

Visit to Shiquan, Shaanxi

2010-08-04 to 2010-08-08

Introduction

Under the organization of Shaanxi Soong Ching Ling Foundation and Hong Kong Friends of Guangming Association, a party of three psychologists from Hong Kong comprising Eddie Li, Joseph Lau and Ingrid Mak visited Shiquan, Shaanxi between 2010-08-04 to 2010-08-08. The major objective was to run a two-day training course on developmental psychology and management of emotional and behavioral problems for the teachers and counselors of the schools within the municipality of Shiquan. Many students in these schools were LBC (Left-Behind Children who stayed in their native villages and who did not go together with their parent/parents who went to the urban areas for work). More than 80 teachers from different schools of Shiquan attended the course in a primary school in Shiquan. From the call roster, about five teachers (or counselors) from each school attended.

Timing and Weather

It was in the middle of the summer holiday. Shaanxi did not usually have a long summer. But 2010 was a year in which there had been very heavy rain in the middle of July causing major floods in the lower estuary of the Han River. Summer had been hot and in 2010, unusually humid. From Xi'an onwards, there was a persistent temperature of 35-37 degrees. That might probably explain that these training courses were seldom organized in the summer holidays. The run-down of the course was modified so that more time was allowed for mid-day recess.

Travel to Shiquan

Eddie Li, Joseph Lau and Ingrid Mak took an early morning flight from Shenzhen to Xi'an on 2010-08-04 arriving at around 1200 noon after an one hour's delay. The party was received at the airport. The travel from Xi'an to Shiquan took about 3.5 hours. The party stayed in a comfortable hotel called River View.

Participants of the Course

The teachers and counselors that came were mainly in their twenties and early thirties. There were a few older and more experienced teachers, including one headmaster. Teachers were civil servants who actually got a salary of about RMB2,000+ per month. Counselors were mainly university graduates who came as half-volunteers. They might be getting only 40% of the salary of the teachers. They generally live in with the LBC in residential schools, and are responsible for

their guidance and overall safety. Many were in fact employed two years ago in 2008 in a batch of 30 under the sponsorship of the Shaanxi Soong Ching Ling Foundation and under the payroll of the Women's Federation. Their contract would be expiring in September, and the Women's Federation was reviewing the future of these counselors. Some might later be employed as teachers. Most, if not all, the teachers and counselors were from the vicinity of Shiquan, so in fact seldom they did not have to travel too far to attend the course.

Situation of LBC and School Counselors in Shiquan

According to the statistics provided by the Women's Federation, about 9,000 school children were LBC. About 5,000 of them lived in the boarding schools. They occupied about 40% of the student population in schools that provided boarding facilities.

As stated above, the counselors were employed under a pilot project of the Women's Union in 2008. Not all boarding schools had these counselors, since there were only a total of 30. Most of them were females in their twenties. Two counselors might have to take care of more than 200 boarding LBC for the whole school, so they could not give the children more than minimal attention. In the boarding schools, students were grouped into dormitories of about 20-25 each. Elder students were appointed as "Team Leaders" taking care of the daily chores of the younger ones. The counselors contacted the Team Leaders on a regular basis, e.g. to ensure that the students were safe.

Venue and Facilities

The primary school assigned for the lecturing was centrally located in the municipality of Shiquan. The lecture room was spacious and accommodated up to 200 students. Facilities included computer and projector, a direct projecting device (quite convenient for showing pictures, drawings and hand-written presentation material) and wired microphones. Standing air conditioners also provided some cooling for the classroom. There had been occasional short-circuiting of electricity. Notwithstanding this, the lecture room was adequate and well-catered. Ample drinking water was supplied to participants.

Reception

Mr. Su Ming, Vice-chairman of Shaanxi Soong Ching Ling Foundation and Ms. Zhang Ying, Vice Secretary also of the Foundation accompanied the party to Shiquan. After arrival at Shiquan, the party was received by the Ms. Yi, Vice Municipal Chief of Shiquan, Ms. Fang Longju, Municipal Chairperson of Women's Federation of Shiquan, Ms. Xia representative from the Education Bureau, and two other officials of Women's Federation - Ms. He Xia and another younger

Ms. He who was a civil servant just graduated from university.

