

The Development of Youth Network for Strengthening Social Adaptation of Thai Vulnerable Juveniles

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Abstract

The purposes of the study were 1) to examine the effects of a youth network on vulnerable youths' social adaptation knowledge, 2) to examine the vulnerable youths' satisfaction with the youth network on social adaptation development, and 3) to examine the effects of a youth network on vulnerable youths' changes in behaviors of social adaptation. The participants consisted of 302 vulnerable youths in the northern Thai province of Khon Kaen selected by a systematic sampling method. A group of 10 authorities was also chosen purposively to join the interview session. The instruments included a youth network plan, a social adaptation test, and an interview form. Frequency, percentage, mean score, S.D, and t-test were used to examine the data. The content analysis assessed qualitative data. The findings study reveals how a planned youth network resulted in the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and desirable behavior among youngsters at risk.

Keywords: vulnerable juveniles, youth development, youth network

1. Introduction

The modern world is characterized by a capitalist economic system and intense competition between nations and individuals. Due to the nature of an economic system that permits capitalists to compete independently in the market, the social disparity could not be avoided. Poverty, oppression, and life instability place a subset of youth at risk in both life and education (Van de Kleut & White, 2009). In many countries, families with average incomes who can afford basic education for their children also have to contend with problematic budgets, teaching methods, and staff quality (Zaki Ewiss, 2020). As education is a fundamental indicator of a person's future career, family, and quality of life, this widens the socioeconomic gap between the wealthy and the poor (Dronkers, 2010).

Capitalism also affected financially uncompetitive youths. Poor and underprivileged children are forced to become vulnerable and face many social issues. Skinner et al. (2006) describes vulnerable kids as "those with unmet basic rights. Vulnerability means weak or poorly guarded and ranges from resiliency to helplessness. Vulnerable youth are more at risk than their peers. Deprivation (food, education, parental care), exploitation, abuse, neglect, violence, and HIV infection might affect them (Arora et al., 2015). Their hardships could be exploited for criminality, drug trafficking, child labor, etc. Lack of social support may also cause vulnerable youngsters to make decisions leading to undesired pregnancy, drug addiction, crime, etc. The public and private sectors should help vulnerable teenagers cope with difficulties.

The socio-economic problems plaguing Thailand are a significant factor in the difficulties that the nation's youth must overcome. According to the World Bank (2022), the economy of Thailand is comparable to the economies of other developing nations as capitalism has derived significant advantages for capitalists. The country offers free medical care and public education in public schools extending up to twelfth grade for all its citizens. However, throughout the past ten years, the economy of Thailand has been exhibiting a negative trend, and the continuous Covid-19 pandemic has only served to make matters worse. As of the year 2022, the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council reports that 174,900 Thai citizens have been unemployed in fields other than agriculture for more than a year (2022). It should not come as a surprise that the rate of the national debt

has increased over the past five quarters in a row given that the price of fructified agricultural products, which is the primary source of income for the vast majority of Thai citizens, has increased. This trend has been observed for the past five quarters in a row. The persistent economic problems faced by the nation have a domino effect on society and have been a contributing factor in the rise in the number of young people who are living in difficult circumstances.

The Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection (2017) reported that 3.7 million young people in Thailand fell into the category of “vulnerable.” These numbers include kids who are displaced, undocumented, have special needs, or come from low-income homes. According to the Office of Children and Youth Justice System’s data from the year 2021, 68% of juvenile offenders in Thailand come from broken homes (2021). Furthermore, fifteen percent of all babies in the country had teenage moms. As a result, it is important to use the right treatments to help at-risk adolescents, reduce social problems, and advance social progress.

One of the most crucial problems among vulnerable youth is the inability to adapt to social values and norms. The term “social adaptation” refers to the process by which an individual attempts to strike a balance between his or her desires and goals and those imposed by the surrounding environment and other factors. As a result, one looks out for the kinds of things that make life more enjoyable and get one’s social approval, as well as their ability to adjust to new conditions (Al Zboon, 2013). Therefore, to blend as a desirable member of society, one should be informed of social ideals, legal rules, and morality. With an unwell socio-economic condition faced by vulnerable youth, it could be possible that lack of social adaptation is one of the causes leading to problems they made to society.

Supporting the development of a youth network could be an alternative method to improve the situation of vulnerable juveniles. Gathering youths in a similar situation to share their experiences and suggest possible solutions to their problems. According to The International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies (2013), Youth networking involves meeting people, developing contacts, and using them in youth development missions. Moreover, youth networks use networking to achieve long-term goals for member organizations. Xavier (2012) suggested that a local/regional network for youth engagement is an instrument/mechanism that gives a young community a stronger voice that impacts the target context. Youth working together could be a great advantage in achieving social transformation. However, it may also be a challenge due to factors such as the diversity of stakeholders, lack of resources or support, low youth sector development, lack of recognition of the value of youth work or non-formal education, cultural diversity of communities, etc. Therefore, stakeholders should support what the youth needs to develop a successful network.

