

Beyond Beyond

Building a Community Vision for Youth in Ang Mo Kio*

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A key aim of Beyond Social Services in Ang Mo Kio (AMK) is to promote a high level of community participation amongst children, youth, and caregivers. In light of Beyond Social Services' past engagement with the AMK community as well as recent trends, there is a compelling need to prioritize community efforts, mobilize resources in the community, and encourage greater ownership in the community through the process of building a community vision. In a series of qualitative interviews with youth and caregivers from the AMK community, this paper chronicles the common themes in their respective visions for the AMK community, and examines how Beyond Social Services can partner the community in striving towards a common vision.

Introduction

Beyond Social Services (BSS) is a non-profit organisation whose mission is to “curb delinquency among disadvantaged young people and their families and to move them beyond their problems” (BSS, 2012). As stated on its website, BSS espouses a core belief that “people have the ability to help themselves and can successfully reach their goals despite their disadvantages”. This belief in an individual’s resilience also extends to a belief in the resilience of the community, which is the hallmark of BSS’ strengths-based approach to community development.

In practice, BSS facilitates the Community Life Competence Process as a mode of engagement with the community. The Community Life Competence Process emphasises a strengths-based approach as a means of community development—as facilitators look for strengths instead of weaknesses, the community’s inherent capacity to “build a vision for the future, to assess, to act, to adapt and to learn” (Community Life Competence, 2012) is revealed. Building a community vision is thus a vital first step towards the longer-term goal of resilience. When members of the community express their individual desires, hopes, dreams, aspirations and fears, they create a common picture of what their community could look like. It is against the backdrop of such a vision that the community assesses where it currently is, and acts to progress toward such a goal. Finally, after making significant progress, the community can adapt to new

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changes and challenges, having learnt from its previous experiences, and actualizes its potential to be resilient.

The community involved in this vision-building exercise consists of the youth and families in contact with the BSS Youth United Ang Mo Kio (AMK) team. Most of these youth and families live in Blocks 641, 645 and 647 in AMK Avenue 4, where the community workers have focused on since the beginning of 2012. Two community workers from BSS have been present in AMK since twenty years ago, but given the vast area of AMK, BSS made an executive decision to focus their efforts on these three rental blocks of flats. After streamlining their efforts, the Youth United team constitutes one of the smallest teams in BSS. There is thus a need to create a community vision in order to prioritize community efforts, mobilise resources, and encourage greater ownership within the community. This paper documents such a process.

Methodology

Sampling

This study is a preliminary effort to kick start future vision-building collaborations. As such, we started with 6 youth in contact with the community workers and perceived as hubs within the community. To compensate for the small sample size, we included an additional youth only tangentially involved in BSS' activities and networks to add breadth of perspective. The youth were also distributed across three distinct age groups; the youngest youth were still actively engaged in BSS' events, while the oldest ones were in touch with the community workers in a more personal capacity. Talking to a spectrum of age groups thus brought to the fore developmental and cohort patterns in their experiences and attitudes. Benson, Leffert, Scales and Blyth (2012) note the importance of parents' participation in building a common vision as a "shared commitment" to the youth with the rest of the community. The parents of youth were thus involved in the process of community building.

Building a community vision through conversations

We adopted a dialogical approach to building a community vision. The conversations varied in size, ranging from two to six people, and took place at various locations within AMK. Jackson (2012) elaborates on the power of storytelling:

[By] enabling dialogues that encompass different points of view, the act of sharing stories helps us create a world that is more than the sum of its parts. My interest here is in the ways in which storytelling involves not the assertion of power over others, but the vital capacity of people to work together to create, share, affirm, and celebrate something that is held in common.

That the “act of sharing stories helps [the community] create a world” makes plain that the quest to build a community vision opens up a space for people to participate in building a narrative about their own community. Furthermore, the act of storytelling affirms the “vital capacity of people to work together” and aligns with the strengths-based approach of BSS. Since the community is heterogeneous, there will inevitably be points of divergence in the community vision. Yet the act of storytelling does not impose a dominant narrative on the community, but enables dialogues that surface and “encompass [these] different points of view.” Eventually, the world that is collectively imagined is “more than the sum of its parts.”

