

Original Paper

From Ohio to Hong Kong: Fostering Dynamic Learning Communities Through the Building of International Partnerships

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Abstract

In 2017, Franciscan OFM friars from the Diocese of Hong Kong proposed the development of an international classroom exchange between Franciscan University graduates and their Kowloon, Hong Kong parish schools. This study defines the creation, cultural issues experienced, and program curriculum proposal during the building phase of this international program. The researcher proposes the use of O'Shea's (2014) mission and identity framework as a lens for best practices, faith formation and defined social cohesion for all participants and significant impact.

Keywords

EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Mission and Identity, Culturally Relevant Teaching, Institutional Partnerships

1. Introduction

Upon arrival to the Tsz Wan Shan district in Kowloon, Hong Kong a visitor quickly realizes that their immersion into the community is complex. This never sleeping urban area requires a heightened alertness. From the early morning commuters among the city's darting commercial bus transposition to the late-night where these same people purchase to carry out dinners from the counters of one of a kind outdoor restaurants that line the streets, the people of Kowloon are always going somewhere. Standing among the commuters, one only needs to look up to see towering government housing that holds its own communal identity. The streets are lined with narrow shops that house bakeries, convenience stores, fruit markets and a multitude of specialty shops. If the day is clear from pollution or low-lying clouds, mountains frame the district. Among this kaleidoscope of activity is where the EEP (English Enhancement Program) between Franciscan University and St. Bonaventure Catholic Schools begins. The history of St. Bonaventure is not uncommon for Hong Kong. The school is a model that was

adapted in the early 1970's by the Chinese government. During this decade, Chinese officials acknowledged the need for a more purposeful education system and began to build schools with the intention of implementing religious communities to run the daily operations.

The first school system within Tsz Wan Shan consisted of one primary school and one high school. It should be noted that high school is a terminology from a Western perspective and secondary schools in Hong Kong are typically named colleges.

During this period of providing a more intentional access to school for those in the margins, Father Howard Stunek a Franciscan OFM from Chicago located to the area and accepted the request to manage the newly built schools from the government. Father Stunek renamed the school system after Saint Bonaventure in addition to adding the Western title of *high school* to the secondary school.

As additional government housing was built around the schools, the need for more classrooms seats increased. Fifteen years ago, the primary was divided into two schools which used a rotation of morning and afternoon sessions to serve students. Once this concept could no longer serve as a model, a second school was built and full day instruction was provided.

Within the school systems of Hong Kong, there are two tracts which a school may be classified as: IB (International Baccalaureate) or DSE (Diploma of Secondary Education). In either accreditation, proficiency of English on the final exam is the change agent. In addition, all schools are given a banding system of 1, 2 or 3. Schools banded as a 1 would be considered low achieving, band 2 is considered average to somewhat below average. Those schools identified as band 3 schools are the coveted schools to be accepted to; most band 3 schools serve the private, affluent sector.

St. Bonaventure at this time is considered an average to slightly above average band 2 school. The limiting factor is the lack of English proficiency within the school. For example, in 2016 a total of 19 students taking the University entrance exam passed the DSE (Diploma of Secondary Education) content portion with high scores; however, the exam participants only received a level 2 out of 5 for the English assessment. These results are far beyond disappointing, the history of insufficient mastery of English is a direct correlation of being accepted into a University but not completing due to insufficient conversational and academic English.

A majority of the students who come to the St. Bonaventure schools are from low SES (social and economic) families lacking the opportunity to practice English in the home and the use of private tutoring is not monetarily feasible. As the demand for and scale of English language teaching in Asia has proliferated, Asian governments have recognized the high value attached to English speakers as a commodity in the global economy (Jeon, 2020, p. 2).

2. The Role of Religion in a Diocesan School

Franciscan University is a private Catholic college anchored in the industrial town of Steubenville, Ohio with an enrollment that centers around 2,700 students on ground and an established online presence. In the summer of 2017, St. Bonaventure stakeholders contacted Franciscan University to propose a partnership that would afford graduates of the University employment to foster native English speakers in the school systems of St. Bonaventure. Candidates were charged with the tasks of (1) English language support or resource persons for local teachers and students, (2) using means within or outside the school curriculum, in collaboration with local teachers, under the supervision of the school principal to build an English program, (3) foster a Franciscan presence that supports Catholic identity within the schools.

