

Enabling Youth in Decision Making through Competent Youth Work

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Introduction

A key primary goal of the new Malaysian Youth Policy 2015 is for Malaysian youth to be responsible citizens in initiatives at national, regional, and international levels. For them to have this capacity, their positive assets need to be developed, one of which is the capacity in decision making as part of their social competencies. It is through this capacity that the youth be given the opportunity to express his/her views and ideas. After all, when youths are given a voice, they are contributing their ideas for the future, not only for the community and the country, but also definitely for themselves as well being the future citizens.

Youth as we all know, are not yet fully independent even though they try their best to, especially with the current millennial youth. They still need some form of guidance at an early phase of their transition from childhood to adulthood. In addition, they need adults to facilitate the opportunities for them to express themselves. These adults are usually those involved in youth work with the capacities and resources to guide them and enable them with the opportunities for their expression.

For youth to develop competencies, they have to learn and go through a few stages of learning which essentially also suggests that their development takes place through these stages: Stage 1 – being fully dependent on adult guidance; Stage 2 – being where the adults give partial guidance while the youth contribute ideas; Stage 3 – where the adults main facilitate while the youth makes all the decisions; and Stage 4 – where the youth no longer needs any adult guidance nor facilitation (Choy and Delahaye, 2003). So basically the presentation of this paper will be focusing on Stages 2 and 3.

What then are the competencies that those in youth work requires in guiding and facilitating a youth in enabling his/her voices and expression? A study was conducted in 2014-2015 to assess the status of youth work practice in Malaysia, and the core competencies required for professional best practices.

For the youth voice to be heard, we also need those involved in youth work to be equipped with relevant competencies so as to effectively deal with the youth, and to provide the youth with quality in work practices. It is this quality of youth work practice that inspires confidence in the youth to make decisions of their own. Those involved in youth work are respected as role models to the youth.

Methods

The research conducted was an assessment of the core competencies that are required of Malaysians involved in youth work and their level of competencies. A quantitative survey research was employed for the study. After reviews of literatures on competencies for youth work, the researchers of the study decided to adapt the National Collaboration for Youth *Competency Observation Assessment Tool* for this Malaysian youth work competency study. While the NCY tool comprise of 10 competencies with several items in each of them, the Malaysian study revised the tool to 12 core competencies after a series of instrument development workshop, and a pilot test.

The competency most related to enabling youth voice is about youth empowerment. In the NCY context, the competency is *Involves and empowers youth* and comprise of 10 items. All the competencies involve 2 sets of scales for *Practice* and *Skill*. For *Practice*, it is only a *Yes* and *No* response to assess whether each of the competencies was practiced; while for *Skill* a scale of 1 to 3 was used: (1) Low, (2) Medium, (3) High. For this competency on youth empowerment, the Mean is 3.50, S.D. 0.891.

The adapted Malaysian competency is *Involving and Empowering Youth* comprising of 9 items. These items are: involving youth in decisions regarding programmes and activities; involving youth in implementing and evaluating programmes; planning programmes with the youth from the beginning to the end; encouraging youth to learn together with their peers; develop the youth with the skill to communicate with confidence; ensuring that the voice of youth is given priority in managing their activities; encouraging two-way communication between youth and youth workers; opening opportunities for youth to choose the programmes they want; and encouraging the youth to assess their own involvement and decide on improvements. The reliability of this competency has a Cronbach alpha of .910 for *Practice*, and .926 for *Skill* after the second pilot test.

The study involved 300 respondents from the Government, NGOs and private organisation. The survey questionnaire design was used due to its cost effectiveness and convenience of the respondents. The respondents also have privacy and confidentiality when answering the questions unlike using an interview. Samples were both collected randomly from a list of organisations identified through the criteria set for government agencies, NGOs and private sector organisations. Some were sent by post, some by drop-off, and some administered directly during a National Youth Convention by an enumerator. Finally, descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation using SPSS software were used for the analyses of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

The demographic profile of the respondents indicates that there is an almost equal number of male and female respondents, 55.3% and 44.7% respectively. Most of the respondents are young and below 30 years of age (60.7%), while the majority 79.3% are Muslims and Malays (77.3%). Not many of them are highly educated with only 7.0% with Master's or PhD degrees, while most of them have lower academic qualifications such as Diploma (38.0%) and Bachelor's degree (31.7%).

