

Senior Female Secondary School Students' Attitude Towards Physical Education in Hong Kong

香港高中女生對體育課的態度

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Abstract

Few studies have attempted to study the perception of physical education of secondary school girls with 'non-participation' behaviours during physical education lessons. This paper tries to explore the differences of attitudes of 'non-participation' and 'ordinary' senior form school girls toward physical education in a single-sex school. Six students were purposely selected in the study. They were interviewed and invited to give comments on physical education in their school. Their behaviours in three physical education lessons were observed and recorded. Data in the study indicated that most students held 'sex stereotyped beliefs', however, only the 'non-participation' students showed alienated behaviours from the physical education lessons. Possible reasons for these were the difference between the 'non-participation' and 'ordinary' students on the perceived status and values of physical education within school. School administrators and physical educators should revise the school physical education curriculum and instructional behaviours in order to maintain the students interest and positive attitude toward physical education.

摘要

本文嘗試探討高中女生對體育課的態度。六名於體育課“欠活躍”及“普通”態度的女生被揀選參與是項研究。她們分別接受訪問，研究員記錄她們對學校體育課的評論。研究員並觀察她們六人分別在三節體育課的行為表現。數據顯示兩組同學大都持有“女性”觀念，而“欠活躍”同學更對體育課有不感興趣的行為表現。其中可能的解釋是“欠活躍”及“普通”同學對體育課持不同價值觀。學校行政人員及體育教師應改善學校體育課程及教學行為去維持學生對體育課的興趣及存正面態度。

Introduction

Adolescence is usually considered as the period of transition from childhood to adults status, a hard time for youngsters experiencing rapid changes in physical and social development. It is also a time when lifetime attitudes and patterns of living begin to be established. A number of studies have demonstrated that individuals with positive attitude toward exercise generally exhibit more frequent or more intense exercise behaviors than ones having less positive attitudes towards exercise (Harris, 1970; McPherson, Paivio, Yuhasz, Rechnitzer, Pickard, & Lefcoe, 1976). Dishman, Sallis, and Orenstein (1985) also pointed out that the amount of physical activity undertaken in early life may be important because of its influence on later activity levels. Furthermore, social psychologists recognize that the period of middle childhood is the time when attitudes are being formed (Medinnus & Johnson, 1976) and it is also believed that major attitude changes occur during the period of adolescence. For

this reason there is great concern about the attitudes of adolescents toward physical activity.

By studying the Canadian adolescents, researchers have indicated a dramatic drop in fitness levels and an increase in health problems during the adolescent years (Bailey, Mirwald, Faulkner, Fairburn, & Owen, 1982; King, Robertson, & Warren, 1985). Findings of British research continue to show that adolescents' activity level decreases with age, and girls are more remarkable than boys (Armstrong, Balding, Gentle, & Kirby, 1990; Dicksenson, 1987; Hendry, 1978; Northern Ireland Fitness Survey, 1989; Thirlaway & Benton, 1993; Williams, 1988). Hong Kong adolescents also held similar activity patterns as the western youngsters. Ng (1996) studied the physical activity profiles of 217 Hong Kong secondary school children. She found that the school students are quite sedentary. Watching television, playing computers and shopping were their major recreational activities.

Adolescents' Participation of Physical Education

Adolescents seem do not like to include physical education into their school curriculum if they have choices. Researchers have shown that Canadian school children are choosing to opt out of school physical education programmes once the subject becomes elective (Baker, Campell, Peterson, Wideman, 1982; Earl & Stennet, 1987). Similar situation also happened in Western Australia. From 1984 to 1988, enrollment in Physical Education Studies by year 12 girls decreased from 44% to 37% when P.E. studies was introduced as an optional course in 1984 (Secondary Education Authority Statistics, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989). Browne (1992) tried to find out the reasons of grade 12 Australian girls for electing or not electing P. E. Physical educators believe that a better understanding of students' attitude and beliefs about physical education can influence teacher effectiveness and the design of programmes to address the need of school children (Jackson, 1992).

