

Independent Evaluation of Youth Can Move the World

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1.0 Summary

Youth Can Move the World (YCMTW) is a one-year course offered by the Varqa foundation in collaboration with the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education (I.D.C.E.). Its goal is to give youth a forum to discuss, express, and reflect upon social issues facing the young people of Guyana. In addition to the discussion of social issues, YCMTW asks participants to think about how they can transform themselves and their communities. I was commissioned by the Varqa foundation to independently evaluate the programme. To do this I visited various YCMTW groups, surveyed and talked with facilitators and participants, reviewed the manual, proposals, and reports, sat in on training sessions, and discussed the programme with YCMTW support staff.

My general opinion is that YCMTW is a solid programme that fills a need, is relevant to youth, and is accepted and endorsed by its participants. This is not to say YCMTW is without challenges and these will be discussed throughout the evaluation and in the conclusion. In the evaluation I reviewed 6 principal areas, the delivery model of the programme, the YCMTW groups and facilitators, the training programme, the topics and manual, support for facilitators and participants, and the linkages of YCMTW. I have not reviewed the financial statements; I will leave this to the Varqa foundation and its donors.

2.0 Evaluation

2.1 Delivery of the Programme

Youth Can Move the World (YCMTW) trains young people as facilitators to deliver the YCMTW course in their respective communities. The use of peer facilitators is a very good idea. It gives young people the chance and the challenge to learn and practice their leadership skills. Furthermore, having youth as facilitators reinforces to participants the concept of volunteerism and community involvement, which is one of the central aspects of YCMTW. By leading a YCMTW group facilitators are empowered to address the issues affecting young people in their communities.

YCMTW emphasizes the expression of ideas and thoughts about social issues through creative means. Participants are encouraged to write songs and poems, act out skits, and make banners and board games. Participants and facilitators alike indicated that this was a fun process that helped to reinforce the concepts. Moreover, the expressive process also requires the participant to reflect upon the issues, the goal of YCMTW. Many participants stated how much they enjoyed hearing the ideas and points of view of the other participants. Finally, it appears that in most communities there is little chance for youth to discuss social issues in a pressure free environment. Consequently, YCMTW is filling a gap in the support network of Guyanese youth.

2.2 Groups and Facilitators

About 25 groups have been consistently active in the YCMTW programme. This is a good number considering the size of Guyana and that the project is in its first year. About a third of the classes are in the Georgetown area. The other groups are spread around the country in Linden, ECD, Essequibo, EBD, Berbice and even in the hinterland areas of Kato, Pomeroon, and Santa Mission. YCMTW has done a good job in getting a good mix of locations and should continue to strive to take YCMTW to all regions and villages of Guyana. However, one problem is that the number of active facilitators has declined throughout the year. At the evaluation meeting in April 2000 there were 58 attendees, down from the 100 who attended the initial national training. In the future it will be a challenge for YCMTW to increase its retention rate in the face of such obstacles as migration, social pressures and other commitments of the youth. The original goal of having 3000 youth involved was quite ambitious and would require a 100 percent retention rate of facilitators with large number of youth attending each YCMTW group. Considering this would be the first time for many facilitators to be the leader of a youth group, having 30 participants is a

very high and unlikely expectation. Nevertheless, many facilitators stated that as word was circulated around the community (about YCMTW) more youths would attend meetings and participants would bring their friends, making the groups quite large. Bearing in mind this was the first year of course and that classes were held all over Guyana YCMTW was successful and has the potential to grow in subsequent years.

As a group, the Facilitators were very enthusiastic and dedicated to their communities. They range in age from 14 to 30 although there are significantly more females than males. This may be a reason for lack of young male participants, even though in some areas where males do lead groups the male participant rate is still low. Some facilitators suggested that the integration of sports could help to draw more young males to YCMTW. An ideal situation would be to have a male and female leader for each group.

2.3 Training

All facilitators attended an initial 70-hour training course over 10 days from July 28th to August 6th 1999 at the School of Nations in Georgetown. Georgetown is the most logical place to have the training as it is the transportation hub of the country. Moreover, having all participants initially train together for 10 days has many benefits, including the casual and formal communication about the issues between participants from all over Guyana. Generally, facilitators indicated that the initial training course gave them the required skills to run their own YCMTW group. The two problems that facilitators felt needed to be addressed at the training are how to keep control and act as a leader or authority figure when the participants are often peers and how to start a discussion when the group is not responding.

The use of experts from Iwokrama, the Ministry of Health, and other interest groups to give lectures and workshops on the different issues at the national training is a good method to deliver the required information. Furthermore, the periodic workshops throughout the year in areas such as literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and suicide prevention helps to keep facilitators interested, in addition to expanding their knowledge base. As always there is a thirst for more training and training on a regional level. Regional training can be a good idea, but the primary training should continue on a national level as it brings people together from different communities. Regional training should be on a smaller scale and driven by the facilitators. Perhaps in future the Varqa foundation could establish a proposal system for regional groups and facilitators to access funds for special regional training events. Finally, now that there is a pool of facilitators who have completed the course, they could become support people for the new facilitators.

2.4 Support Systems

Facilitators had support in the form of the periodic additional workshops, an April 2000 programme evaluation meeting in Georgetown, and periodic visits by regional coordinators. Some facilitators complained of not having an easy place to turn in case of concern. Often a friend or relative was the only perceived source of help. Now that YCMTW has completed one year, a mentoring system could be established between past and present facilitators.