Data

Conversations were recorded with the permission of participants and then transcribed. Excerpts of the conversations presented below were edited for clarity. Out of the 5 male and 2 female youth, there were 5 older youth (aged 18 and above) and 2 younger youth. Amongst the 4 parents, there were 3 mothers and 1 father.

Discussion

Role Model

Both the youth and parents alike recognized the need for youth in the community to have role models while growing up. The positive effects of mentoring, “a caring and supportive relationship between a youth and a non-parental adult” (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006), are well documented in the literature. A father of three, Parent 3, agreed that youth tended to listen to their friends rather than parents during this developmental period. Hence, it was important for the youths to have adult role models other than their parents. Parent 1 lamented it was inevitable that as her kids grew older, she would not always be at home, and her kids would have more friends around. Besides parents, Youth 1, 2, 4, and 5 also recognized that their relationships with a community worker they respected were instrumental to their growth. According to the youth, he motivated

them, prompted them to consider how to become a better person, taught them to differentiate right from wrong, and urged them to spend their time productively. The youth could not emphasize enough the importance of the particular community worker to how they had developed. In Youth 5's words, "[Community Worker A] came at the right time la, [otherwise we would go down] the path that brings us to jail or prison".

The experience of having a community worker invest in the older youth's lives has set off a ripple effect in the community, as the older youth in turn help out with the younger youth in the community. With some prompting from the community workers, Youth 4 and 5 took it upon themselves to ensure that the younger kids in the community would attend BSS' tuition classes. The measure of the community's trust in the older youth is apparent in how mothers of these younger children came to confide in the older youth whenever their children ran into trouble. Having lived through similar developmental stages only recently, the older youth are well positioned to understand and advise their juniors, and have expressed willingness to do so.

Despite these positive emerging trends, there are challenges to ensuring the continued presence of role models within the community. Firstly, there is a lack of interaction between youth of different age groups. Perhaps as a natural corollary of becoming more occupied with other activities, the older youth are not as engaged in the BSS' current activities, and therefore do not know the younger youth in the community well. As Youth 1 and 2 pointed out, even though they interact with some younger kids, they by-and-large do not recognize the youth younger than 14. This inter-batch disconnect contributes to a sense of unfamiliarity when the older youth participate in BSS activities, since most activities organised cater to the younger demographic. While there might be perceived differences between different groups of youth, this lack of interaction between the older and younger arguably magnifies these differences and lends to a sense of cohort exceptionalism that hampers mentoring relationships. Youth 1 voiced this sentiment when he made distinctions between his own batch and the younger batches:

As in right now you don't see younger boys go together. You don't have a neighbourhood clique much. My time like [we] used to go out every time. We don't have much work, even though we have studies and stuff, we still managed to make time... Nowadays I don't know how to get like youths

to come out. Now it's more like Internet and everybody stay at home in their rooms.

Such sentiments may cause the older youth to underestimate shared experiences that undergird empathetic mentoring relationships. The alternative that the older youth proposed, inserting community workers as professional role models, will be examined in closer detail later in the paper.

Another barrier to the proliferation of organic role models within the community is a keen awareness amongst the older youth that their priorities at present have changed. The current National Servicemen recognize that joining the military takes up most of their time and hinder them from volunteering much with BSS. Yet when pressed about whether they would be able to volunteer more as civilians, there was a sober recognition amongst these youth that they would never have more time in future, given their more pressing concerns about studies, work, and supporting a family. According to Life Course Theory (LCT), where "lives are viewed most appropriately as a sequence of roles and transitions embedded in larger context" (Crosnoe, 2000), the older cohort of youth has reached a transition where their previous trajectory of greater involvement in the community has been disrupted. The oldest youth who are effectively out of army confirm that it is much harder to meet up with their friends, much less the younger ones, given that most of their batch mates are working. It is hence understandable that the older youth are somewhat reluctant to take on the mantle of a role model. As Youth 2 suggested, BSS could consider organizing an event to rally the older batch that are currently out of touch, and subsequently connect them with the younger youth. Returning to LCT, where friendships "tie individuals to larger social forces" as part of a "network of linked lives" (Crosnoe, 2000), how friends respond to this particular transition would shape how the youth respond.