Attitude and Participation in Physical Education

Psychologists believed that individuals tend to behave in accordance with their own attitudes (Cooper & Croyle, 1984). There is also evidence to indicate a relationship between attitude and participation (Dishman, 1990). Investigators further indicated that school children electing physical education reported more positive attitudes toward physical education and physical activity and vice versa (Baker et al., 1982; Browne, 1992; Earl & Stennett, 1987; Macintosh & Albinson, 1982; Shucksmith, Hendry, & Love, 1991). Recently, Scantling, Strand, Lackey, & McAleese (1997) surveyed 1,438 senior students in America and found that 73% opted to avoid taking physical education as elective. The main reason they avoided physical education was the importance of other courses for college and 33% said that they did not like the subject as the major reason.

Attitudes may be thought of as 'a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object' (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 6). It is generally agreed that attitudes are acquired through positive experiences, negatives experiences and modeling (Williams & Smith, 1980; Woolfolk, 1987). In regard to student attitudes toward physical education, adolescent females seem to possess unfavourable attitude toward physical education since they do not participate actively in physical activities.

The identification of these factors associated with students avoiding school physical education could provide useful information to teachers who wish to improve the appeal of their curricular content and instructional practices. Physical educators identified several factors might contribute to alienation from physical

education. Boredom, repetition, and lack of meaningful work within the lessons were some of the named factors influencing students disliking the subjects (Fox & Biddle, 1988; Rice, 1988). Teacher behaviours was also claimed to be another element led to student alienation (Allison, Pissanos, & Sakola, 1990; Carlson, 1994; Figley, 1985; Luke & Sinclair, 1991). Furthermore, researchers suggested the competitive class environment affect some students disliking physical education (Portman, 1992; Robinson, 1990). In addition, problems related to the interaction between self-concept, self-esteem, and the social context of physical education classes had been cited as other determinants in students dislike of physical education (Carlson, 1994, Figley, 1985; Fox, 1988; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Macintosh & Albinson, 1982).

Attitude Towards Physical Education of Hong Kong Students

Few studies have been conducted related to the issue of female students towards physical education in Hong Kong. Wong (1992) studied the factors influencing girls' negative feeling about physical education lessons in her school. Pressure from public examination and "not skillful enough" were the main factors affecting secondary five girls and secondary four girls respectively. While "a dislike of wearing physical education uniform" and "spoiling feminine image when participating too much in physical education" were amongst the least influential factors. Chan (1995) also identified senior secondary school girls in her serving single-sex school held negative attitudes towards physical education activities. She suggested five possible aspects that might relate to aforementioned phenomenon. They are (a) insufficient satisfaction and achievement in students, (b) students' reluctance to toil, (c) teacher's attitudes and behaviour, (d) "expectation gap" between teachers and students, and (e) school tradition. Recently, Li, Chow & Yeung, (1995) tried to explore what senior female students perceived as factors affecting their participation in physical and sport activities in schools. They found that the subjective perceptions on sex-role stereotyping behaviours by the students was the major factor influencing their participation in physical activity. However, the sample schools in their study were two co-educational secondary schools, the perception toward physical education activities of the females students might be influenced by the behaviours of the male students in their schools. Therefore, one of the purposes of this study is to find out whether the senior female secondary students in a single-sex school also hold the same perception on physical education activities as those of the co-education secondary schools. Besides, the researcher is also interested to know whether there is difference of the perception on physical education between the senior form female students with 'non-participation' behaviours and those with 'ordinary' behaviours.

Why qualitative research approach was chosen ?

As the author intends to understand rather than to predict, he chooses to use qualitative methods. He wants a more in-depth look into his concerns and wishes to obtain a more holistic description on the phenomenon that are going to be investigated.

The author plans to study senior female students in a single-sex school, it might be regarded as a case study. He requested the physical education teacher to observe the characteristics of some selected non-participation female students in her physical education classes and also interviewed them about their attitude toward physical education. Besides, she gathered the interview information and behavioural characteristics of these non-participation students in a natural setting environment (in her own school and during physical education classes) and this might help to collect the 'genuine' data of the students.

Method

Participants

Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Data were collected at Kowloon Secondary School, which was a catholic girls school. A case study approach was used in which data were collected from six (Mary, Jane, Betty, Ada, Fanny, and Cathy) senior form students. Mary, Jane and Betty were regarded as the students with 'non-participation behaviors' during the physical education lessons as the physical education teacher carefully observed in her teaching during the last three months. Students with non-participation behaviours were those who did not make full effort and showed alienated attitudes toward physical lesson activities. They were purposely selected. These are described as purposeful sampling and its aim is to allow particular evaluation purpose (Patton, 1990).

