

The process and method of building meaningful partnerships with schools

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INTRODUCTION

Casework for a community worker often involves working with the teachers, school counsellors and discipline teachers of many of the children and youths who are under our care. We could only try to advocate for or on behalf of the child/family, we could try to mobilize resources to support the child/family and in effect, train the child/family to be more independent and build up from their own strengths and community. However, it is so much that we could do as a caseworker. While we worked with the ‘individuals’ through the school and their ‘networks’, this did not make us a partner that has an influence on the ‘organisational’ level. We did not have much say in the disciplinary or character development framework of the school that the individual is in, though we worked on disciplinary issues of specific students with the discipline master or the principal. We were still considered outsiders to the organisation.

Initial entry into schools

The planning for school-based social work programme actually goes back to late 2005, when Beyond adopted a Restorative Justice approach to managing juvenile delinquency and began to conceptualise certain experiential learning activities/programmes based on the Restorative Justice principles that could be implemented in schools, for example, Campland, Community Encouragement (CE) and Family Group Conferences (FGC). We realised that working with delinquent youths on the street or at the home-front alone was not enough and we were missing on another important community partner, that is, the school.

Our entry point was to run experiential learning activities with both primary schools (Campland) and secondary schools (Community Encouragement). These allowed us to build on our strength and to make ourselves known; a ‘foot-in-the-door’ kind of move. It also allowed us to test the ground, know the school system better and explore possibilities of collaborating with school at a higher/deeper level. However, it was found that schools needed something more structured. Some of the activities were later further developed and placed under one big umbrella that became the Juvenile Justice Programme (JJP) in schools, which is under the Children, Youth and Restorative Justice Department.

We then started working with several schools, introducing the Juvenile Justice Programme and encouraging schools to adopt a strength's based approach to managing students who display certain behaviours that put them at risk of delinquency and early school drop-out, and to take a more restorative view on young offenders.

We started working with a school as a pilot school for a community worker attached to a school. We decided to send a community worker 'part-time' to the school as part of Campland Follow-Up. The school's Principal was quite forthcoming and welcomed our help. They referred some cases to us and agreed to allow our community worker to use the school's premises as and when necessary. It was then that we learned about the STEP-UP (*School social work To Empower Pupils to Utilise their Potential*) programme, as most of the students who were referred to the community worker for casework were under the programme. We were even invited for an interdisciplinary meeting under the Character Development Department of the school. However, feedback regarding the 'part-time' community worker's role in school was not all positive, although not totally negative. We did have the school counsellor and the Principal's support and cooperation, but many teachers could not really understand our role. Some were not responsive and didn't think they were an important part of the casework plan. We were also not taken as seriously as we expected, as we were not being 'funded' for the services that we provided, we felt that we were just being used.

This experience made us realise that only providing Juvenile Justice Programme and casework support 'free of charge' to a school was not enough. We would still not be influential enough to be able to make a change in the way schools looked at and dealt with disciplinary issues. We were only scratching the surface and could not reach the core. To make a difference we needed to be more than just a provider of a service, more than just a community worker coming to the school once in a while and where only a handful of the school staff knew us. We needed more say in the school committees to be able to effect change. The only way in achieving that was to be part of the school system, to have a stronger presence in the school and to be acknowledged by the school staff as a whole, not only a teacher, a department head or the school counsellor, as with individual casework. We had to have some kind of 'structured' or 'valuable' meaning in the school so that our voice and opinion could be heard and taken seriously. This is where the STEP-UP

Programme comes in. It was the golden opportunity for the Juvenile Justice Programme to tailor our programme especially for a school and be able to have a stronger presence in school.

Entry through a formal, government funded programme

Upon request from some schools, we decided to embark on the STEP-UP programme that was first introduced in 2004 by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCYS) to enhance the capability and capacity of Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) in their provision of school social work.

With STEP-UP, we would not only be receiving mainstream funding (the programme is jointly funded by both the MCYS and the school), which would surely get the school's full attention and cooperation, but we could also have direct access to the school's resources as well as be part of the school's various committees, most importantly the Pupil Welfare and Character Development committee (that includes the disciplinary team). We could also propose for a community worker to be based in the school as part of the STEP-UP programme. We were working directly with the will of the school and MCYS, as the school asked for us to be their STEP-UP provider and MCYS is the government body that funds such programmes to support schools and VWOs; in other words, we would be fully working at the 'Organization' level (school) and touching base with the 'Structure' level (MCYS).

To reach that stage of cooperation, we had had several discussions and meetings with the key people of the schools. Revisiting the whole process, from the conceptualization of the STEP-UP programme proposal, that had to be in line with our Juvenile Justice Programme mission, to the current running of the programme in the schools, we wish to identify any methods that may have been adopted to create partnership with schools and the influence that we wish to have, the positive and negative experiences, what we can use again and what can be changed or improved on.

BACKGROUND

The STEP-UP Programme

The national juvenile delinquency rate has been steadily rising over the last 10 years. It is found that an average of about 1,200 children and youths drop out of school each year¹, one main reason expressed being a lack of interest in academic interest and some of these out of school youths expressed their interest to work instead. As most of the drop-outs come from the lower income strata of Singapore, working is an obvious way to help supplement the household income.

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) launched the STEP-UP initiative in 2004 to support VWOs in their current delivery of school social work services/programmes in schools.

MCYS has reviewed the programme and adopted the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime (IMYC) recommendation so that the goal of STEP-UP is to complement the school system with programmes to build and strengthen social and emotional resilience within students, with more focus on at-risk students², to enable them to better cope with challenges and maximize their schooling experience.

The key outcomes of STEP-UP are:

- Early prevention and intervention with students at risk of dropping out of school, antisocial behaviours and delinquency
 - Prevent premature school leaving
 - Reduce anti-social behaviours
 - Prevent students at-risk from entering the Criminal and Legal Justice System

¹ Information correct as at May 2005 from the MCYS website

² The definition for 'at-risk students' has been taken from the IMYC: *"those who have been subject to a combination of interrelated biological, psychological and social factors that result in a greater likelihood for the development of delinquency, substance abuse or other related anti-social and self-destructive behaviours"*

- Empowerment of parents and primary caregivers of students at-risk to better support and manage their children
- Empowerment of teachers and school management to better support and manage their students

Beyond's Selection of STEP-UP Schools

Starting in 2006, 8 schools have called upon Beyond to be their STEP-UP provider and we have considered all the schools, however, some of these schools were looking at just having a vendor providing a service, which was not what we were looking for.