According to the Second Vatican Council, a Catholic school must make an ongoing effort to “create for the school community an atmosphere enlivened by the gospel spirit of freedom and charity (38).” Upon the initial visit of the Franciscan faculty liaison to the schools of Kowloon, there was a significant sense of community and understanding of the student’s struggles. Students in the primary schools were outgoing and sought out the visitor from Franciscan to share their classrooms, school projects and practice English. In the two primary schools, there were clear examples of active learning and attention to providing academic instruction that was student centered. The halls and classrooms have a purposeful Catholic identity through the use of icons, artwork and Saints to name common areas; however, the culture and Catholic identity are complex. Within the halls of the high school, Catholic identity was present through the visual representation. The school has a designated religion classroom or common area, where students may come for tutoring on the religion exam, fellowship and club activities lead by the two religion teachers in the school. According to the Second Vatican Council, “that this community dimension in the Catholic school is not a merely sociological category; it has a theological foundation as well. The educating community, taken as a whole, is thus called to further the objective of a school as a place of complete formation through interpersonal relations (p. 18).”

For St. Bonaventure high school, the religion common area is the central focus of faith formation and promote cooperation, foster communication and develop shared beliefs. It should be noted that of approximately 700 students, at the time of the faculty member’s visit, only 20 were practicing Catholics. The religion teachers stressed that for them, there was an overwhelming need for ongoing Catholic presence within the student’s daily lives. This observation aligns with and can be affirmed by the following “...the Catholic school aims at forming the persons in the integral unity of their being. They must be involved in the dynamics of interpersonal relations that give life to a school community (Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education as cited by O’Shea, 2010).

The purpose of cooperation in the educational setting is to promote student and teacher interdependence. Peterson, Beymer, and Putnam (2018) discuss how positive cooperation promotes effective communication and stems from shared beliefs and values. The research presented in the current study supports the influence of shared beliefs on the cooperation of the teachers to each other,

their students, and the researchers. Cooperation regarding shared beliefs of expectations, discipline, and religious practices supports social cohesion because students learn to form effective relationships through shared interests, as well as, how to collaborate with others respectfully. Also, students experience the responsibility of their actions and the consequences on the world around them.

With a school population that is limited in regards to practicing Catholics, administrators and the religious who lead the school community face challenges that are unique and somewhat foreign to those their sister schools in the United States. In such instances, *Gravissimum Education is* provides the following consultation” the importance of the Catholic school apostle is much greater when it is a question of foreign missions (p. 77).”

The foundational program goals of English language support, enhancing school curriculum, and fostering Catholic identity began to take on new meaning when presented in the context of *Gravissimum Education is*. What was once a program intended for academic advancement needed to first be rooted in Catholic doctrine to serve the church in a more authentic context.

According to Neil Ormerod, there are four dimensions of mission and identity: the religious, moral, cultural and social (as cited by O’Shea, 2014).

Table 1. O’Shea, G. (2014), Review of Religious Education for The Catholic Education Office Diocese of Parramatta

	Mission	Identity
Religious	Prayer, liturgy, belief, sacraments	Christian conversion, public witness to faith
Moral	Moral expectations for community life	Moral witness, moral challenge
Cultural	Theology, moral thought, artistic expression, Christian Literature	Cultural dialogue, challenge and critique
Social	Christian community living, local parish, Christian groups	Social justice, outreach to the needy, marginalized

O’Shea’s application within the context of a Catholic school affords a framework to measure the strengths and weaknesses within a school community, “Catholic primary school can be viewed as an extension of the local parish by seeking to form children in the basics of Catholic religious, moral, cultural and social identity; where as the role of the Catholic secondary school looks to provide

opportunities for active engagement into social justice (p. 53)".