Opening Ceremony of the Training Course

The course lasted for two days from 2010-08-05 to 2010-08-06. It started with an Opening Ceremony at 0800 when welcome speeches were delivered by Chairman Su and Chairperson Fang. Statements of expectation were made by representative of the Education Bureau. Eddie Li returned with a speech of thanks on behalf of the party. He stated that one of the core beliefs of the group was that children should have the right to grow up in a safe and stimulating environment. The group of three psychologists well recognized the special educational and developmental needs of the LBC, and they were quite pleased to have the opportunity to contribute their professional knowledge and experience. Eddie Li was also very thankful of the enthusiastic participation of Mr. Joseph Lau who was a very experienced clinical psychologist in the field of child clinical psychology for more than thirty years.

Run-down of the Training Program

The run-down of the training program was as follows:

Date	Time	Topic	Psychologist
2010-08-05	AM	The Psychological Adjustment of LBC – an Overview	LI
		An Introduction to Developmental Psychology – Piaget, Erikson, Bowlby, Ainsworth and others	MAK
	PM	Common Behavioral and Emotional Problems of Children and Adolescents	LAU
		Using the Strengths and Weakness Questionnaire	LAU
		Q & A Session	LAU, LI & MAK
2010-08-06	AM	Feedback Session and Case Discussion	LAU, LI & MAK
		Management of Behavioral and Emotional Problems – Role of Teachers	LAU & LI
		Management of Behavioral and Emotional Problems – the Use of Drawings, Puppets and other Special Media	LAU & MAK

2010-08-06	PM	Self Care of Teachers – Stress Management and Empowerment	LI
		Management of Behavioral and Emotional Problems – Counseling and Behavioral Modification	LAU & LI
		Case Presentation – Five Cases Presented by Teachers	LAU, LI & MAK
		Concluding Remarks and Recommendations	LI
		Closing ceremony	Presided by Fang

Day 1

At the beginning of Day 1, Eddie Li reiterated the belief that children to have a right to grow up in a safe and stimulating environment. Children today would be the future of tomorrow. In view of the special needs of the LBC, they should be given special care and attention for them to grow up safely and respectfully. Apart from focusing on the different problems and challenges of the LBC, their strengths should not be ignored. Furthermore, while academic development was important, it should not be given exclusive attention. For children who might not be able to achieve too well academically, they could also be led to develop in other areas.

Ingrid Mak introduced the different stages of development according to Piaget and Erikson. The developmental needs at different stages were discussed. The importance of the development of different virtues that formed the core of humanity according to the Eriksonian model was highlighted - such as trust and confidence, sense of autonomy and industry. These developmental tasks could be facilitated by different caretakers, including parents and teachers. Teachers did have a particularly important role and function because many parents of the LBC were absent in a substantial part of their formative years. Teachers were inevitably given this additional responsibility for the proper holistic development of these children. Ingrid Mak further introduced the different Attachment Theories of Bowlby and Ainsworth, so that teachers could also appreciate the intricacies of attachment since early childhood. Many LBC only had short glimpses of their parents before they parted, seeing each other no more frequently than once a year or several years. Teachers should therefore learn more about the different aspects of substitute parenthood.

Joseph Lau highlighted the complex etiology in most problems found in children and adolescents, such as physiological, environmental and familial factors. He asked teachers to look at these different factors carefully in order to gain a comprehensive understanding behind all the problems and issues. He also listed several common behavioral and emotional problems found in childhood and adolescents, and reminded the teachers and counselors that the presentation of these

problems might vary with different severity and from one individual to another. He encouraged teacher not to just look at acquisition of skills and techniques. The trilogy of knowledge, attitude and techniques was of equal importance. Many teachers and counselors might only want to learn more knowledge and skills about handling children. Adopting correct attitudes, such as respect, positive regard, empathy and willingness to listen would also be essential for the successful management of problems encountered.

Joseph Lau further described a Strengths and Weaknesses Questionnaire for reference by the teachers and counselors. The Questionnaire was validated in both foreign and Chinese settings. It was intended to help the teachers get an initial impression of students who might be having some emotional and behavioral problems. Scoring keys were provided to each school units. Initial response to the Questionnaire was not totally enthusiastic. It was noted that teachers and counselors might feel quite helpless even if behavioral and emotional problems were identified. Professional care was not easily accessible, and not easily affordable.

Several cases were shared by the teachers before Day 1 of training ended. Eddie Li also introduced an exercise from mindfulness training – biscuit appreciation, in order that teachers could appreciate the importance of savoring the present, and helping self and students express gratitude towards good things in life rather than taking things for granted.

Day 2

Day 2 was started with a discussion on the several cases presented the previous day. Some recurrent themes included lacking in academic interest in some students, bullying behaviors of older children, bad habits such as drinking and smoking in early adolescence, internet excess and addiction, having parents with mental health problems, and other behavioral problems such as lying and stealing. Ways of handling were shared. It was reiterated that a comprehensive understanding of the different etiological factors was important for every case, and there would not be a singular easy way in the handling of each case.

