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## Tracing VAT-2008 program participants' self-development: Effect of social work program undergraduates intervention strategies

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### Abstract

Research regarding violence amongst youth and teenagers had suggested the importance of designing and implementing effective intervention programs that takes into account the participants' specific needs of the teenagers. The purpose of the study: to identify the effect of the VAT-2008 program on teenagers who were categorized as high-risk teenagers by their respective schools; to identify the VAT-2008 participants' self development from the socio-economy, values and personality aspects; to determine the factors that constraint the VAT-2008 participants from changing their attitudes. What are the effect of the VAT-2008 program on the high-risk school teenagers from the aspects of their self-development socio-economy, values, personality and change in attitude? This study was framed within the descriptive qualitative research approach. It adopted the exploratory field work research design in which primary data was collected via the open-ended questionnaires and supplemented by performing face-to-face interviews, using interview schedule which was constructed by the researchers, with the participants and their parents and/or family members. A significant percentage of the participants reported the VAT-2008 program had positively impact on their feelings of self-worth, level of confidence, and made them become a more independent and responsible individual. Participants had also confided that they become more responsible to their families and had realized the importance of working their ways to towards attaining a better and comfortable life. Each participant's case is unique. Despite reporting the positive impact of the program on them, nevertheless their experience participating in the VAT-2008 program had qualitatively different effect on their their self-development, socio-economy, values, personality and attitude. The interventions strategies implemented by the Social-Work undergraduates had indeed significantly touched their life journey.

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## 1. Introduction

Tracer studies have their own strengths and effects in determining the individual's development after going through a practice or an intervention. Other than providing the opportunity to determine and re-evaluate whether a program which is already in place had met its planned and stated objectives, tracer studies also open the opportunity for the program organizers to gauge the outcomes of their programs and to evaluate the extent in which the programs are accepted and appreciated (Cohen, 2004). By looking at the outcomes of the programs, which had been implemented within certain time duration, the organizers would be able to identify the actual approaches that had brought about the changes among the program participants. Additionally, they can also separate these successful approaches from the less successful ones. Questions asked in tracer studies were questions pertaining to the effectiveness of the programs, which usually had been overlooked in other evaluation studies. To design a new program that is more effective than the previous one is, in a sense, quite difficult (Cohen, 2004). Hence, tracer studies that involve a holistic and a variety of approaches, when compared to earlier programs, can become the referral structures or become intellectual guidelines for further similar program initiatives, in which participants can learn more.

### 1.1 *Volunteers Approaching Teenagers (VAT) – 2008 Program*

For Sultanah Bahiyah Foundation (YSB), the VAT-2008 program grant provider, this tracer study can provide knowledge and ideas towards providing better quality services to the community. VAT-2008 was an extension program proposed by Fuziah Shaffie, Mohd Fo'ad Sakdan, Nuraini Yusoff, Shafee Saad, Wan Ab Rahman Khudzri Wan Abdullah, Azizan Husain, Azlizamani Zubir and Muhammad Salleh Ahmad Fadzillah (2009). Prior to the VAT-2008 program, a motivation program called 'Program Pra-Kerjaya: Pemantapan Diri Remaja' (Pre-Career Program: Self Enhancement among Teenagers) was carried out for four days and three nights. This program had successfully brought in 90 schooling teenagers into the Universiti Utara Malaysia campus in early 2008. As a result of this, VAT-2008 program, that aimed to deeply explore the high risk school teenagers misbehaviour problems using an 'intervention' approach, was implemented for a duration of one semester (four months: July – October) and had involved 120 Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) Social Work Program undergraduates (hereafter known as UUM volunteers). These undergraduates had carried out face-to-face interview sessions with 120 teenagers from 10 secondary schools in Kedah, which is a state in the northern part of peninsular Malaysia. These teenagers had earlier been identified as having misbehaviour issues by their respective schools.

