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Support for Youth Workers: **SLIPPING ON THE SOCIAL CURVE**

What are the issues concerning the training of our youth workers? What support exists for them? Are we creating a vacuum where we are grooming an increasing number of youth workers and not providing enough resources to ensure their sustenance? Children-At-Risk Empowerment Association's (CARE Singapore) John K E Tan sheds some light on this matter.



Reaching out to youths today requires special skills and an unwavering tenacity. Frankly, nothing quite prepares you to work with youths who are undergoing the turbulence of adolescent development. Youth workers who interact with them on a daily basis require an extraordinary set of attitudes and mindset – which includes having acute perceptiveness, patience, a listening ear, strength, a big heart, firmness and charisma.¹

Based on such high expectations, how do available formalised training and support systems for youth workers measure up?

Just Who or What are Youth Workers?

A 2005 workgroup, commissioned by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) and the National Youth Council (NYC), defined a youth worker as ‘a person who works with young people to help them become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent, through the provision of developmental, preventive and/or remedial services.’² It also recognised that there is no fixed job definition or role for the youth worker, varying with each individual youth organisation.

The NCSS-NYC study further reported that the majority of youth programmes they surveyed were activity-based involving groupwork, camps, life skill programmes and recreational activities. This contrasted with the distinct tasks associated with social workers such as counselling, casework and home visits.³

The study also identified a wide range of roles performed by youth workers in diverse settings. These included direct work with young people as individuals and in groups; designing, delivering and evaluating programmes, supervising other staff; managing buildings and resources, and liaising with other professionals, parents and community groups in order to ensure that provision of services respond appropriately to the needs of young people.⁴

Notwithstanding the diverse tasks undertaken by youth workers, one particular role stands out with its strategic and long term implications – befriending and reaching out to youths, particularly, in preventive settings. As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure. The youth worker’s efforts greatly facilitate the reduction or amelioration of the social cost of delinquency.

Support for Youth Workers

It is ironic that the young people we commission to the service frontlines to reach out to youth-at-risk,

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are actually deprived of attention and floundering in a critical service gap. Apart from a smattering of courses put forth by the Social Service Training Institute (SSTI) – NCSS’ training arm – there is no formalised course that provides foundational training for the aspiring youth worker. A common initiation practice is to thrust inexperienced youth workers onto the frontlines and, depending on the respective youth organisation, provide them with supervision via mentoring or shadowing a more experienced youth worker.

At CARE Singapore, rookies are placed on a newbie track that includes weekly training coupled with ongoing direct supervision provided by a team leader in the youth-work setting. We also enrol them for SSTI’s *Working with Youths Introduction Course*, a 35-hour training programme. These steps, although significant, are inadequate. More has to be done to reduce the gradient of the learning curve.

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The NCSS-NYC study identified eight core competencies to be developed within the youth worker, although it did not specifically recommend the order or timing with which the core competencies are to be acquired by the individual.⁵ These competencies are categorised in four major domains (as shown in Table 1), each specifying the youth worker as a resource provider:

Core Competencies of Effective Youth Workers

<p>Resource to Youths</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledge on the developmental stages and issues experienced by youths. 2. Ability to mentor and engage youths as well as be a positive role model to them. 3. Skills in managing behaviour and providing appropriate intervention. 4. Skills in managing group dynamics and conducting groupwork effectively. 	<p>Resource to Families</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Ability to engage families in the overall intervention plan for youths.
<p>Resource to Organisation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Skills in programme development (i.e., planning, implementing and evaluating programmes) to enable the organisation to implement effective programmes to serve the needs of youths. 7. A sense of professionalism and ethical practice to uphold the integrity and reputation of the organisation. 	<p>Resource to Community</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Knowledge and ability to engage community partners through effective collaborations to provide systemic solutions to youths.

Table 1

Training the Service Providers

I am in favour of the recommended competencies but would ask that youth workers be trained in the first resource domain, that of being resource to youths, prior to the other domains. I am aware, however, that currently there is no basic certification at the moment for youth workers in this area. I contend that the sector needs to come together to lay the pathway for this basic certification to be provided.

There are several challenges that appear to hinder the laying of this pathway. Firstly, the youth work sector in Singapore is a very small sector comprising at most a few hundred youth workers, not inclusive of the volunteer youth sector. Training providers may find it tough to run courses without the critical mass to support breakeven revenues assuming that these courses are not sponsored in the same way. Alternative training models or forms of support require a shift in mindset, possibly a long-drawn process.

