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# AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY WORK

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

FROM THE FIELD

FROM THE SECTOR

ACWA UPDATES

BOOK REVIEWS

ACWA RESEARCH AGENDA

2023
VOLUME 3

ACWA
AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY WORKERS ASSOCIATION

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Journal of Community Work acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Traditional Custodians, recognising their ancient and contemporary knowledge, wisdom and enduring relationship to land, air, sea, and fresh waters. We thank them for protecting earth's ecosystems since time immemorial and extend our respect to all Indigenous peoples across Australia - Elders past, present, and emerging.

AUSTRALIAN
**JOURNAL**
OF COMMUNITY WORK

*The Australian Journal of Community Work* (AJCW) is one approach the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) has adopted to fulfill its organisational objectives. This includes the **promotion and advancement of the occupation of community work in its many forms; contributing to the development of new knowledge and research in community work; and to support recognition and confidence in the community work profession**. The Journal provides key contributions towards fulfilling those aims by fostering the **sharing of both practice wisdom and rigorous research**.

Overall the AJCW provides a forum for the discussion and sharing of all facets of the community work profession, including double blind peer-reviewed papers - as well as non-peer reviewed articles. AJCW is listed with the Australian Research Council's (ARC) Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA).

This Journal is currently published annually, with plans to move into publishing semi-annually. We have adopted a rolling submission process with articles welcomed anytime. We do, however, request they are received up to three months prior to publication. This will allow time for relevant papers to go through the double-blind peer reviewing processes. Articles will then be made available to ACWA membership ACWA[1] prior to the graphic designing and collation of the Journal, which will then appear on our website, fully downloadable at no cost.


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1 www.acwa.org.au/ajcw/
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# EDITORIAL

***Welcome to 2023 edition of the Australian Journal of Community Work (AJCW), produced by the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA).***

It comes at a time when our community services sector continues to cope with issues resulting from Covid-19 - now continuing into the post Covid-19 era. The dedication, diligence and perseverance displayed by so many people (paid and volunteer) engaged in the community work profession is exceptional, as this journal illustrates. To support workers facing issues relating to the pandemic ACWA provides resources for workers and their workplace, as well as those to share with clients – please see: ACWA Resources[3].

On a lighter note ACWA, through a range of activities including this journal, has recently renewed long-term collaborations with both *New Community*, the community development journal produced in in Melbourne, and the International Association for Community Development (IACD), based in Scotland. A significant outcome from these partnerships is ACWA/AJCW becoming the Australian host, in conjunction with the IACD, sponsoring of the very successful **World Community Development Conference '*From the Edge*' (WDCD)**, held in Darwin in June 2023. Highlights of the WCDC provided in the first section in this edition.

In common with the diversity of work roles undertaken by those engaged in the community sector profession, articles in this volume span a wide range of topics covered in the Peer-reviewed (both Australia and International), From the Field, From the Study Desk, and From the Sector. They include:

- A proactive outreach approach engaging people, in their local communities, discussing their mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.
- An evaluation of a project that provided a unique model of holistic, wraparound support tailored for individuals – targetting vulnerable parents who may have experienced a range of issues including homelessness or intergenerational trauma.
- Students contributing their stories of journeying through life and study – working towards becoming professional community sector workers.
- Exploration of impacts of family violence - significantly from lived experience of both victim survivors and survivor advocates.
- International Diploma of Community Services students' placements - sharing their cultures within their local community (within Australia) and being warmly embraced in return.
- Two contributions from overseas: one drawing on 'Ubuntu' to ensure no one is left behind through application of inclusive participatory community development - and the other exploring the value of neighbourhood houses and how they fit within international agendas including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- A woman, living with down syndrome, reflecting on her education pathway through to her graduation from university.

The remaining sections also emphasise community work, through Book Reviews, ACWA Updates, Recent Information and Reports, and the ACWA Research Agenda - all important components supporting and connecting involvement within the community services sector.

3 https://www.acwa.org.au/covid-19-resources/

## Editor's Reflections

I recently read an article by Journell (2023)[4], *Why Would Anyone Want to Be a Journal Editor?* It led me to reflect on my role and found I concur with his conclusion that, despite the personal costs, there can be real rewards when taking on this work. Journell summed up editing's true role and responsibility by stating it is to move the field forward in new and/or significant directions. That is the aim of this the Australian Journal of Community Work. ACWA - through this Journal - encourages strong, dynamic research that has the potential to influence public policy and legislation, providing opportunities to promote practitioners' experiences and stories, as well as encouraging public recognition of community work as a profession – thus fostering shared practice wisdom while encouraging the professional pride of community work practitioners (Cordingley, 2020)[5].

