

Evaluation Plan: Tzu Chi USA, Character Education Program at Dallas

By Jim

Introduction:

The Dallas Independent School District (DISD) and Garland Independent School District (GISD) have been facing several educational problems for a long time. According to a poll commissioned by The Dallas Express, a plurality of respondents who currently have children in DISD believe that the poor quality of DISD schools is the main reason why Dallas is losing residents (The Dallas Express, 2023). There are various concerns regarding DISD, including a high student attrition rate, uneven teaching quality and resource allocation, disparities in academic achievement, insufficient student counseling and support, and lack of parent and community involvement. These issues have contributed to socio-economic challenges and high dropout rates in DISD areas. In the GISD, while the situation is not as severe as before, there are still a few schools that suffer from a significant lack of educational resources. One such school is Lyles Middle School - a junior high school located in Garland, TX, and a part of the GISD school district. As of the 2021-2022 school year, the school had a total of 759 students, out of which 36.9% were at risk of dropping out. Additionally, 29% of students were enrolled in bilingual and English language learning programs. The school's minority student enrollment was 93 % (U.S. News, 2022).

Program Description:

Tzu Chi Foundation is a global non-governmental, non-profit organization founded in 1966 and headquartered in Taiwan. With the mission of "love in the name, kindness as a career", Tzu Chi is committed to providing humanitarian assistance, medical services, education promotion, environmental protection activities, cultural exchanges, and other social services and charities (Zhang, 2007). In Taiwan, character education for early childhood students has a long history, such as Da Ai Mama, and Tzu Chi Character Education. Tzu Chi USA continuing character education programs in the United States. Tzu Chi USA Dallas branch, during its initial years in Dallas, recognized the issue of high dropout rates in the DISD and GISD areas. In 2011, the organization initiated a collaboration with Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy (BOMLA) school. Tzu Chi sends its volunteers to schools every month to impart character education. The local schools have recognized the success of their cooperation, resulting in the growth of The Character Education Program in recent years. New locations were opened at the Barbara Jordan Elementary School in 2017, and the Lyles Middle School in the Garland Independent School District in 2018. The program is mainly implemented in lower school-age classes, such as third-grade classes in elementary schools and sixth-grade classes in junior high schools. Conducted once a month, in one class (n ranges from 25 to 35) and occasionally to the entire grade (n ranges from 90 to 255).

Tzu Chi Foundation's character education program aims to sow the seeds of gratitude, respect, and love in students. The program includes diverse courses, activities, and mentor guidance to improve character quality, promote social harmony, and cultivate social talents. Its objective is to guide students to become socially responsible leaders with positive influence (Tzu Chi Edu, 2024).

Tzu Chi believes in empathic education theory (Verducci, 2000) to enhance empathy and emotional intelligence in students. This model emphasizes understanding the feelings, emotions, and needs of others, and providing support and care for their experiences and situations. The key features and objectives of this model are to develop empathy, promote emotional intelligence, build positive relationships, and increase social awareness. Empathy education can be achieved through various methods such as teaching activities, curriculum design, role-playing, teamwork, etc. This educational model helps students grow and develop as individuals and also contributes towards building a more harmonious, inclusive, and caring social environment. In practice, education through fun and hands-on practice is the basis for achieving goals. Therefore, the program uses various stories and games in the classroom to enable students to understand the sacrifices and dedication of their parents and to comprehend how hard-won everything is. For instance, let students raise eggs by themselves, simulate pregnancy, calculate their daily expenses, and more. The program teaches time management through the game of sand and stones, and students can write their gratitude cards and post them on the bulletin board. Additionally, students are encouraged to share their experiences in the next class and greet or thank their parents and teachers to promote attitude change and participation in household chores. These activities are designed to help students understand and practice gratitude through interactive and practical experiences while developing a sense of responsibility and empathy to achieve program goals.

Evaluation Design:

Although the program has been running for several decades, there are no statistics or methods to measure its effectiveness. Previously, the program relied on oral interviews with principals or teachers and produced videos to demonstrate the project's good reputation. After implementing the program, participating schools report improved student behavior and a reduced need for disciplinary action (Tzu Chi Edu, 2024). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was suspended for two years. Although it was restarted last year, one school reduced the frequency of their cooperation due to a change in leadership.

In this design, we will start by asking a few evaluation questions. These questions include:

1. To what extent has the program successfully instilled moral values, gratitude, and empathy in students?
2. What is the level of parental involvement, and how does it impact student outcomes?
3. How has the program contributed to improving school culture, reducing discipline issues, and enhancing academic performance?

4. How effective are the program's activities and components in achieving its objectives?

The program's design method can be categorized as a quasi-experimental design with elements of qualitative inquiry. The quasi-experimental aspect involves comparing an experimental group (class implementing the program) with a control group (class not implementing the program) to assess the program's impact. The qualitative inquiry complements this by providing deeper insights into participants' experiences and perceptions.

Data Collection:

The following methods can be used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data:

Quantitative Data Collection:

Experimental Group (Implementation Class):

- Pre- and post-program surveys: Administer surveys to students, parents, and teachers in the experimental group before and after the program to assess changes in attitudes, values, and perceptions.
- Academic performance data: Collect data on students' academic achievements (e.g., grades, attendance, discipline) in the experimental group to measure the program's impact on academic outcomes.

Control Group (Non-Implementation Class):

- Similar data collection methods as the experimental group but without program implementation to establish a baseline for comparison.

Dropout rate analysis: Analyze dropout rates among the experimental group compared to the control group to evaluate the program's long-term impact.