Finally, after several rounds of discussions and meetings, the Juvenile Justice Programme in schools from Beyond Social Services is partnering and running STEP-UP programme with 2 primary schools and 1 secondary school for a period of 2 yrs starting January 2007. The three schools have stepped forward and been proactive in wanting to strengthen the support that they can provide to 'at risk' students, this being in line with MCYS's goal in wanting to complement the school system. The schools feel that they have the 'heartware' but lack the 'hardware'. Often schools, despite their concerns for the well being of students, would either take harsh actions such as suspension or expulsion to deal with difficult students or refer the matter to the police as they lack the know-how or resources to deal with the matter satisfactorily.

Thus, Beyond's Juvenile Justice Programme in schools addresses the issue of youth offending through our strong partnership with the schools we work with, their students, the families and the community. We have been working with children and youths for over 30yrs and we have agreed to share our knowledge and practices with the school, so that they are empowered and more independent in managing their 'at risk' students.

Evaluation of the STEP-UP Programme

Some setbacks

As with all programmes, there are aims and outcomes to be achieved. We are therefore required to furnish quarterly and yearly evaluation to the National Council of Social Services (NCSS) that acts as the Programme Administrator on behalf of MCYS, following the format provided under STEP-UP.

These evaluations are **mostly quantitative** and only show numbers. Somehow, they do not reflect the work behind the numbers and the **quality** of work that has been done. This is partly due to the funding model, as each VWO will bill the respective schools and MCYS according to the numbers that they have submitted, or provided a particular component of the programme that they have proposed. The funding of many programmes is linked to output; therefore, the administering authorities (MCYS/NCSS) require and often depend on numbers to make their assessments, versus qualitative data that shows the achievement of goals set (e.g., improvement in 'at-risk' students' attitude in school, or school's overall view and management practices of 'at-risk' students or improvement in 'at-risk' students' parents' relationship with the school).

For example, if we started work in a school in 2006, at the end of the year we can provide data about the number of students who joined our programme and out of this number, how many students dropped out of school, how many were suspended, etc... these numbers, compared to previous years, maybe 2005, may reflect that for example, the number of students who have dropped out from school in 2006 is less than the drop out rate in year 2005, but, the data says nothing about the work behind the decrease in the drop out rate and why the students do not drop out now.

Evaluation systems also set us to fail as they sometimes **restrict** the creativity of methods of work that can be done. To try to accommodate or fit an evaluation system, a programme may be developed in such a way that it is easier to monitor and generate data when needed. The high caseload and intensity of work of community workers often does not give them enough time to do their reporting and case recording as thoroughly as they wish; thus, it is easy to favour a programme that makes it easy to keep track of numbers.

Deficit or strength's based perspective?

The idea that seems to underline the conception of the programme itself is very much based on a deficit approach, looking at the youths as problematic and lacking something. Although the definition of 'at-risk' takes into consideration that the problem does not lie with the individual alone but a combination of the social environment as well (systemic approach); we are still looking at trying to solve a problem. It should not be that way. As long as we keep labelling a youth as 'at-risk', that youth will remain such and we will keep focusing on his immaturity and difficult

behaviour, disregarding his actual strengths and the possible contributions that he can make to his community.

If we adopt the deficit approach (of needs assessment and funding according to numbers), that seems to permeate the idea behind the programme and start planning our activities to meet these 'needs', then we will fall into the adopted collective thinking that numbers dictate the need for a programme and therefore for more funding to be pumped-in to run more of such programmes or to develop other programmes to meet the needs. This model of providing resources on the basis of needs underlines the perception that only experts can provide help; that the people in this community are weak and cannot help themselves. That is, however, not the basis of our work. We believe that a community is strong, especially through its ties and relationships. Unfortunately, through the current system, 'the glue that binds communities together is weakened'³. Instead of supporting and empowering a community in making full use of their strengths, we are supplying programmes and aid and making them depend on the system/experts to settle their issues. We will simply end up being just a service provider, not the advocator, motivator and trainer that is part of our ART (Advocacy, Resource mobilizing and Training) framework.

The Triangle of Care

We want to discover the resources and abilities in the people of a community; encourage them to step forward and be more proactive; activate and connect their weak and strong ties and strengthen the community's independence. We want to get them to cast aside the dependency on outside experts to tell them that they have problems and that only the experts can help them solve it.

We want to focus on strengthening the 'Triangle of Care' around the student so that the school, the family and the community take charge and play a bigger role in supporting the student. We want to reinforce the links that connects these 3 important networks together so that it has a protective effect on the youth.

³ John P. Kretzmann & John L. McKnight, Building Communities From The Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding And Mobilizing A Community's Assets. © 1993 ACTA Publications.

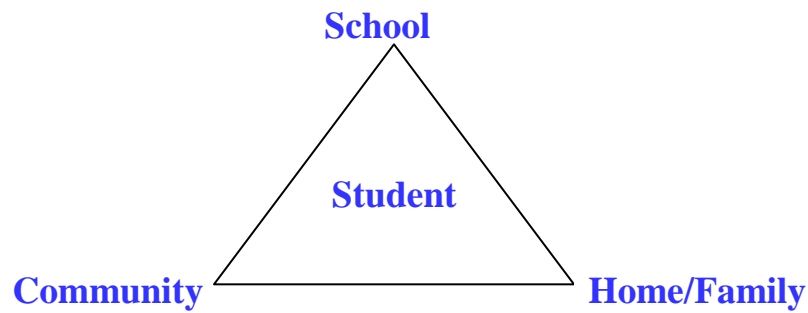


Figure 1. The Triangle of Care

Initiating change at ‘Structure’ and ‘Organization’ level through STEP-UP

Beyond’s approach has always been to try to take a more strength based perspective, which is different from a counselling or deficit perspective. Our activities are examples of how we hope to influence the children and youths to realise their potential and that they are contributors of their communities. However, if we are the only ones who take that approach, our work with the youths will quickly be forgotten, even by the youths themselves, once they go back to mainstream life. If the very system that is tasked in building up their foundation uses a deficit perspective, then we are fighting a losing battle. However, should the organization itself use a strength based perspective, we have an ally in the bigger system and in turn hopefully be able to effect change at the system level.