**ANNE JENNINGS**
*Editor*

**ACWA has now published three annual editions in the new, revitalised AJCW format. We are calling on our valued authors and readers to let us know your opinion and suggestions relating to this journal, as we are committed to continuous improvement. Your ideas on future research topics and editions are encouraged and we invite all users to seriously consider submitting articles for the next, and later, issues.**

**INTERESTED? PLEASE CONTACT OUR EDITOR ajcw@acwa.org.au for further details.**

4 Journell, W. (2023). Why Would Anyone Want to Be a Journal Editor? Inside Higher Ed. www.insidehighered.com/advice/2023/01/10/why-and-how-become-successful-journal-editor-option

5 Cordingley, S. (2020). AJCW Editorial. Australian Journal of Community Work, Vol 1, p. 4).

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Welcome ceremony by Garramilla Dancers of the Larrakia People, Darwin
Photo kindly provided by Tina Torrens, Torkit Business Solutions.

SPECIAL REPORT

# World Community Development Conference 2023

**By AJCW Editor, Anne Jennings (who was a presenter at the WCDC).**

**SPECIAL REPORT**

**The 2023 World Community Development Conference "FROM the EDGE"** (WCDC) was held in Darwin in June 2023. Initiated by the Scotland based International Association for Community Development (IACD), the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) was the Australian co-host of the event, supported by other valuable sponsors. The gathering provided unique opportunities for Indigenous (a major component of the conference) and non-Indigenous people – local though to global – practitioners (paid and volunteers), academics, policy makers, funders, and other stakeholders met to share perspectives relating to the context and challenges of community development/community work currently, and into the future.

The WCDC focused on working from the edge to deepen connection to community and culture. It was guided by six principles: radical inclusion, provocative action, valuing the local, being good ancestors, and positive change - and was organised around three themes: community, connection, and culture. The conference was organised in partnership with the Larrakia people and became the first IACD conference (since initiated in 1979) to have a strong First Nations focus. Did it achieve its goals? Correspondence from the Northern Land Council answers that question in a letter to the WCDC Organising Committee:

*We appreciate your consistent efforts to ensure that the conference was inclusive and, moreover, that it would serve as a real platform for empowerment and recognition for first nations and other communities in leading their own development. The emphasis on 'bottom up' and practical initiatives, rather than more academic presentations, made the conference an incredibly rich and relevant learning experience for us all.*

420 delegates from 12 countries participated, with presentations and workshops spanning a remarkable range of themes and stories - aimed at expanding our perceptions of working in and with communities. Of note was the collective presentations and conversations by and between Peter Westoby (Qld), Jim Ife (WA) and Anthony Kelly (Qld). This provided many participants the opportunity to hear and meet the authors of research and publications that have been major authoritative reading for community workers over many years.

Of special mention is the presentation of the IACD Lifetime Achievement Award to Anastasia Crickley. Anastasia was conferred with this honour for her enduring commitment to human rights and social justice, and her longstanding contribution to community work in Ireland, internationally with the United Nations and the European Union, and for 9 years as a Board Trustee with the IACD. Anastasia was also the former Head of Department of Applied Social Studies at Maynooth University, Ireland. When receiving this award Anastasia took the opportunity to share some of her experience, reiterating her commitment to community work globally - and placed a call to action around key issues community practitioners will need to address in the coming years.

Importantly, the WCDC provided a comprehensive range of keynote speakers and a wide range of national and international presenters – their addresses are now being added to IACD's YouTube video channel – to view please see:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNd1HpC3EGErLoXk_olG_4Q

Photo: WCDC Organising Committee.

Also of note were the 'Practice Exchanges' – practical learning activities that celebrated the cultural heritage and traditional practices of the region, offered in conjunction with the WCDC. Amongst participants was ACWA Board Member, Les Stewart. Les visited both the Kakadu National Park and the Katherine Gorges, appreciating seeing, and learning about, ancient Aboriginal Rock Art. In his words:

*I have been enriched by what I have seen and experienced, the contact with so many 'likeminded people' and the wonderful opportunity to explore this great land – whose feet the people of the oldest living culture have walked and cared for - for millennia. This was a privilege and honour which I will take with me now and always.*

## ACWA/AJCW Involvement in the WCDC

As well has having members involved on the WCDC organising committee for nearly two years prior to the conference, ACWA was involved in several other ways - including being presenters of the second day two of the conference, opening it with the welcome and an overview of our organisation provided by Nic Toonen OAM, Board President, and Jesu Jacob, Chief Executive Officer.

