

Enabling Youth in Decision Making Through Competent Youth Work

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Abstract

The first primary goals of the Malaysian Youth Policy 2015 is that the youth should be more responsible citizens in initiatives at national, regional, and international levels. This suggests that the youth should therefore be involved in decision making at all levels. And this is where one of the positive assets of Malaysian youth that have been identified is social competency in decision-making. Since those involved in youth work play a role is facilitating the development of the youth, they then have an important role in facilitating the development of this capacity for decision making of the youth. Those in youth work are professionals who work with young people in a range of settings (Commonwealth Secretariat 2012). They can be found in youth clubs, street-based settings, social/welfare services, sports/leisure centres, schools, museums, arts facilities, government agencies, children's homes, hospitals, among others. Their job roles are diverse from being counselors addressing youth problems to youth development building youth assets in positive youth development, researchers, youth education, and policy makers. All these diverse roles require those in youth work to be equipped with various skill sets guided by theory, best practice, youth principles and values and communication skills. Ultimately those in youth work are in the business of developing youth through which the youth are guided and facilitated to express themselves and become future leaders with decision-making capacities through empowerment. A study was recently conducted to identify the status of youth work practice and the core competencies of Malaysian youth workers for their professionalization. Professionalisation of youth workers is now one of the priorities of the new Malaysian Youth Policy 2015. The study found that Malaysian youth workers have yet to be considered as 'professionals' and hence lack the relevant competencies to be professionals. Among the recommendations are competency training for these youth workers, establish professional standards, ethics and practice, and the formation of a youth worker association that will certify and register these professionals in youth work.

Keywords: Decision making in Youth, Youth Work Competencies, Empowering Youth, Youth Workers, Professionalizing Youth Workers

Introduction and Background

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 (Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, 2015). 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 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 from: 1) being fully dependent on adult guidance; 2) require partial adult guidance; 3) where the adults mainly facilitate while the youth makes all the decisions, i.e. semi-autonomous empowerment; 4) where the youth no longer needs any adult guidance nor facilitation and are established and independent in their own lives (Choy & Delahaye, 2003). However, the critical period is during the second and third phase. This is what this paper will focus on.

The Issue of Concern

If we want the youth to be partners in nation building, we have to empower them with decision making skills and opportunities, and that they have to be partnered with concerned adults to unleash this potential (Hamzah, in Tiraieyari, ed. 2014). The youth are at a stage of human development where change and transition takes place (ibid). And according to Hamzah (2014), they have to be empowered to be confident in their decision-making abilities.

Even though we talked about adults being facilitators and enablers for the youth in developing their decision-making skills, not all adults would have these skills. This is where professionally trained youth workers are required to carry out these tasks. An earlier study by Shariff and Maimunah (2008) found that even the fulltime officers of the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia are not sufficiently competent in youth work.

Hamzah (2005) also cited studies by Universiti Putra Malaysia that the prime enablers of youth in transition still lacked professionalism in youth work. This is where he proposed that these prime enablers have to be professionalized youth workers who are trained with relevant knowledge, skills and competencies in development of the youth.

The Malaysian government through the Ministry of Youth and Sports have recognized the importance and relevance of youth work to be professionalized with core competencies. For this reason, they have established youth work professionalization as one of the 9 priority areas in development of the youth in the Malaysian Youth Policy 2015.

This paper is from a study by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (2015) then seeks to establish: 1) who these professional youth workers are: and, 2) the status of empowerment that enables the youth worker to enable youth to become decision makers. 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. It was to determine what needs to be done to enable our youth workers to be competent in dealing with youth development, one of which is of course, being competent decision makers.

For the youth voice to be heard, we also need those involved in youth work to be equipped with relevant competencies in quality work practices so as to effectively deal with the youth. This will be to provide the youth with opportunities to express themselves well. 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.

Youth Work Empowerment and Competencies

According to the Commonwealth Youth Programme (2012), those working with youth or youth workers are professionals working with the young people in a variety of settings, such as in clubs and street-based settings, with social/welfare services, sports/leisure centres, schools, in museums, art facilities, hospitals, children's homes and young offenders' institutions. They can also be found working directly for the government or local government, community development, capacity building, accredited and non-accredited learning, and as well as in voluntary and non-governmental organisations. Here, their focus is on the social and political education of young people, and their wellbeing, as well as empowering the young people's participation in issues that affect their lives (ibid.).

Decision-making comes from **empowering** young people to "play an assertive and constructive part in decisions that affects them at all levels of society" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1998). For the youth worker, empowering young people is helping the young people to develop their potential as thinkers, interactors and doers, involving them creatively in social change, gaining access to resources, playing a full and active part in social and economic development, organizing self-sustaining initiatives, asserting theirs and others human rights, practice values and principles, and participating fully and actively in the democratic process (ibid.). Basically, empowering the young people is about giving them the opportunity to take control of decisions that influence their lives and well-being, that includes having a sense of ownership to their ideas, values, opinions, and interests (Edginton et al. 2005).

