

Participatory Action Research (PAR) on the Effect of Youth Outreach on a Youth Drop-in Centre

by

Zakiyah Ibrahim

Abstract

The existing social services for youths in Singapore overlooks certain at-risk youths and these youths remain undetected by the social services. A youth outreach programme serves to reach out to these unidentified youths and link them to appropriate services. Literature reviews on youth outreach work in other countries have found evidence of the potential and effectiveness of the youth programme. The definitions, theoretical models, challenges, strategies and research methods surrounding outreach work from these literature reviews serve as a useful resource in implementing outreach work in Singapore. This paper presents a pilot youth outreach programme conducted by Youth Infinity, the youth department of The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres, to reach out to the youths in the neighbourhoods in which The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres operate, and aims to increase the number, and diversity of youths engaged in their drop-in centre, Club Infinity. The research method of participatory action research guided the research, and the research processes followed the four stages in the action research cycle: planning, acting, reflecting and observing. A mixed-methods formative evaluation was carried out to measure the effectiveness of the pilot programme in achieving its aims, and the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data generated comprehensive findings for this research. While the quantitative findings revealed no considerable impact on the number and profile of youths engaged in Club Infinity after outreach, the qualitative findings demonstrated successful factors and challenges faced in youth

outreach work. The reflections of the researcher and participants on their experiences from the pilot programme also revealed that the participants were more outreach-oriented after participating in the research. The outreach-orientation of the participants led them to engage more youths, become more youth centric and saw their skills as youth workers improve, hence fulfilling Youth Infinity's aspirations as a youth agency. The pilot programme has also provided future directions and recommendations in terms of programme design, manpower, collaboration and evaluation to encourage youth agencies to include outreach as part of their youth work.

Introduction

Youth Infinity (YI) was established in 2006 as a specialized department for youth services under The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres (AMKFSC). One of the core services of YI includes running a youth drop-in centre, named Club Infinity (AMKFSC, 2012). Youth Infinity hopes to reach out to youths in the neighbourhoods in which AMKFSCs operate to increase the number and diversity of the members of Club Infinity. A pilot youth outreach programme was conducted to investigate the effects of this outreach programme on Club Infinity as a drop-in centre.

Literature suggests that youths rarely initiate or willingly seek intervention as they are passive in connecting themselves to services (Bouvier, 2007). Conducting youth outreach is thus crucial in efforts to engage youths to use services that they may not be aware of (Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007). It has the potential to identify youths at risk who are not known to, or are passive in accessing youth services. In addition, youth outreach engages youths at their free will, thereby increasing their interest and willingness to participate in the engagement.

Participatory action research (PAR) guided this research as it is a suitable research methodology for practitioners who wish to improve their practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). As the practitioners in YI hoped to expand the pool of youths engaged in their drop-in centre, they were involved as research participants. Through their participation in their own practice and in research, they would have the opportunity to build upon their existing knowledge of outreach work. The researcher's involvement as a participant enables the researcher to be part of the outreach work that is being investigated and to provide insights as an insider (Ronel, 2006). Furthermore, PAR recognises the value of experiential knowledge (Reason, 2006), which allows the researcher to feel the empathy and resonance (Heron, 1996) that outreach workers experience when conducting outreach.

Methods

The research process followed the four stages in the action research cycle: planning, acting, reflecting and observing. This cycle allows the processes of reflection and action to be repeated several times (Heron & Reason, 2006) so that the participants could continuously reflect on their outreach experiences and improve their strategies of outreach.

A total of 5 outreach workers and 1 researcher participated in this research from November 2012 to January 2013. The participants were aged between 23 and 33 years; four of them were females. The participants recorded their observations in an observation form (Appendix A) immediately after every outreach session. A total of 18 debrief sessions were conducted by the researcher with the outreach workers. The guiding questions for the debrief sessions are listed in Appendix B. The researcher also recorded a journal of her personal reflections within 24 hours of each debrief session.

A total of 80 youths were engaged by the participants during the study period. Exact data on the youths engaged during outreach were not collected but majority of the youths were males and they were aged between 12 and 20 years.