Looking through the SONI lenses, we know that what is expected of us by MCYS and the school would be to work at the ‘Individual’ and ‘Network’ levels. This will of course be the crux of our work, having direct practice with the students/ youth-at-risk and their immediate family and community. We’ll look at building rapport with the youths and their family, discovering their hang outs, their hobbies, and their influences. We hope to also harness their own strengths and skills so that they are diverted from the criminal justice system. We cannot get away from that component of the community work that we do.

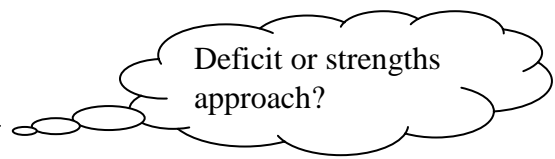
However, Juvenile Justice Programme would not be complete if we are not able to have some influence at the ‘Organization’ level, especially made more possible now that we are

embarking on STEP-UP programme. Having direct access in school would give us a chance to learn more about the school, identify its resources and strengths and empower them in their ability to manage ‘at-risk’ youths. We are now in a totally different ball-game and went into the school through a different route, that of the will of the ‘Organization’ (school) and the ‘Structure’ (MCYS) themselves. We now have more say and will be able to establish a presence in the school. Through STEP-UP, we have a ‘meaning’ or a recognition for a need from the school; it is not us who want to run a programme in the school but the school that now considers us as a strength in their community or part of their social capital and wish to tap on that.

We also wish to be able to influence the school in their approach in handling ‘at-risk’ youths. And should we have a somewhat strong or steady influence at the ‘Organization’ level, we hope it may indirectly or even directly also influence the ‘Structure’ level. Already, by embarking on a MCYS initiative that is STEP-UP, we are indirectly grazing the ‘Structure’ level. To have more impact, we hope the school will then feedback to other school networks and the Ministry of Education (MOE) about the Juvenile Justice Programme and in turn advocate for adopting a Restorative Justice approach to managing ‘at-risk’ students.

Holistic Social Work Intervention Model

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Structure | Schools’ information sharing platform/networks Sharing/feedback of experience with school cluster/MOE/MCYS meetings/gatherings Publicity Public forums/platform – advocator for Restorative Justice Principles Evaluation |
| Organization | Empowerment of school Parallel thinking Provocative thinking/challenging Influence perspectives/approach Social capital (community ties and partners) School’s physical and material resources (equipment, vacant room, hall, etc.) School’s people (staff, canteen operators, security guards, cleaners, etc) Funding |



| | Evaluation |
|-------------------|--|
| Network | Social capital (weak ties and strong ties of student) Family and friends - Peers/affiliations CE – FGC School’s physical and material resources (equipment, vacant room, hall, etc.) School’s people (staff, canteen operators, security guards, cleaners, etc) Community organizations |
| Individual | Community Encouragement (CE) – includes concepts of Moral Reasoning FGC Rapport building Information finder (genogram, eco-map, etc.) Strengths model (capacity inventory, strength check, contributions, CCA, etc.) Goal setting |

METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS OF FORGING A PARTNERSHIP⁴

Having the SONI model in mind, we started the groundwork at the ‘Organization’ level. We needed to have more details about the wills and goals of the school, their current methods and their current successes. Basically we needed to get to know the school. As with every partnership, it starts with knowing what each other will bring in the relationship and how can each benefit most and move forward, riding on the strengths of both parties.

However, if we go in as an expert with a proud, superior or even blasé attitude, we will be heading towards losing that partnership. Although we are professionals and have garnered experience in our area of work, we still have to take a step-down position as we get to know the school and accept that they are master of their domain and expert in their field. We must remember that we are going to play in **their** field. If we go in too strongly, we’ll appear as arrogant and looking down on the school. If we go in too soft and nonchalant, we’ll appear disinterested and the

⁴ Partnership understood from The American Heritage ® Dictionary of the English Language, 4th Ed.: *a relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specific goal*

school may think we are in either only for the money or we are not confident in our work. The right amount of humility yet firmness and confidence is needed to forge that relationship.

Phase 1 is the groundwork that was done as well as presenting our core operating principles; raising the school's key personnel's interest and securing that interest by arriving at an agreement (contract). We had to be clear about what we were going to bring to the partnership that will suit the school system best. It is also being transparent about the terms and condition that comes with the partnership.

Phase 2 is to involve all the teaching and non-teaching staff of the school. Teachers are the 'heartware' of the school and we hope to see their involvement in the programme. What is at stake and what the partnership is about, as the agreement was between the key personnel of the school only.

ACTION: Phase 1 – Foundation/groundwork

1.1 Planning for the meeting

There were 8 schools that were initially interested in having Beyond to run STEP-UP in their school. 6 out of these schools already knew Beyond through the JJP and wanted renewed partnership. They trusted us enough to now consider providing us with funds to run a structured programme in the school. The 2 other schools have heard about Beyond's work through other school staffs during their school cluster meeting (word of mouth) and were very interested in knowing more about us.

Before meeting the schools, we had to be clear about our objectives and what we expected from the schools. We did not want to be just a service provider and simply run activities. To effectively run STEP-UP, we had to be clear that STEP-UP was just a means to get mainstream funding (school and MCYS) and what we were proposing was Juvenile Justice Programme. However, STEP-UP allowed us to negotiate for more than just running some activities. We then quickly arranged to meet with the key people of the interested schools: Full Time School Counsellor, Principal, Vice Principal, Head of Department (HOD) of Pupil Welfare and Character Development Department (comprises Discipline team), HOD of Pastoral Care and Counselling

Department for a discussion regarding STEP-UP as we had only 1 month to prepare the STEP-UP proposal to submit to the schools and MCYS for approval.

