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About YouthSCOPE

YouthSCOPE is compilation of abridged youth studies consolidated by the National Youth Council (NYC). It aims to actively share the findings of local youth research studies, with a view to promote a knowledge-sharing culture in the local youth sector. Youth Scope is currently published on an occasional basis.

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About the National Youth Council

The National Youth Council (NYC), a division of the People’s Association, was set up by the Singapore Government on 1 November 1989 as the national co-ordinating body for youth affairs in Singapore.

Mr Chan Chun Sing, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, is the Chairman of the 12th Council. The Council comprises members from various government ministries, youth organisations, academic institutions, voluntary welfare organisations, media and private sector organisations.

NYC is the Advocate, Enabler and Partner for Youth. Together with our partners, NYC develops a dynamic and engaging environment where young people are inspired to dream and committed to action.
The NYC connects with young Singaporeans so that their collective voices can advocate and enable positive change as an:

- **Advocate:** Aggregate youth voices and represent the interests of young Singaporeans nationally and internationally

- **Enabler:** Enable young people to pursue their aspirations and be positive contributors to Singapore through our programmes and grants

- **Partner:** Congregate youth leaders and youth organisations to jointly develop a vibrant youth ecosystem

NYC is also Singapore’s focal point for international youth affairs.
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Editorial

“I am blown away by this report. Such a wonderfully written piece that is exemplary of what I am looking for”. This was what I wrote in the report turned in by a group of my students. Then when going through the report with them, I asked them what they thought of revising the report into an article for publication. They were excited. I posed the same question to another group, and they were hesitant. Why was there such a big difference in their responses? I suspected it had to do with how good the respective youth-led programmes were viewed to be. While We Are Different--the programme that the first group of students wrote about--seemed to be vibrant and growing, Keep Youths Alive--the programme that the second group wrote about--was struggling with some issues.

How do you decide whether a youth-led programme is good or not? What is a youth-led programme in the first place? Are they successful in Singapore? These are some questions that this YouthSCOPE issue attempts to answer, as we showcase a few youth-led programmes. The essays in this issue are the product of a Social Work class on urban youth work. The students were given a group project to suggest a new youth-led programme or critique an existing one. Besides it being a journey where the students would learn about youth trends, youth programs, and thinking critically about them,
I had a simple question in mind: what is the extent of youth participation in Singapore? The results were such a pleasant surprise that I just had to ask National Youth Council if they were interested to compile the student reports into a publication. Why?

First, the students came back with fantastic examples of not only youth-led, but even youth-initiated programmes. The programmes they found were not only viable, but some were large in scale, and could have a substantial impact on Singapore’s community. I personally did not expect that such a variety and quantity of programmes could be found with sufficient information that students could write about in a project. Second, the students wrote really great papers. This issue is the fruit of the students’ labour from January to May 2010. While we showcase exemplary youth programmes, we also balance it by providing what we hope are constructive and fair criticisms of the programmes. The aim is that we can learn about how to better engage youths and harvest their strengths for the benefit of themselves and ourselves.

More specifically, this issue has two aims. The first aim is, without being shy about it, to showcase the fantastic work that youths are doing in their communities. We have no qualms about this. It is not biased. We are simply writing about programmes we have encountered. The youths who have led the programmes that we write about are amazingly brave and generous people who have poured in their youthful creativity and energy into the programmes that they are leading. I hope readers get this point loud and clear from reading the chapters. The second aim, however, is to learn how we can better engage youths and harvest their strengths for personal and community development in Singapore. Towards this aim, we provide critiques of the programmes and the Singapore landscape.

I am grateful that the National Youth Council has embraced our collection as an issue of its YouthSCOPE series. This issue on youth participation embodies youth participation not only in terms of the subject matter, but also in the very essence that students’ class projects are turned into a publication that hopefully will benefit the youth sector. Since the essays in this issue came
from a single project, the issue is different from other issues in that it is presented like a book, where the different essays are chapters linked to each other. The first chapter define important concepts and key theoretical frameworks in the youth participation literature. The student essays are all anchored on these youth participation concepts and theories. In chapter two, we provide a macro view of the youth participation landscape in Singapore. This is followed by three essays containing students’ analysis of a youth-led programme in each chapter. Chapter six summarizes a few other programmes that other groups of students wrote about, and the key insights that we can learn from the programmes. The issue ends with reflections on the state of youth participation and leadership in Singapore. It provides some learning points as we look ahead.

Irene Y.H. Ng

About the Editor:
Irene Y.H. Ng is an Assistant Professor of Social Work in the National University of Singapore and Executive Editor of Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development. Her research areas include poverty and inequality, intergenerational mobility, youth crime, and social welfare policy. She is Principal Investigator of an evaluation of a national Work Support programme and a collaborator in a research in Michigan studying delinquents processed through the adult criminal system. She serves in committees in the National Youth Council, the Chinese Development Assistance Council, and the Family Research Network. Her teaching areas include policy, research, programme planning, and youth work.
CHAPTER ONE

Youth participation: Can we trust youths to lead the community?

Irene Y.H. Ng
Back to Basics: Understanding Youth Participation

Can we trust youths to lead the community? To answer this question, we need to go back to basics. What is youth participation? The two words might invoke the notion of social participation, which is the participation of youths in social groups such as sports, arts groups, and uniformed groups. The National Youth Council (NYC) periodically reports the state of social participation among youths through its publication YOUTH.sg: The State of Youth in Singapore. In 2010, the social groups with the highest participation rates are online groups (28.5%), sports groups (17.5%) and religious groups (9.8%). The social groups with the lowest participation rates are discussion groups (eg. politics, religion) at 2.4% and community groups at 3.4% (Ho, 2010).

However, youth participation advocates and researchers argue that the above is not true participation. Their definition of youth participation is aligned with the definition of community participation, which stresses that participation must involve “people in the decisions that affect their lives” (Checkoway, n.d.). Therefore, if an international organization decides to build a dam in a rural community, but have not consulted the local residents whether they want it in the first place, or on how to build it, there is no participation. Even if they involve the locals to help build the dam, this is
not participation. Similarly, many youth programmes are run by adults for youths, but without inputs from them.

The definition by the National Commission on Resources for Youth (1975) is helpful in specifying how youth participation should look like:

“**Youth participation is the involving of youth in responsible challenging action that meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and/or decision making affecting others in an activity whose impact or consequence is extended to others – i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves.**”

This definition is long, but it clarifies three important pieces to youth participation. First, youths should be involved in meeting genuine needs, not just getting youths involved so that they will be made to feel involved. Second, youths should be involved in planning or decision-making. After all, youths form a substantial proportion of society, and their views should matter to programmes that are meant for the community. Third, the impact of youth involvement is not just on themselves, but extends to others. Simply put, true youth participation will benefit others.

In encouraging social participation by youths in the conservative sense, we emphasize the benefits of participation to youths themselves. Research has shown clearly the benefits to youths from participation. These include higher academic performance and attainment; lower likelihood of school dropout; reduced risk-taking behaviour; improved self-esteem; lessened anxiety; and gains in interpersonal competence (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005; Zill, Nord & Loomis, 1995; Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003). These are the youth development reasons for youth participation.

In promoting youth participation, the personal development reasons for engaging youths are still highly valued. More than that, however, advocates of youth participation emphasize the benefits to the community of allowing youths to plan and make decisions. Most people support youth participation for youth development reasons, but few are able to appreciate the youth
participation potential for community development. Such a view limits efforts in pursuing greater youth involvement. Extending on Checkoway (n.d.)*’s three levels of development through youth participation, Figure 1 shows a pyramid of development. When we take the narrow view of involving youth for their personal development, the sphere of influence is also narrow. But engaging youth can develop the organization and even the larger community. When we see the potential of youths at the community level, we reach the large base and will make greater efforts to involve them.

Figure 1. Pyramid of development of youth participation

What can youths offer? Some benefits include:

- Youths are creative. They offer new ideas that break out of the old and tired ways.
- Youths are energetic. They provide vitality and excitement to programmes.
- Youths are part of the community. Benefiting them alone benefits the community, and their take on community matters is significant and important.
- Youths have the right to be heard. Beyond benefits, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (MCDS, 2001), children (and youths) have the right to active participation and to be heard.
Of course, for every point above, there are counter arguments, such as youths being anti-establishments, fickle, unreliable, or apathetic towards societal needs. The argument by youth participation advocates is that much of these negative behaviours and attitudes of youths can be turned into strengths by empowering them and giving them meaningful roles in the community. Youths are too often viewed as problems, and insufficiently viewed as strengths or resources for community development.

**Obstacles & “ISMs”**

Interestingly, much of the negative views of youths’ behaviours and attitudes might be the adults’ own prejudices and stereotypes of youths. Youths too internalize these negative views that the larger (adult) society imposes on them. Some obstacles to youth participation, as articulated by Checkoway (n.d.), include:

- Adults view youths as “problems” rather than “resources”
- Adults plan programmes without involving youths in the process
- Adults do not share their power with youths
- Youths do not view themselves as a group that can create change
- Youths may have good ideas, but are unsure how to implement them
- Youths are not organized enough for real influence

What are the results of such prejudiced attitudes and behaviour towards youths and their participation? These can be summarized into three “isms”. The first ism, *tokenism*, means that youths’ participation is not of “real” quality (Checkoway, n.d.). They might be there in numbers, but their involvement is only “token”. For example, a community performance needs to include representation from all ages, and gets children and youth volunteers to join. However, the young people are given only minor parts, with no inputs on how the performance should be. The second ism, *adultism*, assumes that “adults are better than young people, and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement” (Checkoway, n.d.). For example, youth fellowship programmes in churches
might be planned by adults without seeking or with token ways of seeking inputs from the youths; remedial youth programmes might be designed by youth agencies and policy makers without asking participants’ views aside from the narrowly scoped focus groups or individual surveys.

In my observations of youth work and development, I have found a third ism - *elitism*. With the above-stated barriers to involving youths, there is a tendency that only the most outstanding youths are given leadership and decision-making roles. In the school system, these are often the ones from the elite schools or who are older and in the universities. The environments in these institutions are more conducive to youths coming forth to germinate new ideas and put ideals into action. The question is how representative are these youths of the general youth population or the rest of the society. In addition, youth participation only by such elite youths implies a huge untapped potential from the larger pool of youths. Two particular groups come to mind. One group comprises the quiet ones who tend not to be noticed. The other group is what some classify as at-risk or troubled youths. They are youths that have displayed behavioural problems such as school truancy, delinquency, and bullying, and for which remedial programmes are needed. Unfortunately, encouraging participation from these groups takes much greater effort, perhaps more effort than worth the while for many. What is worthwhile, however, is coloured by our expectations on how these youths will respond and our limited view of what they can accomplish. I believe youth workers and social workers have many examples of how empowering these youths through participation has led to changed lives for the youths themselves and also for people whom they helped. I personally have witnessed some. Youth participation itself can be a remedial tool for at-risk and withdrawn youths. However, it is not the place of this issue to document such transformations. The point to note is the bias towards elitism and against certain groups of youths because our mindsets about them are more entrenched.
**Adults as Allies**

The call for greater youth participation and empowerment does not mean that adults leave youths alone to do as they will. To optimize on youths’ potential, adults play a crucial role in coming alongside to unleash that potential. Adults can do this by helping to:

1. Facilitate critical reflection
2. Develop theory of change
3. Empower them
4. Allow them to explore and fail
5. Assess their assets
6. Provide structure & resources

**Models of Youth Participation**

What, then, does youth participation look like? Offered below are two frameworks that can be used as benchmarks in evaluating the extent of youth participation taking place in a particular community programme.

