

Toys for Friends (TFF): A Community Service Learning (CSL) to Cultivate Social Responsibility among Primary School Students

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Abstract

Service Learning (CSL) is an academic learning approach that integrates community service and academic content to enhance each other. Literature on CSL focuses heavily on the learning outcomes of the participants specifically service providers and very few looked into the backbone of the CSL, which is its framework and learning modules. Therefore, this study aims to examine the extent to which a CSL initiative, Toys for Friends (TFF) is effective in fostering social responsibility among students (service providers and service recipients), specifically by looking into its framework and learning modules. TFF was designed to bring together two Malaysian primary schools from different socioeconomic brackets: one serving as a service provider school involving privileged students and the other as a receiving school involving underprivileged students. This study acts as a preliminary study to identify areas that need to be improved before the implementation of the TFF to ensure its successful execution. This study was qualitatively designed. The data were collected via structured interviews with ten tertiary academic staff who had experience participating in community service-learning programmes. A thematic analysis was performed on audio-recorded interview data. The findings identified four significant themes which are, (1) fostering social responsibility among all key players, (2) bridging community gaps through the two-pronged CSL approach, (3) promoting social responsibility through learning modules, and (4) providing opportunities for face-to-face meetings among participants. The findings suggest that students would be able to acquire social responsibility while simultaneously enhancing their English language proficiency through participating in TFF. This study provides insights into useful aspects and strategies for CSL curriculum designers to consider when designing programmes to ensure that both service providers and service recipients gain social responsibility and experience effective learning.

Keywords: Community Service Learning (CSL), English Language learning, primary school students, social responsibility, Toys for Friends (TFF)

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INTRODUCTION

Community Service Learning (CSL) combines academics with meaningful community service activities to accomplish three key objectives: enhancing students' learning experiences, promoting their lifelong community involvement, and increasing mutual benefits among communities (Brondani et al., 2008; Brondani, 2012). All these objectives work to develop a sense of social responsibility in students. This is because learning through community service promotes greater accountability to uphold social responsibility (Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006). Social responsibility, as described by Brondani (2012), is an individual's sense of responsibility towards the society, where a person lives by improving relationships in the society. The integration of community service in learning institutions is essential to provide students with life skills that are advantageous to the community and society as a whole.

Higher education has long embraced the concept of Community Service Learning (CSL), which can take many forms: stand-alone, co-curricular, or integrated into core courses. In Malaysia, the idea of a "university for the community" is reflected in the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2015–2025 for Higher Education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019), which calls on universities to serve their communities, leading to the introduction of SULAM, which stands for Malaysian Service Learning. SULAM focuses on applying service-

learning methods to teaching and learning (Mamat et al., 2019). Numerous community service-learning studies in Malaysia have been carried out within the context of higher education since its introduction in 2015 (e.g., Mahadir, Piang, & Jamil, 2019; Mamat et al., 2019; Yusof et al., 2020; Ibrahim, Hassan, & Bayang, 2020; Hashim, 2020). SULAM consists of structured service activities that respond to recognise community needs and provide opportunities for reflection on activities and experiences (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019) to achieve desired and holistic learning outcomes.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Community service-learning is a powerful and transformative pedagogical approach (Dzinekou, Mureithi, & Sergon, 2022). This type of learning goes beyond charity acts by providing students with the knowledge and resources they need to improve their knowledge through purposeful learning and meaningful student engagement (Hasbún et al., 2016). It serves as a catalyst for students' social responsibility development by exposing students to the idea of service-learning activities that address community issues and advance the common good (Afzal & Hussain, 2020), highlighting the positive influence people may have on one another's lives. Mahadir, Piang, and Jamil (2019) and Afzal and Hussain (2020) illuminate CSL's role in deepening students' understanding of course content and equipping them with the necessary knowledge, abilities, and mental tools to manage challenging social issues. Hence, to enhance knowledge and mental tools, it is essential to include service activities (which are experiential in nature) and reflection in the learning process.