Main components of the discussions with the schools' key people would include:

- A. understanding the school's expectations and objectives and their existing efforts
- B. explaining the principles/framework behind our work
- C. sharing our own expectations and objectives
- D. sharing our proposed methods/activities/programme
- E. pre-agreement of the budget and terms for STEP-UP

A. Understanding the school's expectations and objectives and their existing efforts.

To be able to tailor our JJP to a school, we had to first understand the school's needs and reasons for being willing to fund a social service agency to start the STEP-UP programme. As it is not a small amount of money, we suspect the school will definitely have high expectations as to the end results of the programme. We have to be clear about the school's objectives in embarking on STEP-UP and what are their expectations of the agency. For example, they may expect that at the end of the year, there won't be any students who drop-out or all the 'naughty' students will change from demons to angels. By being aware of their expectations, we will then be able to see how to manage those expectations. We also need to know about what measures the schools have already put in place to manage their 'at-risk' students prior to STEP-UP. This is looking at their existing efforts and strengths and whether we are able to support or complement them.

B. Explaining the principles/framework behind our work

We use the framework of the community model, which is adapted from the Systems Theory, the Ecological Perspective, the Strength's Perspective and Community Encouragement's concept of I, We and Together We. We therefore recognise that an individual is very much part of a family and eventually part of larger communities. The presenting problem also does not lie solely within the youth, but in the interface between the youth and his/her environment/sub-systems (i.e. student-family, student-school and student-community). Each having their individual strengths [I], each somehow having either weak or strong ties amongst/between themselves [WE], e.g., student-family, family-school, school-community, student-school, etc...and what we hope to see is all of

them combining efforts and resources [TOGETHER WE] so that it forms a protective environment around the students, with the student fully involved as well.

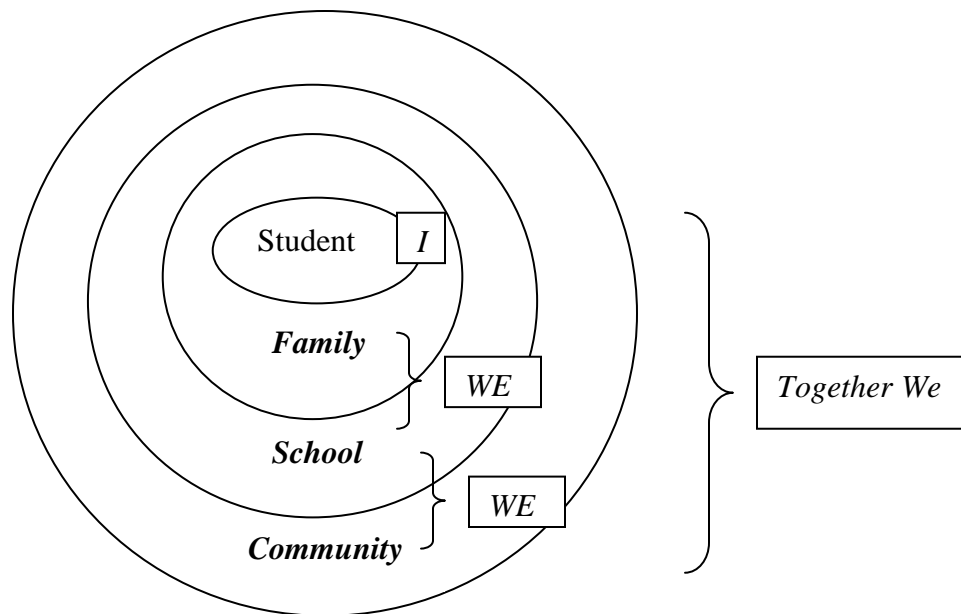


Figure 2. Community model

We also use a holistic approach in developing our programme, where it would not only involve the school, the family and the community but also comprise of a mix of preventive, developmental and remedial/diversionary aspects.

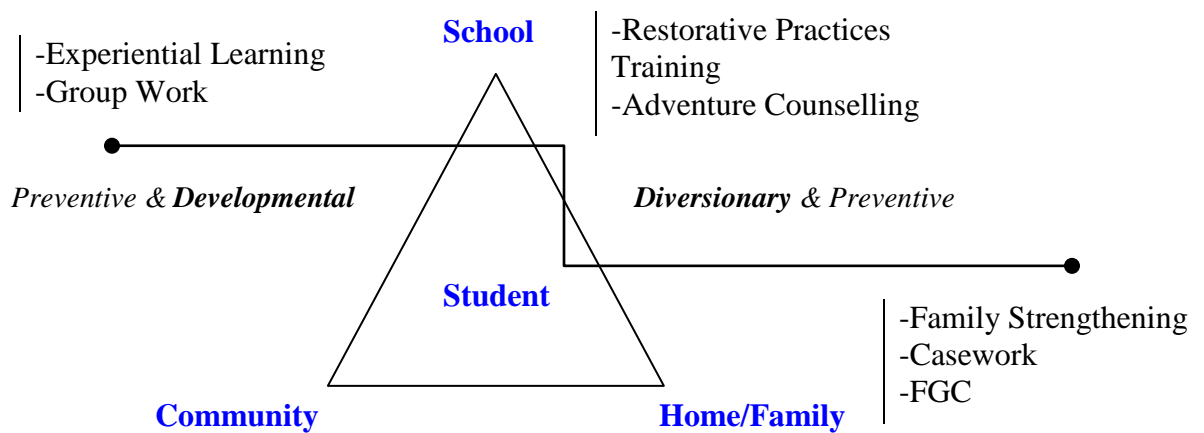


Figure 3. Holistic Approach of the Triangle Of care

C. Share our own expectations and objectives

Guided by the principles of Restorative Justice that focuses on individual accountability, collective responsibility and ‘putting things right’ by healing damaged relationships, JJP aims to:

- provide youths-at-risk with a **viable care plan** that the family, schools and extended support networks put together to reduce anti-social behaviour;
- **Create an inclusive school environment** by supporting schools implement a Restorative Justice programme that ensures students are kept accountable for their actions. Ultimately, the resources we help strengthen in schools will ensure that, in the long run, school staffs are empowered to be able to deal with disciplinary issues more meaningfully, creatively and effectively, without the need for an external agency to be involved;
- **Nurture Moral Intelligence**⁵ in students referred for our initiatives.