Joseph Lau and Eddie Li then made a presentation on the role of teachers in shaping the behaviors of students, especially the LBC. Teachers should become aware of the importance of consistency, and how behaviors were often reinforced rightfully or erroneously by their own attention. Joseph Lau and Ingrid Mak then illustrated several common media for communicating and interacting with children. They included drawings of House, Tree and Person, drawings of important life contingencies, drawings of the family and schools, the use of “Emotions Balloons” and “Bad Feelings Basket”. Teachers and counselors were asked to do some drawings themselves, and they expressed great interest in the activity. Some even described their own drawings in front of the class, enriching their understanding of the technique from the first person. Mr. Lau and Ms.

Mak further demonstrated the use of puppets, family dolls and play-dohs, which would all facilitate communication. Interaction had been enthusiastic and fun-filled.

In the afternoon, Eddie Li summarized several different aspects of stress management and self-care as a teacher or a counselor for these LBC. Teachers and counselors were just being human and they were given a fairly heavy responsibility for the education and normal development of the LBC and other students. In view of limited resources, and lack of professional training in managing difficult children, they might also be stressed out like any other human beings. Ways for self-care and stress management were introduced. Teachers and counselors were also asked to provide self with frequent positive self-talks for self-empowerment.

More cases were presented in the afternoon and views were interchanged. The group also asked the teachers and counselors to review the possible limitations in each case (e.g. early academic failures in childhood causing deteriorated motivation to study in adolescence, heavy drinking culture in society and family making drinking difficult to prevent), and changes might only be possibly effected over a prolonged duration. They were also encouraged to adopt an educative-preventive and public-health approach in order that problems might be identified and managed at an early stage. For example, discussions on internet usage could be made at early stage of primary school emphasizing on discipline and the effects of excess. This might bear better preventive results than focusing exclusively on children who might have already been heavily “addicted” to the internet. Similar discussions could be made on preparation for adolescence, as many students, particularly LBC, might not have ready access to such information from their care-takers, parents and/or grand-parents.

Eddie Li ended the two days of training by making several concluding remarks. He emphasized that no one could take it for granted that all children could grow up normally. As for LBC, much heavy responsibility had been bestowed to teachers and counselors. So they should exercise proper self-care and self-empowerment. Getting the appropriate knowledge and learning the appropriate techniques were just the first steps. Having the right attitude was of even more importance. One should learn to look at the broader picture and the comprehensive reasons behind every problem identified. Knowing the right attitude and getting a broadened medium for communication were essential.

A few recommendations were made by the group:

- Teachers and counselors should broaden their perspective about the holistic development of LBC and other students. Evaluation should not be based exclusively on academic success or failure.

- Small interactional groups with the LBC and other students could be considered. These groups gave chance for individual students to learn and discuss matters related to their personal growth and development, e.g. adjusting to residential schools, feelings towards absent parents, adolescent issues, and common behavioral aberrations such as excessive internet use.
- Ways should be considered for residential LBC to reinforce their sense of belonging, especially towards their schools and their peer group. They could be organized into small units for competition in sports and games, debates and other recreational activities. Within the peer group, the sense of affiliation, emotional bonding, readiness for sharing could be further developed. This might help to bridge the gap of absence of adult attention at home, lacking of siblings to play with or to share, and increasing withdrawal or even self-isolation as noted in some students.
- Voluntary workers, especially from nearby universities, could be enlisted in order to promote influence from these university students. The existing system of “Substitute Parents” would also be further enriched.
- Praise and empower yourself in the role as a teacher or a counselor. You are using your life to influence the life of others.

Day 2 ended with a closing ceremony presided by Chairperson Fang and a group photo session.

Conclusion

The training course had been well received, and the original objectives had been broadly met. There were several inherent limitations that might hinder the realization of the recommendations as stated above. Teachers and counselors were not familiar with running small groups with the children. Topics such as gender health and adolescent issues were not frequently discussed, and so teachers might not be comfortable to start discussions on these topics. As for the counselors, there were only 30 of them employed since the start of the project in 2008, and they were far too few in number to be able to give individual attention to the residential LBC as they might wish to. As for the enlisting of help of university students, the Women’s Federation of Shiquan did not have much direct contact with big universities in Xi’an. This might make mobilization of these resources difficult. The group acknowledged these issues, and might have further discussion with Dr. Kim-kwong Chan at a suitable stage.