Furthermore, research by San Yi and Tan Yee (2017) showed how CSL might help participants overcome any perceived social barriers by building a bridge between the classroom and the community. These perceived social barriers or misconceptions often emerge as students come from different social backgrounds. Through participating in service-learning activities, the misconceptions are believed to be reduced or completely diminished as students are connecting at personal, intellectual, and social levels. This illustrates the huge potential that CSL has for bridging social gaps. Mahadir, Piang, and Jamil (2019) also asserted that participation in CSL leads to personal growth and helps the development of responsible community agents. In brief, CSL can be perceived as a dynamic teaching methodology that actively promotes students' social responsibility in addition to their academic growth.

According to Puig et al. (2011), service-learning can positively influence students' social attitudes and serve as a means of preparing them to be good citizens. Developing good citizens in students means moulding them into people who actively engage in community affairs and who make contributions to the greater good. To do this, it is necessary to incorporate a sense of social responsibility into CSR initiatives to fulfill a community's needs through the pursuit of the common good (Puig, 2011). In response to this, numerous tertiary institutions have established CSR programmes with the explicit goal of promoting students' social responsibility competencies (Hasbún et al., 2016). Therefore, service-learning pedagogy should aim to develop knowledge of sustainable development and social responsibility. For this to happen, certain conditions must be met, such as the careful design of CSR to meet the learning and social objectives, the support of the stakeholders, the involvement of all community partners, and working with real community needs.

Schools, besides tertiary institutions, should also be platforms where students can have opportunities to develop their social responsibility. This is because, as mentioned in a recent study by Mohd Sharif et al. (2023), 21st-century schools should be the centres of community engagement, empowerment, and transformation, not just places where students receive academic instruction. This suggests that primary and secondary schools need to adapt by incorporating CSL into their curriculum. A previous study by Seider, Gillmor, and Rabinowicz (2011) supports this and suggests that service learning is relatively new and unfamiliar in school settings.

Therefore, a recent study by Afzal and Hussain (2020) suggests that learning community service should become a compulsory course in schools and not just an elective course. This is because social responsibility should be encouraged from an early age, i.e., in primary school. As supported by Thabet (2018), transitional signs begin to appear by the age of 12 and last until the age of 15 or 16. This is because it is a crucial phase for instilling good values in students. Plus, as highlighted by Erikson's (1968) theory of identity formation, students develop themselves greatly within a collective social context. Hence, getting primary school-age students to participate in community service activities would help them grow up with a strong sense of responsibility towards their community.

In addition, Mohd Sharif et al. (2023) suggested that the use of CSL can reduce social gaps between privileged and underprivileged groups. This happens through active roles played by service providers and service recipients. They believe that even as service recipients, they cannot be passive participants receiving the service; they also need to contribute back to the community or at least repay what the service providers have done for them. Through

this, both groups are believed to gain a sense of social responsibility. Therefore, they proposed a structured design for their CSL, which they named Toys for Friends (TFF). TFF deals with the idea of having students from a privileged school provide service to their counterparts from an underprivileged school. Both service providers and recipients are required to give or do something for their counterparts. This structured design of their TFF curriculum involved TFF key players, a framework, and learning modules (which are shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3). In response to this, the current study is carried out to assess to what extent the programme’s design can promote social responsibility among primary students, be they service providers or service recipients and bridge the two different social groups in the school community.

METHOD

This study aims to look into the design of the Toys for Friends (TFF) programme as a Community Service Learning (CSL) specifically its framework and learning modules. To provide a more systematic approach to the data, this study was divided into three stages: (1) Stage 1: Conceptualisation of Toys for Friends (TFF) as a Community Service Learning (CSL) programme; (2) Stage 2: Designing the Toys for Friends (TFF) framework and learning modules; and (3) Stage 3: Assessing the Toys for Friends (TFF) framework and learning modules.