In responding to the needs of schools, young people and their families, Restorative Justice Service, via the Juvenile Justice Programme, addresses issues by strengthening the Triangle of Care around the young person. By working in partnership with schools, families and community resources, viable opportunities that restore the youth back to his/her community are created.

Moreover, it gives the young people a chance to “put things right” and assume responsibility for their actions without having to remove them from the community, as is often the case when parents think they are unable to handle their ‘delinquent’ youth and send them to the Juvenile Court, or the school calls in the Police for a student who has committed several offences.

Thus, a set of practices and tools are used to ensure that our intervention is **preventive, developmental and diversionary**⁶.

We also hope to stress to the school that we have to be included on the Pupil Welfare and Character Development management meetings or Disciplinary team meetings so that we could contribute our expertise and experience.

⁵By Moral Intelligence, we mean the capacity to understand right from wrong, to have strong ethical convictions and to act on them so that young people behave in the right and honourable way. This helps young people develop as decent, good human beings, who are responsible citizens.

⁶By “diversionary” we mean keeping the youth away from the criminal justice system.

D. Share our proposed methods/activities/programme

Our initiatives in schools will thus address issues surrounding:

- students offending and anti-social behaviour/s;
- students' felt marginalization or alienation from their communities;
- other protection and care issues regarding youth-at-risk.

Our school programme will embrace a three-pronged approach by:

- wherever possible, diverting student offenders from the criminal justice system and instead, helping them become contributing members of our society;
- reducing the prevalence of anti-social behaviours by strengthening the students' sense of belonging to their school;
- encouraging, empowering and facilitating home, school and community partnerships that work cooperatively towards the well-being of youth.

Experiential activities will be an integral part of our programme and we strongly encourage the school staff to take part in these activities together with the students, as this is a neutral platform for student-teacher bonding and for each to see each other in a different situation. By being in a controlled situation where they are out of their comfort zone, students react differently and show a side of them that may not always be obvious in a classroom setting. And students will not be the only ones to notice these differences. Teachers may also notice another side of a very loud student or the courage of shy students, or the leadership abilities of usually 'bad' students.

We will also organize Restorative Practices training for school staff and support them in implementing these principles in school as and when necessary.

We will also focus on engaging and strengthening the student-family and school-family relationship besides for academic purpose. As the school is an integral part of a child's early years it is important for parents to view the school as a community partner and not just a 'place where my child learns to read and write'.

E. Pre-agreement on the budget and terms for STEP-UP

STEP-UP is funded on a co-funding basis where for the 1st 2 years, MCYS supports 75% of the proposed programme costs, subject to a maximum cap of \$37,500 for each year. The school will have to fund the remaining 25%. In the subsequent 3 years, MCYS can continue to co-fund but at 50% of proposed programme cost instead of 75%. It would thus appear that the total maximum cost for STEP-UP is \$50,000 and this is what we will be proposing to the school and MCYS.

After looking at the activities that we plan to bring to the school and the cost needed for each of them, are we ready to have the total programme costs go beyond the maximum funding of \$50,000? However, we are not embarking on STEP-UP for the money and we'll have to stress to the school that we are looking at partnership and not vendor-ship. We are here for the children and youth and even if we have to absorb the cost of some activities, we are willing to do it. That was how committed and sincere we were.

We plan to have a community worker based/attached to the school for 2-3 full days so that we can have a presence in the school, are readily available to the school staff for consultation or participate in and contribute to interdisciplinary team meetings regarding disciplinary and student welfare issues. The worker also acts as a liaison between the staff and the community. Often times, school staff have no time to do home visit or get to know their students outside of school curriculum time. We can be or strengthen that link. And true to community work, the worker can explore the school's community and generate a community map of the services and resources available 'out-there' and establish links to these resources, so that the school is empowered with other community partners.⁷ This also means possibly having a temporary desk/office space in the school and a school entry pass.

1.2 Learning points

To be able to plan a good programme, we had to first get to know the school, their expectations of us and/or the programme, their aims and most importantly their existing resources and strengths. It is like a relationship; it starts by getting to know the other party and continues being a discovery of each other.

⁷ Eco mapping of the school is a good way to engage the school in looking at it's own community with a new perspective

After meeting with some of the schools, we could not agree with 5 out of the initial 8 schools that wanted us to be their STEP-UP provider, reasons being either the school could not agree with our proposed budget having prior budget commitments or budget constraint at that point in time, or non agreement on the proposed programme, or our own constraint in terms of manpower. We needed the right people who could agree with the principles behind the work and be willing to be the advocator, resource mobiliser and trainer and we could not promise such commitment to all schools yet. However, not being able to run STEP-UP in these schools did not mean the end of a relationship. All schools still want to continue working with us and some still want us to be their STEP-UP provider and will make provision for our proposed budget in their next financial year. Thus, out of 8 schools, 3 were all set and ready to take on our proposal.

The main issues that were brought up commonly by all three schools were:

- the increasing number of early school drop-outs
- difficulty in managing students who display anti-social behaviour in and out of school
- students engaging in dangerous habits such as smoking and glue sniffing and identification with older youths/adults who have ties with street gangs
- issues dealing with teenage sexuality
- difficulty in engaging and getting full support from parents/family of 'at risk' students

The expectations and aims that came out quite prominently in all the discussions with all three schools were:

- to reduce the rate of premature school drop-outs
- to reduce the number of suspensions/expulsion/extreme disciplinary actions
- to better manage anti-social behaviours
- to prevent 'at risk' students from entering the criminal justice system
- for students to develop a sense of belonging to school
- for students to believe they have potential, even if it's not academically

Through this sharing session, we managed to align our own goals and expectations with the school's goals and expectations. We were indeed not 'miracle' workers and we were glad they were not expecting miracles.⁸

Stains and Laundry Analogy

To control expectations, we also used the 'laundry' analogy, where we are NOT dry cleaners and the students 'dirty laundry', the programme cannot be seen as a laundering process where dirty laundry will come out 'perfect' white, but should we be seen that way, then

- there are stains that simply cannot be washed off. What do we do then? Well, laundry is also sometimes about maintaining the quality of the fabric even if the stain stays
- sometimes, stains give a unique definition to the laundry
- laundry cleaning is not a one off process, especially for stubborn stains, and results cannot be achieved quickly, with the schools handing over their problems and washing their hands off it, but rather through partnership between Beyond, school, family and community over a longer period of time
- with the proper dosage of 'detergent' (remedial and developmental work), 'softener' (care and support) and lots of clean water (environment), we can obtain quite good results
- it is also important to take good care of the laundry (preventive measures) so that it does not get soiled easily

Basic exploration of the school's social capital

Although it was good for us to know the needs of the schools, we moved on to what we really were there for, we tried looking at the resources and strengths of the schools. Other organizations/agencies that the schools were already working with and existing programmes that the school already had.

