month Voluntary Community Service to Develop Health Programs in School Settings

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ABSTRACT

In university, students can participate in various community projects, which underserved populations such as in a school. However, several obstacles may arise during these projects. We conducted a qualitative study with the primary aim of understanding the challenges when students in Yogyakarta participate in healthy school projects. For six-months, we attend two-hours regularly meeting on Wednesday to observe how volunteers discuss appropriate articles, make detailed planning, organize tasks among volunteers, and prepare the tools. We then observe two-hours activities in elementary school on weekends. In the end, volunteers are asked to give feedback through Google Form as an evaluation that can be learned for the next action. The students faced three main challenges during their community service projects. First, uncontrollable turnover, we saw many students interested to join as a volunteer but they inconsistently participate for various reasons. Second, unclear professional identity, we found students are confused in determining the area of expertise because they do not have a choice of a specific topic where they want to focus. Third, working with different backgrounds, this program recruits volunteers from students interested in public health, especially medical, dentistry, nursing, midwife, nutrition, public health and other students who collaborate in a team to develop health programs. The six months of voluntary community service provided a good chance for students to develop health programs and learn to engage with the community, but there is difficulty in managing volunteers. Voluntary action manager has to build good engagement among volunteers to ensure sustainability students participation and improve volunteers focus through discussing appropriate articles on the managerial perspective of a public health program in medical and public health journal.

Keywords: Voluntary community service, Field work, Public health students, Public health program management, Service learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

As health students transition into public health practitioners, they will face a growing number of communities whose health problems are related to surroundings. Consequently, health students must be prepared to prevent the effects of a multitude of environmental factors on the health of their communities [1]. Health schools recognize the merits of community service for students and have incorporated it into their curriculum [2,3].

Community-engaged learning gives opportunities for students to interact with populations with different needs and perspectives. Students need to be prepared to engage ethically and respectfully, while thinking critically and reflecting on their roles in communities [4]. Community placement also gives students more exposure to community-driven activities than implementing programs under health center management. Students learned a lot on the activities of community participation rather than the specific roles of health workers in ensuring program effectiveness [5].

The health school in Indonesia includes community service into its official structured curriculum but it still limited time and lack of focus to give experience for students. All students may participate in various

voluntary community projects from their campus or other institution which serve disadvantaged populations to get more learning especially in specific public health program management. However, several challenges arise during the projects. Indeed, more than study has shown that voluntary community service with health students, but few that showed challenges for students as volunteers [6]. Reflections are undeniably integral to the improvement of community service. Many studies have found the importance of reflections in learning and self-exploration [7,8]. Interestingly, a study explained on the 'shadow-side' of reflection, which could be defined as an unwanted consequence of reflections, offering an alternative that reflections should be done strategically [9]. In summary, the objectives of the study is to identify the challenges faced by students when participate in voluntary community service in school settings.

2. METHOD

We conducted a qualitative study on the twenty-five undergraduate and graduate students with health background (medical, dentistry, nursing, midwife, nutrition, public health) from Universitas Gajah Mada who participated as volunteers in Yogyakarta healthy school projects. We identify the challenges for community service in school settings from the perspectives of volunteers, without influence by the researchers. For six months, we attend two- hours regularly meeting on Wednesday to observe how volunteer discuss appropriate articles, make detailed planning, organize tasks among volunteers, and prepare the tools. We then observe two-hours activities in elementary school on weekends. In the end, volunteers are asked to give feedback through Google Form as an evaluation that can be learned for the next action. We assess students' experiences in community service in school settings for two areas: action of community service and challenges faced by students when participating in community service. Subsequently, content and thematic analyses from results of observation and online survey were performed independently four researchers.

3. RESULTS

3.1. *Process of healthy school projects*

Four stages in implementing a healthy school program: 1) formulating concept of program, 2) recruiting volunteers, 3) implementing activities in school, 4) monitoring and evaluation.

3.1.1. *Formulating concept of program*

They conduct a situation analysis as a consideration in making appropriate program for students including observing the school and the surrounding environment, discussing with the school master and teacher, meeting the school committee and parents of the students, and approaching the students. Then, they design curriculum of program for six months in specific topic: water, sanitation, and hygiene, nutrition, bullying, and physical activity.

3.1.2. *Recruiting volunteer*

They openly recruit volunteers from undergraduate and graduate students with a health background such as medical, dentistry, nursing, midwife, nutrition and public health. Volunteer recruitment information is disseminated through posters, social media, class tours, and collaboration with student associations. Students who are interested to join are interviewed by the program manager to identify what their topics to focus.

3.1.3. *Implementing activities in school*

They make meeting with all volunteers to discuss appropriate articles, to make detailed planning, to organize tasks among volunteers, and to prepare the tools. Volunteers are asked to confirm attendance to ensure team members will be involved. The program manager communicates and coordinates with the teacher related to the activity. They also give briefings to volunteers before activities, especially those who did not come in meeting.