### 1.2 *Intervention*

Intervention, as an effort to convince or influence an individual through using a specific procedure or method, can be carried out by different individuals, either for him/herself or for others (Trevithick, 2005). The term intervention refers to a purposive and early planned action and takes place between a client and a social worker with the purpose of preventing or solving a social problem which the client is currently facing (Crompton, Galaway, & Cournoyer, 2005). An intervention involves exploring the problems and determining the goals by applying intervention theories, plan for treatment, and planning and implementing appropriate strategies for further actions. In the intervention process, the helping steps and re-evaluation of problem is carried out to ascertain that the earlier set goal can be sustained and is achievable. At the end of the intervention, clients should show changes in their attitude and behaviour. In the VAT-2008 program, 'intervention' refers to the individual and face-to-face meeting sessions between the school teenagers and the UUM volunteers, and it was non-directive in nature. There were four meeting sessions, which had taken place either in school or in the teenagers home, based on the planned schedule. Noteworthy, social workers do not make decisions for their clients, or

persuade the clients to accept their views or conclusions (Coulshed & Orme, 1998). It is the clients who decide for themselves.

A study on youth violence and effective intervention carried out by Merwe and Dawes (2007) indicated that developing and implementing effective intervention on youth is important. Nevertheless, the design of this intervention program must conform to the specific needs of the youth based on prior evaluation. Program that focus on the changing of behavior and preventive in nature is deemed necessary to be implemented by various parties to reduce the percentage of misbehavior among teenagers. Many studies show the early intervention is the best step in preventing and misbehavior among the young teenagers and in fact is more cost effective and potentially give positive results compared to intervention programs at later stages (Merwe & Dawes, 2007).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Research regarding violence amongst youth and teenagers had suggested the importance of designing and implementing effective intervention programs that takes into account the participants' specific needs. There exist certain reasons, situations, life style and/or behaviour that can initiate an individual to be in a risky situation, which in turn could instigate him/her to do the same mistake or repeats it in the future. Teenagers in schools are no exception in being caught in the risky situations – and the situations may be highly risky. High-risk refer to a set of dynamic assumptions pertaining to cause-and-effect that can cause an individual to be in a dangerous and negative situation in the future (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Shaw, 2002). Risky situations may not necessarily be happening now, but nevertheless can be expected or predicted to happen in the future if no appropriate programs are executed to avoid these circumstances from happenings. A study carried out by Fuziah et al. (2009), which involved high risk school teenagers who were identified and selected by their respective school councellors based on their school discipline records, reports high percentage of misbehaviour among school teenagers in truancy, smoking, getting into fights, disrespectful, hanging out, illegal racing and free mingling or socializing between boys and girls. Hence, a tracer study that explore the effect of intervention initiatives was deemed necessary in order to learn how these initiatives and actions could prevent the problematic teenagers from continuously being trapped in the aforementioned risky situations.

## **3. Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to identify the effect of VAT-2008 program on teenagers who were categorized as high-risk teenagers by their respective schools. Specifically, the objectives of the study are (i) to identify the VAT-2008 participants' self-development from the socio-economy, values, and personality aspects; and (ii) to determine the factors that constraint the VAT-2008 participants from changing their attitudes. The study is very significant for YSB because important issues involving high-risk school teenagers can be identified and actions can be taken to assist these teenagers in making appropriate choices towards improving their personalities and development that in turn would support the nation's intention of having citizens who would be useful human capital. Furthermore, the findings provide valuable input for YSB in its future planning of implementing better and more relevant high-risk teenagers' development programs. Additionally, the knowledge gained from such a study would be of value when similar program, using similar methods, can be adopted to assist other high-risk school teenagers from other education districts, either within the same state or within the nation as well.

## **4. Research Questions**

The research question that guided this study was what are the effect of the VAT-2008 program on the high-risk school teenagers from the aspects of their self-development socio-economy, values, personality and change in attitude?

## 5. Research Methodology

This study was framed within the descriptive qualitative research approach. It adopted the exploratory field work research design in which primary data was collected via the open-ended questionnaires and supplemented by performing face-to-face interviews, using the interview schedule which was constructed by the researchers, with the participants and their parents and/or family members. The main locations for the study were the secondary schools which were involved in VAT-2008 program as well as the participants' houses or places where the participants were staying during the data collection process. Telephone interviews were also carried out when the need arises, for instance, when the participants were not at home when the raters visited their respective schools or homes. For triangulation purposes, the participants' parents or relatives, or even their neighbours, were interviewed to confirm the responses given by the participants during their interviews with the volunteers or the responses given by the participants in the open-ended questionnaires prior to their interviews with the volunteers.