All three schools already had ties with at least 1 social service agency in their community that was running some programmes/activities in the school. They also have talks and workshops for students regarding addiction from the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) of Singapore, teenage

⁸ Analogy, alignment and humour help to relax the atmosphere, create a more positive environment for further discussion and help to put across certain points to the school that could otherwise have been negatively understood.

sexuality and anti-smoking talks. All have relatively active Parent Volunteer Groups (PVG), a fully functioning Pupil Welfare and Character Development Committee/team or Pastoral Care team that was in charge of counselling, referral and discipline issues. Each school also had certain strengths that made them unique and very innovative; Golf club, rope skipping champions, cup-stacking club, and more. Getting to know the schools was an eye opener and gave us a better idea of how the programme we planned for STEP-UP would best fit in and serve our common goals.

This also gave us a chance to praise the school for their creativity and constantly thinking out of the box to cater for diverse interest of the students. We also validated their efforts in already adopting a strength's perspective and creating an inclusive environment for all students. Our programme will be another effort from the school in trying to create that inclusive environment, this time with a little more focus on 'at-risk' students.

All schools were linked to:

- community social service agency
- active PVG
- active Pupil Welfare and Character Development Committee/Pastoral care
- CNB
- Professionals for unique CCAs

Our approach when meeting with the school's key personnel was to be frank and realistic. As the school shared with us their experiences, we also shared our limitations as well as our strengths, our small setbacks and our successes, similar to the school's own experience, for example, although we hope to divert as many youths as possible away from the criminal justice system, there are those who will still slip through the gaps. We also shared our reservations in certain areas that they wanted us to add in our proposal, such as having anti-smoking workshops or sexuality talks for select groups of students. We honestly shared that these were not our area of expertise and organizing workshops and talks were not how we worked, but it would seem that the school is already doing its best regarding these areas and had contacts of other community partners who touched on these issues. We encouraged them to explore these avenues instead.

Transparency in our approach

We also shared that what is presented in the STEP-UP proposal is but a part of the full Juvenile Justice Programme that we are bringing in the school. Due to the MCYS proposed funding cap, we could not factor in certain components of the programme and that we would be absorbing the extra cost. The school will be getting more than what they are going to fund. For example, we are going to run Campland, although it is not mentioned in the proposal. The cost to run Campland in a primary school costs about \$30,000. If we factored that in the STEP-UP proposal, it would already take more than ½ of the whole budget and there would not be enough allowances for casework and training. This is to be transparent and show our commitment in the partnership. We were not embarking on STEP-UP for the money, but for the children and youth.

What we hoped in return was for the school to help us in our own fund raising efforts, such as sending students for our annual MILK Run, or allow presentation to be done in the school about and take donation boxes for Share-A-Meal, another fundraising project by MILK-Mainly I Love Kids, our partner agency. These terms, amongst others, were drafted into a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) signed by both parties so that we were both clear about our roles and what we have agreed on.

We also realised that our approach in communicating our programme with the school's key personnel played an important part in building a partnership. Communication skills are an integral part of counselling. Although counselling is mostly used between a 'client' and a counsellor/social worker, it is however not limited to a helping profession setting. Counselling techniques often form part of our everyday communication pattern and comes naturally to most of us, it's just whether we are aware of it or not. While trying to create partnership, we have to be consciously aware of our communication skills and keep ourselves on track.

Applying the main skills set of counselling in building partnership

| Skills | Techniques | Examples of application |
|---|---|--|
| Attending <i>(Creating an empowering</i> | -Sensitive choice of meeting place -Appreciate hospitality | -agreed to meet at the school -thanked them for making time to see us -expressed our need for more |

| | | |
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| <i>environment)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -One-down position -Conscious incompetence -Reflect feelings -Validate relationships and ties -Externalizing problem -Involvement tasks -Hierarchy reinforcement -Seek their advice | <p>information regarding school culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -showed our willingness to work with agencies they are already working with -school is but a part of the child's system and can't be everywhere and handle everything -it is not easy to handle 'at-risk' students -asked for their advise regarding the community and where they identified possible youth hang-outs |
| <p>Understanding <i>(Adopting a Strengths perspective)</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Alignment -Joining -Elicit meanings -Success stories -Peer and external appraisal -Context matching -Enlarge and celebrate strengths -Role clarification -Exception questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -sharing our common goal for the 'at-risk' students -encouraged the school to share their successes and what makes them unique -ensured the school that our role was not to take over whatever efforts they have already put in, such as counselling, we just want to lend our own experiences - aligned with the school's good intentions in wanting to do more for 'at-risk' students |
| <p>Influencing <i>(Negotiating a contract)</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Future oriented questions -Restraining -Creating Win-Win situation -Scaling, circular questions -TO LO PO SO GO -SMART goal setting -Analogy -How can they contribute back -Inclusive agendas -Job description | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -although they may not totally adopt our Restorative Justice practices at the moment, we both gain if 'at-risk' students are given a second chance and do not end up under the criminal justice system -how they view their current efforts on a scale and what would see a move up? -what are they ready to do? -are the staff willing to participate in our |

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| | | programme -follow the MOE guideline for referrals: teacher counsellor -> school counsellor - > us -> external specialised agencies |
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ACTION: Phase 2 – Garnering the whole school’s cooperation

2.1 Mass briefing to the school’s management and teaching staffs

As it is the beginning of a new school year, it was the best time to introduce ourselves to the school staff. So far, only key personnel of the school knew us and the programme. We arranged to have a mass briefing as part of a series of training for teachers.