ACWA board members also presented their work over the conference – Conrad Townsend with his presentation *Shifting the paradigm: working collaboratively across community to end CSE*; as well as facilitating the workshop *Aperture-shining a light on CSE*, and Anne Jennings who presented her research *Exploring ways Community, Culture & Connection can contribute to expanded Socio-Ecological Community Development*. Importantly, Board Member Pam Mitchell generously contributed her skills and supported the team throughout the event.

ACWA Board President, Nic Toonen OAM opening the second day of the conference.

In addition the AJCW's Editorial Advisory Board member Assoc Professor Vicki Banham, from Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, facilitated a stimulating and well received workshop - *Finding your voice: Using the Australian Journal of Community Work to creatively communicate your practice stories.* A positive outcome from this workshop has now commenced, the creation of an online *Community of Practice for Practitioners* initiative encouraging and supporting aspiring community workers to submit papers to the Journal. ACWA members also contributed their research, including Jaya Manchikanti and Jan Richardson - who did us proud. Further, five articles in this edition are a direct result of authors participating in the WCDC.

With all board members in attendance ACWA took the opportunity to hold a Board Meeting, as well as hosting a Special General Meeting. The later was conducted with members both face-to-face and via Zoom. The key agenda item was the proposal to change ACWA's constitution from a not-for-profit (NFP) Association registered in Victoria, to a Company Limited by Guarantee (remaining NFP), registered with the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, covering all of Australia. The motion to change was passed unanimously and everyone involved are sincerely thanked for their contributions. ACWA is now undertaking constitutional requirements to enable change to be finalised.

## CALL FOR PAPERS FOR THE NEXT EDITION OF THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY WORK

**This is the first time the International Association for Community Development, supported by the Australian Community Workers Association, has specifically featured First Nations Peoples at their world conference.**

As a direct result of interest expressed at the World Community Development Conference in Darwin, we are **CALLING FOR ARTICLES RELATING TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS** for our next AJCW issue.

Professor Anne Poelina, Co-Chair of Indigenous Studies at The University of Notre Dame Australia, will contribute her knowledge and wisdom as AJCW's Special Editor – Indigenous for this forthcoming edition.

We are now accepting Peer-Reviewed, Non-peer Reviewed, From the Field and From the Study Desk articles for the special Aboriginal Australians' Lives and Experiences themed edition - as well as our regular genetic community work content. This First Call is open until the 30th April, 2024 and, based on response, a Second Call may be called to close by the 31st July 2024.

**Enquiries to the Editor:**
ajcw@acwa.org.au

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Image by Freepix

PEER REVIEWED

# Doorknocking as a novel approach to community conversations about mental health

**Lisette Kaleveld (presenter at the WCDC), Yasmine Hooper, Emma Crane, Bill Gye, James McKechnie**

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## Background

Many people experiencing distress or mental health conditions, and their families, are not connected to mental health services or supports. Help-seeking is often absent (Alonso et al., 2004; Alonso et al., 2007) or a late-stage occurrence (Christiana et al., 2000), meaning that people do not access the right support at the right time. While mental health issues can be self-managed, or respond well to informal, non-professional support (e.g., Bjørlykhaug et al., 2022; Wells et al., 2022), in some cases where individuals delay or avoid formal, specialist care, there can be adverse outcomes and costs to the persons' quality of life, social functioning, and finances (Wainberg, 2017; Oliver et al., 2005).

The Assisting Communities through Direct Connection (ACDC) Project, operating since 2021, utilises doorknocking to reach and speak with householders about their mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. This novel, proactive outreach approach not only facilitates important conversations, but doorknockers also deliver pragmatic help in discussing support options, providing information and linking people with mental health or other services if needed.

Between 2021 and 2022, 21 sites (both metropolitan and regional) across all Australian states and territories were visited by People Connectors of the ACDC Project. Over the course of Round One (four sites) and Round Two (17 sites), People Connectors knocked on over 37,000 doors. More than 6,600 householders engaged in a conversation at the front door and approximately 4,000 people completed a survey about their social and emotional wellbeing. The Project is currently active in six additional Round Three sites.