*Ladder of participation (Roger Hart, 1992)*

Roger Hart’s ladder of participation (1992) is perhaps the most famous model in the children and youth participation literature (Figure 2). Published as “Children’s participation: from tokenism to citizenship” by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), it has been the model of choice in assessing participation by young people. Hart proposed eight levels of participation according to the degrees of youth participation. The first three levels are described as “non-participatory” where youth are either being “manipulated”, used as “decoration” or tokenized (Howard, Newman, Harris, & Harcourt, 2002). At these levels, youths have no or little say.
The ladder moves up from the fourth to the last rung as the degree of youth participation increases. At the fourth rung, youths are given a role such as sitting on the youth committee board and are informed about the reason and the functions of their role. The next rung allows youths to be consulted on the programmes developed by adults. Up to the sixth rung, programmes are adult-initiated. Shared decision making starts from the sixth rung. The seventh and eighth rungs are both youth-initiated programmes with the earlier being directed or youth-led and the later having shared decision making (Fletcher, n.d.).
According to Fletcher (n.d.), it is debatable whether level 7 or 8 is a higher level of participation and which of the two rung is more meaningful. In the end, it probably depends on the programmes.

**Shier's Pathways to Participation**

Another well-known model is Shier’s Pathways to Participation (2001). Here, youth participation is seen as a process rather than a specific event or project. This model is useful in assessing organizational readiness and offers a set of questions to help organizations decide where they currently stand. It identifies areas that organizations need to improve on, so as to develop more effective youth participation practice. There are five proposed levels of participations:

1. Youths are listened to;
2. Youths are supported in expressing their views;
3. Youths’ views are taken into account;
4. Youths are involved in decision-making processes; and
5. Youths share power and responsibility for decision-making.

In addition, at each level, three stages of readiness are proposed. At the “opening” stage, there is no opportunity to engage young people at that level yet, but the organization commits to creating the environment for youth participation. Next at the “opportunity” stage, opportunities such as resources and knowledge are available, so participation can start to take place. Finally, at the “obligation” stage, engagement of youth at the respective level becomes an agreed policy in the organization.

**Youth-initiated and Youth-led Programmes**

Using the above participation models and concepts, the next few chapters analyzes a few youth-led programmes in Singapore. Chapter two gives an overall landscape of the youth scene in Singapore. It provides the background to the next few chapters analyzing specific youth-led programmes in Singapore. Chapter three features We Are Different (W.A.D!), a sports- and service-oriented programme started by youths.
The programme was expanding and seemed to have lots of resources and networks through its parent organization. Chapter four analyzes Get Your Sexy Back (GYSB), a hugely successful anti-binge-drinking campaign started by four final year students in Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The programme had gone beyond NTU, to nationally broadcasted campaigns with big sponsors. Chapter five changes track to Keep Youths Alive (KYA), a small-scale programme started by youths who had developed a decision-making curriculum to help youths make choices that prevented them from going down the wrong paths that the programme developers themselves had taken at certain points in their lives. Permissions from WAD and KYA were sought and readily granted for inclusion in this book. All analysis of GYSB was done by reviewing secondary published material. This issue concludes with a chapter that reflects on these fine examples of youth participation, and what we can learn from them for better youth engagement and community development. Finally, it must be noted that most of the essays were written in mid-2010. The programmes featured would have evolved since then, but the learning points from the nature of the programmes at the point of writing are still relevant.

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Youth participation in Singapore

Irene Y.H. Ng
Youth development is a priority in Singapore. In 2004, the name of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports was changed to the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS, 2010b). This reflected the Singapore government’s emphasis on developing the future generation. Sports is an important partner to youth development, and many sports-related youth programmes have been promoted nationally. One example was the hosting of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games (YOG) 2010 in Singapore. This event involved the whole nation, and focused the world’s attention on this small island country, and in particular its youths. With all the hype around the YOG, the Olympic buzz also spawned many sports-related programmes that youths were eager to participate in.

**National Youth Council**

The National Youth Council (NYC) was established on 1 November 1989 by the Singapore government as the national coordinating body for youth affairs in Singapore. The Council comprises members from various government ministries, youth organisations, academic institutions, voluntary welfare organisations, media and private sector organisations.

The NYC connects with young Singaporeans so that their collective voices can advocate and enable positive change as an:
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Some of the youth programmes spearheaded by NYC at the national level include: (i) the SHINE Youth Festival, a unique festival, organized by youth for youth, held during the Youth Month (July) of each year to showcase the diverse talents and skills of young Singaporeans, highlight their contributions to the community and profile young inspiring role models for our youth; (ii) the Young Changemakers (YCM), a seed project grant to support youth-initiated projects that benefit the local community and society; and (iii) the Youth Expedition Project (YEP), a programme which encourages youths to initiate meaningful overseas community service programmes.

NYC is the administering body for the Singapore Youth Award, and is the liaison body with ASEAN and other international organisations on youth development. NYC works closely with regional and international youth organisations and youth ministries to connect local youths with those from other countries. At the international level, NYC is a member of the Commonwealth Youth Programme, sending its representatives to attend the Commonwealth Youth Ministerial Meetings, Commonwealth Youth Forum and related workshops.

**Singapore’s Youth Sector**

The youth sector in Singapore comprises a colourful variety of organizations, from youth-dedicated organizations, to social service agencies such
as family service centres and ethnic-based groups that offer youth programmes, to religious organizations. Community efforts to engage youths are seen in the inclusion of a youth arm or youth-centric activity in community organizations, for example, Youth Executive Committees (YECs) in Community Centres and ad-hoc youth committees in Community Development Councils. These committees run programmes for youths and often also community service programmes.

**Analyzing the Tapestry of Youth Participation in Singapore**

Hence, there is a whole range of resources and organizations reaching out to all types of youths of a wide age range (from 15 to 35 years of age, as defined by the NYC). There are awards to encourage participation excellence from outstanding youths, such as the National Youth Achievement Award (NYAA), where youths are challenged to complete tasks in four areas, namely service, adventurous journey, skills, and physical recreation. They are to complete these tasks within a specified period to reach bronze, silver, and gold awards. The gold award also requires a residential project (NYAAC, 2011). There are also remedial and outreach programmes for at-risk youths, such the Guidance Programme for first time offenders (MCYS, 2010c), and enhanced STEP-UP for youths at risk or who have already dropped out of school (MCYS, 2010a).

The emphasis on youth development in these programmes is clear and strong. Less clear is the extent to which these programmes engage youths to participate in ways that truly empower them and unleash their hidden potential. In many of these programmes, youths might be mere participants, with little or no say in how things are done. Perhaps only a few shining stars are calling the shots. The rest of the youths do not think they need to participate beyond the levels that they are already doing so. In such a scenario, adultist attitudes are prevalent and internalized by youths too.

In an online survey conducted by the author in 2003, views from 177 Singapore residents revealed much willingness to allow youths aged 15
to 19 years old to try doing various community tasks, but low confidence
in youths’ ability to perform these tasks. The tasks included eight types of
activities that, as documented by the youth participation literature, youths
have been successfully engaged in (Zeldin et al., 2000):

1. Speaking to groups about social issues
2. Mentoring other teenagers
3. Representing community to town councils
4. Serving as voting members of neighbourhood associations
5. Organizing a community service project
6. Managing and overseeing a fund-raiser
7. Conducting evaluation research of community projects
8. Serving on board of directors of a community development council

While the respondents were conveniently sampled through the author’s
personal contacts and therefore biased (Chinese, those aged 15 to 22,
females, and students were oversampled), the results implied that many
of the respondents were less aware or appreciative of the community
development potential of youth participation than personal development.
While many more respondents were supportive of allowing youths to carry
out the listed activities, few were confident in their ability. The support
also decreased as the activities moved from more conventional ones, such as
speaking to groups about social issues and mentoring other teens; to “top-
of-the hierarchy” activities such as being voting members and on a board
of directors. One response from an enlightened respondent, a polytechnic
lecturer, summed it up well:

“When an older person looks at a teenager, how much confidence do
they have in their abilities? Whether teenagers are able to do it is a
moot point if they’re unable to get the support needed.”

Indeed, the effectiveness of youths could be limited by not only adultist
attitudes that question youths’ ability, but also by adults not making the
effort to support them. Furthermore, adults are not the only ones with
adultist attitudes. Youths internalize adultism too. In the survey, those aged
18 and below were at times the most negative about their participation.
Three related reasons were proposed in the study. First, with limited exposure to the possibilities of their involvement, many teenagers probably did not even consider contributing in the capacity listed above as things that youths are allowed to do. Second, the limited exposure might have been due to the heavy emphasis on academics and school-based activities, such that teenagers had little exposure to community participation. Third, the view that some areas are out-of-bounds for youths might have been shaped by a hierarchical society, where many initiatives are top-down.

Whatever the reason, the survey provides some indication of the limits that people, whether youth themselves or adults, place on the contributions of young people. The next few chapters illustrate some fine examples of youth leadership in the Singapore community. The examples also highlight some of the gaps that limit the effectiveness of the illustrated programmes. We hope that these examples inspire professionals and volunteers who work with youths — e.g. social workers, youth workers, community workers, teachers — to rethink how they can support and engage youths better. Perhaps this compilation will lead to more documentation of youth programmes, with evaluations of how effectively they are empowering and allowing youths to make decisions and lead.

References


CHAPTER THREE

We Are Different (W.A.D!)

Sharleen Siow
Phua Xue Wei
Benjamin Yeo
Neo Soon Kheng
Youths have a Voice

Youths are known to be energetic, innovative, flexible and unpredictable. They have many ideas, are restless for activity, and possess a vibrancy unseen in any other age group. However, youths placed in a societal context with governing rules and culture can be dismissed, stereotyped and even stunted to an extent that renders them “invisible”. Nonetheless, youths are far from silent. They can affect positive change and make the right decisions. Their refreshing outlook on life can also be a great asset. However, they need platforms to facilitate their active role in society.

In this chapter, we will analyze a youth programme in Singapore that takes upon this role of facilitating youth activism, empowerment, leadership and development. We believe that it has succeeded in giving youths their rightful “voice” and the freedom to grow. In the process, it has benefitted large portions of society, in particular the many youths that it serves.

In writing this chapter, we have gathered information from the programme’s official website, relevant news articles, interviews with a few of its members and leaders, as well as incorporated the personal experiences we had when we participated in one of the activities.
We Are Different

Founded by a group of youths in 2008, ‘We Are Different’ (W.A.D!) is the youth wing of Harvest Care Centre (HCC), Harvester Community Church’s social outreach arm. HCC is registered as a non-profit organization that seeks to serve both local and overseas communities. Its mission is to “transform communities by meeting the needs of individuals and families of all races and religions” (HCC, 2012). As its youth wing, W.A.D! actively reaches out to youths from all walks of life through sports, service learning and character building activities. Despite its religious origins, its activities exclude religious overtones. Since the beginning, it was agreed by its pioneers that no religious message would be brought in to its activities. Nonetheless, together with HCC, and like any other voluntary welfare organization (VWO), W.A.D! aims to “impart good moral values, character traits, and see new generations of youth raised up and given opportunities to shine.” ¹ The pride of W.A.D!—“by youths, for youths”—is a message its members and staff are constantly spreading. W.A.D! encourages youths to be different, willing to make a difference, bringing out the uniqueness in all youths and helping them to express it. Since its formation in 2008, it has grown to a size of 120 youths.

