



DISTRICT YOUTH OUTREACHING
SOCIAL WORK TEAM

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Introduction

In designing outreaching social work (OSW) service for young people, we need to examine the core value of outreaching social work and to analyse the environment. Without considering these, we may lose the core value and mission of outreaching social work/outreach social work in this ever-changing society. In this chapter, I will firstly describe the difficulties of the development of outreach social work in the past few years, then I will share the challenges and difficulties that we have faced, and finally the way we can go forward.

Blooming Days

Outreach social work for young people in Hong Kong was established in 1979 after the *White Paper on Personal Social Work among Young People in Hong Kong* was published in 1978. The service is designed to reach out and establish contact with young people who may be socially undesirable, delinquent, or self-destructive. The aim is to enhance the social functioning of individual young persons through remedial, preventive and developmental measures (HKCSS, 1983). However, the public, especially from the government, often questioned the service. Lo (1990) said that the government was not satisfied with the performance of outreaching social work, e.g. the caseload was always below standard. Thus, Ng and Man (1985) were commissioned to conduct an evaluation of the service in 1981. The report was completed in 1985 and it confirmed that “youths in the outreaching program were, in general, curbed from further deteriorated in their behaviour problem.” (Ng and Man, 1985:219) Through negotiation and the joint efforts of various outreach social work teams, the government finally recognized the work of outreach social work and allowed the service to continue and expand.

Kwok (1999) stated that, from 1987 onwards, outreach social work service entered its golden years. The service was expanded



rapidly and outreach social work teams were increased to 34 in 2000, covering the whole territory. In between these two decades, the outreach social workers developed various social work intervention models or strategies to handle various youth problems, such as the application of various theories and therapies, e.g. social learning theory and narrative therapy. The teams also conducted a variety of research to explore youth problems and increase public awareness about various youth problems such as drug abuse, school dropouts and gang issues. All of these eventually helped the outreach social work service to develop a good public image in society. The outreach service represents expertise in working with youth-at-risk. Their tremendous output also reflects the great energy and liveliness of the service.

Gloomy Days

However, the *Report on Review of Children and Youth Centre Services* in 1994 stated that centre services should be improved and a new model, namely integrated approach, should be adopted, i.e. the children and youth centre services should include centre-based service, school social service and the outreach service. Children and young people can get one-stop service from the centres. The service can flexibly deploy their resources and adopt working approaches to meet the multifarious needs of young people in the communities served, and can be responsive to community need. An evaluation conducted by the City University of Hong Kong from 1995 to 1997 confirmed the effectiveness of the integrated team (IT) model, and with approval from the Social Welfare Department, integrated teams were formed to replace children and youth centre services (SWD, 1998:50). Hence, the integrated team model would become the future development of children and youth services, and the IT is renamed as Integrated Children and Youth Service Centre (ICYSC).

ICYSC is regarded as a rising star in the children and youth services in Hong Kong, though there are still many discussions and



debates concerning its application (Chan, 1996; Lee, 2002), but as a whole, the field welcomes the proposed model. The government then encouraged the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to redeploy their own children and youth services as ITs in various districts, but without adding additional resources. Since the integrated model was to be the main development trend in the future, NGOs began to rearrange their own children and youth services to form ITs. The outreach social work teams for young people would become one of the services in ITs. As a result, the number of OSW teams shrank quickly. At the worst moment, only 25 teams were operating and 19 of them had not more than five workers. This exercise has torn OSW teams to pieces (Kwok, 1999). Worse than that, the Social Welfare Department requested that once an ICYSC is formed, the original OSW team should cease serving the area. This is the announcement of the death of the service.

Crisis Vs. Chance

Whenever there is a crisis, there is an opportunity. The establishment of ICYSCs meant that OSW would be replaced by them. Initially, many people thought that ICYSCs would be better. The outreach social work service in an ICYSC would have more manpower because a team with similar manpower would serve only 12,000 of the youth population, while an OSW team would have to serve a population of 100,000 before integration. The ICYSC would also adopt a holistic and total-person approach to serve the clientele, but the original OSW service would only be a remedial service, and finally the integration of school, outreach and centre-based service would allow flexibility in deploying manpower among these three services.

Discrepancies however often occur between theory and practice. The outreach social service in an ICYSC cannot have the above-stated advantages, but rather it is easily neglected and absorbed in practice. The Devil hides behind the application—limited



manpower, but greater demand from the community. Most of the outreach workers in an ICYSC need to assume more duties and roles than previously, and thus, they can no longer focus on their clients, i.e. youth-at-risk or gang members.