Qualitative Data Collection:

- Focus groups and interviews: Conduct focus groups and interviews with students, parents, teachers, and program facilitators in both the experimental and control groups to gather qualitative insights on the program's strengths, challenges, and impact.

Program Monitoring:

- Regular monitoring and feedback: Establish a feedback mechanism to receive ongoing feedback from stakeholders, including surveys after each session or term in both groups to assess participant satisfaction and program relevance.

- Review of program materials: Evaluate program materials, curriculum content, and activity effectiveness based on feedback and outcomes.

By employing these data collection and monitoring strategies, it is possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact and effectiveness.

Method of Evaluation:

Take BOMLA for example. There are approximately 75 to 90 sixth-grade students each year. There are about 25 people in each class, and there are 3 to 4 classes in each grade. Tzu Chi volunteers randomly select one class each year to continue character education. Randomly select one class from the other two as the control group.

In this evaluation plan, we will employ the SSRS (Social Skills Rating Scale) to assess the social skills of students participating in the program. The SSRS is a validated tool that allows teachers and observers (parents) to evaluate children's social skills across various domains, including cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control. It utilizes a 3-point rating system, where a higher score indicates stronger social skills (Stephen, 1998).

The SSRS will be administered to both the experimental group (class implementing the program) and the control group (class not implementing the program) every half-semester (four times a year) to compare the before and after the program intervention. This will allow us to measure changes in students' social skills over time and compare the outcomes between the two groups. The evaluation of the program using SSRS will focus on the following aspects:

1. Pre-Post program Assessment: Before the program intervention begins, the SSRS will be administered to students in both groups. This baseline assessment will provide insights into the initial social skills levels of the students.
2. Comparison Between Groups: The pre- and post-program SSRS scores of the experimental group will be compared with those of the control group. This comparison will help evaluate the program's impact on enhancing students' social skills compared to the non-participating group.
3. Analysis of Specific Domains: The SSRS scores will be analyzed across different domains such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control. This analysis will help identify areas of strength and areas for improvement in students' social skills development.
4. Longitudinal Analysis: The pre- and post-program SSRS scores within each group will be compared to conduct a longitudinal analysis. This analysis will provide insights into individual students' progress over time.
5. Qualitative Insights: The quantitative SSRS data will be supplemented with qualitative insights gathered from focus groups, and interviews. This combined approach will comprehensively understand the program's impact on students' social skills and behaviors.

Outcomes:

Short-term objectives:

1. Enhancing moral values and gratitude awareness - By providing courses on character education, students will learn the significance of gratitude in the short term and develop good moral values. This will help enhance their motivation and empathy, and demonstrate care and understanding towards others.
2. Strengthening family relationships and identification with school - By encouraging parents to engage in school activities and character education classes, students will realize the efforts of parents and understand that things do not come easy. In addition, increasing parents' understanding of their children by filling in questionnaires. This improved communication and understanding between students and parents can lead to stronger family relationships and, after the process of event tripartite collaboration, an increased sense of identification with the school.

Long-term objectives:

1. Improving school atmosphere - This program aims to cultivate social skills and a sense of gratitude in students, which is anticipated to enhance the school atmosphere and foster a greater sense of community.
2. Reducing the dropout rate - By creating a positive school atmosphere, this program is expected to decrease the dropout rate and enable more students to finish their studies successfully.

Short-term indicators to evaluate the program's effectiveness include pre- and post-program surveys that assess students' understanding of gratitude and moral values. Additionally, classroom observations will be conducted to evaluate students' behavior changes related to empathy, care, and understanding toward others. Feedback from teachers and parents on noticeable improvements in students' attitudes and actions will also be considered. Lastly, student questionnaires will be administered to gauge their perception of family support and school identification.

Long-term indicators will include annual surveys or focus groups with students, teachers, and parents to evaluate the overall school atmosphere and sense of community. To assess trends and changes following program implementation, a longitudinal analysis of dropout rates over several years will also be conducted.

Possible threats to the accuracy and consistency of the results can be internal or external. Some of the most common internal threats are selection bias, maturation, and testing. External threats like the selection of schools.

Internal Threats:

Selection Bias: To minimize selection bias, it is considered good practice to randomly select one class each year for the experimental group and another for the control group. However, if the randomization process is not executed properly or if there are differences between the selected classes that could impact the outcomes (for example, one class has higher-performing students), it could introduce bias into the results.

Maturation: During the program, students may naturally mature or change in ways unrelated to the program. This maturation effect can confound the results, particularly if there are significant developmental changes during the evaluation period.

Testing: Repeated administration of the SSRS to assess social skills can lead to testing effects. Due to familiarity with the test, students may improve their scores, which is not necessarily an indication of actual changes in social skills.

External Threats:

Selection of Schools: The program is being implemented in specific schools such as BOMLA, Barbara Jordan Elementary, and Lyles Middle School. It is important to note that the findings of the program may not apply to all schools in the DISD and GISD. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings to other settings may be limited.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the evaluation plan for the Tzu Chi USA Character Education Program at Dallas is designed to assess the program's impact on students through a quasi-experimental design. However, it is crucial to consider potential internal and external threats to the accuracy and consistency of results, such as selection bias, maturation effects, testing effects, and the limited generalizability of findings to other schools within DISD and GISD. Despite these challenges, this evaluation plan provides a solid foundation for evaluating the Program's effectiveness. Based on the original Tzu Chi's oral interviews and produced videos, along with this data evaluation, can more effectively convince others of the usefulness of character education.

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