Stage 1: Conceptualisation of Toys for Friends (TFF) as a Community Service Learning (CSL) programme

A Community Service Learning (CSL) programme called Toys for Friends (TFF) was organised by the Language Academy (LA), the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH), UTM to encourage a sense of social responsibility among primary school students. This programme’s main objective is to cultivate a love for others and the love of giving among students while also assisting them in writing simple English sentences. As discussed in Mohd Sharif et al. (2023), there are three important parties involved in Toys for Friends (TFF) who are called the key players, namely the faculty, the students, and the community. The faculty is the first player, the organiser of this programme, and is in charge of designing the overall curriculum as well as developing the modules for service learning. The faculty in this curriculum serves as a liaison between the students and the community. In this context, the Language Academy is the faculty. The second player is the students. They are in charge of providing the service. The students for this programme come from privileged backgrounds and attended one international school in Johor Bahru. As for the third player, it is the community that is the recipient of the service.

The community in this programme is the students who attend a rural school in Pontian, Johor, who come from an underprivileged background. The three key players in this programme are outlined by Mohd Sharif et al. (2023, p. 35), as seen in Figure 1:

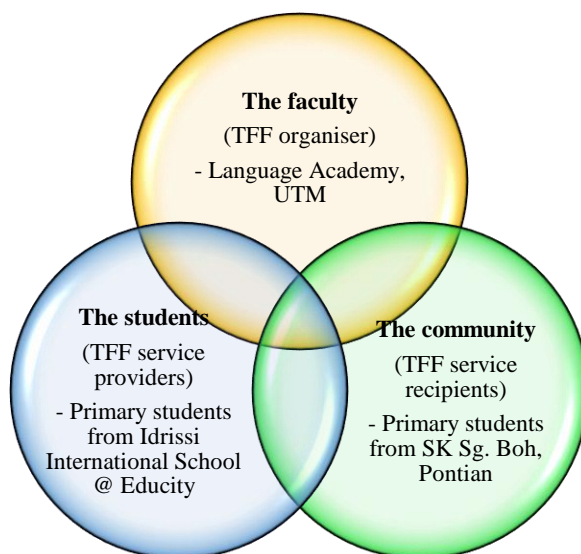


Figure 1: The three key players in TFF

The Quality of School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning Standards (Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, 1995, p. 5) serves as a reference for the faculty in designing the programme. The faculty follows the standards to ensure that service learning (1) improves academic and service learning, (2) allows students to take on new roles and skills, (3) is well-planned and includes reflection, (4) allows students to

meaningfully contribute to the community, (5) creates new and positive connections between students and the community, (6) involves adult supervision and guidance, and (7) involves staff development (the organising committee).

Stage 2: Designing the Toys for Friends (TFF) Framework and Learning Modules

The TFF Framework is a two-pronged approach to community service learning (CSL). The faculty developed two different learning modules for students and communities to suit their language learning competencies that contain the three components shown in Figure 2. Figure 3 illustrates the TFF framework, which was adapted from Mohd Sharif et al. (2023, p. 36).