3.1.4. *Monitoring and evaluation*

Program managers monitor all activities in school including assessing volunteer performance when they doing their roles and tasks. In the end of activities, they make evaluation meeting to get commentary from every volunteer. Volunteers are also asked to give feedback through Google Form as an evaluation that can be learned for the next action. They involve the school master and teacher to evaluate the activities that have been carried out.
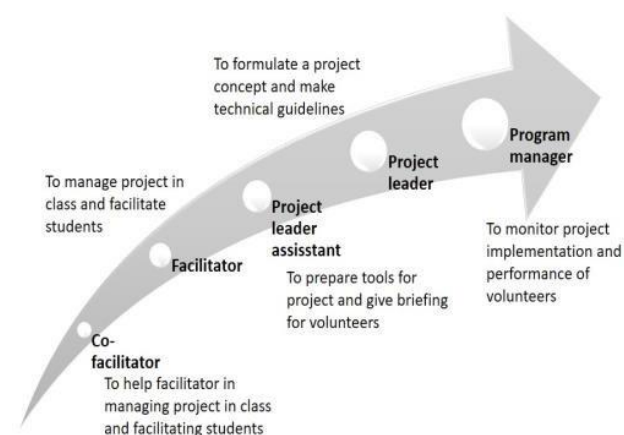
3.2. *Volunteers organizing strategy*

Figure 1. The volunteers roles

Figure 1 presents the category of volunteer roles in the healthy school program. In general, each volunteer has the same opportunity to fill these roles, but they have to start becoming co-facilitators first and then become the program manager to get experience. This volunteers organizing strategy is also useful for testing the sustainability of volunteers in the program.

3.3. The challenges faced by students as volunteers in school project

Three challenges were faced by the students in their community service projects: 1) uncontrollable turnover of volunteers and inconsistency their commitment to the projects, 2) facilitating students to determine professional identity they want to focus, 3) managing work in a team with different backgrounds member.

3.3.1. Uncontrollable turnover

The average attendance of volunteers in the meeting is only 2-5 times, there are even volunteers who have never come. Meanwhile, the average attendance of volunteers in the program implementation is also 2-5 times, so that each activity is almost always with different members. The presence of the highest frequency volunteers (more than 10 times) from core team of the healthy school project. Volunteer absence is rarely delivered at the WhatsApp Group or to the project leader, the most common reason is to have another agenda at the same time or without confirmation.

Students' motivation to participate in voluntary community service in school settings are varied. These include: to get experience in developing health programs for community, interested in program concepts and ideas, happy to interact with children, care and empathy for children's rights, likes to do social activities, fill free time on weekends, and is assigned a direct supervisor. But, these reasons are not enough to make students have a strong sense of ownership of the program. Many students have to learn in balancing commitments because the time is limited to join community service.

3.3.2. Unclear professional identity

Project supervisors always remind the main goal of voluntary community program in school settings, in addition to practicing in public health program management, as well as to build professional identities that they want to focus. The field of public health studies is very broad, therefore each volunteer has the opportunity to choose and develop a specific topic program that they like. Unfortunately, many students have not succeeded in identifying what scientific fields they want to develop. Volunteers follow program that have been made by the core team. And only a few volunteers propose new program topics.

3.3.3. Working with different backgrounds

The voluntary community project in school settings is managed by a team of students who are interested in public health program management and have different backgrounds. They have a diversity of experiences and approaches in problem solving. Volunteers from medical students are better at disease based programs, while volunteers from non-medical students more focus on social approach. Working in a team with a different background requires an open and effective communication channel in order to combine team members' ideas into an innovative and interesting strategy.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Proposal of solutions to challenges faced

Alternative solutions were offered to tackle the challenges, such as giving appreciation to motivate volunteers, making journal club to build professional identity of volunteers, and making a strong executive committee for the project to manage volunteers.

4.2. Giving appreciation to improve motivation

The challenge for program managers from non-profit organizations is to retain volunteers [10]. Volunteers often don't last long in the voluntary program if they don't get rewardsthat meet their expectations. While, the sustainability of programs also is threatened by high attrition among volunteers. High turnover of volunteer causes the lack of sustainability in the relationships among volunteers. Retention and performance can be affected by job satisfaction from intrinsic and extrinsic factors [11,12]. Non-financial incentives such as appreciation schemes for volunteer efforts and achievement is the key to motivate and retain volunteers where they are not receiving stipends [13].

4.3. Making journal club to build professional identity

Other studies have explained that community service learning closely related to stronger professional identity and confidence as well as deeper understanding [14,15]. A systematic review found that journal clubs can improve reading habits, knowledge of statistics, and the use of relevant literature [16,17]. The journal club has been a good opportunity to participate in high-level discussions in the team. Especially, many of the interactions are judged tobe transactional (focused on deadlines and deliverables) rather than transformational (focused on group and individual professional development) [18,19]. From journal reading, volunteers can get perspective of public health program in medical and public health journal.

4.4. Making a strong executive committee to manage volunteers

Now, few studies offer solutions for the challenges in community service. McCarthy et al. [20] showed the similar challenges with our analysis, further highlight the recurring themes of challenges in service learning from the committee.

4.5. The challenges faced by students as volunteers in school project

Making a strong executive committee through keeping a structure of project was proposed as a strategies solution to solve challenges during community projects participation, particularly when the previous system was weak in structure and leadership [6]. A strong executive committee is also important to ensure the organizing of roles and responsibilities that are fair to volunteers

5. CONCLUSION

The six months voluntary community service provided a good chance for students to develop health program and to learn engaging with community, but there is difficulty in managing volunteers. Voluntary action manager have to build good engagement among volunteers to ensure sustainability students participation and improve volunteers focus through discussing appropriate articles on managerial perspective of public health program in medical and public health journal.

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