The first session held at all three schools included an introduction of Beyond Social Services, our mission and vision and the work that we have been doing. We then introduced the Juvenile Justice Programme that includes STEP-UP being the component of the programme that is co-funded by MCYS and the school.

The main components of JJP being:

- Community Bridging (facilitate a triangle of care)
- Community Encouragement (experiential learning activities)
- Case Management (casework, community work, FGC)

Again we were frank and honest about our purpose and in the delivery method. With the management’s team approval, we even shared with the staff about the budget and how we are absorbing part of the total programme cost. Other points that were brought out during the briefing are:

- School provides the basic education and formative years of a person. It is an essential and integral part of growing up. It contributes in shaping a young mind, together with the home/family and the community.
- Teachers know their students best. They see them day in and day out. They are the first to notice changes, whether for the better or for the worst.

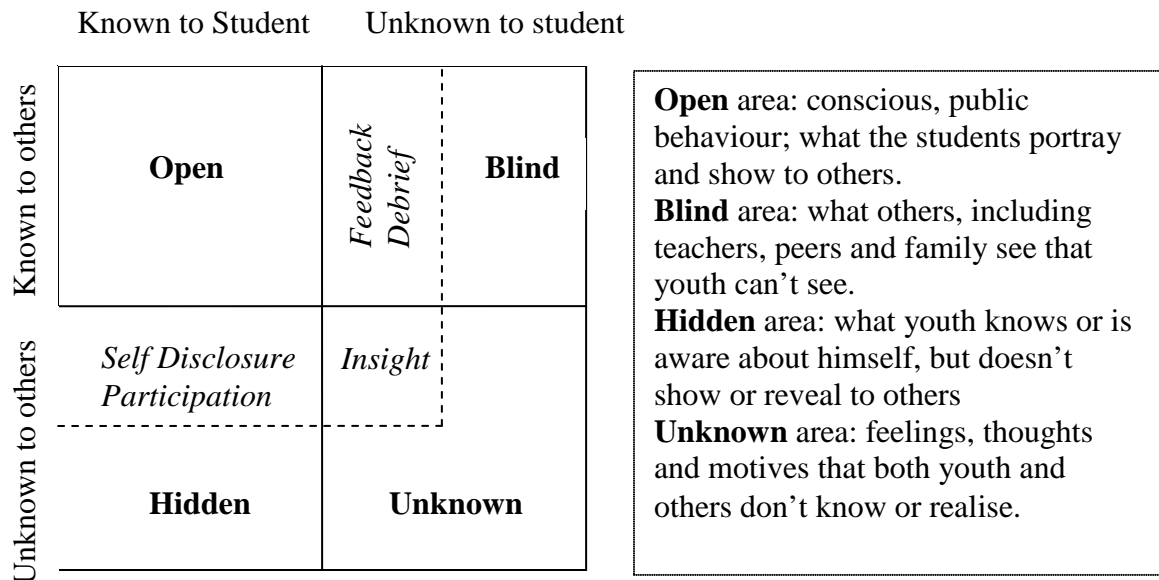
- Teachers have an amazing job, something that we may not be able to do. It needs brains!
- Teachers work long hours, a bit like us. But they start at 7.30am!!! We start later! We won't be able to wake up at 5 or 6 am everyday!
- Students look up to teachers, they will be the potential role model, if one is lacking at home.
- Even if there are a number of students who misbehave, play truant or drop out, the majority of students still come to school, whether it's their parents who make sure they come or on their own. There must still be something about the school that makes students come back.
- Research has shown that bullying issues decrease when students have a strong relationship/bond with at least 1 teacher in the school. That alone is a powerful preventive factor
- We look at things from the strengths perspective. Instead of looking at what is lacking or what is wrong with the student we look at what the student already has and move from there. It does not mean we totally disregard the problems; we simply use different 'lenses' – approach. Same goes for how we work with the school. The school is already doing its best and has put in a lot of efforts in managing its students, we are not here to change that, but to support and complement these efforts
- We strongly encourage the school staff to take an active role in our programme and participate in the activities that we have lined up for the students, their families and the school staff.

Hands on experience for school staff

We engaged the school staff in a few games that we planned for the students and debriefed in the same style as we would do with the students, so that they could experience first hand what the students will be doing and how students could be learning and discovering about trust, discipline, respect, empathy, teamwork, communication and cooperation, amongst others, during the different games. We also showed them how these games can bring out self-awareness in the students; the best in each student: their fears and bad habits, as well as their skills, values and strengths, simply by being placed in a situation that sees them out of their comfort zone. That is where a very loud student is found to be very quiet and dependent on others for direction or a usually violent student being very patient and helpful. Through the games, we want the teachers to

see different or less often shown sides of the ‘at-risk’ students, usually, a more positive side and how the teacher could possibly make use of that strength of the student to help them in class.

Johari Window applied to Community Encouragement (CE)



Community Encouragement is a good tool to help expand the ‘Open’ area of self-awareness of an ‘at-risk’ student without the worker appearing to be too confrontational and probing. Youths take time to trust and will not open up and confide in adults easily. Through Community Encouragement, we try to build rapport and understand the youth through indirect, less threatening means:

- Self-Disclosure occurs when the youth actively participates in the experiential activities and takes on roles that he does not usually take, e.g., a usually disruptive youth can show great leadership qualities and focus his attention on goals
- Self-disclosure also occurs when students are encouraged to share their views, feelings and experience of the game; whether he has learnt anything, contributed, etc...
- Feedback occurs during the activity as the youths communicate to play the game; they will keep each other on track

- Feedback also occurs during debrief; from the ranger (adults) as well as from the peers, as they share about what happened, what they have observed, its implications, ways to improve, etc...
- Insight will be the new experiences and feelings that occur within the youth. It's the discovery and the puzzlement they often feel during and after a game.
- Insight is also whether they are able to bring out and link the learning of the activity to the outside world, such as classroom or family.