As a pilot youth outreach programme, formative evaluation directed the evaluation process to ensure the programme had been implemented according to plan. This evaluation served to guide and provide direction to the programme so that the findings would be used to make improvements to the programme (Royse, Thyer, Padgett, & Logan, 2010) and contribute to the knowledge on youth outreach work.

A mixed-methods evaluation provided a holistic approach to collecting data. The quantitative data on the number and profile of youths engaged in the outreach work, activities and drop-in centre were measured and compared in pre- and post-outreach. The qualitative aspects involved each participant completing an observation form at the end of every outreach to ensure consistency in recording data. A debrief session was also conducted by the researcher to consolidate the participants' observations and thoughts for the sessions. The researcher also kept a journal of her personal reflections to complement the observation forms and debrief sessions. A data-driven thematic analysis identified themes of the helpful and unhelpful strategies of outreach that appeared consistently in the observation forms and debrief sessions (Boyatzis, 1998).

Findings

In terms of the quantitative findings, the pilot youth outreach programme was successful in reaching out to the community's youth. The outreach programme engaged a total of 85 youths. However, in terms of increasing the number and diversity of youths who used the drop-in centre after outreach, only 2 out of the 7 new

youths engaged by Club Infinity became regular members and only 1 of the new youths was unengaged in school. Therefore, the change was inadequate to suggest that more at-risk youths have been engaged through the outreach work.

From the qualitative findings, two broad categories emerged: successful factors for outreach and challenges faced. Additionally, the experiences reflected by the participants and researcher revealed that the YI practitioners became more outreach-oriented in their approach to youth work.

Successful Factors for Outreach

Planning. Having identified the target group and geographical areas for daily outreach work helped to facilitate the smooth-running of outreach work and minimized the time spent on travelling. In terms of manpower, a backup youth worker was also designated to be on duty for every outreach session.

I am so thankful that I assigned three outreach workers for every session, even though we only need two per session. I cannot imagine how many sessions we had to cancel if I didn't do this. [Personal journal no. 10, Researcher]

Strategies for initial contact. Snacks were distributed during outreach work to help break the tension when the participants first approached youths. An 'outreach card,' which contained information on Club Infinity's opening hours and facilities, was also given out and the card was more well-received by the youths than the workers' business cards. A map with information on how to get to Club Infinity was also printed on the outreach card.

Engagement techniques. The participants tapped on the youths' expertise in the community to involve them in the outreach process. They also tried to reach out to

youths in areas where they had previously met them to re-engage them and continue with rapport building. Building rapport was recognized as an important strategy in inviting the youths to drop in at Club Infinity.

Youths' and participants' characteristics. The participants from YI had been youth workers for at least a year and had been actively conducting programmes in various schools in the community prior to this research. Their involvement gives YI a unique advantage as it meant that the participants had already been known to many youths in the community itself. This was helpful in making the initial contact as the youths let their guard down after recognizing a familiar face. The participants' casual attire also made them appear less intimidating to youths:

I think we were dressed so casually that [the youths] thought we were youths too! So that definitely helped to bring their guard down. [Observation form no. 3, Worker 4]

Being able to speak in the youths' ethnic language definitely helped in engagement. The participants shared that the youths were more likely to identify and be comfortable with a worker of the same ethnicity. Given Singapore's diverse ethnic composition, a heterogeneous team of outreach workers is deemed more capable of meeting the needs of a diverse group of youths on the streets (Ronel, 2006).

As the participants faced a lot of anxiety when approaching youths in the initial stages, having a supportive outreach team who constantly provided encouragement and assurance to one another gave them courage to overcome their fears and resulted in successful engagement with youths.

Challenges Faced

Youths' characteristics. The participants reported having a fair share of youths who were resistant and unwilling to be engaged. They observed that youths who congregated in big groups or had adults present in their groups were especially so. The participants also met youths who seemed to be under the influence of substances. In those instances, the participants were unable to engage the youths for an extended period of time as the youths appeared dazed, and the participants, being unfamiliar with the environment and inexperienced with outreach work, perceived that it was not safe for them to continue the engagement.