In a nutshell, the core aim of W.A.D! is to develop the unique identity of each youth, building a generation of youths with positive characters, who can “think different, see different and be different” (W.A.D!, 2009). The goal of W.A.D! is to set every youth apart. This is their assumption of youths – that they are agents of change. Other roles that W.A.D! takes include inspiring, empowering and mentoring youths, encouraging partnerships with external organizations, creating opportunities for growth and imparting values to form the core of their character. These form the basis of their programmes’ structure, direction and goals.

A closer look at W.A.D!’s philosophy would highlight keywords like “bring out”, “positively and dynamically” and “different”. Using a strengths-based approach, W.A.D! does not impose its expectations on its youths; instead, it

¹ Quoted from a staff working at W.A.D! Club
seeks to bring out the best of all youths, displaying its belief in the innate talents and identity of a youth. As they surface these qualities of a youth, they encourage positive and dynamic expressions and realization of their potential. Thus, a strong emphasis on diversity in youths prevents W.A.D! from fitting youths into a prescribed model.

**Leadership, Mentorship, Participation**

Another emphasis of W.A.D! is the belief that “leaders are made, not born”. Encouraging the youths to discover their potential, it imparts leadership skills and opportunities to them. The progression in service-learning also ensures that the youths are given some form of mentorship when they partake in the activities. The focus is on the individual development of the member – “[growing] players beyond the physical” (W.A.D!, 2009).

W.A.D! constantly seeks youth volunteers to facilitate events or join a committee. One example of W.A.D!’s extensive youth participation is CAN! Discover, an event that was conceptualized, initiated and spearheaded by seven youths. With aims to connect people to the Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games (YOG), the event consisted of two main parts—W.A.D!’s Next Race and W.A.D! in the World, both containing elements of promoting cultural consciousness via creative and enjoyable activities. Taking advantage of the organizing committee’s resources, W.A.D! grabbed hold of a rare and golden opportunity to be involved in a national-level event (YOG) in meaningful ways.

**Analyzing Programmes and Activities in W.A.D!**

In this section, we will look at what W.A.D! is currently doing, and provide recommendations to some challenges identified in the various aspects of its youth work.
Youth and Sports

Sports and physical activities are W.A.D!’s major platforms of outreach to youths. Research has shown that there is a positive impact of sports on youth. For instance, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) found that sports brings about positive youth development, physically, socially, psychologically, emotionally and intellectually (as cited in Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2005). In addition, according to Mutz & Baur (2009), sports can also be seen as a “favourable, functional alternative to violent and aggressive behaviour” (p. 308). The authors pointed out that sports allow a person to “let off steam” without hurting other people, and aggressiveness is regulated by the rules of the sport. In a way, it provides a socially-accepted means to releasing aggression. While sports in itself is beneficial, W.A.D! uses sports as a means to an end, rather than a means to itself. It is merely a channel that directs youths to participation, leadership and community involvement.

W.A.D!’s sporting activities are structured in “fun-to-learn” and “easy-to-play” ways (W.A.D!, 2009). However, there are inevitably some youths who are less sports-inclined, making it harder to engage them. Among such youths might also be those who want to play but are afraid of joining in. Thus, one recommendation for W.A.D! is to train their coaches to cater to different levels of sporting competence. For example, a special course structured to first cultivate love and familiarity with sports might be a less threatening beginning for such youths, compared to directly confronting them with the challenges of a new sport.

Promoting Civic Engagement

A good youth programme should also help its youths “[recognize] that they [are] a part of a larger community and [have] a stake in it ... [providing] opportunities for youth to become meaningfully engaged in their community” (Borden & Serido, 2009). W.A.D! organizes local and overseas service learning projects which include students in the planning process right from the beginning to create more ownership and learning opportunities. In 2009, W.A.D! sent a group of youths to Cambodia to serve
the community there. The trip was “all youth planned and led”\(^2\). One can see W.A.D!’s youth empowerment philosophy reflected here as it imparts a hands-on role to its youths.

With much opinion about Singaporean youths being apathetic, “caught up with myopic self-centred interests” (Chan I., 2009), pushing youths to be actively involved in the community can be a daunting task, especially when many do not “care enough to make a difference.” (Seah, 2005). While W.A.D! has managed to gather a pool of active youths, this culture of active participation has yet to be inculcated in the large majority of youths in Singapore. Moreover, many are unaware of the ways in which they can participate and impact others in the community.

There is good reason to step up efforts to engage the public, especially schools. Schools provide the easiest access to youths, especially since youths spend most of their time there. Moreover, in an educational setting, it is perhaps an apt environment from which such values can be instilled in youths. To date, W.A.D! only has networks with a small (though significant) number of schools — in 2010, it had worked with four schools on separate occasions.

Apart from sports, W.A.D! could perhaps engage the community involvement programme (CIP) and co-curricular activities (CCA) branches of these schools as entry points into more groups of youths. After all, W.A.D!’s philosophy is relevant to the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) mission to “enrich students’ experience through CCAs” (MOE, 2009). Although most youths are actively engaged in CCAs, the structure and confines of a school might only offer growth opportunities to a minority of youths. W.A.D!’s non-school setting provides for greater freedom for youth development and experiment; youths can become more than just members. We acknowledge that W.A.D! has done a commendable job given its recent beginnings. Nevertheless, there is room for engaging these decision-making bodies at the higher level in order to advocate for activism and community contribution by youths.

\(^2\) Based on an interview with a member of W.A.D! Club
Collaboration with Other Organizations in the Community

W.A.D! officially endorses partnership with like-minded sponsors, schools, parents, youth organizations and individuals. This is reflected in their various activities. Apart from Sports Clinics at schools, the annual ROMP! Sports Carnival has the support and sponsorship of various organizations and partners such Singapore Sports Council, Health Promotion Board and Tchoukball Association of Singapore (TBAS). This allows W.A.D! access to necessary resources such as funding or sports training. In 2008, the ROMP! Sports Carnival was jointly organized by Reach Family Service Centre (FSC), giving W.A.D! important access to their clientele of rehabilitating delinquents, allowing them to engage these at-risk youths and involving them in the event (Chan C., 2008). These, among others, are some examples of W.A.D!’s inter-agency collaboration efforts.

Indeed, W.A.D!’s collaboration with other organizations has reaped good rewards (Chaskin, 2009). By venturing into community collaboration, W.A.D! can tap on external resources (e.g. coaching courses at TBAS). Secondly, as mentioned above, it has also been able to reach out to a greater variety of youths with the help of these platforms (e.g. school students, youths involved in the FSC). Thirdly, the philosophy behind engaging other organizations in the community is congruent with a client-centric approach — W.A.D! brings the programmes to youths, allowing them to access it in their comfort zone, within their communities and affiliated organizations.

Inter-agency collaboration is easier said than done. It often requires compromise which is difficult for the various parties to accept. Moreover, while schools provide excellent outreach opportunities, many might not understand or agree with the utility of such a programme. For example, a school’s principal might believe in the top priority of academic results and reject such programmes; or the school might operate on the basis that youth development is the family’s responsibility, not the school’s. Another challenge is one that is typical of youth programmes—potential partners might not have faith in these activities simply because they are youth-led and therefore not credible. This poses as a hindrance for W.A.D! to expand
its target clientele as they would naturally have fewer platforms to build upon and less disposable resources too.

The issue of the lack of faith other adults might have in youth-led initiatives is a deep-rooted one which requires much advocacy and persuasion. Perhaps the adults involved in W.A.D! can take up this role, given their prescribed authority and maturity as adults. After all, this has to start from an adult, since the issue is the distrust of non-adults (i.e. youths). Also, these adults can be good examples of mentors and nurturers of youth to other adults, who, perhaps, have never had such ideas and perspectives.

The use of sports as its main “attraction” gives W.A.D! much potential to engage youths who are at “higher risk” due to “ennui”, such as those not regularly attending school or CCAs (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2007). In the near or distant future, it could possibly collaborate with schools to identify such youths. It could also look into organising Sports Clinics in the Singapore Girls’ and Boys’ Homes and the Reformative Training Centre. Moreover, this might facilitate the re-integration of juvenile offenders into the community because sports can serve as a common ground. It is no respecter of past mistakes or status. This would triumph over the subtle elitism prevalent in the youth participation in school CCAs as it would give these stigmatized youths an equal opportunity to be involved in ways that, within a school context, are not possible. Understandably, there are foreseeable resource constraints. Nonetheless, this is a potential worth commenting on and considering.

**Nature and Quality of Outreach**

Next, we shall look at how W.A.D! reaches out to and engages the youths. Given its collaborations with schools, a major platform of their outreach is educational institutions. W.A.D!’s runs Sports Clinics in primary and secondary schools to introduce Netball and Tchouckball to the students. Tchoukball has also been introduced to some polytechnics and is on its way to becoming a CCA in some of them. Under the Character & Skills Development and Service-Learning component, W.A.D! holds workshops,
camps and activities for the students. Using schools as outreach platforms is effective because it is the easiest access to a large group of youths. Moreover, because it is a structured institution, there is already an established order to build upon.

W.A.D!’s marketing strategy reflects its awareness of a youth’s preferences. Firstly, W.A.D!’s vibrant image puts them in an attractive frame. The bright colours, loud and catchy slogans, and the energetic quality of W.A.D! mirror the characteristics of youths. By marketing itself in this way, it succeeds in capturing their attention and satisfying their appetite for something outstandingly different. Secondly, they make use of appealing methods to meet the youths’ needs. For example, sports, camps, activity-based workshops etc. are some of the avenues through which goals of leadership and development can be met without sacrificing structure or spontaneity, which are both especially important for youths. Indeed, it is apparent that W.A.D! practises a youth-centric approach.

As W.A.D! was only established in 2008, it has yet to make itself known to more groups of youths. One challenge in the area of outreach is widespread publicity. Singaporean youths are generally not familiar with the idea of joining an external youth club. For W.A.D! to exert this new influence on the youth community in Singapore is not easy. Moreover, the engagement of schools is not an easy task, as was discussed in the previous section.

**Analyzing Development and Participation in W.A.D!**

Having analyzed the programmes and activities, we are now ready to discuss youth participation in W.A.D!.

**Youth development and leadership**

Before assessing W.A.D!’s youth development and leadership qualities, it is pertinent to differentiate the two. Although youth development and youth leadership have been used interchangeably, one must note that they are
different concepts. According to the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), youth development is defined as “a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent” (Edelman, Gill, Comerford, Larson & Hare, 2004). The definition of youth leadership involves two parts—“the ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence the opinion and behaviour of other people, and show the way by going in advance” (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998); and “the ability to analyze one's own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem to carry them out. It includes the ability to identify community resources and use them, not only to live independently, but also to establish support networks to participate in community life and to affect positive social change” (Adolescent Employment Readiness Center, Children’s Hospital, n.d.).