Secondly, though the youth sector is relatively small, we have yet to come together to work collectively. The NCSS-NYC 2005 study broached the possibility of the formation of an association to look into the development of the youth work sector. However, it

also cited the lack of a common identity, education and training background as potential obstacles for such an endeavour.⁶ Mindful of this observation, I am suggesting that the players in the youth-work sector convene to discuss the training needs of current and aspiring youth workers.

The third issue presents a greater challenge as it deals with mindsets, something that was also surfaced by the NCSS-NYC 2005 study which reported that *'some youth workers felt that they do not receive enough recognition for their work. They felt the profession was a grade lower than social workers and other helping professions in terms of recognition and remuneration.'*⁷ This lack of recognition may be attributed once again to the lack of professionalism perceived of the youth worker. It is imperative, therefore, for the youth-work sector to come together.

Moving Forward

Recently, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), together with NCSS and the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW), launched an accreditation scheme that purports to ensure professional standards among social work practitioners.⁸

What does this portend for youth workers? Under the SASW's FAQ page explaining the scheme, the following comment was made:

*"Programme Executives/ Youth Workers who are not social-work-trained but are performing social work functions for the major part of their work can qualify to be accredited Social Service Practitioners if they meet the entry requirements for Social Service Practitioners. They can become accredited Social Workers if they go on to acquire a recognised Social Work qualification and also fulfil the other entry requirements for accreditation."*⁹

The accreditation effected on 1 April 2009 is not currently mandatory. I applaud the scheme as it aims to raise the professional standards of social work and services in Singapore. What room does it leave for youth workers? Does it imply that youth workers need to convert to social service practitioners and eventually social workers to practice in the social service sector? Not all youth workers are social work degree holders but their expertise in working on the field should not be discounted. It is interesting to note that the National University of Singapore's Graduate Diploma in Social Work¹⁰ has a specialisation track for those interested in pursuing social work involving children and youth. The three specialised elective subjects, however, are available only to candidates possessing a recognised social work academic qualification. Candidates without such qualifications may be permitted to enrol on a case-by-case basis as approved by the institution's Head of Department of Social Work.

Granted, for some youth workers, morphing into professional social workers will be a logical career progression. But what of those who choose not to tread this path, preferring the option of youth work at its hardest core. What will their career paths be like?

Perhaps we can learn from England's experience with the professionalisation of youth workers. There, two ranks are distinguished – youth support workers and youth workers. Youth support workers are those holding pre-professional and vocational qualifications, whereas youth workers possess qualifications at honours degree level or higher. Opportunities are available for youth support workers to upgrade to youth worker status by pursuing qualifications at higher education diploma or foundation degree level. Youth workers can aspire to be youth managers. Starting annual salaries for youth support workers and youth workers range from £15,000 (about S\$35,000) to £27,000 (almost S\$63,000) respectively.¹¹

Acceptance of the WSQ as basic certification for youth workers by the industry is however sketchy at the moment. I assert that by coming together, we can at least increase awareness, if not acceptance of the WSQ scheme. This will augur a good start toward the professionalism of youth workers in Singapore.

There is a glimmer of hope offered via the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) training scheme, under the auspices of the Workforce Development Agency (WDA). Youth workers can look forward to courses presented within the Youth Care and Outreach sub-sector of the WSQ's Community and Social Services sector. Acceptance of the WSQ as basic certification for youth workers by the industry is however sketchy at the moment. I assert that by coming together, we can at least increase awareness, if not acceptance of the WSQ scheme. This will augur a good start toward the professionalism of youth workers in Singapore. ❖

¹ CARE Singapore <<http://www.care.sg/web/html/career.html>>

² National Youth Council, "Core Competencies For Youth Workers And Volunteer Youth Workers in Singapore: Final Report," 2006, 50-51

³ National Youth Council, "Core Competencies For Youth Workers And Volunteer Youth Workers In Singapore: Executive Summary," 2006, 2

⁴ National Youth Council, "Core Competencies For Youth Workers And Volunteer Youth Workers In Singapore: Final Report," 2006, 9

⁵ Ibid., 46

⁶ Ibid., 52

⁷ Ibid., 38

⁸ Singapore Association of Social Workers, "Accreditation System for Social Workers and Social Service Practitioners: Introduction," <<http://www.sasw.org.sg/public/accreditation/Accreditation.htm>>

⁹ Singapore Association of Social Workers, "Accreditation System for Social Workers and Social Service Practitioners: FAQ," <<http://www.sasw.org.sg/public/accreditation/Accreditation%20FAQ.htm>>

¹⁰ National University of Singapore, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences: Social Work, <http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/swk/graduates/graduate_diploma_in_social_work/>

¹¹ *The National Youth Agency, UK*, "The NYA Guide to Youth Work in England, (December 2007) <http://www.nya.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GSFR.asp?NodeID=108452>, 15



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