Participants' characteristics. The participants' gender affected the outreach process as the majority of the participants were females. When it was an all-female team, the participants sometimes perceived that their safety could be compromised because of their lack of experience in outreach work and unfamiliarity with the youths.

We were all girls then. And it was a group of half-naked boys playing soccer. I think it was wise that we didn't approach them. [Observation form no. 8, Worker 2]

The participants also struggled with balancing their day job as a youth worker and a participant in outreach work at night. Although the participants were allowed to recover and report for work later the next day, some of the participants continued to report for work in the morning due to their heavy workload. The participants shared that they felt weary from lack of sleep. This also affected their health, and two outreach sessions had to be cancelled because the participants involved were ill.

Unforeseen circumstances. The streets were usually quiet when the participants conducted outreach at night. All the participants reported being surprised

that the youths were not as available on the streets as the participants had expected them to be. This, however, could also be attributed to the period during which the outreach was conducted: it was monsoon season in Singapore and hence there was a lot of rain. When it rained earlier in the day, the open areas that youths were usually found in were wet; when it rained at night, the participants were constrained in terms of the areas where they could conduct outreach work.

The presence of police patrolling at night also affected the outreach work. When the police were patrolling in a particular area, the youths went into hiding and hence the participants were unable to engage them. Furthermore, the youths also appeared more guarded when they were engaged by the participants while the police were patrolling.

When we were chatting with the youths, a police car happened to drive by.

Suddenly, the youths put their cigarettes away. They also stopped talking to us enthusiastically and some of the boys in the group started leaving. I think they suspected that we were communicating with the police officers. [Personal journal no. 1, Researcher]

Unsuccessful engagement techniques. In their reflections, the participants reported that having long conversations about Club Infinity during initial engagements was not useful to the engagement process as the youths were not interested in the agency at the beginning. Instead, the participants' demonstration of their interest in the youths and initiating conversations about the youths' interests facilitated rapport building. The participants also reported that participants outnumbering the youths also seemed to be unhelpful to the outreach process as the

youths seemed to perceive the situation to be intimidating and thus were more guarded.

Remember when we were talking to the two girls and the three of us were standing around them. They seemed reluctant to open up probably because we were so intimidating! [Debrief session no. 2, Worker 1]

“Over-staying” was a term used by the participants to describe situations when the youths were starting to lose interest in the attempts at engaging them. The participants, being experienced youth workers, were able to detect the youths’ disinterest with their presence from their body language. In such instances, the participants reminded one another to keep the engagement short.

Discussion

Beyond looking at the quantitative measures and ascertaining if the targeted indicators were met, the qualitative findings revealed that YI has gained a lot of knowledge and practice experience from the pilot youth outreach programme, which, in turn, has added value to the work of YI with youths.

Extending Youth Network

All the participants reported that the outreach programme expanded their network of youths by engaging more youths. They expressed satisfaction with the outreach programme and were encouraged that they had made the presence of Club Infinity known to a larger number of youths through outreach. They were hopeful that Club Infinity would attract more youths to the club in future. They also discovered new groups of youths who had not previously been aware of Youth Infinity.

Identifying New Needs

Through the night outreach programme, the participants identified the presence of older youths in the community. These youths were mostly students of tertiary institutions and they had different needs from the group of youths that Club Infinity had been engaging. The operating hours of the agency's present services, particularly the afternoon drop-in service, conflicted with the schooling hours of the older youths. This could have contributed to the small number of youths successfully engaged by Club Infinity's current drop-in service. The participants realized there was a need for a night drop-in service, demonstrating that they were proactive in reaching out to these youths by providing services according to the youths' needs. As these youths had been observed to spend unsupervised time with their peers at night, the participants suggested that the hours of Club Infinity should include a night drop-in service, allowing the youths to spend supervised time with their peers. This night drop-in service would likely attract more youths to Club Infinity.

Personal and Professional Development

The experience of outreach work has encouraged the participants to develop their knowledge and skills as youth workers. Their experiences from outreach work have exposed them to effective and ineffective ways of engaging youths, which will benefit their work with youths in future. Furthermore, the participants have become more outreach-oriented in their work with youths. It was previously highlighted that youths rarely initiate or willingly seek intervention and are passive in connecting themselves to services (Bouvier, 2007). Therefore, the newly-equipped outreach-orientated participants have become proactive youth workers, which can greatly

benefit YI as an agency. With their enthusiasm for outreach work, YI will most certainly be able to reach out and engage more youths in future.