In 2001, a research conducted by the Hong Kong Social Worker Union (HKSWU) reflected the situation. Outreach social workers in ICYSCs could spend only half of their time in dealing with the street youth. More than 53% of the social workers in ICYSCs reported that the service could only deal with a limited number of street youth, while nearly 70% reported that the outreaching service provided by the ICYSCs was worse than before. In 2002, Lee conducted similar research, finding that the difficulties that outreach workers in ICYSCs encountered included “service target lacked motivation, worker lacked related skills and not enough service delivery time.”

These reports reflect most of the reality. The fatal problem in ICYSCs is that the outreach worker, unlike in the past, cannot work in the spots and keep regular contact with the street youth wholeheartedly. Since there are great demands from the community, especially from the school systems, an outreach worker in an ICYSC often will be the first to assist in these works. But much more unfortunately, the outreach clients are the most powerless ones, as they would not voice their needs or even show resistance when they feel they are being labelled as deviants. In these circumstances, their needs will often be neglected when other community members show more readiness to request services from the ICYSC. As a result, even when the workers have good intentions, limited time can be spent on outreach work (HKSWU, 2001).

This situation urges the re-establishment of independent OSW teams which are mainly targeted to work with street youth. A group of outreach workers formed a concern group and met different parties to voice the needs of street youth. The government then showed a positive response and asked the concerned group to submit a proposal. In 2002, the Social Welfare Department finally agreed



to set up 16 district youth outreaching teams (YOTs) in Hong Kong to cater the needs of street youth.

Core Elements of Outreaching Social Work

Relationship Building

The gloomy days of the last few years have provided a good opportunity for workers in the service to review the core elements of the service. This review helps workers to understand why OSW is worth maintaining, and even that ICYSCs should be the main trend in development.

According to the *Operational Manual for Outreaching Social Workers* (HKCSS, 1983), the working approach of outreaching is to “work with young people in their natural environment” and to “adopt a systematic helping approach” to assess the needs and problems of young people. This depicts a core element of OSW, i.e. working with young people in their natural environment. As we know, the clients are young people who are detached from the conventional and formal systems, and the characteristics of these young people are that they are unwilling or unmotivated to seek services because they do not feel they need to change their lifestyles. Thus, the worker is required to work in their living environment to understand and develop a mutual dialogue to achieve a fusion of horizon, otherwise resistance may happen (Lee, 1996). In this aspect, the outreach worker needs to spend tremendous time in working in the natural environment and in conducting genuine dialogues with street youth. These work can help workers in connecting with these detached youth and also in understanding them, and thus reducing their resistance and increasing their motivation to be assisted. Through this investment, workers can build up a trusting relationship with the youth, which is of utmost importance for effective intervention (Lee, 1997).



Working with Individuals in Groups

The second core element is to adopt a “case in group” approach in working with the natural gang. The *Operational Manual* (HKCSS, 1983) defined the work approach of OSW as a group work approach. The stages include field observation, rapport building, social relationship, working relationship and termination. Lee (1997) further elaborated the group work approach in an outreaching setting as comprising three elements: “rapport building” (R), “group focus” (G) and “case in group” (C). Lee (1997) considered the ability of workers to build relationships with the natural groups of youth-at-risk to be a crucial aspect in effective/ineffective intervention. After building up a trusting relationship with the group, the worker will often design some tailor-made programmes or services for the group. This will require the worker to be sensitive to the needs and interest of the group, as well as sufficient community resources to support such kinds of programmes. This is extremely important in the present day. Nowadays, outreach workers use various types of programmes, such as training bands, hip hop dancing, beauty courses, war games, etc., to attract the targeted street youth to participate in their programmes. Through their participation, more understanding of their needs can be acquired. Finally, when the relationship between group members and an outreach worker is stable, the outreach worker will try to use individual work or the casework approach to help the targeted youth. This process often lasts one to three years (Lee, 1997).

To allow outreach work with youth-at-risk to be effective, the work within the environment, and the aforementioned core elements should be attended to. Allowing workers to work in the community, allowing sufficient time for them to build up trusting relationship with the clients, the development of dialogues with them, and finally soliciting sufficient community support are all important.



Life after Death: Difficulties Ahead

The setting up of District Youth Outreaching Teams (YOTs) is not the end of the story. It represents a new page of challenges and difficulties for the outreach service. The work is in fact the same as that of the earlier OSW, and YOTs are formed to serve identified at-risk youth and street gangs in 16 prioritised communities in the territory. Though the work is similar, the environment is different.