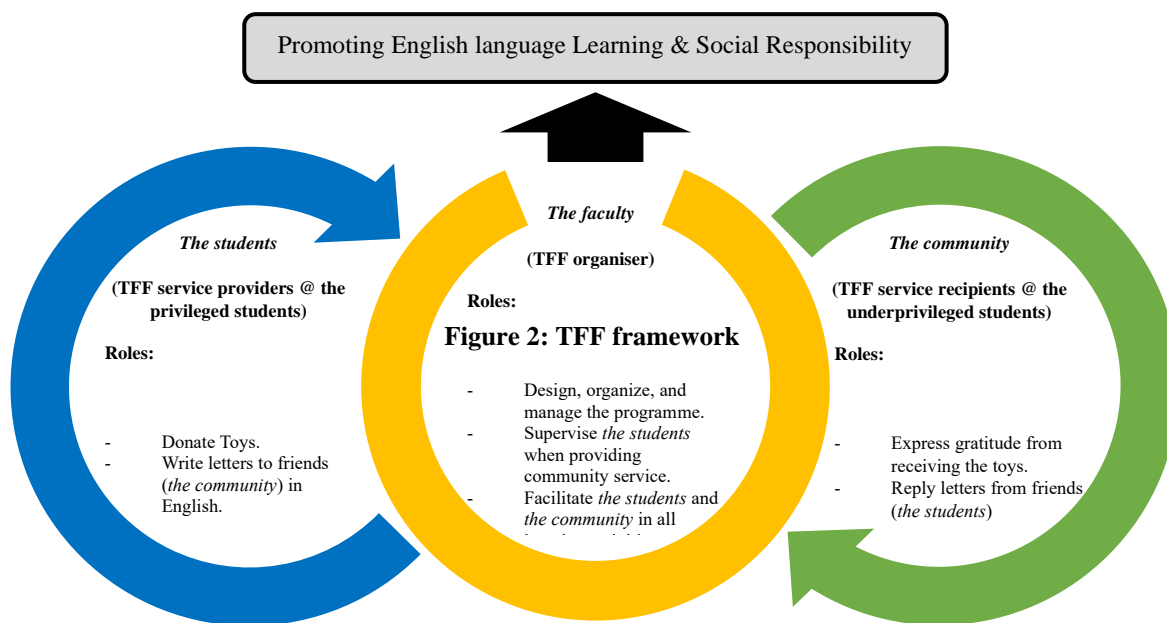


Figure 2: TFF Framework

The TFF framework in Figure 3 shows the active roles of the three key players and the efficient integration of the three components into the learning modules, all of which are aimed at promoting social responsibility and English language learning. The faculty is responsible for bridging privileged (the students) and underprivileged (the community) communities through two learning modules. The faculty members will be involved in the programme’s implementation as facilitators or adult supervisors. The students provide service by choosing the best gift for a friend, writing a letter, and reflecting on the learning process. The community, on the other hand, receives the service by expressing gratitude, responding to a letter, and reflecting on the learning process.

McEwen’s (1996) three theories used in developing a service-learning module, namely cognitive development, moral development, and experiential learning theory, have inspired the development of the TFF learning module. Based on the suggestions made by Mc Ewen, there are three components considered by the faculty when developing the modules: (1) academic content; (2) community service activities; and (3) reflection. These components are based on the idea that students learn by “giving (doing)”. Figure 2 demonstrates the TFF learning module components as seen in Mohd Sharif et al. (2023, p. 35).

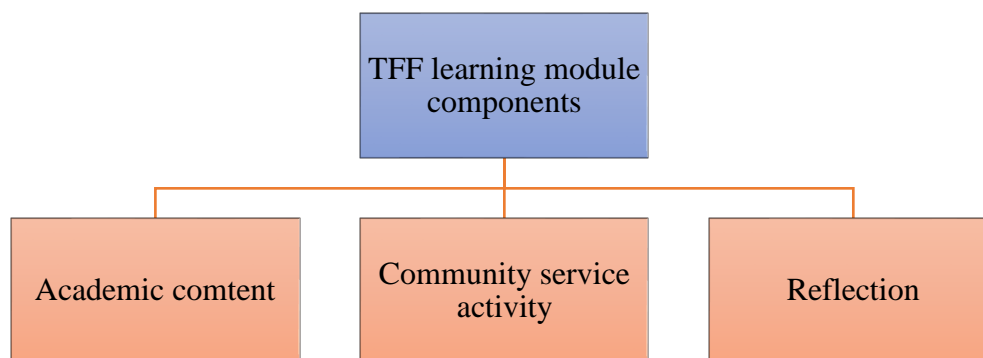


Figure 3: The three components of TFF learning module components

In general, TFF promotes English language learning and instills social responsibility in students through acts of giving, the writing of letters, and reflective activities.

Stage 3: Assessing the Toys for Friends (TFF) framework and learning modules

The literature on community service-learning studies shows a deficiency in qualitative research (Thabet, 2018). To bridge the gap, the current study uses a qualitative research design. To find out the extent to which TFF may foster social responsibility in primary school students, ten participants were interviewed (see Appendix A for structured interview questions).

The interviewer was one of the co-researchers and was also a TFF faculty member. The interviews involved four stages: (1) The interviewer gave the participants an overview of Toys for Friends (TFF), including the key players, the learning module components, and the two-pronged approach to the TFF framework; (2) The interviewer checked the participants' understanding of the TFF design; (3) The interviewer asked the participants three questions; and (4) The interviewer thanked and dismissed the participants.