(Gendered) Youth Activities

Youth 6 and 7 verbalised a hope for BSS to conduct engaging activities within the neighborhood, which coincided with the parents' desire to see their children involved in healthy and constructive activities. Across the different age groups of youth, there was agreement that a common activity, where they get in touch with BSS, is crucial to bringing friends together. The oldest youth, Youth 1 and 2, repeatedly emphasised that soccer is the key activity that brings all the boys together. That BSS has been running two soccer clinics for the boys in AMK concurrently testifies to soccer's importance in banding together boys across the

different age groups. In fact, soccer is a possible career trajectory that many young boys in the community aspire to, now that the stellar performance of Youth 2 has gained him a spot on the national team. Some of the older youth volunteer to coach the younger youth when the external coach is busy, which demonstrates the potential of soccer to connect youth across the different age groups. BSS should thus continue to run soccer trainings, not only to connect youth of the same age group, but also the older and younger youth.

As is now apparent, soccer is chiefly for the boys, and a disproportionate focus on it risks neglecting the girls in the community. If soccer appeals more to guys, then the ratio of guys to girls who come in contact with BSS will inevitably be skewed. Hence, in the past two years, BSS has been facilitating weekly gatherings for the girls, including Youth 6 and 7, in the community to play captain's ball at an open space. The teenage girls and the community workers both appreciate how captain's ball trainings have been a platform for the older ones to exercise their leadership qualities whilst having fun and keeping healthy. Unfortunately, while the girls may enjoy and excel at captain's ball, their assets are not valued equally like the boys' soccer skills are. There is a slim to negligible possibility of captain's ball becoming a career for the girls who play in AMK. This raises the question: how can we continue to engage the youth in creative and inclusive ways, while recognizing that it might be difficult to change perceptions about a sport? BSS has made good progress in partnering external organisations to organise hip-hop classes and performances, which have inspired interest from both genders, and can continue to explore new ways of engaging the youth.

While the youth and parents clearly prefer for BSS to conduct engaging developmental activities, there is more ambivalence when it comes to *hanging out*, or in the Malay language, *lepak-ing*. The youth almost uniformly expressed that they enjoy talking to and spending time with each other at void decks and this seems to have been integral to growing up in AMK. However, Parent 1 expressed reservations about creating such spaces, because she believes her child got involved in "unhealthy activities" from accessing such settings. Parent 4 revealed she never let her young children out of sight in the community for fear that they would be exposed to such activity. Perhaps there can be a compromise when the BSS community workers enter such spaces and befriend the youth as adult role models, as we will elaborate on later.

Spaces and Places

Naturally, the use of space in AMK is pivotal in engaging the youth, especially in light of Parent 1's observation that many youth hang out below the block because their private spaces at home are often occupied. The desire for space, both for youth-centered activities as well as *hanging out*, was a recurring trope in our conversations with the youth, and was accentuated by the absence of a youth drop-in center in AMK. Predictably, the activities that can be conducted in the community are closely intertwined with the spaces available. For instance, the sustainability of using soccer to rally boys has been partly contingent on the availability of a street soccer court a few blocks away as well as an agreement to use the soccer field at Yio Chu Kang Secondary School on weekends. However, the stakeholders in AMK have not always been receptive to the youth's use of common spaces. The older boys, Youth 1 and 2, recounted incidents of the police coming when they played soccer at the void decks, while the girls have had water bags thrown at them while they were playing captain's ball. Community Worker A recounted:

We used to play void deck soccer and anywhere la. You know the place across the basketball court they call Circle? They used to do that. Now, no, the present youth don't do much of that. Even the playground used to be a field and they used to be there. But they converted it to a playground because they didn't want the boys to play...

While the playground has become a valuable asset for the families in AMK, and while the youth have recognized the rationale of the community's response, the space crunch in AMK is undeniable and perceptible. Given that this problem is of concern to the entire community, it is important for community workers to bring various groups together to understand each other's view on spatial arrangements and for community workers and youth to continue to find creative ways of overcoming the space crunch.