Moreover, three other 'ordinary' students (Ada, Fanny, and Cathy) in the same form were also invited to take part in the study. They were considered as 'ordinary' because they did not have any behavioral problems and behaved properly during the physical education lessons. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Students were informed that the purpose of the study was to investigate their subjective perceptions and attitudes toward physical education.

Data Collection

Interviews. The six selected subjects were interviewed by the physical education teacher within a week. As the professional role of the physical education teacher might influence the students during the interviews, she strongly reminded them the purpose

of the interview and encouraged them to speak freely and openly. The length of the interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. The conversations were tape-recorded and notes were taken during the interview. Note taking helps to capture the interviewee's own language and provide the context for interpreting answers given by the interviewee (Patton, 1990). Cantonese was the language used in the interview. Open ended questions were used to encourage subjects to speak freely about their personal perception on physical education. These questions were :

1. What is your opinion that physical education is regarded as part of the core curriculum in senior form (form four)?
2. Have you ever found enjoyment during physical education lessons?
3. What are the factors that affect your attendance or hinder you from participating in physical education lessons?
4. In what ways do you think we need to change in order to improve the present situation?
5. What do you like to do during physical education lessons?

Lastly, additional open ended questions were asked to check and confirm the consistency of the attitudes and perceptions on physical education of these interviewees. They were:

1. Can you name some benefits of participating in physical education activities?
2. Can you give me some suggestions to make physical education lesson more interesting?

All interviews were translated into English and statements of similar manner were put into the same category. The following categories were created: values of physical education, contents of physical education and sex stereotyped beliefs and alienated behaviours.

The physical education teacher tried to describe the behaviours of the non-participation students during her teaching lessons. Field notes were recorded through a audiocassette recorder immediately following each lesson and transcribed verbatim. Three lessons for each subject were used to collect data and field notes of physical education lessons were recorded and analyzed. The field notes focused on the behaviours of the selected subjects during the physical education lessons, and included observations and reflections of the physical education teacher. The English panel head of the Kowloon Secondary School was invited to read and comment on the English version of the field notes.

Additional Document. The mistress in charge of extra-curricular activities at Kowloon Secondary School was asked to provide information on the profile of the extra-curricular activities of the selected students. Besides, she was also invited

to comment on the attitudes and behaviours of these subjects when they participated in the school extra-curricular activities. Data collected from the extra-curricular activities mistress could help to understand more about the activity pattern of the selected students.

The English version of the interviews record, the field notes and the extra-curricular activities information of the selected students were cross checked by the English panel head of the Kowloon Secondary School, the physical education teacher as well as the extra-curricular activities mistress in order to improve the validity of the collected data.

Triangulation. Trustworthiness of qualitative data is generated through triangulating multiple data sources (Patton, 1990). In this study triangulation involved the use of multiple data collection methods. Collected data are the interview data, observation data as well as the comments of the third party on extra-curricular activities. Different types of data can provide cross-data validity checks. The author strictly adhered to the behaviours and attitudes being observed and tried to match them with different data sources.

Results

The findings have been organized into three sections: (a) values of physical education, (b) contents of physical education, and (c) sex stereotyped beliefs and alienated behaviours.

Values of Physical Education

All students agreed to include physical education in part of their curriculum. However, they did not recognize physical education as an academic subject. To them, physical education was regarded as a 'second class' subject when compare to other 'examined' subject. Some even tried to avoid physical education lessons when the times of examination or tests of other subjects came.

Jane: When there is test or examination on the same day, I definitely need some extra time to prepare for my test or examination, I think physical education lesson is the most appropriate time. Therefore, I usually pretend to be sick on that day physical education lesson.

Betty: When times near examination, I suggest to change physical education lesson as study period, because I need that time for revising materials. In fact, physical education teacher usually takes continuous assessment, my absence will not influence my physical education final grade.

Ada:when I have to prepare test and examination and sleep lately, I do want to skip the lesson that day too.....

Fanny:There is not enough time for those examined subjects. I prefer using the P.E. lessons for the make up class of these examined subjects.