During the interview, as emphasised by Su Li (2022), the interviewer had to be careful not to impose her own values and biases on the participants or say anything that would devalue them. This is important to allow them to freely express their thoughts and opinions. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, and they all had experience taking part in community service learning. The participants consisted of male and female academic staff from three public universities; *Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)*, *Universiti Tun Hussein Onn (UTHM)*, and *Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM)* each with three to ten years of working experience and involved in more than one community service learning.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim following the Jefferson (2004) transcription notation system, which was modified by Mohd Sharif (2024). Following the compilation of the transcriptions, the information was imported into Microsoft Word, where each interview was saved in a separate Word document with the interviewer number indicated by the file name (e.g., I1 refers to Interviewee 1). The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. Multiple readings of the transcribed interview data were performed in order to identify recurrent responses, which were then coded into key phrases. These codes were then divided into further categories, which were then labelled as themes. The data coding and theme interpretation were submitted to two inter-raters, who were qualitative analysts with more than eight years of experience conducting qualitative research. This is done to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research data, as suggested by Gunawan (2015) in Miranda et al. (2023). The inter-raters' agreement with the researchers on both data coding and theme interpretation was substantial.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed four significant themes: (1) fostering social responsibility among all key players; (2) bridging community gaps through the two-pronged CSL approach; (3) promoting social responsibility through learning modules; and (4) providing opportunities for face-to-face meetings among participants.

Fostering social responsibility among all key players

Five participants shared the opinion that the Toys for Friends (TFF) programme may foster a greater sense of social responsibility in each of the three key players: the faculty, the students, and the community. The following excerpts serve as examples of this viewpoint:

“...TFF is not just help improve social responsibility among students who participate but the staff who organize as well...” – I2

“... I think the students from international school that provide the service will have the social responsibility, they help the students from Sg Boh... but Sg Boh will also feel appreciated and wanting to give the same help in future to others, and then the UTM staff also, they will get the social responsible because:: they help fortunate students help unfortunate students...” – I3

“...all key players will be socially responsible when....after they join this TFF thing.” – I5

“I think these key players need to work together well so to build the social responsibility in themselves and also other players...” – I6

“...anybody what in terms of being more responsible, responsible to the community after this programme sure...that all of them will. This is good programme...” – I9

The participants believed that the students (be it the students who are the service providers or the service recipients) and the organiser (the faculty) would show an increased sense of awareness of people around them and a heightened sense of social responsibility through participating in this programme. They mentioned that

“...TFF is not just help improve social responsibility among students who participate but the staff who organize as well... the students from international school that provide the service will have the social responsibility...Sg Boh will also feel appreciated and wanting to give the same help in future to others.....the UTM staff also they will get the social responsible because they help fortunate students help unfortunate students....so all key players will be socially responsible after they join this TFF thing.”

“I think these key players need to work together well so to build the social responsibility in themselves...”

“...anybody m:: can benefit in terms of being more responsible. Responsible to the community after this programme...”

The findings of this study are similar to those of Afzal and Hussain (2020), who mentioned an increase in students' sense of responsibility and emphasised the value of this social skill after they participated in community service programmes. This is because when they provide service, they are more aware of the fact that there are other students out there who are less fortunate. By acting as charitable agents, and giving toys to peers who could not afford to purchase them, these students will gain confidence that they have done something good for someone. This will give them a sense of success, which Thabet (2018) describes as a feeling of achievement and satisfaction. Such deeds, according to Afzal and Hussain (2020), support the idea that people can have a great positive influence on the lives of others and indirectly cultivate one's sense of social responsibility.

It is also expected that the faculty, who are the university academic staff members who designed the programme and are the organisers of TFF, would benefit from their development of social responsibility. This is in line with the standards outlined by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1995), where CSR should involve the development of the organising committee. This is because they are among the university agents responsible for contributing to society. As outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2019), SULAM is a concept of the university for a society that emphasises structured service activities designed based on the needs of the community.

Before designing TFF, the faculty identified the needs of the community through conversations with pertinent stakeholders, and then they carefully designed the learning modules based on the input they had received in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes. This has clearly shown that they have gained social responsibility, as they are trying their best to fill in the community gaps when tailoring the design of TFF to meet the needs of the community.