3. Methodology

The methodology for this study reflects Action Research coined by Lewin in the 1940s (Creswell, 2005). Lewin observed the discourse in the availability of goods, assessments of the damages occurred, and the need for improvement of intercultural relationships after World War II. To address this dilemma, he devised a series of steps to facilitate discussions or "think tanks" with those affected. Creswell 2005 (as cited by Boury, 2012) offers the process consisted of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The use of this model has now transposed into the educational sector and deemed Action Research. The term Participatory Action Research (PAR) is applied when there is a desire to improve a community's organizations, families within that community, and the social dynamics of a group of people. The theory of PAR is a framework to implement changes within an organization through the participants.

For the program's first year, four women and one man accepted the offer to assist classroom teachers and build plans for English enhancement and faith formation set forth by the Diocese. All four women were recent graduates with degrees in social work, education, and catechetics. The male participant graduated with a degree in theology from another institution that has ties to Franciscan University. All female participants were from the same institution of higher education, Franciscan University.

4. Program Recommendations

4.1 Religious

"One of the hindering factors for the growth of religious life in secondary schools in Hong Kong is that Religious Education is not a component of the DSE final examinations. However, we have noticed a small number of students actively participate in prayer-centered or prayer-related workshops at lunch time and occasionally volunteer at a soup kitchen nearby at St Bonaventure Church." ~EEP Program participant

"Prayer can and should be integrated at the beginning and end of more activities in the school (such as sports games, tutorials, club meetings and band practice), at the very least as a way to create a space for students to practice their public speaking in either English or Chinese. Although the main outlook or belief of the students at St Bonaventure Secondary School is atheist, most people respect the person of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary." ~EEP Program participant

Given the complexity of the cultural and religious differences between the American Catholics and school communities, the first year though challenging, did afford opportunities to develop and begin programs to address the concern of a more robust Catholic identity. Though mentioned in some of the reflections that students could be disrespectful of the teachers, this hasn't been the case when it comes to the parish priests.

As mentioned in one of the quotes, the DSE (Diploma of Secondary Education) exam takes precedence

over all other activities. This exam determines admittance to college, and for students is the gateway to gainful employment and future career choices. In year two of the program, the lens of religious formation should be adapted to form a western perspective to the realistic rhyme of the students responsibilities.

Programs that require ongoing attendance may not be suited to the culture of students attending a regular school day followed by tutoring in the evenings for the exam. Finding “windows” of time that students may have fellowship with the Catholic Americans for prayer and intentional faith formation is recommended. Whereas American peers in a Catholic high school would attend a weekly mass during the school day, after school prayer groups or retreats, the Hong Kong student may benefit more from a separate weekend mass time that addresses tutoring schedules.

O’ Shea (2014), in his framework, stresses the importance of the public witness of faith. Due to the various religions and agnostic practices, consistency of the Catholic witness may not be shared but is seen by all. Through “living the gospel,” Catholic teachers working in the schools of St. Bonaventure are presenting an authentic representation that is translated not by words but by actions.

4.2 Moral

“While there are no drugs in Hong Kong, students generally seem to “eat up the hype” or be curious about them. Cheating is seen as mutual help or teamwork, walking out in the middle of class is fairly acceptable, screaming and arguing with the teacher and not turning in homework are regular occurrences.”~EEP Program participant

“the prolonged periods in which they are required to stay in school, generally from 7:30 am to 5:00/6:00 pm. This routine does not allow students to spend enough time with their families, who generally work late as well. We have met several students who have one parent working 5 or 6 days a week in Macau or mainland China.”~EEP Program participant.

“We hope that our presence will continue to inspire and challenge our students to love one another and themselves more fully. This requires us to have more fellowship with the students, being witnesses of what Christian community is all about. We as missionaries can and should work together more often in the schools, advising and encouraging the schools to incorporate a more structured prayer life.”~EEP Program participant

The context of morality and the desire to achieve academic success is a cultural issue faced not only in Hong Kong but in the United States. For high school students in Hong Kong, factors working to undermine the school climate may be attributed to the pressures of academic success and economic gains for families. Cheng and Shing (2017) propose poverty in Hong Kong hit a record high with 1 in 5 people considered living at or below the poverty line. Also, the rate of affordable housing in Hong Kong has driven the demand to a level that most individuals are not able to meet.

