

Reflections From Vietnam

IBDP Service Learning Trip

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Socrates, the father of Western philosophy once said, “An unexamined life is not worth living,” and my journey to Vietnam from 23 to 30 November 2016 was a gateway for enlightenment of the very world that I live in.

Singapore Sports School’s International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme Year 5 and the Secondary 4 Pre-IB student-athletes went to Lao Cai, Vietnam as part of our Creativity, Action, Service of the IB programme. From Hanoi, we took a train to Lao Cai where we visited a primary school. Prior to the trip, we set up a flea market, baked and sold cookies to our school as well as organised a carwash to raise funds to buy the items we needed for the children in the primary school. As the pre-trip preparation occurred at the same time as our exams, we had to prioritise our time to ensure we were able to raise enough funds and have enough time to study for our exams. While this was tough, we managed to balance our time in raising funds and studying.

Lao Cai is more of a rural village, located in the mountains of the far northern region of Vietnam. This high-altitude place has a cold climate, with occasional snowfalls in the past decades. Most of the ethnic minority people that live there, work their land on sloping terraces since the vast majority of the land is mountainous. Their staple foods are rice and corn. It is also a 30-minute walk up the hill away from the school that we would be helping the next three days. We spent three nights in a pleasant homestay here.

The school we helped was rather small and had very simple architecture. We decided to paint the exterior walls of the school as well as the classrooms, and replaced the broken ceilings with fresh ones.

The process was not easy – it was cumbersome and meticulous, not to mention strenuous. Nonetheless, we completed what we planned for. The school looked nicer than it looked before; a fresh coat of paint, clean ceilings rather than dusty, broken ones. I think the improved learning physical environment would motivate students in the village to attend school. In addition, we also taught English to the children as well as played games with the students. The children were extremely happy to interact with us. I learnt that one can bring loads of joy into someone’s life. Moreover, the children were wearing worn-out sandals, so our teachers also bought new ones for them. I remember how one child clutched the new pair of sandals on his chest that was given to him. Furthermore, most of the children only had a thin sweater, and did not have shoes on. I wondered how they survived the chilly winters in a high-altitude mountainous village?

One significant part that affected me during my stay was the conversations I had with the villagers. On the second night after dinner, a group of teenage-adults made their way here to our homestay in the semi-darkness of the moonlight to improve their English-speaking skills with our assistance so they could find work in the tourism industry in Sa Pa, the town of Lao Cai. Such jobs are a great source of income for the villagers as most of them rely solely on farming to make a living.

There were about five of us (student-athletes) and the five of villagers, sitting around a table, chatting away. After introducing ourselves and talking about our lifestyles and cultures, we divided into

"partners", where we would have "private" conversation with the other. My "partner", Toon, and I are both 17, but I was shocked at how different our lifestyles were: I am a student living comfortably in Singapore where most of us actually go to school and are being cared by parents and teachers; on the other hand, Toon has been a farmer since he was 10, making ends meet for the well-being of his two younger sisters. I was taken aback by this juxtaposition of our lifestyles. I remembered his eyes glistened as his eyebrows raised when I told him about life in Singapore. I wondered what he was thinking about. This conversation provoked in me probing questions about myself. Are all the extravagant smartphones, branded clothes, bags and shoes worthy at all? Or are all of these just mere objects that possess no intrinsic values? Why not spend the money to help others instead?

When I am struggling to make a decision about which shirt to wear, or whether I should get the new iPhone 7, I would always remember that Toon would also be struggling to decide on something too; if there is enough food for his two younger sisters on the table.

These scenes have forced me to examine our lifestyle in a first-world country. I realise that in Singapore, sometimes we spend an abundance of our time and energy on things that are superficial or materialistic. Perhaps we should change and redirect our priorities to make this world a better place? Simple thoughts like appreciating our next meal, or not wasting food, how to help the poor, or recycling plastic bottles are some possibilities.

This trip also reveals the complex social issues that are prominent throughout the world. For example, Lao Cai village do not have an organised waste management system, so they have to deal with their own litter by themselves by burning them. Also, they have to come to terms with the negative outcomes that arise from the development of the tourism industry in Lao Cai, where agricultural farms are affected as many villagers leave their homes to find a job in the tourism industry.

This service-learning trip is not just a trivial 8-day journey in Vietnam, but an 8-day odyssey that encapsulates intellectual understandings of the world that we live in, opening up dimensions of questions that transcends the knowledge that are taught within the four walls of a classroom. Such perception of the world encourages us, as student-athletes, to generate a more intentioned and intellectual thoughts and ideas to tackle complex underlying issues that are ubiquitous in civilisations.