## A rethink of who accesses, and how people access, mental health support

Community Mental Health Australia (CMHA) conceptualised the project in response to some of the key issues underpinning the current 'mental health crisis', a term that describes the under-functioning of Australia's mental health service system both in terms of the uneven quality of its service delivery, as well as the significant barriers that stand between services and the people who need help.

In 1971, Julian Tudor Hart famously published a paper, 'The Inverse Care Law' (Hart, 1971), asserting that the availability of good medical care tends to correlate inversely with the need for it in the population served. Hart argued that inequalities in health, as a result of 'deprived environments' (or, as we refer to them today, the social determinants of health) are compounded by inequalities in access to care, as poorer members of society cannot afford to pay, or the services are not as available in their local communities.

Hart's widely cited paper remains relevant decades later (Kaleveld, et al., 2023).

In the mental health context in Australia, we also know that stigma is persistent and exists alongside poor mental health literacy, which may be higher among those most in need of support (Reavley & Jorm, 2011; Tay et al., 2018). In addition, when people are ready to seek help, they often face difficulties finding appropriate supports and services available locally (Corscadden et al., 2019) or do not know about the free or low-cost community-based support options available.

While there is a reform agenda to improve mental health services (Productivity Commission, 2020; State of Victoria, 2021), there is also a need to look beyond clinical services, to connect with people outside of service settings, and to also identify what the local environmental and social determinants of poor wellbeing are within various community settings (Hooper et al., 2022).

Without local, contemporary knowledge of discrete communities and places, one cannot assume what supports, services and activities are needed (Rock & Cross, 2020).

***"If you go proactively out into community…you will get a real selection of people because there's a lot of people that don't go into help-seeking behaviour or they're quite averse to being connected to traditional mental health services." (ACDC Project Team member)***

As conversations are by nature two-way, the doorknocking approach was also a chance for community organisations to learn and gain feet-on-the-ground knowledge about what people in their community are struggling with, in terms of unmet mental health needs (Rock & Cross, 2020). Importantly, this may also be an opportunity to reimagine more diverse ways of supporting wellbeing at the community level.

## A community building approach to support wellbeing and connection

The ACDC Project employs teams of two 'People Connectors' who go door-to-door to facilitate conversations with householders about their mental health and wellbeing, to deliver mental health information and, if needed, to link householders to local services and supports. The People Connectors are usually local residents, recruited for their experience and knowledge of their community (for example, many had previous community sector or support worker experience and there were also several bi-lingual/tri-lingual and bi-cultural People Connector teams).

The conversations instigated with householders were knowledge exchanges; a chance to share information about personal experiences and needs, validate concerns for community wellbeing and explore local support options. In their listening role, People Connectors became expert matchmakers who used their expanding knowledge of the community ecosystem to link people to appropriate services, and also to other supports such as local scrapbooking groups, community exercise classes or bingo nights. In this sense the People Connectors held a community-building role, and their confidence in themselves as facilitators of community knowledge only strengthened over time.

The doorknocking conversations also provided important opportunities for low-key and low-stakes conversations about mental health, which are sometimes not possible outside of clinical settings, or within one's social network. Householders were free to self-describe how they were faring, in the context of their own level of mental health awareness (e.g., knowledge of mental health and capacity for self-awareness and reflection), personal expression and life experience. When a Householder described themselves as 'down in the dumps' for example, this was taken as valid and not necessarily interrogated further to align with diagnostic criteria or specific mental health categories (Kaleveld, et al., 2023). Instead, problem-solving conversations explored what could help shift that experience.

## Overview of methods

The Centre for Social Impact, University of Western Australia (CSI UWA) was engaged to evaluate the project and understand its value for householders (see evaluation report – Kaleveld, et al., 2023). A mixed methods approach involving a literature review, focus groups and interviews, ensured a range of information could be collected to inform the evaluation.

Analysis of survey responses was also undertaken to identify mental health need –across sites and Householder demographics. The survey included self-reporting; standardised measures, such as the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2002); the UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004), and the 5-item World Health Organisation Well-Being Index (WHO-5; World Health Organisation, 1998). It asked householders to consider challenges impacting their mental health and wellbeing (for example, financial or housing stress, problems with friends and family, or physical health concerns; also referred to as social determinants of mental health).

We also gathered information about householders' experiences of mental health support needs, and any barriers to accessing help or support.