Moreover, youth networks have been applied in empirical studies and positively affected youth development in various areas globally. For example, Pittman (1991) found that promoting the role of youth networks allowed them to develop the skills and abilities needed in community development. This included decision-making, critical thinking, collaborative skills, and social skills. Perkins et al. (2001) suggested that community youth development provides young people the opportunity to learn a wide range of abilities and displays a full complement of good connections with themselves, others, and the greater community. Likewise, Ignatowski et al. (2021) suggested that the effectiveness of a youth network project depends on stakeholder participation, vision and goals, systems mapping, data, evaluation, and learning, capacity building, policies, services, and practices, norms and perspectives, and resource flows. A well-managed network could lead to the outcomes of violence prevention, work readiness and employment, engagement of youth and their communities, and graduation rate in high school.

In conclusion, the socio-economic conditions faced by a certain group of youths force them to be in an unhealthy social status. Moreover, it causes problems in acquiring social adaptation among the youths. Therefore, they are vulnerable to issues such as drugs, unintended pregnancy, crimes, etc. Developing a youth network is a potential way to help them face difficulties together and it has been proved to be beneficial in youth development projects around the globe. Therefore, the current study helped youth sectors in a country to collaboratively form a network. The effectiveness of the projects was assessed by examining the participants’ knowledge, satisfaction, and changes in behaviors. The purposes of the study were 1) to examine the effects of a youth network on vulnerable youths’ social adaptation knowledge, 2) to examine the vulnerable youths’ satisfaction with the youth network on social adaptation development, and 3) to examine the effects of a youth network on vulnerable youths’ changes in behaviors of social adaptation.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants consisted of 302 vulnerable youths in the northern Thai province of Khon Kaen. They were chosen using systematic sampling. The specific selection criteria for the participants were family income, parental marital

status, and neighborhood. At least 1,412 of the 12,241 youths in the area met at least one of the criteria. Using Yamane's (1967) approach, 302 participants were obtained. All subjects were treated with anonymity and ethical considerations in mind. The detail of the samples can be seen below.

Table 1. Samples' detail

Gender	Male = 136 (45.03%) Female = 166 (54.97%)
Age	15 = 54 (17.88%) 16 = 53 (17.54%) 17 = 64 (21.19%) 18 = 75 (24.83%) 19 = 56 (18.54%)
Family Income	Low = 249 (82.45%) Lower middle = 53 (17.55%)
Marital status of parents	Married = 215 (71.19%) Divorced = 32 (10.59%) Separated = 40 (13.24%) Widowed = 15 (4.96%)
Neighborhood	Low-income area = 235 (77.81%) Middle-income area = 67 (22.19%)

The second set of participants consisted of ten public servants who were charged with the duty of protecting vulnerable young people in their regions. The following individuals took part in the interview session.

2.2 Instruments

The instruments included a youth network plan, a social adaptation test, and an interview form. In detail, the plan includes the guideline for developing a youth network in the province. The network aims to reflect on socio-economic problems and needs in developing social adaptation. The representatives of network members meet every week via online conferencing platforms. The plan took 3 months to complete. The test was designed in multiple choice, and the interview form was designed in the semi-structured interview with questions to examine changes in samples' behaviors.

2.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data was collected in August 2021 when samples participated in the youth network plan. The knowledge test and satisfaction survey took place after the plan was completed. 10 officials were interviewed three months following the project to assess sample behavior changes. Frequency, percentage, mean score, S.D, and t-test were used to examine the data. The content analysis assessed qualitative data.

3. Results

Table 2. The comparison of the participants' social adaptation knowledge

Tests	N	\bar{x}	S.D	t	Sig.
Pre-test	302	12.65	0.89	16.87	0.00*
Post-test	302	26.64	0.84		

Note. $P < 0.05$.

The result of the study indicates the improvement of the participant's knowledge regarding social adaptation. A paired t-test shows that there was a significant difference between the participants' average pre-test score ($\bar{x} = 12.65$, S.D = 0.89) and average post-test score ($\bar{x} = 26.64$, S.D = 0.84, $t = 16.87$, $p = 0.00$). It could be interpreted that the participants gained social adaptation knowledge after joining the youth network project considering the higher score in the post-test.