Future Directions

From this research and the experiences gained from conducting youth outreach, we hope to encourage other youth agencies to consider youth outreach as part of their youth work. The following recommendations provide directions to other youth agencies to start their own youth outreach programme.

Programme Design

Youth agencies should ensure thorough planning of their outreach programme, in terms of its target group, outreach period and geographical coverage. As the nature of youth outreach is unpredictable, thorough planning and flexibility help youth workers prepare for unforeseen circumstances. The frequency of outreach sessions must also be planned according to the agency's manpower resources. Conducting repeated outreach sessions may take a toll on workers' health. Finally, it is important to ensure compatibility between the hours of outreach and the connecting service. A youth agency should plan its opening hours according to its target clients' preferred hours, which, according to our findings, appear to be from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Manpower

Having more male workers when conducting outreach helps to ensure safety, especially if outreach activities are conducted at night. Given the diverse ethnic composition of Singapore, a multi-ethnic outreach team is also needed to increase the chances of successfully engaging youths of different ethnicities. We also recommend that outreach work be conducted by specialized outreach workers as the experiences from this research show that the participants struggled to balance their day

responsibilities and outreach work at night. With specialized outreach workers who do not have day responsibilities, more outreach sessions can be conducted, and hence more youths can be engaged.

Collaboration

The active police patrols in Singapore could hinder youth outreach programmes as youths tend to go into hiding when the police are on the streets. Therefore, youth agencies should inform their neighbourhood police posts of their intention to conduct outreach activities so that instead of screening youths during police patrols, police officers could alert youth workers of the location of the youths under the police's monitoring and allow youth workers to engage the youths directly instead. Such collaboration would minimize the likelihood of youths intentionally hiding from the streets to remain undetected and increase the number of youths engaged through youth programmes.

Collaborating with youths who are familiar with the streets and have knowledge of the common areas that youths hang-out in is also recommended. These youths can be recruited as peer outreach workers who would serve as the "connecting bridge" (Feudo, Vining-Bethea, Shulman, Shedlin, & Burlison, 1998, p. 52) between youths and outreach workers.

Evaluation

From this research, conducting debrief sessions have proven to be useful, as they allow youth workers and their supervisors to immediately process and consolidate any observations and thoughts that arise from the outreach sessions. Debrief sessions also help youth workers and youth outreach agencies to improve their outreach work by facilitating active discussion of strategies.

We also recommend garnering feedback from youths as an evaluation approach. Feedback from the youths themselves provides valuable insights from the service recipients, which youth workers and researchers might not have observed (Bouvier, 2007; Ronel, 2006). Having a comprehensive evaluation plan ensures that a youth outreach programme is effective and stays relevant in meeting the needs of the community's youths.

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Appendix A: Observation Form

Date: _____

Number of youth workers involved (including you): _____

Duration of outreach: _____

Location of outreach (e.g., Around AMK central): _____

1. What type of physical setting (e.g., Playground, parks) were most of the youths found?
2. How many youths did you talk to in this outreach session?
3. Describe the profile of youths that you talked to?

Age range: _____

Gender: _____ boys _____ girls

Brief description:

4. What helped you to engage these youths?
5. How did the profile of youths influence your ways of engaging them?
6. Were there any engagement styles that the youths did not reciprocate to? (If yes, please elaborate.
7. What did you LIKE about today's outreach session? (you may indicate more than one)

8. What did you DISLIKE about today's outreach session? (you may indicate more than one)

9. Any other comments?

Appendix B: Guidelines for Debrief

1. Number of youths engaged today.
2. Areas of outreach.
3. One word (from everyone) to describe today's outreach sessions.
4. What helped you to engage these youths?
5. What are some of the difficulties you encountered?
6. How can we improve on these difficulties for the subsequent outreach sessions?
7. Addressing the likes and dislikes of today's outreach sessions.
8. Any other points?