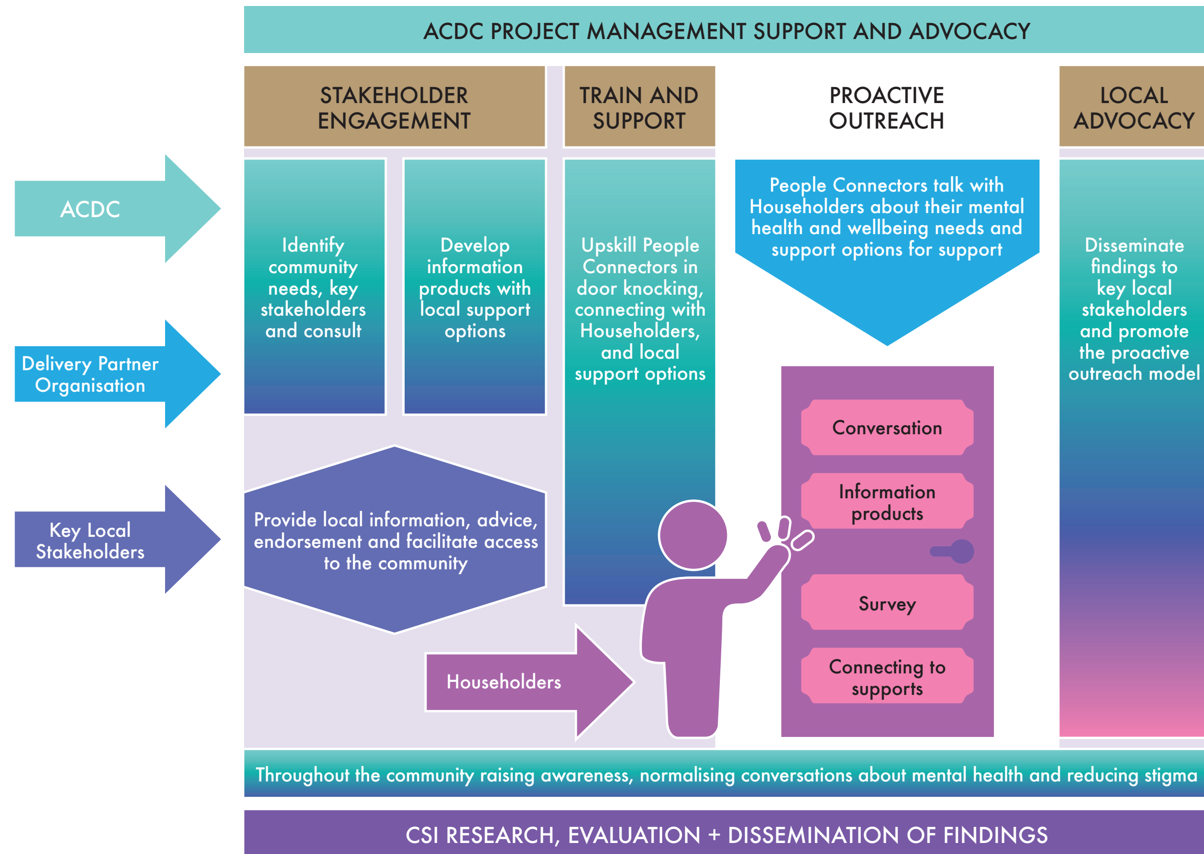
## Engaging the communities

The ACDC Project team, based in Sydney, engaged locally-based organisations – Delivery Partner Organisations (DPOs) – in diverse regions and towns. People Connectors doorknocked in their communities over a 13-week period. During their fieldwork, the People Connectors received support from the ACDC Project Trainer, their Line Manager, and through regular Community of Practice meetings with other People Connectors from other communities. After the conclusion of fieldwork, a summary of local-level survey responses was shared with each of the DPOs, who often shared the data with their local service provider networks to promote conversations about what is needed to better meet the mental health needs of their community. Figure 1 (Kaleveld, et al., 2023, p. 50) provides an outline of the ACDC Project implementation process.

Image by Freepix

1 The Community of Practice meetings were useful check-in points in which to reflect, share and debrief with other People Connectors. The teams of People Connectors had different levels of experience in the role (some having doorknocked for nearly the full 13 weeks, whereas others had only just commenced fieldwork), providing an informal space for guidance, advice, and shared problem solving.

**Figure 1. The ACDC Project implementation process.**




Note. From "*Doorknocking for mental health: Evaluating a novel outreach approach for addressing mental health. Round Two of the Assisting Communities through Direct Connection Project.*", by L. Kaleveld, et al., 2023, p. 50. Copyright CSI, 2023.

