

## Peer Support and Youth Engagement

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### Abstracts

This papers presents the preliminary results of a qualitative study on peers support and youth engagement. Data was obtained using in-depth interview; a total of 14 active and engaged youth shared their experience about how they got involved with and became engaged in youth organization programs and/or community work. The data elicited indicate peer their peers' support and encouragement are important determinants in maintaining youth active and engaged in an organization or community programs. In addition, the preliminary results suggest that positive peer-based leadership program is the way forward to foster and maintain young people's participation and engagement in youth organization and/or community based programs.

**Keywords:** *Youth Engagement, Peer Support, Peer Relationships*

### Introduction

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

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

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

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

### **Peer Interaction and Peer Influence**

Developmental theories indicate that youth or adolescent evolve or change is manifested by the number of peer interactions throughout his or her adolescent life. The interaction can be either formal or informal interaction. Formal interaction can be the interactions happen at school (primary and secondary) and higher learning (colleges and universities). On the other hand, the informal interaction can be the interaction made on daily basis with friends, acquaintances and neighbours. These interactions moved youths towards getting the positive peer support such as, adoption of refined interpersonal skill and behaviour, acquiring new social roles and most importantly gaining some unique experiences. Youth rely on their peer feedback as their own source of self-identity and evaluation. This process is also known as “reflected appraisal”. Youth perceived what their peer is doing or done can influence what the next course of action they going to perform, both positive and negative. However, for this paper, the aim is to look at the positive consequences or action reflected from the peer support. Bandura suggested via his Social Learning Theory, because of the significant and relevant social context, youth may adopt new behaviour through “modelling, social rewards and punishment, and vicarious reinforcement” of their valued peers or friends. Adolescents or youth will look at their peer as a major sources for their social and emotional support. As an example, youth will join or participant in a program if their peers also part of the program. In addition, youth will justify their participation in a program if there receive a positive feedback and acceptance form their peers. These will be their reference or bases to their self-concept. The self-concept which may lead to an elongate process of youth participation and then engagement in a program or activity. Researchers on willingness model has agreed that peer conformity or adaptation may resulted in a positive self-concept. Youth usually will look into the norms of the program or activity and evaluate them if the norms fit. However, youth based their judgement to participate the program on the approval of their peer.

Peer support resulted from the peer influence. Peer influence is described by a phenomenon of which there should exist both selection and socialization (Brechtwald and Prinstein, 2011). Selection effect is when youth tend to associate with their peer who already possessed similar behaviour or like-minded thinking. On the other hand, socialization effect is when the youth and peer behaviour and attitude to be more alike over time. These two effects, as mentioned in many studies were present in many scenarios faced by the youth. Many studies also indicated that the programs or activities for youth need to be interesting and exciting as well. This is because through these programs or activities can be a suitable platform for youth to mingle and interact with each other. Thus, this may lead to a positive selection and socialization effect. Youth who are surrounded with another active and positive youth may spark the effect among youth through sharing experience and observation. Park (2004) suggested that it is worth to mention about the quality of the social interaction as it can related to the social well-being among youth. Youth can learn and then adopt the positive behaviour of the active youth they have met in the youth program of their choice based on their interest and motivation. Youth program with a high quality of social interaction may increase the youth social well-being (Park, 2004). Thus, it is important to run a youth program with more social opportunities, especially an opportunities for peer to interact among the active peers participated in the program. Simons-Morten and Chen (2009) in their studies reported that with peer influence the involvement of youth activities (in school) is greater compared to youth who has less or no friend at school. Peer characteristic can be a factor influencing the youth's behaviour and motivation. Most if time, youth will keep a close contact with a peer that have the same interest and attitude. Youth will develop their interest and attitude towards an activity based on their peer, as a process of acceptance and recognition. Youth will act and behave the way they believe to be received by their peers; to behave as how it is liked by their peers or friends.

## **Methods**

This research uses qualitative method as the researcher believed that the data of this explanatory research approach can be viable via interviews. Interviews allow data to be investigated in depth and in breadth. Data was obtained using in-depth interviews and focus groups discussion (FGD) with 25 youth or young people between the age of 18 and 25. Data collection activity for a grounded theory research approach requires a multiple individuals who has experienced or participated in the youth program or activities, the central topic of this research. This leads to an identical or similar samples, where purposeful sampling helps in determine the informants. The informants were those youth or young people who are involve in an organization or programs. A total of 14 interviews and three FGD were conducted. The interviews lasted for more or less about forty five minutes to an hour per session. The interviews focused mainly on these three dimensions, which are:

- (1) involvement/participation
- (2) engagement and
- (3) sense of connectedness.

During the interview the participants talked and shared their experiences and success stories of their involvement in their chosen programs or activities. All the interview were based on the interview guide provided. The used of the interview guide is to guide the researcher so the same questions to be asked during the interviews. All the interviews were recorded via a voice recorder that than transcribed word by word to keep the data aligned and uniformed. The transcribed file were then coded and sub-coded based on the three dimensions mentioned above.

## **Results and Discussion**

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

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

During the interviews the young participants narrated their experiences and emphasised that they attended at first or joined in as part of a group, i.e. group of friends from a school or neighbourhood. Being with their friends gave them confidence and helped them to face the new experiences related to joining a particular program that they were either required to join or were curious about. Since they knew each other and have similar interests (or requirements) it became easier to explore and/or face the challenge that came with joining the organization. Also being with their friends at this early stage enables them to gain combined information and knowledge from the program they attended. In addition, joining the program as a group made it more enjoyable and meaningful to participate in the different activities. Since they could communicate well among themselves it also made it easier to share and exchange their ideas with other youth participating in the programs. Furthermore, although their initial participation was based on friendship, once in the program together they felt more confident to explore and form peer relationship with other outside their friends circle. In turn, whether or not they remained engaged was not because of their friends, but because they enjoyed what they were doing and felt comfortable with the new friends. Thus, they continued to be engaged regardless of the participation of the friends who initially joined with them.

### **Peers as motivator and mentor**

When youth can recognize their own issues, they can stimulate their spirits and change their intentions into actions (Checkoway, 2011). In turn, they become good motivators and mentors for their peers and other young people around them. Thus, youth as part and parcel of an organization should be regarded as valuable resources of relevant youth experience and knowledge and as reference for other youth (Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). Engaged and motivated youth can bring about positive changes to the organization and also their peers (Checkoway, 2011). Previous studies have reported an association between positive changes and youth mentoring (Buikstra, Ross, King, Baker, & Mclachlan, 2010). When the organization welcomes these changes it increases youth interest and engagement which would have a positive and enriching spill-over effect on their work, the organization and the community, serving as

motivators for others to join. Youth are motivated by their peers' positive achievement, and inspired by them to also try to achieve similar or even higher goals. Nonetheless, the youth "built-in motivational system" that can make them into agents of change and positive development (Buikstra et al., 2010) needs to be nourished since it is not self-sustainable.

### **Conclusion**

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

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