2.5 Manual

The manual for YCMTW provides a strong base to build from. The format of "Facts", "Readings", and "Activities" is clear and easy to follow building from the known (facts) to the interpretable (readings) and finally reflection (activities). The activities encourage participants to contemplate and reflect upon issues, situations, and ideas. Improvements could be made in aesthetics of the manual with more graphics and pictures, but this will come as the manual develops over time.

One area in which the manual could easily improve is referencing. The Human Development report is referred to in the Global Prosperity section, but after this there are few if any references to the source of the quotes and readings. It is noted that in the new edition of the manual, the quotes from the personal and community transformation are referenced from various writings. The rest of the manual should be referenced as well.

Quotes and readings are effective teaching tools, but when they are not referenced they lose their impact. When teaching youths it is important to teach them how to seek out and evaluate different sources of information and ideas on their own. If teaching materials have sources and reference students can then pursue the information that interests and speaks to them. Generally, the readings in the manual have a common style and format, though their source is not revealed. If the authors of the manual are trying to teach issues from a particular point of view this should be declared to the student and reader.

The topics presented in the YCMTW manual were very well received. Virtually all participants indicated that the material is very relevant to their situation and community. The participants encounter the issues presented every day. Participants and facilitators were hard pressed to identify a worst or least favourite topic. "Domestic Violence", "Reproductive Health", "Drug and Alcohol Abuse", and "Global Prosperity" were consistently cited as most successful or favourite topics. Though almost all topics were so mentioned at some point. The topics noted as least favourite included "Protection of the Environment", "Promotion of the Arts", "Life After Death", and "The Nobility of Man". Ironically, "Promotion of the Arts" was cited as one of the least successful topics, but the creative (artistic) expression of the issues was a favourite aspect of YCMTW. This may suggest that the presentation of the issue may be the problem and not the topic. The "Reproductive Health" and "Drugs and Alcohol Abuse" sections would benefit from more resource material. A resource booklet with facts and information could be a very useful reference guide for youth who are often hesitant to ask questions on such subjects to parents or other adults. Particularly, information about sexually transmitted infections (STI's) and the risks and effects of different drugs would be helpful for those youth who do not have any other access to correct information on these subjects. Like the domestic violence section numbers to telephone for help concerning reproductive health and drugs and alcohol would be beneficial. The AIDS hotline recently reopened in Guyana.

YCMTW is trying to promote personal and community transformation yet there are no activities asking students participants to formulate their own ideas and goals in the "Personal and Community Transformation" section. This is a common question in other sections, but is not carried over to "Personal and Community Transformation". There are activities in this section, but generally the answers are taken directly from the quotes and readings.

Potential new topics, according to participants include racism (relevant to Guyana's multiethnic culture), cruelty to animals, crafts, problems in the home and communication. The final two suggestions could be combined into a section called conflict resolution. Conflict resolution could build upon the effective role play exercise in the reproductive health section.

2.6 Linkages

YCMTW is a very good one-year programme, but participants and facilitators need to be helped in discovering what they can do with their newfound skills. Participants will be able to become facilitators and go on to lead their own group. One option for facilitators is to have them continue working with YCMTW. Graduate facilitators could help the new group of facilitators with their groups, continue leading groups in their communities if there is not another person available, and generally help with YCMTW. Options outside of YCMTW are starting a youth group of their own, or collaborating with another organization in their area.

Furthermore, the I.D.C.E. will be offering the eighteen-month pan-Commonwealth diploma in Youth in Development. This is a new Commonwealth course that is taken by distance education. Upon completion graduates can start social work at UG in year two. This diploma could be a good way for facilitators to continue their education in youth outreach work. There are numerous other ways that YCMTW graduates can get involved with youth. Therefore it might be beneficial for YCMTW to establish more formal links with other groups to help graduates on their way.

3.0 Conclusions

Youth Can Move the World is a first class programme. Its approach is innovative and it responds to a need in the community. Youth need a forum to express themselves on real issues that affect them daily. However, YCMTW has many challenges ahead. Though in my opinion its strengths provide a solid base to develop from in the coming years. Strengths of YCMTW include the use of youth as facilitators, the teaching of relevant and pertinent issues, the extent of groups all over Guyana, a solid training course, and the periodic workshops given as the opportunities arise. YCMTW initial success should not make it complacent. There are a few areas that can be improved and refined to make it even better and reach more young Guyanese. The first and most pressing challenge is the lack of referencing in the manual. This should not be a difficult task and it would improve the transparency and validity of the information provided. Some areas of the manual have references and I think if this practice was extended to the rest of the information in the manual it would help youth to learn the proper techniques for analyzing and sharing information. The other major challenge to YCMTW is to involve more young males. This is a difficult problem to solve and is faced by many youth oriented programmes. Gender equity is something that has to be worked towards over time. Other challenges which YCMTW faces are establishing a formal support network, involving more and different communities, keeping graduates involved in youth work, and simply responding to the needs that a new group of participants will inevitably have.

The basic model of YCMTW is sound and should be congratulated. Especially considering that the programme is completely run by volunteers. The challenges mentioned above are issues that can only make YCMTW better and improve on an already effective programme. I hope that YCMTW will be able to continue to give young people a safe forum to develop and express their ideas and knowledge of the issues facing Guyanese youth.