The common factor in the desire to create a more cohesive classroom culture and a family unit that supports each other may be better addressed from the perspective of dignity of the human person. That within any decision there are consequences that affect others. For students who are experiencing the

pressures of the DSE, in a culture that does not discuss feelings, the acting out may be a release of the frustrations felt. This challenge is not unfamiliar to Western classrooms and there have been gains to address this through mindfulness training and classroom mission statements that reflect a culture that supports one another.

The desire to create a more cohesive classroom culture and a family unit that supports each other may be better-addressed from the perspective of the dignity of the human person. That within any decision, there are consequences that affect others. For students who are experiencing the pressures of the DSE, in a culture that does not discuss feelings, the acting out may be a release of the frustrations felt. This challenge is not unfamiliar to Western classrooms, and there have been gains to address this through mindfulness training and classroom mission statements that reflect a culture that supports one another.

Catholic teachers from the program offer that they should be a witness of what Christian community values; mirroring respect and collaboration in challenging classroom situations. Teachers may also consider creating workshops to teach coping skills for addressing the anxiety and frustration that comes from home and academic struggles—thus shifting the focus of discipline to one of community engagement and support.

The concept of cheating, as a form of teamwork, is a struggle that all the program teachers shared. This “group think” may not be one that can be changed; therefore, developing ways to leverage teamwork in the classroom in an open forum may provide opportunities for dialog between the American teachers and students.

Within the reflections of the American teachers, there is a desire to form a fellowship with the students through Catholic traditions. Prayer, youth groups and clubs are ways for the American teachers to share their Catholic faith and provide support to Hong Kong families. The challenge is to create a culture of students, religious and non-religious, to feel a sense of ownership and desire to participate.

4.3 Cultural

“There are many challenges and at the same time many great things happening in Hong Kong. Since many of the Catholics in Hong Kong were originally from the Philippines, most of the liturgical and sacramental life has developed with a charismatic and very joyful approach.”~EEP Program participant

“The colorful and welcoming nature of the charismatic Holy Mass is very attractive to the locals who yearn for a sense of community. The traditional Holy Mass however draws many similarities to the ancient Chinese ceremonies and traditions that many have forgotten. Both suit the needs of the people.”~EEP Program participant

“The Diocese of Hong Kong also sponsors many speakers from around the world to come and give lectures and host workshops. Apologetics has captured the interest of a large number of teachers at St Bonaventure, especially those who have been recently baptized.”~EEP Program participant

“The artistic expression is very diverse and flourishing! One of the OFM Friars has a Catholic Artists Club that regularly meets. In the High School that diversity is reflected in the decorations of the

Religious Education room as well as in the hallways and the little prayer room.”~EEP Program participant

There isn't a lack of cultural opportunities within the community for student expression and growing more rooted in the understanding of the unique and beautiful ways Hong Kong embraces their rich, yet complicated, history. Through cultural exchange and the opportunity to participate, American teachers can experience meaningful dialog. O "Shea (2014) offers the view of Benedict XVI (2004), "...the religious dimension is, in fact, intrinsic to the culture. It contributes to the overall formation of the person and makes it possible to transform knowledge into the wisdom of life."

By providing the context of Catholic identity to the cultural norms and traditions of the Kowloon student's, Catholic faith formation moves from facts to the application of faith and reason. For example, the Holy Mass, when offered by the FOM priest marries the traditions of the culture with the Church's teaching—thus building a familiar context for students. By providing international speakers, Diocesan officials present a cultural exchange that is open and authentically reflects the vision of Benedict XVI "transforming the wisdom of knowledge into life." Finally, the desire to create a community for the students is more accessible when coming from the lens of culture as opposed to religion. Through culture identity, all Kowloon students have a connection to explore.