Almost half of the respondents are from the government sector (49.7%), and almost another half (42.3%) from the NGOs. Youth workers in the private sector can be considered to be negligible at only 6.3%. Most of these respondents involved in youth work are also volunteers (51.7%), with 38.0% full time workers, and 10.3% part time workers. And most of them have more than 4 years experience in youth work.

Since this paper is about youth empowerment, the findings of this competency indicates that the score of their skill level is at a moderate level (50.3%) suggesting that they are not fully competent to empower youth. Of these moderate score, the highest is *developing skills in communicating confidently* at 49.3%, while the lowest is *ensuring youth voice is being prioritized* at only 37.7%. This suggests that those in youth work has yet to fully empower the youth to voice out their views and ideas.

If we want our youth to be future leaders, they need to move on from Stage 2 to Stage 3 in Choy and Delahaye's model before they become adults and are able to make their own decisions (Stage 4). Empowering the youth and giving them a voice is part and

parcel of their self-reliance and independence at adulthood. At adulthood, the youth has to be self-supporting and self-sufficient and their decision-making prowess is not confined merely to their work, profession, or their leadership roles. Decision-making begins right from themselves in making decisions about their own lives and that of their inner families. If they cannot make decisions right at the grassroots, how are they to make decisions for the whole country and the rest of the world? This empowerment is also about empowering thinking (Commonwealth Youth Programme Asia Centre, 2012).

According to the Commonwealth Youth Programme (ibid), empowering youth is central to their social education. And this is one of the positive youth asset outlined in the Malaysian Youth Policy 2015, ie social competency. In this asset are 6 items: planning and making decision, interpersonal competency, cultural competency, skill in overcoming risk, civic thinking, and peaceful conflict resolution. The positive youth asset model is based on the principle that the youth has the talent, potential, and capacity to be responsible for their own lives as citizens of a country. And that they youth have the knowledge, skills, attitude, and right behaviours to be positive, fully functional adults who are self-reliant to protect themselves in the face of adversity and challenges (Witt and Caldwell, 2005).

Empowering youth and enabling them with opportunities to voice out their ideas, views, and opinions is to recognize the potentials of the youth, and not considering them as deficits or liabilities with problems to be solved. And this is where those in youth work should acknowledge and recognize. They should 'let go' of trying to teach the youth. Instead, enable the youth to learn themselves and be independent in their thinking and development.

Conclusion

Those in youth work regardless of their role as counselors, role models, administrators, policy makers, programme and event managers, educators are all facilitators in youth development and hence in enabling the youth to be decision makers. This is through opportunities in participation, involvement, and engagements in a variety of events and activities.

The youth will continue to be dependents on their caregivers if they are not allowed to open up their minds and express themselves. Their thinking capacities if curtailed, will not allow them to grow to be thinkers and hence not be enabled to be decision makers.

For the youth to be able to have their voices heard and be decision makers, their minds must be free to think, opportunities be opened to them, and get them to participate and be involved. Those in youth work are the enablers and facilitators only. Regardless of whether the youth decisions are right or wrong, the important thing is for the youth to be given their freedom of expression.

Recommendations

Enabling youth voice is about providing the youth with opportunities in participation, involvement, and engagement (Lee, in Neda, ed. 2014) through: forums such as conferences, seminars, workshops; sharing and learning in educational settings; art and painting; acting, music and songs; recreation, sports and games; cultural activities; radio shows; table talk; success story telling; poster presentations; and, essay writings and poems.

While these are some of the avenues and platforms, they also include being involved in planning of these events and activities from the very beginning of conceptualization to the conclusion, evaluation, and recommendation of future programmes.

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