We were pleased when some teachers approached us after the briefing and asked for our assistance as they wished to have similar games with their classes, as their classes are not the one with which we planned to run the games. They saw the benefit of the games and want their students to benefit from it as well. We were more than willing to assist them and promised we would get back to them as soon as we have finalised the programme.

2.2 Engaging school staff in creating the measuring methods/tools

Beyond could easily come out with standard measuring tools that will help us measure the effectiveness of the programme and submit to NCSS. However, it will not be in line with our practice of partnership with schools. We want them to be fully involved in planning, running and evaluating the programme. Joint sessions and discussions have been and will be held regularly with the school to involve them in developing the evaluation methods/tools so that it is not only a Beyond effort but gives the school a say, strengthens their ability in managing 'at risk' students and take ownership of the outcomes of the programme. The evaluation methods/tools will not only record basic numbers, but also gather valuable feedback from all parties concerned, namely, students, teachers/school and family. This will be the qualitative evaluation that all can contribute to and that will be worth more than the quantitative evaluation.

CONCLUSION

A community worker has already been attached to the 3 different schools and started working on the STEP-UP Programme. It is a work still in progress that will run over an initial

period of 2 years. Within these 2 years, we hope to have been able to implement certain, if not all, aspects of the Juvenile Justice Programme's aims in school.

Should the school be able to creatively and meaningfully handle 'at-risk' students and take on a Restorative Justice approach to young offenders, then we would have achieved something. For now, we concentrate on building and strengthening that presence and defining our role in the school and slowly but surely bringing in our perspective.

Although we are concentrating on our ongoing efforts, we must not forget the initial experiences and learning points. The Community's Worker's Approach to School Social Work is but a summary of the steps taken to start a relationship with schools. The attributes of a school-based community worker has also been summarised. These are our experiences so far and will probably be modified and/or added to as our work progresses.

A Community Worker's approach to School Social Work:

- Understanding the needs expressed by the school and acknowledging their struggles
- Discovering the will and goals of the key partners. What do they want to see changed or improved, how do they want to see it done and what are they willing/ready to do?
- Finding out the existing resources and strengths of the partners and acknowledging the efforts and hard work already put in
- Going in with a humble and open yet firm and confident attitude
- Taking a step down position and at times being consciously incompetent. We do not know everything. We want to learn from them. Eventually, we are playing in their field and they know it better.
- Staying true to our conviction in our principles and approach, such as, Strengths Perspective, Restorative Justice Principles and Community Model. If the school is really unwilling or unable to bend their rules and we are also unable to make more changes on our side to try to accommodate them, we have to stay firm on our resolve and politely decline or withdraw the proposal, however, while still maintaining good relationship and keeping the door/options open for continued or future partnership. In such situations, the school is equally strong in its own resolve and stands firm.

- School's eco-mapping, discovering the partner's social capital – neighbourhood, community, possible resources

The Community Worker's GRACIOUS attributes in building partnership with schools and strengthening the community

| | Attributes | Purpose | Examples/Adaptation to current work |
|----------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| G | Goal Directed | Helps others to identify their goals and support their efforts to achieve them. Willing to suggest alternative perceptions and provide direction when needed | School sharing their concerns and needs. Supporting school in their goal to guide youths → sharing same goal/alignment School often uses deficit approach → slow introduction of strengths perspective as an alternative and how it can help achieve common goal. |
| R | Response Generation | Can generate and create many responses to a wide variety of situations and issues | Our way of working or interacting must adapt to the school's various issues: Truancy, bullying, suicide, depression, gang related activities, vandalism, substance abuse, etc... as well as successes and achievement in sports, arts and academics. School's administrative system is totally different from its operating system. |
| A | Acceptance of Diverse Worldviews | Understands, works and acts on many world views | School may have rigid worldviews about discipline or behaviour. School staff may have their own worldviews about the same issues that may be different from the school's worldview as they have their own traditional worldviews, being Malay, Indian, Chinese or Eurasian. We have our own worldview. The school doesn't always define the staff and vice versa. |
| C | Culturally sensitive | Able to generate a wide range of thoughts, words and behaviours to communicate with one's own culture and a number of other cultures as well | Not one school has the same culture. We have to be able to understand their unique culture and see how our own culture can find a foot in, complement, fit in or add more value to their existing culture. |

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| | | | We must also respect and accommodate the various religious cultures. |
| I | Interpersonal Influence | Realises how own response influences others and how their responses influence self | How we response to school's disciplinary actions or rules is important. We must be sensitive not to show superiority or lack of confidence. We must respond in such a way that it creates a feedback loop and not a one-way dimensional communication pattern. How the school handles disciplinary issues also influences how students view the school. |
| O | Open to Introspection | Recognizes limitations and evaluates work and self with supervisors and team | If we face a block, we must be open to finding guidance from colleagues and supervisors, as well as from school staff. Our way of working may not be the best. School's feedback and consultation is important. |
| U | Unravel and Utilise Theory | Views theory as a construction of reality and that culture and sexual background shape personal beliefs. Able to relate theory to practice. Makes theory understandable for others when appropriate. | We use the strengths perspective and community approach to our work. Schools have their own theoretical background to handle discipline. It takes time but we can slowly make the system understand and view the benefit and limitation of our approach and vice versa → we use experiential learning activities to demonstrate part of our framework and strongly encourage school staff to take part in the activities. |
| S | Sense of Humour | Ability to use humour to comfort, encourage, deescalate tension and to heal in general. Most importantly, to laugh at oneself. Humour also helps to relieve guilt, dissipate anxiety and fear. | As we discuss disciplinary issues with schools, humour often helps to put across our points in a less threatening way. Humour helps to make families at ease during school or home visits. Humour with the students helps them relax and open up to us. Humour with staff help to make them secure and relax. We are not here to observe, criticize, take other their duty; we are here to partner their efforts. |

(Adapted from *Counselling & Psychotherapy: Integrating skills, Theory & Practice* by Allen E. Ivey, Mary Bradford Ivey & Lynn Simek Downing)

We have been able to start a relationship and build partnership with key community partners (such as schools), now we need to move to the next level, that of making these partnership **meaningful** partnerships and continue forming more of such partnerships.