Having developmental inputs in youth programmes can help to deter youth from having bad behaviours, and at the same time build positive attitudes and behaviours in them (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). Recognizing the importance of youth development, W.A.D! has made “courage, passion, integrity, humility, commitment and love” their six core values which they hope to impart through their programmes. In addition, character and skill development is one of their three main focuses. Their T.E.A.M-Building programmes are designed to instill values of “trust, encourage, aspire & me last” to youths.

As for youth leadership, Sipe, Ma, and Gambone (1998) suggest three different forms of it. The first involves youth taking formal leadership roles, such as a team captain. The second is an informal role, such as planning activities, making the rules and organising the logistics. The third is representation, in which youth lead by doing fundraising and presentation for the team. With W.A.D!, all three aspects of youth leadership are covered by their wide spectrum of programmes and activities. For example, youths interested in Tchoukball are given opportunities to learn and be certified
as a coach, so that they can coach the rest of the youths in return. W.A.D! also offers leadership development programmes that empower youths to turn their challenges into opportunities, to lead and make a difference. And lastly, through service-learning project management programme, the youths are given opportunities from pre-activity planning, implementation of project to post activity reflection (W.A.D!, 2009). Thus, W.A.D!, recognizing that youths need more than just activities to grow, consistently seeks to develop each of its youths and is more than just a sports interest club.

**Approach to Youth Participation**

Youth participation is essential in order to empower youths and create opportunities for growth. Some might think that youth participation is about quantity — the more one takes part, the more participative he/she is. However, Checkoway (n.d.) pointed out that youth participation is more accurately measured by quality. He defined it as "a process of involving people in the decisions that affect their lives" (p. 1).

By this definition, youth participation involves a lot more than just joining activities, or taking a non-decision-making role in a committee. Roger Hart’s “Ladder of Young People’s Participation” is an assessment tool for measuring youth participation with rung one as non-participation and rung eight as most participation (as cited in Fletcher, 2011). We think that W.A.D! falls in “rung seven”, which is the “young people lead & initiate action” stage. W.A.D! was started by a group of youths, and totally led by the youths. In terms of decision making, the youths take charge of the entire decision making process, including the making of final decisions. The annual ROMP! Sports Carnival under W.A.D!, for example, has a whole committee made up of youths. They plan and execute the entire programme by themselves. Therefore, it can be seen that W.A.D! has a high level of youth participation.

It is encouraging to see youths having so much initiative and power to decide for themselves on what they want and need. In developing this aspect of their programme, W.A.D! could perhaps tap on adults’
expertise and resources when necessary instead of leaving it entirely to the inexperienced youths. This is not to say, however, that the adults should take over the youths’ decision-making powers. The next section on adult mentors gives some suggestions of how adults can support the youths in the Club.

**Adult Mentors**

In W.A.D!, all youth leaders have at least one adult mentor from HCC to guide them and support them. What is commendable about these adult mentors is that they empower the youths to run the programme and make all the decisions, while they give advice and provide the necessary information needed. These mentors avoid adultism — taking the youths’ perspective and ideas lightly; making decisions without having the youths to agree; seeing themselves as better than the youths. In this way, youth leaders will have the freedom to explore and try out different things without adult obstacles. Indeed, Checkoway (n.d.) states that adults have an important role in “identifying, nurturing, educating, encouraging, counselling, advising, and inspiring the youth leaders.”

We feel that W.A.D! has many developmental assets and leadership opportunities. However, adults’ involvement as mentors has yet to reach the optimal level. Currently, these adult mentors do not participate in the activities and programmes at all. Since “positive outcomes for youth emerge through participation in programs that provide skill building and other meaningful opportunities in relationship with at least one committed adult” (Borden & Serido, 2009), adult mentors’ roles in the facilitation of the learning process through reflection and guiding of the youths to be more effective team-workers, cannot be replaced by youths themselves (Checkoway, n.d.). Without their presence in the activities and programmes, the youths and the programmes themselves will not benefit as much as when the adults are there to facilitate them. Moreover, mentoring would be more effective and relevant when the mentors attach themselves to the youth leaders, experiencing the programmes with them and guiding them along the way, rather than just mentoring outside of the activities.
Hence, we recommend that the adult mentors be more involved in the programmes and activities, working alongside with their mentees, while still giving them autonomy to make decisions. We also recommend making the resources of these adults available to youths who are not leaders as well — that is, every youth, not merely the leaders, should have a mentor (or share the same mentor).

We do sympathise with the fact that it is a challenge to find adults who can be good mentors. Not only do they have to be experienced and knowledgeable, they must also enjoy being with youths, be passionate for their development, and possess characteristics like care, empathy, supportive, dependable, and responsible, so that they are good role models to the youths (Parents League of New York, 2009). These, and having to balance giving youths enough freedom to grow, are great challenges for any budding mentor. It is even harder for adults who possess these qualities to fork out time from their busy work schedule to participate in the activities and programmes, unless they themselves work as full-time staff in W.A.D!. Hence it is always a challenge for youth club or group to recruit mentors, both in terms of quality and quantity.

Yet, adults can and should provide better support to youths. Meaningful adult-youth partnerships are more satisfying and a better use of time and resources than superficial adult mentorship. Recognition of these benefits can better harness youth and adult connections.

**Conclusion: W.A.D! on the Singapore Scene**

The national coordinating body of youth affairs in Singapore – the National Youth Council (NYC) aims to develop a dynamic and engaging environment where young people are inspired to dream and committed to actions. They are the primary source of support for youth groups and programmes in Singapore. They act as youths’ connector, enabler and advocate. In their vision, they advocate active youth citizenry – engaging youths, grooming leaders and giving them a voice. They connect the youth for increased youth
outreach by creating opportunities and access both locally and overseas. Lastly they enable the training of youths through training and capacity building (NYC, 2010).

W.A.D!’s supportive, challenging and action oriented stance echoes this. Through the external partnerships, W.A.D! links youths with community resources and encourage them to speak up and represent themselves in front of sponsors. They allow their youths to take ownership for their activities and find ways to access resources. This is prevalent in almost all of their events due to the youth-led nature. The various service learning projects also ensure that youths are given opportunities for outreach not just within Singapore but overseas as well. Lastly, training of youths—“enabling them”—is the fundamental practice of all of W.A.D!’s programmes. By ensuring that a youth leader is always trained, it pushes them to “build up their capacity”, as mentioned earlier, surfacing the youths’ innate ability.

W.A.D! fits almost perfectly into NYC’s idea of a youth programme and this also shows the success of W.A.D! in fitting themselves into the local context. Practical and decisive in their mission, W.A.D!’s goals and programmes are relevant to the youths in Singapore. Also, they have ostensibly taken into account what the government would support, which has allowed for their access into various organizations. As a result, they moved closer to their goal of engaging more youths when they were given the opportunity to execute their very own initiative, CAN! Discover.

Coming together under the wings of SYOGOC (Singapore Youth Olympic Games organizing committee), W.A.D!’s ownership of CAN! Discover, gives it greater recognition as a source of positive engagement and outreach to youths. As a result of their consequent prominence on the national stage, the YOG organising committee also supported W.A.D!’s annual mega sports carnival ROMP!’09. This is a strong testimony that W.A.D! is moving in the right direction. Moreover, despite the magnitude of this event, it stills adheres to its youth empowerment principles—the committee spearheading CAN! Discover consists entirely of youths.
In a short span of less than 2 years, W.A.D! has done an impressive job in grooming their leaders. From club-based activities, they have moved up the ladder, taking on projects at a national level. Given their lack of experience, we believe that W.A.D! has done well in taking up the many challenges. From their achievements, we can see that W.A.D! fits snugly into Singapore’s strategies for strengthening youths. Indeed, a youth-centric approach comes from a belief that “if there’s a message for the youth, it’s best to leave it to the young.” (Yeo, 2010)

In conclusion, W.A.D! has been successful thus far in being a catalyst for its youths. Having spoken much about its programmes, we would like to emphasize again that it begins with having the right philosophy towards youth work. Following an exploration of W.A.D!’s underlying assumptions and values about youth, we understand how it operates with that philosophy as its base. It definitely has room to improve, expand, and innovate. W.A.D!’s original purpose manifests strongly in its events though it is still a relatively young initiative. Whether it is sustainable in the long run, however, remains to be seen. It will depend on whether it successfully imparts these foundational values to future youth leaders who can continue this work.

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Get Your Sexy Back

Ng Huei Shi
Ng Huei Min
Esther Foong Pui See
Marilene Leow
Introduction

A youth-led programme is a programme that is planned and implemented by youths. In this essay, we shall focus on Get Your Sexy Back (GYSB), a programme that is not only led, but also initiated by youths. We will discuss how youth leadership and participation is beneficial for youths, their peers and larger society, and possible challenges of youth leadership. We will explore the effectiveness and sustainability of the programme, and provide some recommendations for the programme itself.

The analysis is based on information available on the GYSB website and news media. Therefore, the points expressed here do not represent the positions of GYSB or the National Youth Council. Some of the assertions might also require verification by specific evaluations of the programme.

About GYSB

GYSB was launched in 2007. Supported by Asia Pacific Breweries (APBS), it aims to promote drinking in moderation among youths aged 18 to 25 years old. GYSB’s slogan “it’s not the drinking, it’s how you’re drinking” is a slogan that aims to catch the attention of youths. Four Nanyang Technological University (NTU) students conceived the initial idea of moderate drinking.
Furthermore, it was implemented through various youth-related platforms, categorized as Music, Sports, Friends and Fashion (Smith, 2008).

Using music as a platform, they organized a mini-concert at The Heeren on April 4, 2009, where Jill Marie Thomas, the composer of the GYSB theme song, and dancers performed to spread the message of responsible drinking (Wan, 2009). Also, in 2009, GYSB organized a music concert at a popular nightspot called Velvet Underground to promote their “drinking in moderation” campaign (OMY Blog Club, 2009).

GYSB tries to send a message to youths and to the public in general that one can stay healthy and sexy without binge drinking (Seow, 2008). To achieve this aim, GYSB initiated many sports-related events to encourage youths to participate. For instance, GYSB collaborated with the NTU Sports Club to spread their “anti-binge drinking” message at the NTU street challenge. They played sports such as soccer, basketball and netball (Seow, 2008).

Thirdly, GYSB engages youths through friends. Tapping on the popularity of Facebook among the youths, GYSB started the “GYSB group”, through which it encourages youths to join and pledge their support (Facebook, n.d.). On Facebook, youths can also get to know about upcoming events of GYSB and participate in them (Facebook, n.d.). Youths who pledge their support for GYSB are entitled to discounts at outlets such as Times the Bookshop and Leftfoot through GYSB Friends Card.

Lastly, through fashion, GYSB worked with brand names such as NewUrbanMale to produce GYSB T-shirts. These T-shirts, with the slogan “Two beers or not two beers” were sold at selected NewUrbanMale retail outlets (Ong, 2008).

The four founders wanted to promote responsible drinking among the youths through these youth-related platforms because they saw a rising trend of youths who binge drink, especially in clubs. A survey commissioned by APBS conducted by Dr Mathew Mathews from the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore (NUS), revealed that adolescents
were indeed engaging in risky binge drinking behaviour (“Get Your Sexy Back”, 2008). Of the 531 Singaporean youths aged 18 to 25 surveyed at some popular nightspots in Singapore, 73% binge drink at least once a month; 60% of the 531 youths reported that many of their peers had “difficulty controlling the amount of alcohol they consume”; and 63% of the youths said “binge drinking was common among the people they hang out with” (“Get Your Sexy Back”, 2008).