Although some pointed out that they could learn physical activities during the physical education lessons, however, if they had the right to choose, they would rather take less time in skill training or having more free activities time. This is especially true to the 'non-participation' subjects.

Mary: I know I can learn some sport skill during physical education lessons and these skill could help me very much in annual school athletic meet...I prefer to have more free activity time in physical education lessons.

Jane: I prefer to have less skill practising time and more time for modified games activities.

There was difference between the 'non-participation' group and the 'ordinary' group in the perception of the values of physical education in respect to the gaining knowledge nature. The 'ordinary' subjects felt satisfaction when they had learned or mastered some physical skills.

Ada:I really enjoyed the activities especially when I have learnt the skills and tactics of that particular activity. I also find achievement and successful feeling.

Fanny:I find a sense of achievement when I can manage some gymnastic skills.

Cathy:I want to learn some physical skills. It is great that I have learnt some basic skills on basketball during the lessons. I feel that I have a kind of achievement in the lesson.

On the other hand, the students enjoyed taking part in physical education lessons because it was the only subject that helped them to relax. They felt stressful in school because all the other academic subjects needed to be examined. They claimed that this was the only time to help them to relieve their tense feelings.

Jane: Participating in physical education activities will help me to look brighter and become more relax. I can be in a more balance healthy condition.

Betty: Everyday I have eight lessons, it is rather tough for me to get concentrated. Physical education lesson is the best time for me to get relax!

Mary: I think it's necessary to include physical education in form four curriculum. The time-table is fully occupied with academic subjects.....I feel stressful and I need time to relax.

Ada: I mean that P.E. is not an exam oriented subject, and it is not a HKCEE examined subject in our school, we can relax a bit when having these lessons.

Cathy:P.E. is an important subject, it help us to relax.....

It seemed that most of them neglected to say much about the physiological benefits of participating in physical education activities. They only mentioned the psychological benefits of exercising within the physical education lessons would help them to feel better.

Contents of Physical Education

The students seemed to be unhappy with the current physical education curriculum being offered. They claimed that teaching contents in physical education lessons should not be repeated in senior form. Even if they were repeated, advanced skills should be introduced. Both the 'non-participation' and 'ordinary' groups requested to have new sports activities in their lessons. These activities were swimming, team games activities and racket games activities as well.

Mary: Some physical activities are repeatedly taught every year, I would like to have more water sport activities in my physical education lessons.

Jane: I need varieties of sport activities to be include in my physical education lessons. I hope I could have more choices to choose.... I would like to add badminton, softball, badminton, table tennis and tennis as well.

Betty:the current curriculum is not interesting, I would like to add badminton, table tennis and tennis to the curriculum.

Ada:Besides the teaching contents should change a little bit, we expect new P.E. activities should be taught in senior form. They should be different from what we learnt in S.1-S3..... I also want to learn more advance skill in those activities that have learnt in S.1-S.3. I like having handball, basketball as well as softball.

Fanny:The P.E. activities should be more diversified and attractive.....they should be different from those we learnt in lower forms.....

Cathy:I would like to include some new activities that we have not touched in S.1 to S.3. On a whole, I'll include softball, handball, soccer, volleyball, basketball, badminton, and tennis as well.....

Sex Stereotyped Beliefs and Alienated Behaviours

Although the students were studying in a single-sex school, they still hinted their status of being 'female' and should be specially treated during physical education lessons. Some claimed that insufficient provision of time for them to "recover" from physical activities had made them unwilling to participate in such activities. Menstruation was mentioned that cause pain and tiredness and hindered them from taking part in physical

education activities. Lastly, some also requested to avoid taking part in some demanding activities. It seemed that both interviewed groups held similar 'sex stereotyped beliefs. Students were expecting teacher should treat them specially as their sex-role.

Mary: It is rather troublesome to bring physical education uniform to school in winter and one lesson being offered is inadequate.

Jane: One period is a little bit too short for us. There is not enough time for me to get change....It is really hard for us to exercise in hot summer day...I would like to have a air-conditioned indoor games hall, and I would feel better in summer.... Menstruation cause me some inconvenience when taking part in physical education lesson, I would rather be absent on those days.

