

Creating Community: Developing a Group Work Model for Young Women with an Experience of Homelessness

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In response to a lack of safe spaces for young women to both connect and access supports, Brisbane Youth Service Centre for Young Women has developed a unique group program open to women aged 12 to 25 years who have had an experience of homelessness. With the goal of creating a 'community of intent' this model draws from perspectives, frameworks and approaches such as community cultural development, intersectionality and trauma-informed practice.

Brisbane Youth Service Centre for Young Women (CFYW) works alongside young women aged 12 to 25 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Through a transitional housing program, outreach and centre-based supports, CFYW strives to meet young women 'where they are at' and tailors individual support plans that best suit each young woman's self-identified needs.

Through our support work, we identified that social isolation is a key and recurring theme experienced in varying degrees by all young women accessing our program. As support workers we also acknowledge that social connection is a major link in supporting young women through homelessness and a key element needed for an individual's increased sense of wellbeing and safety. With this knowledge in mind, consultations with young women commenced and paved the way for our group program — Connect, Create and Celebrate...

Connect

Not only connecting young women socially, but connecting them through their shared lived experiences of mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, domestic, family and sexual violence and homelessness.

Create

Creating resources for young women and for the broader community. Allowing space and time to learn new skills and participate in activities such as photography workshops or yoga and mindfulness.

Celebrate:

Working from strength-based and trauma-informed approaches — providing space for women to celebrate individual and collective achievements no matter how great or small.

Collective practice wisdom and extensive group work experience within the team provided us with some direction around 'best practice' group work approaches when working with young people, and in particular young people who have an experience of early trauma and homelessness. This is where the concept of 'purposeful informality' has proved a useful framework for guiding our thinking around creating an appropriate group work space, understanding that more didactic and worker-led approaches can hinder young people from experiencing meaningful connection to facilitated groups.

As suggested by Laguerre,¹ purposeful informality is at its core informality that is purposeful and planned. This approach to working with communities seeks to break down class, ethnicity and gender barriers, transforming members from group participants to meaningful members of an informal community. Purposeful informality appears to benefit young women by allowing them to build relationships within a space that does not impose rigid structures and rules and helps to facilitate relationships that would usually occur in more natural social environments.

This approach also grounds the group informally in the space, works through challenges of group processes and supports the exploration of retaining 'humanness' within groups that are created in organisational spaces.

An example of purposeful informality at work is when the young women attending our group program created their own set of expectations or guidelines outlining what they need from their community here at CFYW to feel safe. They called the document *Creating Community* and their collective expectations are as follows:

- not putting people down
- no judgement
- accepting other people
- don't talk over each other
- what happens in group, or is discussed in group... stays in group!
- respect each other
- openness, honesty and trust
- listening to each other
- participation
- respecting what each woman brings including mood, children, pets etc
- share personal experiences and offer support and safety
- don't leave people out — belonging
- acceptance and inclusion
- enjoy yourself!
- hope, faith and encouragement.

This approach is also illustrated in the following case study that describes one young woman's experience of connecting in with group work here at CFYW.

Jacinta's* story

Jacinta, a young woman in her early 20s, first connected with CFYW to gain support around her experience of domestic violence, poor mental health including self-harming

behaviours and a significant eating issue. Jacinta has experienced early complex trauma and abuse, and has spent much of her young adult life in and out of hospital mental health wards. Jacinta shared with her CFYW worker that she often felt socially isolated and without friends.

With the support of her worker, Jacinta was introduced to the Connect, Create and Celebrate group. Initially Jacinta sat on the periphery of group, quietly colouring in mindfulness mandalas and sitting alone. In line with the concept of 'purposeful informality', group work at CFYW allows group members the time and space they need to enter the group at their own pace. Over a short period of time however Jacinta's engagement in the group began to shift.

We noticed that Jacinta began to join conversations with other young women and participate in activities such as photography workshops and a picnic in the park. An important part of creating community is feeling a sense of belonging and trust and this was highlighted when Jacinta started sharing her own values, beliefs and ideas around the oppression and discrimination that can occur within society. As a result of Jacinta's connection to the group, friendships developed that continued outside the CFYW context.

These friendships provided support to Jacinta during times of hospital admissions and more broadly on nights out, weekends away and other 'usual' social activities that young people engage in.

Over the past six months' many different young women have attended group; this aligns with the transient nature of youth homelessness and highlights the importance of flexible service delivery that allows young women to enter and exit the group as they please. By providing a regular and ongoing safe place for young women to connect, Jacinta reports feeling secure attending the group regardless of what group members are in attendance.

Centre for Young Women also borrows from the multifaceted approach of 'Learning by Observing and Pitching In' (LOPI).² Our group

work draws on the facets of LOPI in the following ways:

Community organisation of learning

Young women play a pivotal role in group development, preparation and evaluation. Young women are welcomed in and provided with opportunities to contribute according to their interests and skills. Space and time is taken to reflect on what the group collectively and individually needs.

Motive

The inclusive nature of group processes mean that young women feel valued, open to contributing and wanting to belong.

Collaboration and flexibility

Purposeful informality encourages blending of ideas and values. Young women are invited to participate and direct the group at a level they feel comfortable. Creating community within the group setting encourages collaborative engagement. With flexible boundaries and 'leadership', young women walk alongside each other in group processes.

Goals / transformational participation

Transformational learning, increased skills in empathy, responsibility and valuing contribution leads to an increased sense of belonging. There is a dual focus on contributing and belonging to the group community as well as gaining information and skills.

Learning

Young women share lived experiences and peer support is interwoven with a critical analysis of wider social systems. The group makes connection to the 'personal is political' and this process is facilitated organically by young women and group workers.

Communication

Communication is recurring theme in the group's *Creating Community* document. Communication is also created through shared narratives. Through this building of shared language young women are encouraged to take 'leadership' roles within the group.

Assessment

Assessment focuses on an evaluation of the support provided. Evaluation is collected through ongoing informal

feedback, revisiting creating community document and vision boarding.

Through Participatory Action Learning and evaluation processes young women were supported to identify the kinds of outcomes they hoped for the group. *Vision boards* were utilised to capture these outcomes and young women articulated and expanded upon the following themes:

- friendship
- connection
- learning
- support
- fun.

After each group session, young women were invited to add to the visions boards a small reflection, picture, word or statement that captured what they gained from group that week. They then added their reflections underneath the appropriate theme. For example, on the 'Connection' board women have posted reflections such as 'embracing each other's company', 'acceptance and acknowledging each other's feelings' and 'connection through mutual personal experiences'.

These themes are revisited every few weeks or as group members change to ensure that the outcomes still fit with the hopes of the group.

Group work and 'creating community' is a fluid, ongoing and vibrant process. The needs of a group of people are ever-changing and shifting and so consistent assessment and evaluation is needed to ensure cohesion and meaningful participation for all members. This responsibility should not lie solely with group facilitators or workers, but with the group community as a whole. If there is a meaningful sense of belonging and engagement, then this should occur almost organically and hopefully young women can carry this experience of having positive connection with them into their lives and into their experiences in the broader community.

* Not her real name

Endnotes

1. Laguerre M 1994, *The Informal City*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.18–19
2. Rogoff B 2014, *Learning by Observing and Pitching In to family and community endeavours: An orientation, Human Development*, no.57, pp.69–81.