The target population were all the 120 high-risk school teenagers who had participated in the VAT-2008 program. 10 raters, who had graduated from the university's Social Work Program, assisted in the data collection process, that is they had administered the open-ended questionnaires as well as carried out the follow-up interviews. All these raters had attended a two-days workshop carried out by the researchers prior to the fieldwork. The workshop was designed to train the raters in administering the questionnaires and also on how to use the interview schedule as well as practising the interview techniques, including the use of probes to ensure proper responses from the research participants.

The data collection process was carried out in four phases, whereby the first phase had focussed on collecting data and information on all the VAT-2008 participants' profile from the researchers. Tabulation of this data had served as the initial information for the purpose of planning actions prior to the forthcoming data collection phases. Based on the initial profiling of the VAT-2008 participants, it was noted that 10 were waiting for their Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examination results. Since they will be collecting their examination results from their respective schools on 21 March 2012, that is the day on which the results of this national examination will be announced, the researchers had made arrangements with the schools authorities to meet these 10 students and did the data collection at the respective schools on that particular day. Visits to these schools was the second phase of data collection. Phase three involved home visits to interview the participants and/or their family members and neighbours. To ensure a smooth third phase data collection, the YSB foundation had provided the transport to take the raters to the participants' homes. Collection of data via telephones was the fourth phase of data collection process.

## 6. Findings

78 participants (65%) had been traced in this study from the total of 120 participants. 10 of them was interviewed at their respective schools and 68 were interviewed at the respective homes and via telephones. The age range of the participants were 17 – 21 years with 59 participants (49.2%) were boys and 19 (15.8%) were girls. Table 1 shows the age of the participants.

Table 1

*The participants' age*

Age (years)	No. of Participants
17	2
18	22
20	43
21	11
	78

There were 19 of them who were still studying (13 boys and 6 girls). One was in secondary school (Form 5), and the other 18 were furthering their studies – either studying skill courses programs, certificates or diplomas.

Overall, 66 participants (84.6%) reported to be satisfied with that the VAT-2008 program that they had followed. Among the effect of the program is related to creating the positive awareness among them and had triggered them to change for the better. The VAT-2008 program volunteers, who were from the university's Social Work program, were skilful enough to make them realized where they were then and had successfully guided them to make the necessary changes in them. The volunteers had provided moral support and had impacted the participants' effort to change for the better themselves. These positive feedbacks that were given by the participants is indicative of the effectiveness of the VAT-2008 program. Additionally, the participants also felt that the VAT-2008 program, through the 'warm and friendly interactions' that had taken place between them and the volunteers, had given them the opportunity to re-look at themselves as useful individuals. The sharing of knowledge between them and the volunteers had positively impacted the participants to the extent of making them realize the need for them to become a changed and better individual.

As for the context of self-development, four categories of participants' responses had emerged, namely, positive attitude, negative attitude, cannot remember, and no information. The study shows that 49 participants (62.8%), comprising 35 boys (44.9%) and 14 girls (17.9%), had shown positive changes. Six boys (7.7%) and one girl (1.3%) had not shown positive attitude and these seven teenagers were still maintaining their negative attitudes as they had similarly indicated before going through the VAT-2008 program. Nevertheless, in a sense, a significant percentage of the participants had reported the VAT-2008 program had positive impact on their feelings of self-worth, level of confidence, and made them become a more independent and responsible individual. Participants had also confided that they become more responsible to their families and had realized the importance of working their ways towards attaining a better and comfortable life.

## 7. Conclusions

It is worth to note that each participant's case is unique. Despite reporting the positive impact of the program on them, nevertheless the experience of the VAT-2008 program participants had qualitatively different effect on their self-development, socio-economy, values, personality and attitude. The interventions strategies implemented by the Social Work undergraduates had indeed significantly touched the participants' life journey. The positive development among the participants came from within themselves after having gone through the program. They felt the need to continue their study in order to ensure their survival in the future. Interestingly, the participants who reported the positive impact of the program were those who were willing to voice and share their problems with the program's volunteers, and the testimony for this claim is the fact that 64 participants (82.1%) had sat for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) and successfully completed their secondary education. The participants' self-confidence can be felt to escalate with some who had indicated the intention to further their studies in areas according to their interests. Noteworthy, 19 participants (24.4%) were furthering their studies in various programs at different learning institutions. Nevertheless, there were also participants who

still showed negative attitude. However, this was due to the factors within the individual him/herself. Nonetheless, the number of participants falling into this category was very small.

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