Bridging community gaps through the two-pronged CSL approach

The two-pronged Toys for Friends (TFF) approach to community service learning, according to the participants, may help close the disparities between the privileged and underprivileged communities. The excerpts that follow illustrate this point of view:

“...It is indeed that a two-pronged approach (because) it is interesting.. it helps to bring two schools from two different circles together. Helping the rich students to be more responsible to those the that underprivileged community. Students in real life...they might not have this.. a chance since you know that they are from different circles– 14

“Students who are underprivileged will feel more motivated to learn English. They were excited to reply the letter. They have now friends from higher socioeconomic status and these friends that care about them since they give them toys and write them letters.” – 17

“...well you know, kids that age, they will feel so excited about having new friends and help them but sometimes they are not provided with the opportunity, plus they live far from one another. The pen pal experience will add to the excitement to this programme. The opportunity to make friends who they might not know ever..and then have different backgrounds...they will feel more interested to write a letter because they want to know more about their friends...” – 18

“Of course this programme has a programme approach... the two-pronged concept. I have to say it is brilliant.... I can't wait to hear more after you have done with this.. is it effective? These kids who meet via this programme might not meet if they don't join this programme...they will have more empathy for others and want to help others again. For students who receive the gift, they will be more motivated to write letters. This then helps their English writing skills...” – 19

From the excerpts, it can be seen that five participants acknowledged that this two-pronged approach to CSL has successfully brought together schools from different social communities that may not naturally intersect. They specifically said that

“...it helps to bring two schools from two different circles together... helping the rich students to be more responsible to those that underprivileged community...”

“...they have now friends from higher socioeconomic status and these friends that care about ...”,

“...this programme has given them the opportunity to make friends who they might not know ever and then have different backgrounds...”

“...the two-pronged concept... I have to say (.) it is brilliant and effective. These kids who meet via this programme might not meet if they don't join this programme...”

Through letter writing, this programme promotes written conversations between students, and when toys are exchanged, the gap between the communities is further reduced because both sides actively show care and support for one another, creating a sense of community. The findings supported the assertion made by San Yi and Tan Yee (2017) that service learning effectively closes the gap between the community and the classroom. This is because, as they participate in this kind of programme, they realise that they have more in common with one another than they initially thought.

Promoting social responsibility through learning modules

The Toys for Friends (TFF) learning module was perceived by the participants to be helpful in promoting students' social responsibility. The excerpts that exemplify this perspective are seen as the following:

“...when you:: com: combine the letter writing with the purpose to explain why they give letter and also to students who receive it. They talk about their feeling of receiving and how thankful they are this is...for sure must make the students. Find good reasons behind their intention and care about others' feelings. This makes them more responsible to others.... so helps improve their social responsibility. The reflections at the end also make them reflect on their learning as well as their role ” – 11

“I have to say the three components are very important for us... to build the social responsibility among students..so yeah a: no complaints. I think it will.... I mean the modules can help students and also the Language Academy staff to have the social responsibility improved.” – 13

“...oh yeah definitely..these three components are great for community service learning. We need the academic content, and the English writing skills. They practice to write simple sentences.

Then they choose suitable toys for friends and gift the toys. After that reflect about what they have done all these...to be more responsible to society.. they don't just .. you know...(but) do and know the reasons why they do that.” – I9

“In my opinion, I can see these three components able to provide room for students to be more responsible socially. They are responsible for their friends' happiness when they gift the toys to them and they know most of them couldn't afford the expensive toys. Next, they write letters...this is(for) them to practise their language. Then they need to reflect on what they have done for their friends who received the toys. They need to express their gratitude in their letter and also they reflect on their experience...”.
– I10

Looking at the participants' responses, four of them agreed that it is crucial to take into account the academic content, community service activities, and reflection components when developing the Toys for Friends (TFF) learning modules. These components coexist synergistically to strengthen one another. They mentioned explicitly that

“...when you combine the letter writing with the purpose to explain why they give letter... make the students find good reasons behind their intentions and care about others' feelings. This makes them more responsible to others so helps improve their social responsibility. The reflections at the end also make them reflect on their learning...”.