Betty: It would be better to have a double period in physical education lessons. After physical education lesson, it is hard for me to get concentrated in the following lessons. I feel very tired! If it is possible, I would like to have some light exercise during summer, because working rigorously in hot summer day is terrible feeling.

Ada:Usually when I do not feel well or during the period of menstruation, I want to avoid the lesson..... I do not like having P.E. activities during sunny days. It makes me feel badly.....No, I just do not like exercising in the hot sunny day!

Cathy:the hot and humid weather sometimes make me feel sick. If the weather is too hot, I'll sweat a lot and I feel rather uncomfortable. Weather is on of the major factors that influence me not to take part in P.E. lessons.

Field notes analyzed by the author indicated that the 'non-participation' subjects being observed were rather reluctant to hard work during the lessons. They tried to make as many as excuses as possible and not to participate in games or group activities. Sometimes, they preferred to sit aside and chatted with others. From their facial expression, it seemed that they were suffering during the lessons.

Today Mary was the third time to tell me that she had forgotten to bring her P.E. uniform for the lesson in the last month. Indeed, I felt that she deliberately left the uniform at home in order to avoid the lesson.

At last, Mary turned up with her uniform. However, she came to me and asked for permission to exempt from games activities. She claimed that she was not feeling very well. During the game activities, Mary was sitting on the bench and talked to her best friend loudly. She did not seem to be sick!

Betty always chatted with her classmates in the lesson. She seemed that she did not listen to what I said. She purposely threw the basketball away and did not practice as I instructed. During the group games, she just sat aside and be the 'spectator'.

This was the third time Betty tried to pretend very busy in her practice, but when I walked further away from her, she only stood still and watched her classmates practising. She seemed to be suffering when she picked up the basketball!

I was glad that Jane had brought the P.E. uniform for the lesson. However, when action began, her level of activity was almost negligible. She always stood around. Sometimes she even wandered around and escaped from touching the volleyball.

Jane once again quarreled with me. She insisted that she could not do even one sit up exercise. She stayed in the changing room almost the whole lesson. After the lesson, she came to me and reported that she was not feeling well today.

Additional comments and information gathered from the extra-curricular activities mistress also indicated that these students had seldom participated in any organized sports activities in school. However, they had participated in ball games competitions at some joint-school projects outside school. It seems that they do not really dislike physical education activities and they only do not like to take part in physical education lessons. Moreover, the physical education teacher also provided the attendance records of the 'non-participation' subjects. They were ranked as the three highest absentees in the P.E. lessons of the secondary four level. This confirms the purposeful selection of the 3 students with 'non-participation' behaviours during physical education lessons is appropriate.

On the contrary, the 'ordinary' subjects did not show any alienated behaviours from physical education. From analyzing the field notes, records showed that the 'ordinary' students behaved properly and participated actively in the physical education activities. Besides, their attendance record in P.E. lessons indicated that they seldom absent in the lessons. On the whole, although the selected students held similar sex stereotyped beliefs but only the 'non-participation' subjects showed alienated behaviours.

Discussion

Data gathered in this study obviously indicated that students requested more time for physical education lessons. In practice, they had only one physical education lesson per seven-day cycle as opposed to the two periods per class per week recommended by the Education Department. As criticized by the Hong Kong Sports Development Board that the target of allocating two

periods of physical education per class per week in secondary schools is not often achieved (Hong Kong Sports Development Board, 1993). The Hong Kong curriculum experts, Morris (1997) has identified that this is one of the characteristics of the distribution of time to cultural subjects in Hong Kong secondary schools.

Most Hong Kong senior form students start to prepare their Hong Kong Certificate Examination in secondary four. Most schools will allocate more time to those 'examined' subjects. Cultural subjects will be sacrificed if they are not the 'examined' subjects. Mitchell and Earls (1987) suggested that perceptions about the worth of physical education are determinants influencing the amount of time and resources allocated to the programmes. This in turn reflects the status of physical education in Kowloon Secondary School. As Van Wersch, Trew and Turner (1992) had shown the sharp decline in interest in P.E. for girls after the age of 14 years was more related to the status P.E. had in school. This may partly explained why some senior students showed alienated behaviours from the subject.