Table 3. The participant satisfaction with the youth network project

Statements	\bar{x}	S.D
Family		
1. Joining the youth network helped me realize my responsibilities in the family.	4.75	0.43
2. Joining the youth network made me treat my family with care.	4.55	0.64
3. Joining the youth network helped me understand the importance of family duties.	4.46	0.60
4. Joining the youth network made me listen to my family members more.	4.06	0.80
5. Joining the youth network made me feel more safe living with my family.	4.00	0.81
Average	4.36	0.43
Community		
6. I felt being a part of the community after joining the youth network.	4.03	0.83
7. I felt more confident sharing my opinions after joining the youth network.	3.84	0.87
8. I understood my community's socioeconomic condition after joining the youth network.	3.85	0.95
9. I was eager to join community activities after joining the youth network.	3.74	0.76
10. I considered my community a safe zone after joining the youth network.	3.58	1.13
Average	3.80	0.60
Morality		
11. After joining the youth network, I reasonably handled life situations.	3.57	0.67
12. After joining the youth network, I felt more compassion for others.	3.42	0.67
13. After joining the youth network, I grasped the fundamental morals required for cohabitation.	3.13	1.06
14. After joining the youth network, I felt guilty whenever I considered doing wrong.	3.09	0.71
15. After joining the youth network, I developed my thinking process.	3.04	1.03
Average	3.25	0.60
Overall	3.80	0.40

The result of the study indicates a high level of participant satisfaction with the youth network project ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, S.D = 0.40). In detail, the aspects of family ($\bar{x} = 4.36$, S.D = 0.43), community ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, S.D = 0.60), and morality ($\bar{x} = 3.25$, S.D = 0.60) were rated respectively. In detail, the participants perceive participation in the youth network as a project that helps them adapt to social norms as family and society members. Moreover, the participants felt the project develop their decision-making in various life situations. Therefore, it could be claimed that the participants were satisfied with the youth network project.

Moreover, the result of the interview session reflects interesting issues regarding participants' changes in social adaptation behaviors. The respondents reported that after engaging in the youth network project, the participants were able to adjust to social norms and values. The interviewees claimed that the participants lacked consideration for social ideals and acted based on individual interests, the collective influence of peers, and media examples such as the Internet and television. According to their parents, the participants tended to use rude language in conversation and did not strive to vary the level of language used while interacting with people of different ages or in different situations. After participating in the projects, participants realized their roles as students, family members, and community members. They communicated more effectively and participated in more community events. Parents and community leaders were satisfied with the youths after the youth network was implemented, according to the respondents.

4. Discussion

The study found that the youth network project improved vulnerable teens' social adaptation in terms of knowledge, attitudes, and changes in behavior. Previous research (e.g., Ignatowski et al., 2021; Perkins et al., 2001; Pittman, 1991) has shown the benefits of youth networks in adolescent development and education. In this study, developing a network that allows youths with similar socioeconomic characteristics to meet, build contacts, and leverage development missions lead to the ability to adapt to social situations. According to Xavier (2012), a network for youth participation is a mechanism that empowers a young community's voice to influence the target context. Youth collaboration could be an important factor in accomplishing societal transformation. It could be noted from the results of the study that a well-managed youth network that takes care of human development resulted in the development of knowledge and positive changes in vulnerable youths' behaviors as shown by the results of the study.

Furthermore, the results demonstrate the significance of vulnerable youths' needs in life in providing solutions to their problems. In this study, information gained from the youth network was beneficial for responsible officials, and it led to the development of the participant's knowledge, attitude, and behaviors regarding social adaptation. According to Beale Spencer (2015), vulnerable youth are at risk of engaging in risky social activities. Developing

a youth network in which members can share their experiences and create solutions could be an alternate method for preventing these undesirable occurrences. According to the findings of the study, a well-managed youth network project could lead to the development of a vulnerable group of youth in terms of knowledge and behaviors.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a youth network of vulnerable youths on their knowledge, attitude, and behavioral changes regarding social adaptation. A youth network project was implemented with 302 vulnerable youths in Thailand. Ten authorities were also assigned to an interview session to investigate the three-month behavior changes of the samples. The findings study reveals how a planned youth network resulted in the acquisition of knowledge and desirable behavior among youngsters at risk.

The study's findings may have implications for vulnerable youth development in various environments. The focus of future research should be on the development of the youth network, taking environment, membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, purpose, and resources into account. In addition, experts should focus on juveniles in disadvantaged populations. To provide additional information that could assist children and adolescents from marginalized and oppressed groups, it is necessary to investigate factors that may influence issues such as participation in abusive behaviors, collaboration among stakeholders, and subject participation.

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