A significant asset that has emerged is the pride that many youth take in living in AMK. Two of the older youth, Youth 4 and 5, spoke fondly of AMK as their territory and home ground, because this was where they grew up, "hung out" at the void decks, and played soccer everywhere. Most of them would choose to live in AMK next time if given a choice, partly because of its convenient location. A young parent, Parent 2, who currently lives with her in-laws, even went to the meet-the-people session to expressly appeal for a rental flat in AMK, indicating

her predilection for AMK. Just as Manzo and Perkins (2006) argue that place attachment is a significant asset that can be mobilized to drive community participation, BSS can consider how to use space as an asset to strengthen the members' ties to the community.

Involvement in the Community

Hubs, in the social networks literature, are actors with many connections within the community. The community workers are not the only hubs in the community; there are also other active, well-connected adults in the community who transform and open up spaces. Parent 1, who felt apprehensive about youth *hanging out* at the void decks, responded rather creatively:

Because I have children who come and *lepak* at my place, meaning they got problem, or maybe they don't want to go back home. I also have a carpet outside, they sometimes wanna be with my children, they are outside, then we say take the carpet. Then end up they will sleep until the next morning, they don't go back you know.

Not only is this parent a hub whom children in the community turn to when they have problems, she also uses the carpet as a designated safe space for the children. Such a space is close enough to be under her surveillance, but distinct enough to be unimposing for the children.

Both organic and external hubs are crucial to the functioning of the community. Gossip, for instance, is an important resource through which concerns as well as assets in the community are surfaced. Furthermore, a well-honed hub is preferable to a blanket and institutional application of protocol. Parent 1, clearly a hub in the community, shared:

I have your problems with me, but I don't tell the next door. That's why they come back to me... But when there's a major thing ah, need to be like something, for example like [a community worker] will say, "[Did you] see this particular person?" Then I will say, "Ya, I heard this thing and that," then I will share the knowledge that I have... But personally, things that come to me, people come and tell me, asking of, I will never share. Unless it's like a major thing coming like the person being caught, or what happen, then I say I saw him fighting, or then I will say.

She recognises she has to listen and guard secrets well to gain the trust of her friends, but selectively convey information when people need help. Youth 3 also told a story of how his grandma, on occasions when their neighbour locked his daughter out, would take the girl in without intervening in her father's decision to discipline her. Even while she may have disagreed with how the father disciplined his daughter, she respected the difference in values and protected the girl. This is not to say that every decision a hub makes is ideal, if there was even an ideal option to pick in every situation, but it is informed by experience in the community and a neighborly sensibility. Hence, working with the hubs of the community to resolve problems within the community (BSS, 2011) is critical in helping BSS to understand a situation from the community's perspective and sense potential tension points. In so doing, BSS relies on the natural networks of the community and affirms the community's capacity.

There are drawbacks to relying heavily on hubs as well. Even if a hub has a more-than-average number of connections or 'bridges' to members of the community, a single hub realistically cannot be connected to every single member of the community. Relying on a hub to come up with a list of people who need food rations benefits people within his or her social circle, but may deny those out of it who may need these rations more. Furthermore, 'network betweenness', an index of "the extent that a person brokers indirect connections between all other people in a network" (Burt, 2001) varies from hub to hub. BSS through knowing a larger number of hubs and non-hubs can hopefully mitigate this limitation. Lastly, a vision that promotes a "high level of volunteerism and community participation among children, youths and their care-givers" (BSS, 2011) risks marginalizing the members of the community who prefer to be less involved, and it raises the question of what role – if any – lone rangers can play in the community vision. It is worth mentioning here that Youth 3, who preferred to be alone, showed a keen eye for things happening in the community and displayed a refreshing, alternative perspective his position afforded him. In this light, the task for BSS would be to figure out how to tap on the strengths and assets of peripheral community members.

Regardless of whether members of the community are involved as hubs or otherwise, the community recognises that the activities they hope to see in the community require the involvement and volunteerism of youth and parents. Parent 1 expressed the challenge this way:

I think they should implement more activities, and then get the community to run. Because they always say we need parents to run, we need parents to come in. But how? Even if they are giving out pamphlets also if they don't come forward.

To probe into how to encourage a spirit of volunteerism, I asked the active members in the community why they got involved in the community and what their considerations were. What emerged was often a tension between neighbourliness and deep realism, as echoed among the older youth as well as the parents. Neighbourliness is a hope for a closer, tighter-knit community; deep-seated realism is the sober awareness that one needs to devote energy to concerns in life. Both neighbourliness and realism pulled at different directions in dictating how the members of the community should spend their time. A youth also contended that this deep-seated realism could be situated in the broader national culture and was somewhat inevitable.