**Theoretical Understanding of Adolescent Binge Drinking**

Based on the statistics above, adolescents’ binge drinking behaviour is a disturbing and worrying trend. Why then, do these adolescents binge drink? Adolescents’ binge drinking behaviours can be explained partially by the changes in their limbic system during puberty, where they require a relatively high level of excitement to experience pleasure (Santrock, 2008). Adolescents might find themselves unable to control their binge drinking behaviour because of the slow development of their prefrontal cortex that hinders their cognitive ability (Santrock, 2008).

According to Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory, adolescents are in their developmental period where they are searching for their identity (Santrock, 2008). Adolescence is also the period where they seek thrills, excitement and are very curious. Adolescents’ binge drinking behaviour can also be explained by peer influences. Using the ecological theory, adolescents have to be understood within their social environment. J.J. McWhirter, B.T. McWhirter, E. H. McWhirter and R. J. McWhirter (2007) suggests how adolescents drinking behaviour is often associated with peer influences, where they are often pressured to drink so as not to be the “odd one out”. Coupled by adolescents’ personal belief that they are very unique and invincible, they are less likely to drink responsibly because “nothing” will happen to them (Santrock, 2008).

**Strengths of GYSB**

Giving young people the opportunity to develop and exercise leadership can
have benefits for the individual young person, their peer group and society. Youth leadership benefits the peer group (by inspiring other young people through setting a positive example), the local community, local community organizations and wider society (Kahn, Hewes, & Ali, 2009).

**Benefits of Youth Leadership to Youth Leaders**

GYSB provides an excellent example of capable youth leadership. It demonstrates clearly to the youth leaders that they can create social change just like any adults. They are “resources” and “assets” rather than “problems” and “burdens”. Recognition gained through media publicity would have helped them to develop confidence and self-efficacy in their capability to create change (Driskell, 2002). This empowers the youth leaders and aids in building up their self-worth and self-esteem (Driskell, 2002).

GYSB would have also provided excellent opportunities for these youth leaders to learn various life-long skills and knowledge such as planning, engaging, group problem-solving, negotiating and bargaining, conflict-resolution, social, reflective as well as liaising skills. The emotional and social skills that enable effective leadership have broader significance beyond the potential to prepare young people to take on formal leadership roles (Kahn, Hewes, & Ali, 2009). These skills would be helpful as they transit to adulthood, better equipping them for the workforce.

When working towards their aim or goal, the founders would have also learnt about various group properties such as roles, norms, status, size and cohesiveness (Robbins & Judge, 2010). They would also have had a chance to learn about various group dynamics and processes such as groupthink and group shift, and be involved in group decision-making. Overall, they would have learnt how to work together effectively as a group towards their goal or aim.

As they worked together, these youth leaders would also have had the opportunity to discover each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and how and when to complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses in order
to achieve their goals. Furthermore, working in a group provides a sense of belonging and membership.

GYSB would also have given these youth leaders a chance to be self-aware of their own leadership style and way of working things. According to the Fiedler leadership theory, each youth leader has his or her own leadership style and work best at situations that suit and match his or her leadership style best (Robbins & Judge, 2010). Tasks such as planning of activities and events, and liaising with various corporate partners, would have enabled GYSB leaders to discover and optimize on their leadership styles.

Overall, then, the benefits for these youth leaders are personal development and increased self-capital. Examples of personal development gains might include the formation of quality relationships with peers and adults, improved inter-personal skills (such as building trust, handling conflict, valuing differences, listening actively and communicating effectively), a sense of responsibility to self and others, and integrity. They would better understand their own personal values, of how their actions can affect the larger community. In addition, the networks and resources gained in the community through GYSB would have contributed to lifelong personal and professional relationships.

**Benefits of Youth Leadership to the Community**

We cannot limit our views to just involving youths for personal development reasons. Youth leadership yields benefits to the community. The GYSB youth leaders also act as role models and good examples to the rest of the youths in the community. By setting such a healthy culture, other youths could be inspired as well to take responsibility and lead more meaningful lives. By inspiring other youths of their age group to adopt healthier drinking habits, these youth leaders are tackling the community problem of adolescents’ drinking behaviours, which is a gateway to adolescents’ drug use and aggressive behaviours.

Being a youth-initiated programme, GYSB makes targeted youths more
receptive to the message of “moderate drinking” since both the youth leaders of the programme and the targeted youths are from the same age group (Yeo, 2010). Thus these youths are more likely to “accept” messages sent out by youths as compared to authority and formal figures who might be perceived by them as being from a different world and always monitoring them. A recent study by the National Youth Agency in the United Kingdom points out that young people can be mistrustful of authority and resent solutions that are perceived to be ‘parachuted on them’ and for which they feel no ownership. All in all, young volunteers can be a powerful tool for engaging others, particularly where young people become peer mentors, leaders and mediators (Kahn, Hewes, & Ali, 2009).

Thus, one of the strengths of GYSB is that being a youth-initiated programme, it adopts a lateral style of communication rather than a “top-down” style of communication as commonly seen in many campaigns which are organized by adults and youth organisations. Through this lateral style of communication, youths can more effectively spread the message of “moderate drinking” to their other youth friends, reaching out to more youths. Programmes initiated by youths are also more likely to adopt a “lingo” that aligns with the youths and hence attracts them (Yeo, 2010).

Although there is no conclusive evidence on the reduction of the number of binge drinking cases due to GYSB programme, this programme does lead to an increased awareness among the youths on the deleterious effects of binge drinking on their health. According to a survey conducted by GYSB in March 2008, “69% of 280 respondents of aged 18-25 surveyed said that GYSB has made them more aware of the issue of binge drinking among youths” and “72% of respondents said GYSB has made them more aware of the importance of drinking responsibly” (“Get Your Sexy Back”, 2008). These survey results showed that GYSB has provided these youths with the essential health information that they otherwise would not have known unless they check it out themselves.

With increased awareness of the pernicious effects of binge drinking, there is a higher chance that the targeted youths would try to minimize binge
drinking. This is in accordance with the same survey conducted by GYSB where survey results revealed “78% of the respondents said they would drink responsibly in future” (“Get Your Sexy Back”, 2008).

This programme has also successfully garnered support from the targeted youth community. More youths have pledged to support this programme. They support it either through the website itself or participate in various GYSB events such as road shows, mini-concerts and wearing GYSB exclusive T-shirts (Yeo, 2010). In this way, more youths are involved in events, campaigns and issues that are affecting their lives. They are getting together in various platforms to participate and share their views and experiences on binge drinking. GYSB thus creates a common platform for these youths to come together and generate a community change, regardless of their educational, socio-economic and ethnic background. This in turn promotes a sense of youth-group solidarity among the youths.

This programme is excellent too in that it is both a preventive as well as a remedial programme. It seeks to prevent youths from binge drinking among those youths who have never binge drunk as well as to promote moderate drinking among youths who are already binge drinking.

**Challenges to GYSB**

In this section, we will highlight some of the challenges of youth leadership as well as explore and critique the effectiveness and sustainability of the GYSB programme in fulfilling its aims and purposes.

**Challenges of Youth Leadership**

GYSB seems to have overcome the challenges of youth participation, such as minimizing adultism and achieving effective adult-youth partnerships. Youths lack the resources to implement programmes on a larger scale. Unlike adults who have organizational backing and organizational resources, youths lack this kind of support unless they seek out the adults as their allies. For GYSB, the four NTU students may have few resources
to start off with. However, they managed to garner support from adult allies, which is one of the crucial reasons why they are able to develop this modest project into a large-scale concerted campaign. For instance, APBS helped them to launch the campaign in 2007 (Ong, 2008). NewUrbanMale retail stores also helped them to produce GYSB T-shirts and Clear Channel Singapore helped them to advertise the campaign.

Adultism can be an obstacle to youth leadership. The public perceptions of young people can often be negative, reinforced by unfavourable media portrayals, with young people often being perceived as part of the problem rather than the solution and, at worst, viewed with fear and suspicion (Kahn, Hewes, & Ali, 2009). Their abilities are sometimes undermined by adults due to their lack of experience and expertise. Thus, there might be “adultism” where it seems like the “adults always know better, or best”. However, this is not always the case, especially for programmes dealing with issues that directly affect young people. Youths need to move beyond the society’s perceptions and stereotypes, and start believing in themselves. GYSB has shown that youths have won the trust of big companies who have funded their campaign.

According to Hart (1992), the highest form of youth participation is where adults and youths share decision-making. This is difficult to achieve because youths and adults might have rather different working styles. Adults might hold on to their conventional way of doing things as they have more experience. Youths might prefer more experimental and unorthodox ways of achieving their goals. Therefore, it might be difficult for them to work together as their beliefs and values are different. Yet, GYSB seems to have achieved rung seven in the Hart Ladder of Participation, where adults seem to have played more of the supportive role in funding the projects. However, from another perspective, participation might be limited. This is from the perspective of the kinds of youths involved. GYSB does not seem to include the target youths in the decision-making process as well as in the planning and implementation of the programme. True youth participation occurs when the target youths have a chance to be involved in the planning, implementation as well as giving feedback to the programme.
We question the sustainability of the programme. Since it was a university final year project initiated by four NTU students, one wonders what would happen after they leave university. As the founders transit to work life and other responsibilities of adulthood, it will become increasingly challenging to sustain interest and commit time to the programme. As their age gap with the target youth population widen, they might become less attuned to youth developments and interests. With limited participation in its programming by youths from the target population, platforms used to reach out to the target youths might not be as effective as it was as in the past.

Therefore, while the websites and published materials on GYSB show that GYSB seems to have achieved a much higher extent of youth leadership and community impact than the average youth programme, it might also face limited youth participation that undermines the sustainability of its programme. An evaluation of the extent of participation and its effects of participation will require a deeper analysis.

**Challenges of Impact: What has GYSB Achieved?**

GYSB does not have any clear, specific and measurable outcomes which make it very difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of this programme. The term “binge drinking” can be quite hard to measure. What criteria does this programme need to fulfil in order to be considered effective in curbing the binge drinking trend among youths? Do more youths pledging their support for this programme mean that GYSB is successful in reducing the number of youths who binge drink? Or is an increased awareness regarding the deleterious effects of binge drinking a sufficient outcome?

Further, even if youths did really try to control their binge drinking behaviour, it does not mean that this success could be attributed to this programme alone. Other environmental factors such as talks about risk-taking behaviours (e.g. binge drinking) held in schools might possibly also have led to an increased awareness of the pernicious effects of binge
drinking on the adolescent's health and subsequent reduction in binge drinking behaviour among youths.

Yeo (2010) stated that more youths are pledging to support this programme. They support it either through the website itself or participate in various GYSB events such as road shows, mini-concerts and wearing GYSB exclusive T-shirts. However, supporting this programme by participating in various GYSB events does not necessarily mean that these targeted youths are actually drinking moderately. Also, participating in, for instance the GYSB sports events, has no direct impact on youth’s drinking behaviour. In other words, there seems to be a lot of buzz, but no concrete action. Supporting GYSB by signing up for the GYSB Friends Card allows members to enjoy exclusive discounts and privileges in those supporting retail outlets. However, one can also apply for this Card to enjoy those discounts without really drinking moderately.