Each YOT maintains ten professional staff, although the area served and the population is much larger than ever. For example, one team needs to serve Tseung Kwan O and Wong Tai Sin which, in the past, was served by three OSW teams. A larger area served created a lot of administration difficulties. For example, an outreach worker may spend increased time in transportation from one spot to another. The facilities, like interviewing rooms and group activities rooms, are not sufficient. Some YOTs must borrow interviewing rooms from nearby organisations. The inadequate manpower and insufficient resources, in contrast to the huge serving boundaries, force a YOT to set up priority areas to serve and some areas need to put aside.

With the ICYSCs continuing their outreach work in their own serving areas, this creates the question of overlapping of services, and the separation of the work focus between a YOT and an ICYSC is difficult. In a cooperative meeting organised by HKSWU (2002), it was established that, since each ICYSC has its own service direction and priorities in working with street youth, it would be difficult to coordinate the work in the community. Some may ask for more cooperation from the YOT, but others may not. Some may spend more time on street work, while others may not, some may have very strict definition on street youth, while others may not. Nonetheless, the YOT is expected to coordinate and cooperate with most of them. A worker said that, in his working area, there are more than 10 ICYSCs (HKSWU 2002). In another cooperative session among YOTs in 2005, the cooperation between ICYSCs and YOTs still



remained at the talking level, and also concerned the overlapping of services, but not the development of more effective coordination and comprehensive services for youth-at-risk between the two services.

The definition of youth-at-risk is confused among the services. Ng and Man (1985) suggested that the OSW should aim at preventing youth from falling into delinquency and crime. The focus should be “unattached youth,” i.e. those youth who are not attached to the conventional or normal systems, such as school and family. The *Operational Manual for Outreaching Social Workers* (HKCSS, 1983) has a similar description, but with greater detail. It includes “members of natural gang or street gang;” “unattached young people who are often found loitering without companions;” those who have “poor ties with their families and may run away;” and “school dropouts or potential school dropouts.” These descriptions are attempting to use behaviours as indicators to define who should be approached by the outreach social workers, and they are young people loiter in the community with unruly behaviour and poor ties with the conventional systems. As concluded by Chui (2001), “unattached youth” in the Hong Kong context are “those who are more crime-prone but have not yet committed crime.” Using this guideline, in the past the outreach worker could often differentiate their work focus from other services. However, with the establishment of ICYSCs, this guideline needs to be revised, since the outreach sub-teams of the ICYSCs will also approach similar targets in the communities served, which will lead to an overlapping of services. Though HKSWU (2001) suggested a continuum to classify what type of youth-at-risk should be approached by YOTs and what type should be the target of ICYSCs, there are still many blurred areas. It suggested that youth in general and groups with deviant youth should be the focus of ICYSCs, and that juvenile gangs should be the focus of YOTs. However, it is very difficult to differentiate whether a group is a group of deviant youth or a juvenile gang. For example, in a group of young people who congregate on a football pitch, some are triad members, while some



are still students but have some deviant behaviours, like shop-lifting. Who should be responsible for this gang or group? Is this a gang or only a youth group with deviant behaviour? Is shop-lifting minor deviant behaviour or not? It seems that it is quite difficult to classify the targets only by behavioural terms. Therefore, some teams use geography to classify their work focus, some use age, and some hold regular case conferences. Nonetheless, the problems continue without proper handling.

From 2000 onwards, there are many newly developed services and projects that also target youth-at-risk and that lead to greater competition. The OSW service for young night-drifters (YNDs) (which will be discussed further in the next chapter) is a service which is closely related to YOTs. Since the YNDs also hang around locations similar to those of the clients of YOTs, but at night time (say, from 10:00p.m. to 6:00a.m.), the YNDs most often mix with clients who are already under YOT service. Thus, some youth workers have suggested combining the YOT with the outreach team for YNDs (Chan, 2003). At the time of writing this chapter, the Counselling Centres for Psychotropic Substance Abusers have also been requested to deliver outreach work to young substance abusers in various spots. Lee (2005) lists more than 9 services which are either wholly or partially working with youth-at-risk. In addition to the subvented youth service, many project-based services also aim at doing outreach work with the youth-at-risk, such as the Snow Ball of Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups and Playsafe Healthy Life Project of Caritas-Hong Kong for young disco-goers. These projects often cooperate with some other NGOs and sectors, such as the medical sectors, police or local organisations. These newly developed services create a new work environment for YOTs. How to redefine the roles and functions of YOTs is an issue to be dealt with in the near future.