Social

"St Bonaventure Secondary School has several social outreach programs such as visiting and feeding the elderly nearby, collecting and distributing food for the needy at certain times of the year and holding bazaars whose proceeds go to Catholic Charities.”~EEP Program participant

"We feel our community of missionaries could do a better job of supporting students on this front, but feel constrained by limitations of time and energy. A more structured community life and involvement with local parishes can and should allow us to be of further help in some way”.

"There are several Catholic groups which we have joined and are attempting to become active members of. Some of these social or catechetical groups are run by the St Francis Xavier Lay Missionary Society, a very experienced and well integrated group active in several parts of Asia.”~EEP Program participant

"Time permitting, we can and should also reach out to the Missionaries of Charity Sisters in MongKok who are active on several fronts, as well as begin a mail correspondence with incarcerated men and women that we have been able to visit. “ ~EEP Program participant”.

"In collaboration with other Catholic organizations such as FOCUS group (an international Catholic campus ministry organization based in the US) and Christ Youth Action (a local Catholic youth outreach organization), we can and should support this student initiative by sponsoring talks, helping plan retreats and arrange for students to attend Eucharistic Adoration and pray the Holy Rosary together. “~EEP Program participant

To live in Hong Kong is to be in a city that is always moving. The opportunity for social integration within the parish and town is never lacking; however, as in any international program, it takes time to

form a community outside of the stakeholders. Through Franciscan alumni contacts and the church, American teachers in the second semester were able to connect with outside Western support for their community life. Missionaries working with another non-profit outreach were a source of support for the Americans and provided opportunities for travel advice and community engagement.

Just as the American teachers felt the students needed to have community, they realized that this was crucial for their faith and well-being. Isolation due to language and cultural norms was a concern of the program. However, through the ongoing support of St. Bonaventure school administration and parish priests, the American teachers were able to experience Hong Kong and the Catholic community in the first semester with depth and breadth. This foundation was crucial for the confidence to move outside of the St. Bonaventure and seek fellowship with others living abroad.

Through new friendships and connecting faith communities, a broader lens of Hong Kong and outlining areas was achieved in the first year of the pilot program. These new friendships will afford a larger support system and resources moving into year two for the program.

4.4 Further Research

For the next year, three of the five American teachers will be returning to the program, and one male history major, who recently graduated from Franciscan University will join the team. The researcher hopes that the friendships formed through FOCUS and alumni will help the year two community to be more engaged with each other. There was a sense in the second semester that a divide had occurred within the group. Some were moving forward developing new friendships while two felt excluded. Though all felt welcomed in their school communities, there was some discourse when it came to choosing mass offerings for the team, praying together as a community and opinions of student activities.

As in any organization, conflict is inevitable. However, to afford all participants the ability to choose their leisure activities freely while still maintaining a schedule that binds the program, needed fostering. For the coming year, with the help of a campus TOR friar in the United States, the team will commit to a schedule of weekly mass and prayer along with the planning of team and student-centered outreach. Participants will still be afforded time for personal friendships, travel, and program planning in their selected schools. However, all felt they needed support building their community.

Catholic identity and faith formation are still the program's primary goal, as set forth by the St. Bonaventure administration and parish priests. Having now offered classroom support for English institution and faith formation in the schools and parish, participants have created a supply list of material needs for year two. Program proposals to address specific areas of student success, aligned with the four dimensions of mission and identity and the on boarding of a University priest to cultivate community norms for year two will be of great importance.

The researcher plans to use year two as a transition into developing partnerships with other Western institutions in Hong Kong with the vision of providing future programs to address student faith formation and an undergraduate mission trip, from the researcher's home campus, is in discussion. In

addition, a planned visit by St. Bonaventure administration to explain the program and recruit for year three will occur spring of 2020 campus.

The researcher would like to extend gratitude for the opportunity to partner with St. Bonaventure schools of Hong Kong. The vision to serve all students from the stakeholders has produced significant movement within the parish community and cultural exchange for University alumni and the researcher.

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