There might even be possible backfire in the programme. Promoting moderation in drinking is a rather tricky concept. The promotion of the image of being “sexy” through moderate drinking could actually unintentionally encourage youths who did not drink in the past to drink. There is ambiguity about the message that GYSB is trying to send out to youths. The term “sexy” is abstract and there is no direct and conspicuous linkage between the term “sexy” and “moderate drinking”. What is the definition of “sexy”? Must a youth have a mug of beer, but not more than that to be sexy? Does it also mean that one can get his or her ‘sexy’ back if he or she drinks in moderation’? Does it mean that those who do not drink are not ‘sexy’? The message that is sent out to those youths is unclear and hence may send out the wrong message to the youths as well as the general public.

The powerful influence of the media might undermine the effectiveness of GYSB. The media frequently portrays and perpetuates drinking as ‘cool’ and ‘sexy’. Hence, our youths are under the powerful influence of the media that promotes drinking behaviour, for example, that hooking up with people involves buying drinks for them; the image of tiger beer girls;
that a person with high tolerance for alcohol impresses people, and that
tolerance for alcohol signifies masculinity. Ironically, the media tends to link
high fashion with drinking, where good-looking and well-dressed people
are portrayed hanging out at clubs. GYSB is an attempt to encourage
responsible drinking but the media may undermine its effectiveness.

GYSB does not address why people overdrink. It currently seems to
promote a superficial lifestyle with its emphasis on fashion and music,
which overshadows the causes behind the campaign. The inherent flaw in
adopting such a campaign slant is that it has succeeded in generating hype
by choosing areas of interest to youth, but that does not mean that these
have anything to do with the causes that one would want to promote. The
programme does not tackle the root cause of binge drinking directly. The
programme seems to play around the assumption that youths binge drink
because of negative peer pressure and that they fulfil their need to be cool
and accepted through binge drinking. As opposed to that, research has
shown that there are many reasons to why people binge drink. It is not just
a matter of desiring to possess a certain image and chasing after a “culture”
though we agree that youths are susceptible to facing such challenges.
There could be more deeply embedded issues in the lives of these youths.
Some binge drink as a coping mechanism for stress. For others, it could be
due to their socialization, how they were raised in their families. Thus, for
these people, binge drinking is usually a behaviour formed over a long term.
Sensibly, higher alcohol tolerance is a pre-requisite to binge drinking. Thus,
it is hard to counter habitual behaviours which have developed over long
periods of time with some activities.

GYSB seems to focus on youths who frequent clubs and popular nightspots
but exclude youths who frequent convenient stores like 7-Eleven to buy
alcohol. To be more effective, GYSB needs to maximize their outreach and
target youths who frequent convenience stores.
Suggestions for Improvements to GYSB

With the qualifier that our recommendations are informed by our limited analysis of GYSB and that GYSB might already be doing some of the things we are recommending, we lay out some suggestions for consideration. First, GYSB could probably set a clear goal with measurable outcomes. A clear goal could be “to create awareness among the youths about moderate drinking” and “to reduce binge drinking behaviours among the youths.” In order to be considered effective in achieving these two goals, specific outcomes need to be measured. Some examples are:

- To be able to name the number of harmful effects of binge drinking behaviours
- To reduce the number of times in which the youths binge drink from fortnightly to once a month or few months
- To reduce the number of units of alcohol youths drink at one time from five or more units of alcohol to one to two units of alcohol

Second, as mentioned above, supporting this programme by participating in various GYSB events and applying for a GYSB Friends Card does not necessarily mean that these targeted youths are actually drinking moderately. Some terms and conditions should be included in the GYSB Friends Card. For example, only those who have not been binge drinking for the past six months can apply for GYSB Friends Card. More discounts can be given to those members who have not been binge drinking for more than one year. Perhaps there could be a system where members have to produce receipts from various clubs and pubs as evidence to demonstrate their non-binge drinking behaviours for the past six months or one year. However, this hinges on the integrity of the youths.

Third, the campaign could address the ‘uncool’ and ‘unsexy’ aspects associated with over drinking such as throwing up, lying on the floor, unintelligible speech, since it has a huge emphasis on personal image. Instead of advocating what is ‘sexy or cool’, it could do more to highlight what over drinking does to ‘sexy or cool’ people and the ugly truths related to over drinking.
Fourth, with regard to the sustainability of the programme, youth ambassadors could be an important resource to tap on to ensure that various youth-related issues and development are kept up to date. In order to reach the highest level of youth leadership and participation, target youths should be allowed some decision-making opportunities to lead in some way in this campaign, to be active rather than just passive participants of events and activities (Hart, 1992). To ensure maximal youth participation, the programme could recruit a mix of youth ambassadors of different age from 18 to 25 years and ideally from diverse backgrounds. There should be a mixture of youth ambassadors from different socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, religion as well as gender.

Lastly, from a person-in-environment perspective and systems approach, we feel that for any campaign to be more effective, it should attempt to involve the participation of parents and schools as well. Likewise, in order to effectively curb binge drinking, we need to engage the other systems to partner and help these youths achieve sustainable change. Parents, schools as well as communities need to be kept abreast of such programmes as well, so that they can help encourage their youths to participate.

**Conclusion**

GYSB is an excellent example of a youth-led programme with capable youth leadership. Through GYSB, we have seen that youths can make a difference. Through this report, we hope to highlight an important point of not just appreciating youth participation for personal development reasons, but also appreciating the fact that youths can create community change. Although there needs to be more evaluation by GYSB on whether their main message to drink moderately is getting across, we applaud these youth leaders for their dauntless bravery in overcoming several challenges and obstacles and their unstinting contributions of their “assets” such as time, energy, creativity, ideas and dreams to GYSB. GYSB is a testament of the strengths and potential of youths and of what they can offer. With the advancement of information technology and the internet, we can expect more youths to come together and want to do something. The crucial thing for adult allies
is to set aside their stereotypes and prejudices towards youths and work alongside them to help unleash their potential.

References


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CHAPTER FIVE

Keep Youths Alive

Annie Cheong
Quek Pearl Ning
Tan Zhi Wei
Esther Yu
Somarajan Prija
This chapter looks at Keep Youths Alive (KYA), a youth-initiated and youth-run social enterprise. KYA is a youth-centric social enterprise registered as a private business. Privately funded, it was initiated by young people who had a burning passion to elevate the endeavours of youths. The team comprised like-minded youths aged 18-22 years old, headed by an older youth aged 30. Once troubled youths themselves, the group decided to come together to lend a helping hand to similar youths in Voluntary Welfare Organizations (VWOs) and schools.

Research for this analysis was done via multiple interviews and discussions with KYA, and non-participant observations at two of KYA’s training sessions, during March and April 2010. Recommendations were discussed with KYA who enthusiastically embraced them. Besides the models of youth participation in Chapter 1, the 14 characteristics developed by Community Youth Development (CYD) (1996) (as cited in Chana, 2007) required for successful implementation of youth work and development programmes, were adapted into eight characteristics for the purpose of this analysis. The eight characteristics are:

- an ecological perspective in viewing the youths in the context of their micro and mezzo environments, taking into account their families and schools;
a targeted and well-defined vision in their organization;

- services that recognise the diversity of youths, and are relevant and targeted to youths’ needs and interests;

- services that are consistent, simple and continual;

- a “supportive and flexible” and bonding environment for both staff and youths;

- a clear and strong organizational structure with active, dedicated leaders and youth workers who are reliable, well-respected and caring towards the youths;

- reach out to the “underserved populations” or partner with other community programmes and organizations; and

- creative in problem-solving and dedicated to serving and empowering youths as resources within the community.

About KYA

KYA aims to be a leading social enterprise that empowers youths by guiding them towards making informed decisions for their lives. Through their preventive and developmental programmes, KYA aims to stir in youths the desire to change, and impart the skills needed to make this change. Their mission statement emphasizes being “the leading YOUTH CENTRIC social enterprise that provides awareness and opportunities to youths in achieving personal excellence”. Their motto “Unite to Ignite” speaks of uniting young people together with shared dreams and visions of inspiring and instilling skills to youths. Their core values of Accountability, Awareness, Excellence, Empowerment, Passion and Integrity form their guiding principles in impacting the lives of the youths of today.

KYA’s compact and passionate team of fourteen youths comprise an executive director who oversees KYA’s overall functioning; a deputy executive director and two associate directors who oversee the programmes; a programme and project manager who takes charge of programme planning; and a group of eight consultants who execute the programmes. There are five departments in KYA’s structure mainly – Corporate & Administration, Finance, Sales & Marketing, Corporate Communications and
Knowledge, Innovations & Programmes Development.

Programmes

KYA offers four main programmes: 1) ‘The Raw Deal’, 2) ‘Do or Die Trying’, 3) ‘This is How’ and 4) ‘I am Alive’. According to KYA’s deputy executive director, the programmes were developed from personal experiences, life stories of friends who were once troubled youths and feedback from both participants and observers of their training sessions.

Each programme is delivered through a two-hour seminar style presentation which includes the use of videos, activities and exercises in the KYA workbook aimed at engaging and encouraging youth participation. They build on each other, and aim to invoke awareness with regard to the wide-ranging decisions and choices that youths constantly face in a changing and demanding environment.

‘The Raw Deal’ seeks to equip youths with decision-making skills. It motivates and helps them make informed decisions through (i) the testimonies of other youths, and (ii) the introduction of a structured decision-making framework. ‘Do or Die Trying’ then builds on these decision-making skills by helping youths align these decisions to their identified personal life goals and ambitions. The use of activity worksheets such as the ‘Do or Die Trying’ Planner or the ‘Life Chart’ analysis motivates youths to reflect on the steps needed to reach their goals.

‘This is How’ aims to equip youths with the tools to manage and cope with possible challenges in pursuing their life goals. It emphasizes the importance of (i) staying focused, and (ii) managing time and resources in reaching their goals. ‘I am Alive’ provides an overview of the earlier programmes. It focuses on the youth’s self-development, and instills self-belief and confidence to achieve personal goals.

Moving forward, KYA is in the midst of developing two follow-up projects called ‘Real Change’ and ‘My Choice’. These projects built on lessons learnt
from the four programmes mentioned earlier. KYA recognizes that the four programmes alone are insufficient to help participants’ put into practice what they had learnt. The first follow-up project called ‘Real Change’ is a customized medium to long-term (6 months to a year) supplementary programme. Modelled as a support group for participants, it aims to maintain the level of motivation or re-ignite inspiration acquired through service-learning. ‘My Choice’ is a book project and seminar series that helps youths choose their careers and provide information for informed decision-making. This was initiated as participants frequently raise questions pertaining to future career choices during the course of the four programmes.

KYA programmes are targeted at youths between the age of 13-20, to youths in Voluntary Welfare Organizations (VWOs) and schools. The programmes are offered free of charge to VWOs and are payable for secondary schools. This model of charging schools and not VWOs enables KYA to sustain itself as a social enterprise, where revenues from secondary schools subsidize the free programmes for VWOs. Schools and VWOs have the choice to take the first two or all four programmes. The programmes are made more preventive for secondary schools than VWOs, as secondary schools’ clientele comes from the general student population and VWOs’ clientele are those who have either experienced some form of legal infractions, or are considered at-risk for anti-social behavior.