“...the three components are a: very important for us...to build the social responsibility among students...I mean the modules can help students and also the Language Academy staff to have the social responsibility improved.”.

“...these three components are great for community service learning. We need the academic content and the English writing skills they practice to write simple sentences. Then they choose suitable toys for friends and gift the toys. After that they reflect about what they have done....all these are key to be more responsible to society...”

Mahadir, Piang, and Jamil (2019) confirmed this when they emphasise that community service learning requires students to gain a deeper understanding of course content while also providing them with the knowledge, abilities, and mental tools needed to deal with social issues in society. The knowledge they gained through their participation in the activities and their reflection afterward has highlighted how these three components are interrelated and also play an important role in the student's learning process. Participants also stated that student learning would improve as well as their awareness of their role and contribution to society when they reflect carefully on their learning and service activities. The findings also concur with the findings of Afzal and Hussain (2020), who reported that many students mentioned how through community service they better understand concepts learned in class.

Also, through community service, the students stated that they managed to increase their awareness of social issues and reassess their perception of less fortunate individuals. It is therefore evident that the reflection component in CSL acts as a tool that allows students to have a reality check on both their learning and social role, enabling them to recognise the things they gained throughout the process as well as the things they need to improve in the future. In short, as asserted by Mahadir, Piang, and Jamil (2019), through their participation in service-learning, students are expected to grow personally and become more engaged and responsible agents in their communities. The recognition of the moral behaviour they had learned during the programme contributed to the development of a sense of responsibility in them.

Providing opportunities for face-to-face meetings among participants

While most participants did not mention any areas for improvement, two did point out that it would be beneficial to have face-to-face interactions between TFF participants in order to increase the meaningfulness of the programme. This viewpoint is demonstrated through the following excerpts:

“...maybe you can bring them (the students) from different schools to meet face to face... having face-to-face contact can make them feel more responsible to their peers because they now know their friends personally, and not just in the letter. This will give more lasting impact to them...” – I2

The recommendation from the participants to arrange an in-person meeting between students from the two schools appears reasonable. They said that;

"...the students who do not meet face to face....maybe this.. to make this better...the TFF... maybe that is my suggestion (how) to improve... they will remember their friends better and will want to have a follow-up after the programme. They might (want) to change their socials... I mean social media or phone number here.. This is great you know..you make them be (like) real friends outside of the programme..." – I7

They further added how a lack of such personal interactions has adverse impacts on civic learning (which includes social responsibility), especially concerning their dedication to serving the community and their understanding of community issues. However, Lin and Shek's (2021) research findings indicated no evidence of deficient learning for students in an online community service-learning environment. Therefore, it is unfair to assume that the lack of face-to-face encounters limits students' learning and the development of social responsibility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study explores the possibility of social responsibility development among primary students taking part in the Toys for Friends (TFF) project. This is done by looking into the design of the programme, specifically focusing on its key players, learning module components, and framework. The findings emphasise the TFF Framework's relevance and its novel two-pronged approach. Through the integration of social responsibility and English language learning, this framework offers a comprehensive approach to developing well-rounded community agents.

This study addressed three gaps in the literature: (1) the lack of community service-learning studies conducted in school contexts; (2) the lack of community service-learning studies focusing on service recipients' active roles; and (3) the lack of qualitative community service-learning studies. To fill in these gaps, the study evaluated the design of a community service-learning programme that was conducted in two schools, focusing on the active roles of both service providers and service recipients and including a qualitative design. This study has provided insights into the potential of incorporating a two-pronged approach to community learning services into the school's pedagogical environment. It is suggested that future CSL collaborations among stakeholders consider this approach so that all parties can gain instant and mutual benefits. Future studies should also examine the implementation of TFF, with particular emphasis on its role in cultivating social responsibility in students.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Each author participated equally in the planning and execution of the study, the interpretation of the findings, and the writing of the manuscript. The final editing of the manuscript was done by Nurhidayah Mohd Sharif.

DECLARATION OF STATEMENT

The authors declare that this paper presents an honest, precise, and transparent representation of the published research. All noteworthy research findings are presented here, with any inconsistencies clarified.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors disclose no conflicts of interest. The paper was reviewed and approved by all authors.

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