Information in the present study indicated that all these selected students were very concerned about the 'examined' subjects. The 'non-participation' students in the present study even prioritized the 'examined' subjects high above the physical education. It seemed that the Hong Kong Certificate Examination were putting too much pressure on them. Recently, researchers had shown that students electing other more important subjects was the main reason why they dropped P.E. (Browne, 1992; Scantling et al. 1997). Similarly, students in Kowloon Secondary School might also bear the same belief that the other examined subjects are more important to them in further studies.

On the other hand, the students would like to request a more diversified physical curriculum in school. They all suggested to add more new sport activities in their lessons. This requisition coincide to what Rice (1988) found in the study of attitude towards physical education activities of 602 high school students. The results of the study indicated the need for a wide variety of activities to be offered to the students. The requests from these students may help the school administrator to reconsider the needs of their students.

As in other studies, the majority (over 70%) of the subjects investigated showed that they enjoyed the physical education lessons (Butcher, 1982; Carlson, 1993, 1994; Coe, 1984; Rice, 1988; William & Nelson, 1983). "Fun" was always mentioned by the students. This supported that students like physical education for the fun and enjoyment they derived from it. For the 'non-participation' group, some mentioned that they enjoyed beating the opponents and winning the games during physical education lessons. It seems that they enjoy the competitive

aspect of the activities. They share the same views with those girls being interviewed by Hastie (1998) on their perceptions within a unit of sport education. Some girls like competitions. While the 'ordinary' group felt that learning some skills was a kind of achievement. It is true that providing success experience or helping students to perceive themselves positively in physical education will foster positive attitude towards the subject.

Lastly, the traditional perceptions of sex-role behaviours beliefs by the senior form secondary school girls seemed to be obvious in the present study. As Dewar (1987) expressed, physical education has played a critical role in the development of masculinity and femininity, and it makes it an ideal site for exploring the social and cultural construction of gender. Researchers had further indicated that the practicing behaviours of physical education teachers might be responsible for the production and reproduction of gender in physical education lessons (Wright & King, 1991; Wright, 1996).

Lo (1995) conducted a survey on 200 Hong Kong secondary four students and found that sex-role stereotype image among Hong Kong school girls was very strong. He also agreed that family, peer group, the school teachers and PE curriculum help to reinforce their sex-role ideology. In the single-sex schooling environment, all students are presumably treated equally and given equal opportunities. Scraton (1989) gave evidence that single-sex PE also reproduced gender inequalities. However, the practice behaviours of the physical education teacher at the Kowloon Secondary School has not been studied, it is hard to conclude whether the students sex stereotyped behaviours beliefs and alienated behaviours from physical education lessons are due to the effects of the P.E. teacher. Further studies focus on the behaviours of the physical education teacher in relate to the development of sex stereotyped beliefs and behaviours of students in single-sex school should be explored.

Conclusion

Some students in Kowloon Secondary School holds 'sex stereotyped' beliefs and alienated behaviours from physical education lessons. This partly explains why some do not actively participate in physical education lessons. Indeed, other reasons such as stress from the public examination and low status of the physical education in school may also contribute to the cause of some students alienation from the physical education.. The school administrators in Kowloon Secondary School should take note of this phenomenon.

As the students in the study do not satisfy the current physical education curriculum in the school, there is a need for the physical education head to restructure or reform the school physical education curriculum. Physical education teaching

should be delivered according to the needs of the students because this may help to maintain the interest of the students learning.

Finally, as with all qualitative studies, generalizing the data of six secondary school girls to a large population is left to the readers. Results of this study provoke many questions. Do the practising behaviours of the physical education teachers influence the development of sex stereotyped beliefs and behaviours of single-sex students? Under the current 'examined oriented' Hong Kong school curriculum, how do the school physical education teachers help to raise the status and values of physical education in their own schools? Do the 'non-participation' students in other girl schools hold similar reasons for their alienated behaviours from physical education lessons? These should be seen as the starting point for further qualitative research work. On the whole, the 'non-participation' and 'ordinary' students in the present study did hold different perception of physical education in terms of values and status within school. Lastly, physical educators should always listen to their students and try to understand how the students perceive physical education. Interviewing is a helpful way for them to learn about students perception of their programmes (Peterson & Swing, 1982). A thorough understanding of students perceptions can help us to redesign our curriculum and instructional practices in order to meet the needs of them.

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