The Way Forward

In this highly complicated environment, how can the YOTs develop



new programmes for street youth? Spergel (1995) has examined several outreach programmes and has found that some were more promising for the reduction of the youth gang problem and were more successful than others. His work may have some insights for the future development of YOTs. Spergel (1995) stated that a detached worker is unable to deal with a complex structural problem, which requires the coordination of other strategies and relevant resources. It is necessary to work in a new social context with greater coordinating effort among diverse professionals and agencies.

As discussed above, most of the YOTs, ICYSCs and outreach teams for YNDs are concerned about the overlapping of services. To be frank, overlapping is better than having a service gap. Even the targets are overlapped, but the services can be different from other services. Each of the services has its own strengths and limitations. For example, ICYSCs have more resources than YOTs, and most of the ICYSCs have already gone through their modernisation process with their facilities more updated. These pools of resources would definitely be better than those of the YOTs. On the other hand, YOTs may have more information on community dynamics which workers of ICYSCs may not have the time to collect. To admit our own weaknesses and exercise our strengths are doors for cooperation.

To establish cooperation, a YOT can identify one or two high-risk areas and seek cooperation with the local ICYSCs or outreach team for YNDs. This cooperation should not be limited at the case level only, but should be in at a community level where more dimensions of intervention and possible methods of cooperation could be created.

Apart from the cooperation among agencies themselves, cooperation among different professionals is also required. Only street social work intervention may not be useful for contemporary street youth. Youth-at-risk are actually the young people who are vulnerable to external disadvantages and risks (Chui, 2001). This



vulnerability goes beyond personal factors which need more than social work intervention.

In the past few years, some pilot projects have worked in this direction and have sought a combination of various programmes and professional specialisation, for example, “Extraordinary Body Check for Young Drug Abusers” (非常體驗) by the Hong Kong Playground Association. This project is a combination of social work intervention and medical intervention. This kind of cooperation should be continued, though the cooperation may not be easy because of the differences between different disciplines.

YOTs can successfully engage the unattached youth in the streets, but one of the difficulties is how to motivate the clients to commit to changes afterwards. One of the possible solutions is the exercise of social intervention not only in the streets, but also in other social contexts which are sometimes neglected but may be more effective than only work in the streets. These new social contexts may include schools where there maybe school-gangs conflicts, in a medical setting (e.g. clinic) when the youths seek medical service, or in the police station when the youth-at-risk is arrested. All these working contexts are places where we seldom try to exert intervention. In these contexts, the young people are usually in crisis or are experiencing feelings of stress, and are more easily motivated to change. Outreach workers are familiar with these contexts but sometimes overlook the utilisation of these contexts as means to conduct intervention. To make use of these contexts for intervention, a lot of coordinating may be involved, but if it is proven to be effective, we should have the courage and commitment to try. With the new contexts which arise, new strategies may develop.

Youth problems in Hong Kong may be different in various districts, but to a large extent, they have their own similarities, especially in the aspect of social disadvantages, such as the school system and the work environment. As suggested by Chui (2001), social workers should intervene concerning social disadvantages and the powerlessness caused by class, gender and age structure of society. In the past few years, outreach workers have tried to do



some intervention concerning the social disadvantages of society. Ngai (2005) concluded that the outreach workers have already developed some strategies for tackling social disadvantages, such as seeking new allies for the development of community support networks, establishing a research centre for policy advocacy and coordinating with youth for social change. How to make these practices become a collective power and be one of our core working strategies should be one of our future goals.

We sometimes may encounter resistance or hesitation in allowing youth-at-risk to participate in our service development. Research conducted by Chui (2001) and Lee and Cham (2002) has shown that outreaching clients are ready to participate in the planning, implementing and evaluating of the service. The research has suggested that the outreach service should allow greater user-participation. If, on one hand, we advocate the rights of our clients, but on the other hand we ignore their rights of participation in the service, it would be a ridiculous practice. Allowing them to participate in the service can show our respect and trust in their abilities and also demonstrates their abilities and potentials to the community.

Conclusion

To appropriately design the OSW for youth-at-risk, we should base it on the contexts that we face. Without these considerations, the work may often get into a muddle. We also need to remember our core work focus, otherwise we will only be creating a programme rather than a service. It is believed that our future work should put more effort into coordinating among the local youth services and various disciplines. We need to work closely with local youth services to create synergy, to cooperate with various disciplines to cater for the multiple needs of youth, and to emancipate our youth from various oppressions. We need to remember the core mission of OSW—to reach out, to communicate, to understand and to connect street youth with our society.



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