**Benefits of Youth Leadership in KYA**

**A. Benefits for the Youth Leaders**

According to Checkoway (n.d.), one of the benefits of youth participation is personal development. KYA is no exception. Through our non-participant observations and interviews with the youth leaders, we noticed an increase in self-awareness for the leaders, as they were made more aware of their feelings and thoughts. During a debrief, one of the leaders admitted that he was short-tempered and the youths’ rowdiness made him easily irritated and this might affect group dynamics. When we were observing the session with delinquent girls from a Home, another facilitator, overwhelmed by
his own emotional baggage of being an ex-delinquent, had to excuse himself from the session for a while. Through their sessions with youths who share similar background, there was increased self-awareness. They were made to see their previous wrongdoings. They became aware of possible transference issues when handling these youths.

Furthermore, youth leadership and participation empower the youth leaders. In the process of empowering the youths, they have also empowered themselves. The youth leaders who had first embarked on KYA’s journey, had to conceptualize ideas and look for clients and sponsors. This honed their project management, networking and leadership skills, which in turn built self-esteem and competency. However, discouragement from the difficulties of expanding the client and sponsorship pool might dampen confidence.

**B. Benefits for the Youth Participants**

Youth-led programmes are highly beneficial to the youths in the programme. The KYA leaders, being youths themselves, have the knowledge, experience and ideas unique to their life stage. These rich inputs cannot be found in adult-led youth programmes. The KYA leaders are also seen as peers instead of someone with authority as they are in the same life stage, thus they are more influential in the youths’ lives. Furthermore, at-risk youths affiliate with the KYA leaders quickly as the leaders were once troubled youths, and self-disclosure of their experiences resonates with what the at-risks youths are undergoing.

Youths are also a rich well of resources and this is apparent in the KYA leaders. They came up with creative ideas, activities and engaging videos in their programme. This is a characteristic of ‘what works’ in a successful programme. With these innovative methods, the youths are more interested and stand to benefit more from the programme. For example, the KYA leaders came out with a “war planner”, which is a goal-setting planner for the youths. The analogy of fighting and winning a war as a goal setting activity made it more interesting. Feedback from evaluation forms collected from the youth participants have also been very positive.
C. Benefits for the Community

In the long run, such youth-led social awareness programmes, if carried out effectively, have the potential to benefit beyond the youths in the community. As the KYA programme seeks to address at-risk youths’ issues in the community, it serves as an outreach effort for the nation. On top of that, the community will also start to appreciate youths and view them as assets and not a burden.

Challenges of Youth Leadership in KYA

As highlighted in the previous section, a youth-led programme such as KYA can offer tremendous benefits, especially when the programme is youth-for-youth in nature. These benefits are not limited to the youth leaders, but are also extended to the youth participants and community. However, there are some key challenges which one must still bear in mind, when youth leaders are planning programmes.

A. Lack of Expertise

1. Programme Planning: Lack of a model and theoretical framework

In terms of programme conceptualization and content, KYA appears to have clear overall objectives. Programme content is drafted to meet the mission and vision of the social enterprise, while adhering to the underlying principle of ‘keeping it real’. However, the leaders were not exposed to the importance of theoretical underpinnings and evidence-based applications in programmes. As such, both programme conceptualization and content were guided neither by youth development theories nor the practices of ‘what works’ when working with youths. This general lack of expertise is the fundamental challenge for KYA. In the programme content, there is a focus on self. This effectively ignores the essence of the ecological model, which posits that individual human development occurs within multiple embedded ecological systems and is enhanced if the mesosystem is consistent and positive (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Incorporating the ecological perspective would have been useful for the programme, should it be tapped, as expressed in the list of characteristics required for successful implementation.
of youth programmes by CYD. For example, in terms of goal setting, KYA came up with a creative Do-or-Die planner that serves to motivate youth participants and to help them to set goals for themselves. However, the planner did not elicit how the various systems (family, peer group, schools etc) might be helpful for the youths to meet their goals.

Another challenge that KYA faces is the need to have a more targeted programme and/or clearly targeted group, another important characteristic of ‘what works’ in the implementation of a youth programme by CYD. Currently, the generic programme is not targeted to a specific group and suffers from a one-size-fits-all problem. Though acknowledging that the programme is more appropriate for youths-at-risk, the youth leaders are delivering the same programme with the same programme content and activities to all students in secondary schools. The students in secondary schools span a wide age range from secondary 1 to 5 and come from different streams. They have different needs and face different risks. Younger youths’ ability to process abstract thought could be limited by the late development of the pre-frontal cortex (Dahl, 2004). The programme might not be suitable for the youths with more challenging developmental needs. Hence, for the programmes we visited, we found that much of the objectives of the programme were not achieved due to the lack of targeted programming and/or clearly-defined targeted group(s).

II. Programme Process: Lack of training in delivery

In programme delivery, the leaders adopt several methods of delivery that includes presentation, activities, discussions and self-disclosure. Given the lack of training and experience in the youth leaders, the challenge for KYA when it comes to programme delivery is knowledge and skills such as the establishment of a comfortable facilitator-participant ratio and facilitation or group work skills. This is crucial as it is not just about whether the activities are being implemented but how well it is being implemented. These skills to handle group processes and dynamics contribute to the effectiveness of the programme.

Firstly, a comfortable facilitator-participant ratio has to be formulated to
ensure that delivery is at its optimal. Due to manpower issues, facilitator-participant ratio has been around 1:20 or even 1:40 at times. This clearly does not aid facilitation (Toseland, 2005). This issue is further complicated by the absence of a co-facilitator in programme delivery, which would have been useful as one could be content-oriented while the other being process-oriented. Due to the facilitator-participant ratio, the youth leader was unable to provide proper facilitation to the youth participants, to meet their problem objectives.

Secondly, in terms of group work and facilitation skills, several issues were observed for example:

- A need to tap on power holders in the group
- Lack of an ice-breaker to build up energy level in the beginning
- Lack of a group contract
- Inability to handle transference and counter-transference issues
- Lack of hands-on and experiential activity
- Lack of processing after activity

During our observations, while it was good that the facilitator used a video in audience engagement, he did not debrief with the audience what they saw. A debrief is important for processing thoughts in reaction to the video and guiding students towards the stated objectives. Indeed, besides the video engagement, there was a general lack of linkage and flow connecting their objectives and activities.

Training in group work skills is also important because the KYA leaders are themselves youths and are therefore themselves also facing developmental needs (e.g. emotional management and impulsivity). For example, a facilitator was unable to handle the group process and decided to self-disclose to get the group moving. However, in the midst, he was emotionally affected by the self-disclosure due to the inability to reconcile with the problem. With group facilitation skills, the self-disclosure by the youth leader could have been tapped to foster group learning.
III. Programme Evaluation: Lack of outcome measurement

Also due to the lack of expertise, the challenge for KYA is to formulate evaluation instruments that serve to provide feedback to the programme content and implementation. This is especially important when the programme lacks a theoretical base and evidence-based applications. Currently, the programme was pilot-tested with at-risk youths but outcome measurement did not occur. At best, it was based on the post-programme evaluation forms from the youth participants, instead of pre and post test. Post-programme evaluation forms were also not consistently implemented.

B. Lack of Adults as Allies

The potential of what youths are capable of cannot be undermined, especially the potential in youth-for-youth initiatives as leaders gain the most when they are able to care for others (Checkoway, n.d.). However, that does not mean that youths should be left entirely on their own in the process of building their own initiatives. According to Hart (1992) and Shier (2001), youth participation is optimum when youths and adults share power and responsibility in decision-making. This section highlights the challenges faced by KYA as a purely youth-led initiation with the absence of adult allies.

I. Importance of adults in helping youths to align themselves to the programme overall vision and initial motivation

Youth leaders and participants of such initiatives who lack adult allies may be too caught up in carrying out their daily tasks, such as coping with the stresses of activities planning, coordination and facilitation of programmes. They may lose sight of the overall vision of their programme, and what motivated them to embark on the journey (Checkoway, n.d.). The importance of adult allies was especially evident in the facilitation process of the two seminars we observed in KYA. The facilitator was emotionally affected to the extent that he was unable to carry on with the session. Another facilitator was visibly drained from heavy workload of coordination and programme planning on top of his facilitator role, resulting in a less energetic session. These outcomes could be partly attributed to inadequate
training in terms of expertise. Some adult guidance, motivation and affirmation to the youth leaders would have also provided encouragement and direction.

Although the youth leaders were more self-aware of how their personal emotions and stress affected the conduct of the seminar, they were ultimately left on their own to cope with their emotions and to evaluate their sessions. The facilitators left the sessions with feelings of self-blame, low morale and an occasional shift of blame to the participants. Their discouragement after the sessions was in stark contrast to the enthusiastic and hopeful messages posted on their website and Facebook page.

An experienced adult figure would not only affirm the youths for their efforts and remind them of their original motivations, but also help identify and deal with issues faced during programme planning or seminar facilitation. He or she could assist the youths to identify root causes of the problem, clarifying choices to be made for improvements and growth (Checkoway, n.d.).

II. Importance of role of adults in developing youth leaders

The youth leaders shared with us their difficulties in improving both themselves and the organization without the guidance of someone with expertise and experience. An experienced adult mentor or advisor can help young people translate experience into lifetime lessons, bringing them through the continuum of change (Checkoway, n.d.). This could be done through meetings, group sessions or workshops, which brings the youths through thought processes in improving both their ‘heartware’ and ‘hardware’. The KYA leaders need to first identify their own needs and expectations of others, thereafter coping with them through an adult advisor. In addition to solving problems, adults can empower the leaders by helping them identify their personal strengths and how that could be tapped on to contribute to the organizational dynamics, thereby improving organizational skills.

This is not to discredit the youth’s ability in being self-aware, but to
highlight the need for someone to recognize, validate and further develop the leaders. The adult’s facilitation in helping youth leaders translate life experiences to life skills would be useful in helping them to identify root causes of issues they face, which will be valuable assets they are able to bring into adulthood. Furthermore, the friendship between the adult and the youth alone can be sufficiently significant positive encouragement and support to bring about unexpected positive influences (Checkoway, n.d.).

III. Importance of adults in linking youths to further resources

A strong organizational structure was another characteristic of a successful youth programme in the list by CYD (1996). The KYA leaders started out everything from pure individual effort, including the funding of the organization, programme planning and cooperation. These are testament to their hardiness and initiative. However, they also reflect the leaders’ limited connections and networks for gaining inroads into schools. Since its inception in May 2009, KYA had ran its programmes in only three mainstream schools, at a discounted rate. It is currently finding it difficult to get more contracts in schools. The role of the adult ally here would be to help identify and build relationships with institutional partners, and also to find the opportunities in obstacles (Checkoway, n.d.).