Youth work as a professional field is essentially about "promoting the personal and social development of young people" and "insuring that each individual has equal opportunity to fulfil their potential as an individual and as a member of their society" (Edginton et al., 2005, p.63). That is why youth work requires the youth workers to be professionally competent. The youth workers are at the forefront of developing human capital as nation builders in the youth. The future nation builders and leaders are in their hands to develop. This is an important role that youth workers have been playing in the background. It is through professionalization that the youth worker can provide a quality of practice in this occupation of youth work (Krauss et. al, 2012).

So, to be a professional, the youth worker is required to be equipped with relevant competencies which in youth work are the 'knowledge, skills, and personal attributes workers need to create in positive youth development settings'; and core competencies are 'the "demonstrated capacities" in the foundation of high quality performance' (Astroth et al., 2004) and programmes (Walker & Gran, 2010). Competencies establish the standards and practice to strengthen the profession when they are 'concrete, observable, and achievable' (National AfterSchool Association, 2011).

Moreover, youth workers with competency skills help to predict youth outcomes and positive development of the youth (Hartje et al., 2007). And their studies found correlations between significant competencies for youth work staff who have undergone staff training, education and skill sets.

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 and decision making 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* that comprise 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 of experience in youth work.

This study then suggests that the respondents who are essentially youth workers are in youth work and from various other professions. Other than the officers of the Ministry of Youth and Sports who are fulltime government employees, and some working with youth NGOs, most of the others are mere volunteers. Despite their background and experience, they are still considered youth workers. Nonetheless, the definition itself of who constitutes to be designated a *professional youth worker* has not been established, especially in the Malaysian context. There is therefore a question as **who** should be considered the professional youth worker in Malaysia. As yet, there is still no specific definition for the term *professional youth worker*. The study then suggests that anyone who are involved in youth issues or youth development work can be designated as a *youth worker* with or without any professionalization nor any qualifications or training or accreditation.

It contrasts with what the Commonwealth Youth Programme (2012) that defined the professionals directly engaged with the young people in their work. As this study indicates, not everyone of the youth worker are truly directly engaged with the young people. Many of them are in managerial and administrative work, as well as being policy makers.

Professionals, according to Edginton et al. (2005), are those equipped with theoretical knowledge on the profession's practice; practitioners with a monopoly of judgment based on their knowledge and expertise; have undergone training, accredited courses and licensing to become a member of the profession; and have established a professional culture promoted in institutional settings, research and education, and professional association.

When it is about youth empowerment, the findings of this competency indicate 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 competency 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 with their own lives, how are they to make decisions for the whole country and the rest of the world? But to be empowered with decision-making has to also start with 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, that is, 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 & 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.

Enabling the youth to make decisions on their own is to allow them the opportunities to express themselves and have ownership of their actions. In this way, the youths learn to take responsibility of their decisions and accept the outcomes of their decisions. The old culture of trying to control the young people as indicated of the youth work officers in the study suggests that they are still in the era of *youth deficit* model believing that these youths need to be fully steered. This is now the era of the *youth asset* model where the youths are to be equipped and enabled with positive qualities, values and living competencies.

The youth need to grow and mature. They will become adults eventually. The time will come for them to be their own decision maker. This transitional phase of transiting under parental care of childhood to adulthood is the training phase for them to develop their full independence and autonomy. Competent and professional youth workers should start to 'let go' of their control and allow these young people to establish their own identity as postulated by Erikson (1968). Self-identity is a natural phase in the life cycle of the growth of an individual (Erikson, 1980).

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 among their responsibilities is enabling the youth to be decision makers. They become decision makers through opportunities in participation, involvement, and engagements in a variety of events and activities, and as well as to their rights to ownership of their decisions.

The youth will continue to be dependents on their adult 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. Without this independence of thinking and decision making skills, they cannot venture out from parenthood care.

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. It is about allowing them to dictate their own lives, and determine their own future directions whether for their own lives or for their society and nation.

As beneficiaries of the future, the youth should have the capacity of free thinking, creativity, and innovation in their thinking and views. This is where it is important for youth workers to be competent in enabling the youth to be free to think and make their own decisions.

Recommendations

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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. These involvements will give them a sense of ownership and learn about their responsibilities in their lives.
- 3) A competent youth worker should therefore have the competency of letting go of controlling the youth. At the same time, to steer and guide them whenever necessary. But ultimately, enabling them to be decision makers is to unleash them to the world and contribute their knowledge, talents, skills and capacities.
- 4) There is a necessity to establish the concept of a professional youth worker in the Malaysian context.
- 5) A framework of professionalization of youth workers is required to outline the pathways for youth workers to be trained, accredited, and licensed.

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