“HARMONIZATION” SUMMER CAMP
Viet Nam
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SECTION I

“Harmonization” Summer Camp 2009 (HSC09) enhanced the lives of children with intellectual disabilities and brought a brighter path for their futures. Hosting a series of leisure, recreational and educational activities throughout a 5-day camp session, we promoted independence, self-esteem and social skills for children from the Binh Minh Secondary School by pairing each child with one volunteer student, recruited from various high schools and universities around the country. The camp took place in Hoa Binh, a mountainous region in northwestern Viet Nam.

HSC09 brought a life-changing experience to all participants; although the experience was transforming in different ways. For 30 disabled children, whose age ranges from 9 to 21, this was the first extensive period of time without their parents. They were exposed to a variety of activities, to the nature, to the social world, as well as to their own inner capacity. At the same time, 30 student volunteers had a unique opportunity to contribute to the community and its disadvantaged, as Hong V. had said in his diary, “after 18 years, this is time I paid my debts to life.” The maturity of the volunteers grew with their responsibilities, as both a mentor to the children and a young citizen of society. We (supervisors and accompanying parents) were amazed upon the tremendous care that the mentors gave the children in the daily routine and group activities: not only they were considerate and supportive big siblings, they became close friends who played games and shared stories.

The intimacy between the mentors and the children was one lasting perspective on the camp. Unfortunately, there is not an expectation for disabled children to socialize with the whole community. However, the camp demonstrated a smooth transition in the process of socialization. After 5 days, we observed positive growth not only with how to communicate with similar aged-peers but also how to become more and more approachable to new people. By the end of the camp, the strong interpersonal bonds were noticeable. There were a few exceptions due to health problems and physical inabilities to communicate (listening/speaking problems), but even within these, the children developed an attachment with their mentors. There is a perception that disabled children might be imperceptive to emotions; however, indeed, they were very sentimental and desired to express their feelings. Therefore, receiving love and care from the mentors was a “moving” and “treasureable” opportunity to be more confident and aware that they are not ignored.

The second lasting impression was the educational initiatives of the camp, which included the curriculum and its implementation. We organized sports, arts, games and nature exposure activities where the children gained particularly communication skills (e.g. careful listening and clear speaking). Some children developed new lifeskills, such as tying strings and coordinating body movement. Moreover, by being placed in a peer context and away from the family, this contributed to greater independence. It also uncovered many symptoms, both positive and negative, previously unknown to their parents. This was extremely meaningful, since we reported these to their parents and provided consultation for the child’s continued development.

HSC09 could have been even more successful if there had been more involvement from Binh Minh Elementary School. In the proposal phase, we anticipated that the school’s special needs staff would design the curriculum and supervise the camp site, as the disability experts, jointly with us.
Unfortunately, due to a summer schedule conflict, we, as the two project leaders, planned and implemented the summer camp on our own. Thanks to the helpful parents and responsible mentors, everything ran very well and smoothly.

SECTION II

In the volunteer application form for prospective mentors, we proposed two essay questions discussing mentorship and friendship. The most two commonly-referenced words were "respect" and "amity". These are the words I’d use to describe my perception of peace: the secured condition in which people are appreciated and equal in terms of social status. Peace is strengthened by a shared aspiration for change to the community, starting with the lives of underprivileged people.

The name "Harmonization" was created from this perspective. In her diary, Linh N. wrote, "This is absolutely true - the harmony between the mentors and the mentees, between the mentally-defective and the kindhearted minds, between the long life ahead and the swiftly-passing duration of 5 days has connected all of us - who are coming from different regions of our country and living in different continents of the world, but are all here to share and spread the love."

Although HSC09 is local-based, given the geographic representation of the people who participated, the reach is more widespread. The student volunteers returned home and to school, spreading the experiences as a means to advocate for respect and empathy for people with disabilities. Some anticipate implementing the camp on a smaller size in their local community by involving even more people. As the goodwill is duplicated, more and more children with the disabilities will have the opportunity to integrate in their communities and be better appreciated by others.

Peace in mind – mental comfort and the sense of self-achievement – was what participants acquired. The children were very motivated and gained confidence through the activities and the positive encouragement from others. By the end, the volunteers, including the project leaders, were consumed by feelings of fulfillment. We were able to put into practice our passion for social responsibility. We have always believed in humanitarianism, and the success of HSC09 has fortified that belief. Without either the generous funding from the “100 Projects for Peace” or the enthusiasm of the participants, the camp could not make such claims. On the last day of the summer camp, the two most frequently spoken words were “love” and “miss.” Both of these will echo whenever we reflect on the personal growth and experiences gained through “Harmonization” Summer Camp 2009.

Personal Reflection:

Media Features:
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