Recommendations

Evaluating KYA based on the characteristics of ‘what works’ for successful implementation of youth work and development programmes, KYA had fulfilled four out of nine criteria, with one being not graded (Table 1). The four criteria that KYA met were: (i) services being consistent, simple and offers continuity; (ii) presence of active, dedicated leaders and youth workers who are reliable, well respected and caring towards the youths; (iii) programmes that reach out to the “underserved populations” or partner with other community programmes and organizations and creativity in problem-solving and; (iv) dedicated to serving and empowering youths as resources within the community. This checklist, together with Shier (2001)’s pathway to participation, will serve as an important guideline in our recommendations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Whether KYA fulfils characteristics</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecological perspective in viewing the youths in the context of their micro and mezzo environments, taking into account their families and schools</td>
<td>No. Focus on individual goal attainment for youths.</td>
<td>To incorporate ecological perspective into programme content, e.g. dealing with communication patterns, interaction with peers and family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme needs to have a targeted and well-defined vision</td>
<td>Largely no. Rather well-defined vision but programmes generic.</td>
<td>More targeted programmes and/or clearly targeted group. Use of language to be age-appropriate; less abstract. Seminars to be more activity-based.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services should recognise the diversity of youths and are relevant and targeted to youths’ needs and interests</td>
<td>No. Similar services are catered to both mainstream school and homes despite recognizing diversity.</td>
<td>To step up on: i) content delivery in terms of linkages to previous seminars; ii) proper wrap ups and evaluation with participants in ensuring that desired outcomes are being fulfilled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services should be consistent, simple and offers continuity</td>
<td>Yes. A total of 4 seminars with related and built up content.</td>
<td>More support to be given to the youth leaders, especially in team-building. Youth leaders work alone for programme development and seminar facilitation most of the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization should promote a “supportive and flexible” and bonding environment for both staff and youths</td>
<td>Unsure. More information needed on staff programmes needed.</td>
<td>To include adult allies who have relevant expertise. To increase pool of trained youth leaders/facilitators through recruitment drive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear and strong organizational structure</td>
<td>No. Suffer from manpower issues with no adult allies as advisors.</td>
<td>To include adult advisors who have relevant expertise to advise youth leaders in terms of skills and connection to relevant resources and networks. Practical and gradual approach to expose youth leaders to other established youth programmes and initiatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of active, dedicated leaders and youth workers who are reliable, well respected and caring towards the youths</td>
<td>Yes. Energetic and enthusiastic about their work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach out to the “underserved populations” or partner with other community programmes and organizations</td>
<td>Yes. As a social enterprise, monies earned from mainstream school are channelled to free programme for youths in homes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative in problem-solving and dedicated to serving and empowering youths as resources within the community</td>
<td>Yes. The materials and handouts are creative.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The two biggest challenges that KYA face currently as a young youth-initiated programme have been identified in the above section. In order for KYA to meet their desired objectives and to benefit the youth leaders, organization and community, they should address: i) the lack of expertise in evidence-based youth work and group work skills and; ii) the absence of adults as allies with the youth leaders, based on Shier (2001)’s pathways to participation model (see Chapter 1).

Using CYD’s measurement of the impact of youth development programme, we have come up with various recommendations that KYA might want to improve on to develop their programme for the betterment of themselves, their targeted youths and the society. We think that the two most practical approaches are: (i) to expose the youth leaders to other established youth programmes and initiatives that have theoretical underpinnings, thus allowing them to experience ‘theory at work’ before introducing the very idea to them and; (ii) have an adult ally as a mentor to achieve the highest level of youth participation of both Hart (1992)’s and Shier (2001)’s frameworks. This would be a gradual change, however, as youth participation is a process (rather than a specific event or project) where youths gradually pick up and sharpen their skills. It is important to expose them to established and successful youth programmes for them to model their programme on. Facilitation by an adult mentor of their thoughts and feelings processes after the exposure can then help to validate and develop these ideas.

However, we also identified possible obstacles in embracing our recommendations even though some of the youth leaders have expressed their openness towards receiving and accepting relevant feedbacks. We, as students, took a few years of relevant education and internship experience in social work to appreciate the importance of evidence-based work. To expect the youth leaders to appreciate evidence-based work in the same light as us in a matter of days is not possible. The leaders of KYA can gain these knowledge and skills incrementally through concerted efforts to attend training and to learn and reflect on-the-job.
Conclusion

Our team attended only two seminars conducted by two consultants. Therefore, the analysis in this paper is limited to observations made from the two seminars and face-to-face conversations with the KYA representatives. Nevertheless, the findings and suggestions are reasonable and KYA leaders were also very accepting of our views.

With perseverance and openness to ways to improve and refine their programme and skills, in particular with respect to finding adult allies and honing group work skills, this small start-up can make much difference in young people’s lives. Overall, while it is important to try to introduce new improvements for KYA, the uniqueness and strengths of KYA as a youth-for-youth initiative should be recognized. KYA has a viable business model that meets a clear social objective. Its leaders are passionate and had developed an organization with tremendous hard work and innovative ideas. We urge KYA to keep up with their initial motivations and passion in reaching out to youths.

References


Believing in and supporting youth participation

Irene Y.H. Ng
The collaboration on this issue itself is an example of youth participation. I am the adult ally. So is NYC, which provided the resources and avenues to give a voice to the students and the youth leaders they wrote about. The students are the stars, with whom I have interactively formulated the ideas and presentation in this book.

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on all that have been presented. Two things struck me. One is simply how creative and energetic the youths described in these pages are. Such dynamism can be tapped for the benefit of the larger society. Second is how vital proper support from adult allies is. Otherwise, youths’ creativity and energy can be misdirected, and their passion can extinguish.

**Creative Energy**

We are Different (W.A.D!), Get Your Sexy Back (GYSB), Keep Youths Alive (KYA) – what creative names! Indeed, the creative energy of the youths is clear through not only the names of the organizations, but also the creative ways the programmes are run. Creativity indeed seems to be a key success factor for GYSB. With a compelling theme, the innovative names and ideas for each of GYSB’s campaigns struck a chord with sponsors and the media that somehow propelled the movement nationally, beyond NTU. Creative
energy was also salient in W.A.D!, which was bringing sports to youths in various forms (e.g. the new sport Tchoukball) through a variety of platforms (e.g. YOG) and with multiple objectives (e.g. cross-cultural appreciation). KYA, in contrast, was a small programme, and was not outwardly vibrant. But KYA’s energy and creativity are evident in the leaders’ perseverance in running the outfit as a social enterprise and developing and conducting the programmes despite most of them also having their own jobs.

Check out other creative programmes and names that other students in my Urban Youth Work class found:

1. Youth Advolution for Health (YAH) made history as Singapore’s first youth-led advocacy programme for health-related issues. YAH kicked off in September 2005 led by six passionate youths. In 2005, their activities were solely centred on promoting a smoke-free lifestyle. Since then, YAH had evolved to encompass a wide range of health-related issues.

2. Under the flagship of the National University of Singapore Muslim Society (NUSMS), the >65 AID movement enabled youths to reach out and give back to the community, particularly Malay-Muslim elderly aged 65 and above. Launched on 27th March 2010, youth volunteers were involved in delivering meals to needy elderly or adopting an elderly to befriend.

3. SYINC is not an acronym, but a non-word that the organisation came up with. SYINC was a youth led program for youths to come up with innovative solutions to make social change. This was done through creating platforms for networking and capacity building.

4. Smile-A-Mile was a jogging campaign that lasted a month in 2007. It was initiated by four youths who wanted to do something meaningful in their sophomore year in National Junior College (NJC). The project aimed to raise funds as well as awareness for the Disabled People’s Association of Singapore (DPA).
Adult Allies Essential

Something in W.A.D!'s favour might be its connections with a parent organization that has provided connections to the larger community, including sponsors and schools. With abundant resources, collaborations, and ties with adult mentors, youths in W.A.D! were given much freedom to explore and be dynamic. Similarly, GYSB found allies in the media and big sponsors such as Asia Pacific Breweries. Hence, the successes of these two programmes have come about from adult allies who believe and invest in them.

KYA, in contrast, did not have a parent organization, resulting in difficulties gaining inroads into schools. Neither did it have big sponsors to enable it to offer free programmes. To a large extent, it is not fair to compare KYA to W.A.D! and GYSB. The type of programme it offered is very different. It is more content-heavy than the other two. Its curriculum to help youths make better decisions is serious stuff. The activities in W.A.D! and GYSB, on the other hand, included fun activities like sports, shopping, and concerts, that are naturally attractive to youths.

One conclusion might be that youths are good at leading and planning high energy programmes such as sports and catchy low-content programmes such as campaigns. However, I also believe that youths can and should play a role in leading serious programmes such as those by KYA. There are examples of youths leading serious programmes elsewhere. For example, in New York’s South Bronx, one of the most economically disinvested areas in the U.S., youths established an organization called “Youth Force” that is “by and for young people”. Started in 1994, Youth Force provides services such as a youth court for minor delinquent cases, tutoring, and painting of public housing (Checkoway, Figueroa & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

However, for such programmes, youths need closer guidance from adult allies and specific training. The passion of the KYA leaders, for example, should be fanned by some guidance. Having gone down paths that they have regretted, their message of making good decisions is a unique angle.
that few adult initiatives can offer. As suggested by the students in Chapter 5, adult allies (in the form of persons as well as institutions) can support by providing resources to tighten their curriculum, training in facilitation skills, and mentorship in discussing and reflecting on the programme’s strengths and weaknesses.

Going forward, W.A.D! and GYSB too can do with improved support from adult allies. In the case of GYSB, someone coming alongside to help it re-focus and re-strategize might address the criticism of it having lots of hype without clarity of whether its main objectives are met. While its sexy message might catch public fancy at first, an ongoing campaign might lose its lustre and initial aims. For W.A.D!, Chapter 3 had suggested that the adults in the parent company might at times be too hands off. More facilitated reflections and planning might help the youth leaders more in terms of personal and programme development. As W.A.D! seems to be continuing to expand, such adult facilitations would be increasingly important to ensure fidelity to outcomes.

**Sustainability**

It is unclear whether the organizations described in the various chapters would still be in the next year or next few years. Perhaps youth-led programmes do not need to be around for a long time. Perhaps they have a role at a point in time, after which a younger group of youths with brand new ideas come up with new programmes. On the other hand, the skills and experience gained by the current group of youth leaders can benefit younger and other types of youths if there are succession plans and structures for involving different kinds of youths. In this light, it is unclear how intentional W.A.D!, GYSB, and KYA were in involving younger youths in some planning and decision-making. The analyses by my students imply that such efforts might be lacking. Similarly, aside from KYA, it might be more elite youths that are taking the leadership reins. In fact, KYA is a wonderful example of what non-elite youths can do. The typical elite youths do not have the ground knowledge and experience that the KYA leaders have.
For all three programmes, the pioneers of the programmes might age out and lose touch with the ground. For sustainability, regeneration and inclusivity are important. So is constant evaluation to keep the programme focused on its intended outcome.

**Conclusion: revisiting the “isms”**

I hope that the examples and models presented in this book have inspired youth and youth partners alike towards the vast potential of youth participation. I hope that we have shown sufficient examples of youth dynamism and contribution for us to rid ourselves of adultist attitudes that youths are not as able, that we can act upon them without their agreement. I hope we will make efforts towards meaningful and not token involvement of young people. I hope that we will be committed to support and involve different kinds of youths, and not just the elite youths.

**References**

Postlude

At the time of writing this, the World Cup has just concluded. Spain has won, but many thought Germany would win. The reason? Their youth. But not only youth. German players have been said to be disciplined and trained well. They played well together. Their 4-0 win against Argentina during the quarterfinals, in particular, caught the world’s attention. Argentina had star players. But its coach, the famed Maradona, had no strategy. Germany had no star players, but a united strategy and youthful players. To me, this exemplifies the main points of this book. Tap on the dynamic energy of youths by mentoring them well and allowing them the opportunity to be involved and flourish. Germany might not have won, but reaching the semi-finals is quite an accomplishment in my opinion. An octopus who believes in you would help too.

Irene Y.H. Ng

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