Perhaps beyond endorsing the inherent value of involvement, facilitators could accommodate varied and concrete reasons for involvement in the community. Parents 1 and 2 already eased this tension by recognizing that the community is a real resource they can tap on to take care of their sons. They discerned that the community could be their ears on the ground in looking out for their children. The community can be a real resource not just in parenting the kids, but also when volunteering is respite from familial concerns. One of them shared, "Sometimes I feel like I want to concentrate on my family or my kids more. But sometimes when I come to think, it's good to get out of the house." Extrapolating this principle, the older youth could be convinced that preserving social ties in the community and with BSS is not a competing priority, but a valuable resource relevant in the next stage of their lives. Regardless of why these members got involved, many wished that BSS would continue to be engaged within the community because they remembered how the community workers from BSS had journeyed with them.

Beyond Beyond

As should be apparent at this point, the community workers have been working closely with the AMK community. Not only in befriending the youth as adult role models, but also in entering spaces denied to parents to connect with youth, it is easy to understand the centrality of these community workers to the AMK community. Indeed, community engagement requires deep and transformational

relationship building to be effective. The community workers have shown tremendous dedication in entering the community's shared spaces after office hours, and their efforts have borne fruit in their well connectedness within the community, in their intimate knowledge of the community's assets, and in the durable relationships they have forged with the youth. One could make the argument that these community workers are insiders to the community they serve, considering that much of their work banks on such a status.

Despite the advantages and disadvantages of the insider status of a community worker (Staples, 2001), this mode of community engagement seems at odds with the vision(s) that its community workers have articulated for the community. 'Beyond Beyond' is a recurring trope in the conversations with the community workers. When the community is sufficiently resilient, the organisation no longer needs to be around, and the community workers would at most be around as friends. There is a consensus amongst the community workers that they are outsiders to the ecosystem of the community, as framed by the asset-based community development approach BSS subscribes to, yet much of their work requires an inextricable immersion within the community.

This compels us at this point to confront whether BSS' vision for the organisation to disappear in the long run is realistic. The older youth in AMK do imagine outgrowing BSS' help ("my problem I solve myself, I am no longer a kid"), yet BSS has featured prominently in visions the youth have articulated for AMK. They hope that BSS will continue to engage subsequent generations of youth. The question of whether the community can envision a future without BSS becomes critical, since BSS' intervention has fundamentally shaped the community's conception of how a role model should be like. There may also be a "paradox of embeddedness" where the "loss of a core organisation in a network will have a large negative effect on the viability of the network as a whole" (Uzzi, 1997). In other words, the same processes that allow the community workers to connect deeply with the community might paradoxically decrease the community's ability to adapt apart from the organisation and its community workers.

Perhaps the question of how embedded BSS is and would like to be in the community has to be further reckoned with, but evidently, this mode of community engagement rests heavily on the ties of community workers. As an older youth clarified, it is the community worker rather than BSS he is attached to,

which confirms the “long-term engagement/relationship” approach the community workers in BSS have adopted. Youth 4 spoke of Community Worker A they regarded as a father figure:

Ya I mean it’s not nice la, for him to spend more time with us. I mean it’s a job la, but also need time for his family also. That’s why he [changed].

The youth perceived that the community worker spending more time with them than with his family was unsustainable, which prompted them to step up in his place. While the emotional labor required of “caring work” may lend to higher levels of personal accomplishment, it also places individuals at risk of burning out (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

Conclusion

This research aims to kick-start future efforts to build a community vision. Due to the small sample involved in this study, the themes gleaned from the conversations may not be representative of the larger AMK community sentiment, but can structure the space for subsequent conversations. Furthermore, if members of the community or community workers with more intimate knowledge of the place and better-established ties engage in subsequent dialogues, they may unearth deeper aspirations and fears. Lastly, while the community vision might be specific to AMK, BSS’ mode of operations shares these general characteristics, and the pros and cons highlighted in the paper are generally reflected throughout BSS’ work.

Finally, while we sought to uncover the community’s vision for youth in this research, what often emerged instead was the tricky and practical application of the strengths-based approach.

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