

Peer Support and Youth Engagement

Zaifunizam Ariffin¹ Steven Eric Krauss, Haslinda Abdullah, Adriana Ortega & Zuraidah Ali

Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. 43400 UPM, Serdang,
Selangor

Introduction

Youth peer relationships and support networks are part and parcel of their socialization, and such relationships and networks take place while participating in for example leisure activities, after school programs and sport activities (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). The attachment and relationship with peers significantly influence behaviour (Huang, Wang, & Shi, 2012). Although peer influences is commonly cited as a determinant of youth risk behaviour (Albert & Steinberg, 2011; Monahan, Steinberg, & Cauffman, 2009), peer influence also has positive impact on youth behaviour and decision making process (Barber, Stone, Hunt & Eccles, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). For example, adolescents and youth might decide to join in volunteering work or participate in after school programs or youth activities because their friends are taken part in such activities. Similarly youth social group might influence or encourage each other to get involved and participate in new activities.

Therefore it can be argued that youth participation and involvement in activities and programs might reflect positive peer influence. In other words, positive peer attachment and/or perceived peer support could play an important role in youth involvement and engagement in a program that ultimately could change their lives.

On the other hand, youth participation, involvement and engagement are important indicators of the success a program and the hosting or organizing Institution/body. Also youth involvement in activities or programs enable them to share their experiences and knowledge. By participating in youth programs and activities young people also have the opportunity to learn from each other and build meaningful relationships with the other young people participating in the programs. In turn, these peer relationship can have a significant effect on the sustainability of youth engagement in activities and programs.

¹ zaifu.ariffin@gmail.com Institute for Social Science Studies, University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, MALAYSIA

Joining a youth organization can be at first overwhelming as young people would be stepping into unfamiliar territories or areas. Joining youth organizations with friends and/or developing positive peer relationships with other young people in the organization can buffer any uneasiness and help youth to reflect on the contribution they can make as active members as well as the benefits they receive from their involvement and engagement in the organization. This paper presentation would focus on exploring how peer relationship can strengthen youth engagement in volunteering activities in Malaysia

Methods

Data was obtained using in-depth interview. The interviews lasted an hour and focused on 3 dimensions (1) involvement/participation (2) engagement and (3) sense of connectedness. A Total of 14 interviews were conducted with young people between 18 and 30 years old. The participants shared their experiences and success stories.

Results and Discussion

From the interviews the research team was able to identify two big recurrent themes, namely peer influences in the process of getting involved in the program or organization, and the role of peers as motivators and mentors.

Peers influences in the process of getting involved in the program or organization

During the interviews the young participants narrated their experiences and emphasised that they attended at first or joined in as part of a group, i.e. group of friends from a school or neighbourhood. Being with their friends gave them confidence and helped them to face the new experiences related to joining a particular program that they were either required to join or were curious about. Since they knew each other and have similar interests (or requirements) it became easier to explore and/or face the challenge that came with joining the organization. Also being with their friends at this early stage enables them to gain combined information and knowledge from the program they attended. In addition, joining the program as a group made it more enjoyable and meaningful to participate in the different activities. Since they could communicate well among themselves it also made it easier to share and exchange their ideas with other youth participating in the programs. Furthermore, although their initial participation was based on friendship, once in the program together they felt more confident to explore and

form peer relationship with other outside their friends circle. In turn, whether or not they remained engaged was not because of their friends, but because they enjoyed what they were doing and felt comfortable with the new friends. Thus, they continued to be engaged regardless of the participation of the friends who initially joined with them.

Peers as motivator and mentor

When youth can recognize their own issues, they can stimulate their spirits and change their intentions into actions (Checkoway, 2011). In turn, they become good motivators and mentors for their peers and other young people around them. Thus, youth as part and parcel of an organization should be regarded as valuable resources of relevant youth experience and knowledge and as reference for other youth (Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). Engaged and motivated youth can bring about positive changes to the organization and also their peers (Checkoway, 2011). Previous studies have reported an association between positive changes and youth mentoring (Buikstra, Ross, King, Baker, & Mclachlan, 2010). When the organization welcomes these changes it increases youth interest and engagement which would have a positive and enriching spill-over effect on their work, the organization and the community, serving as motivators for others to join. Youth are motivated by their peers' positive achievement, and inspired by them to also try to achieve similar or even higher goals. Nonetheless, the youth "built-in motivational system" that can make them into agents of change and positive development (Buikstra et al., 2010) needs to be nourished since it is not self-sustainable.

Conclusion

To conclude, the results show that youth find inspiration and motivation among their peers. Young people like and enjoy working in groups especially with their own circle of friends because they have similar interest. As young people become engaged and active participants, their peers would look up to them as a source of inspiration and guidance. Therefore young people are able to build good peer support and become valuable asset for the organization and/or community they are involved with.

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