

Peer Support Training Practice and Viewpoints

– Peer support training for Chinese university students using picture books –

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Contemporary Chinese society suffers from a range of psycho-social problems. While urban areas enjoy dramatic economic growth and development, an increasing number of poor people are unable to benefit from these changes, with interpersonal relationships said to be weakening. In spite of the country's huge population, many Chinese people have few opportunities to attend college or find a job. Interpersonal relationships among young people, in particular, show that friends have turned into "enemies they engage with on the battlefield," rather than teammates or comrades with whom they stay together and help one another. As Chinese university students often have no siblings, after entering college and living on their own for the first time, they frequently have trouble interacting with other students and making friends. To investigate this situation with the hope of improving it, the author conducted a study with students at Soochow University in China. The author carried out a peer support training program using picture books and made an investigation based on findings gained during the program.

First, as a preliminary survey, a three-day workshop was held, centered on the training program, from September 11 to 13, 2013, in which a total of 98 Soochow University first-year students, comprising 42 males and 56 females, attended. After the end of the workshop, the participants were asked to write down their comments and impressions regarding the program. Three main categories were identified: "Creating a place where I feel that I belong" (29.8%), "Improving communication skills" (25.0%), and "Enhancing the ability to empathize with others" (33.3%) (Others: 11.9%). Next, based on the data acquired in this preliminary survey, a questionnaire sheet (15 items, each with a 10-point scale) was drawn up for use in the main survey.

As the main part of the project, the same peer support training program was conducted on October 18, 2014. Thirty-seven Soochow University students, comprising five males and 32 females, attended. It was examined if any changes could be seen in the three above-mentioned categories between before and after the training. Analysis was carried out, using a two-way factorial analysis of variance. As a result, the "survey period" showed a significant main effect ($F_{1.16} = 1825.9, p < 0.01$), implying that the average points scored after the training were significantly higher than those beforehand. The three categories also had a significant major effect ($F_{2.32} = 6.48, p < 0.01$). No interactions were seen among the three categories. As a result, the peer support training program using picture books was confirmed to have been effective in the three categories of "Creating a place where I feel that I belong," "Improving communication skills," and "Enhancing the ability to empathize with others."

These results showed that the peer support training program carried out as part of the study had helped to improve the communication skills that Chinese university students tend to lack. At the same time, making use of picture books offered a psychological foundation on which the students could rely and allowed them to project themselves onto, or empathize with, the main characters appearing in the picture books, thereby enabling them to ease the stress that had built up in their day-to-day lives.

It cannot be denied, however, that the effects observed in this study may have been only temporary; the challenge, therefore, is to consider ways to provide peer support on an ongoing basis. Other issues may include how to make the principles of peer support better known, how to draw up peer support training programs suited to China's cultural climate, and how to increase the number of peer support trainers in China, for which the number is still insufficient.