Multiple factors influenced project execution and the responsiveness of the community. People Connectors and DPOs chose the suburbs for doorknocking based on understandings of the needs and areas known to the DPO, and in some cases based on the DPO's own plans for increasing their organisational presence. Physical landscapes, remoteness and distance to services, dwelling types, levels of advantage or disadvantage, or social issues within the community were all factors that varied significantly, and the contextual diversity across sites was significant.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD; ABS, 2018), which reflects the economic and social conditions of households within an area, was allocated to each site at the suburb level. Decile 1 refers to sites of greatest disadvantage (lowest 10%), whereas decile 10 (top 10%) refers to sites with greatest advantage. A low decile can indicate a postcode where many households were low income, and/ or many people in low-income occupations, but also, where few households had high incomes, and/or few people in high-income occupations. A high decile indicates the contrary. As Figure 2 (Kaleveld, et al., 2023, p. 73) shows, sites spanned multiple IRSAD categories reflecting differing socioeconomic statuses across the suburbs visited by People Connectors.



**Figure 2. State, suburb, postcode and IRSAD across sites.**

POSTCODES VISITED AND INDEX OF ADVANTAGE/DISADVANTAGE

| STATE/ TERRITORY | ACDC SITE | Decile 1 | Decile 2 | Decile 3 | Decile 4 | Decile 5 | Decile 6 | Decile 7 | Decile 8 | Decile 9 | Decile 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| New South Wales | Cabramatta | 2166 | | | | | | | | | |
| | Clarence Valley | 2463 | | 2464 | | | | | | | |
| | Greenacre | | | 2190 | | | | | | | |
| | Hurstville | | | | | | | 2220 | | | |
| | Wollondilly | | | 2573 | | | | | | 2571 | |
| Northern Territory | Palmerston | 0830 | | 0830 | | | | | | | 0832 |
| Queensland | Ipswich | 4305 Ipswich | 4305 North 4305 West | | | | | | | | |
| | Mareeba | | 4880 | | | | | | | | |
| | Redcliffe | | 4019 | | | | | | | | |
| | Toowoomba | 4020 | | | | | | | | | |
| South Australia | Port Adelaide | | 4350 | 4350 | | | | | | | |
| Tasmania | Burnie | | 5013 | 5014 | | | | | | | |
| | George Town | 7320 | | | 7320 | | | | | | |
| Victoria | Macedon Ranges | 7253 | | | | | | | | | |
| | Bendigo | | | | | | | 3434 | | 3437 | |
| | Fitzroy | 3431 | | | | | | | | | |
| Western Australia | City of Swan | 3550 | 3556 | | | | | | | | |
| | | 3555 | | | | | | | | | |
| | | 3550 | 3555 | | | | | | | | |
| | | 3550 | 3550 | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | 3065 | | | |
| | | | | 6063 | | 6066 | | | | | |

Note. From "*Doorknocking for mental health: Evaluating a novel outreach approach for addressing mental health. Round Two of the Assisting Communities through Direct Connection Project.*", by L. Kaleveld, et al., 2023, p. 73. Copyright CSI, 2023.

Most suburbs (25 suburbs; 69.4% of all suburbs) fell within the highest categories of disadvantage (deciles 1-3), indicating that People Connectors generally doorknocked in suburbs with lower levels of advantage than what is considered 'average' in Australia. This reflects the selection process whereby community organisations wanted to maximise the benefits of this approach by reaching people who may be most in need because of their amplified experiences of the social determinants of mental health (e.g., economic disadvantage, lack of secure housing), as well as the perception of lower rates of mental health literacy and help-seeking in less advantaged areas. Although, after doorknocking, People Connectors often reflected on how localised relative advantage/disadvantage could be, with noticeable wealth discrepancies between neighbouring suburbs, streets and even between houses on the same street.

The ABS data, although indicative only, helped to set the scene for who lived in each community and their possible struggles and challenges. Socioeconomic factors are key determinants of health, and generally people in lower socioeconomic groups are at greater risk of poor health and wellbeing, disability and illness, unemployment, social exclusion, and homelessness/housing instability .

Having a statistical overview of the site selected for doorknocking was a means of preparing People Connectors for field work. A Community Overview was produced for each site, comprising basic population information (collected from the ABS Census), information about housing (including social housing), internet access, and mental health statistics (e.g., psychological distress, emergency department presentations for mental health, etc.), relative to each suburb. This provided contextual information to the teams of People Connectors and also prompted discussions about what resources and supports might be relevant for the people in their community.

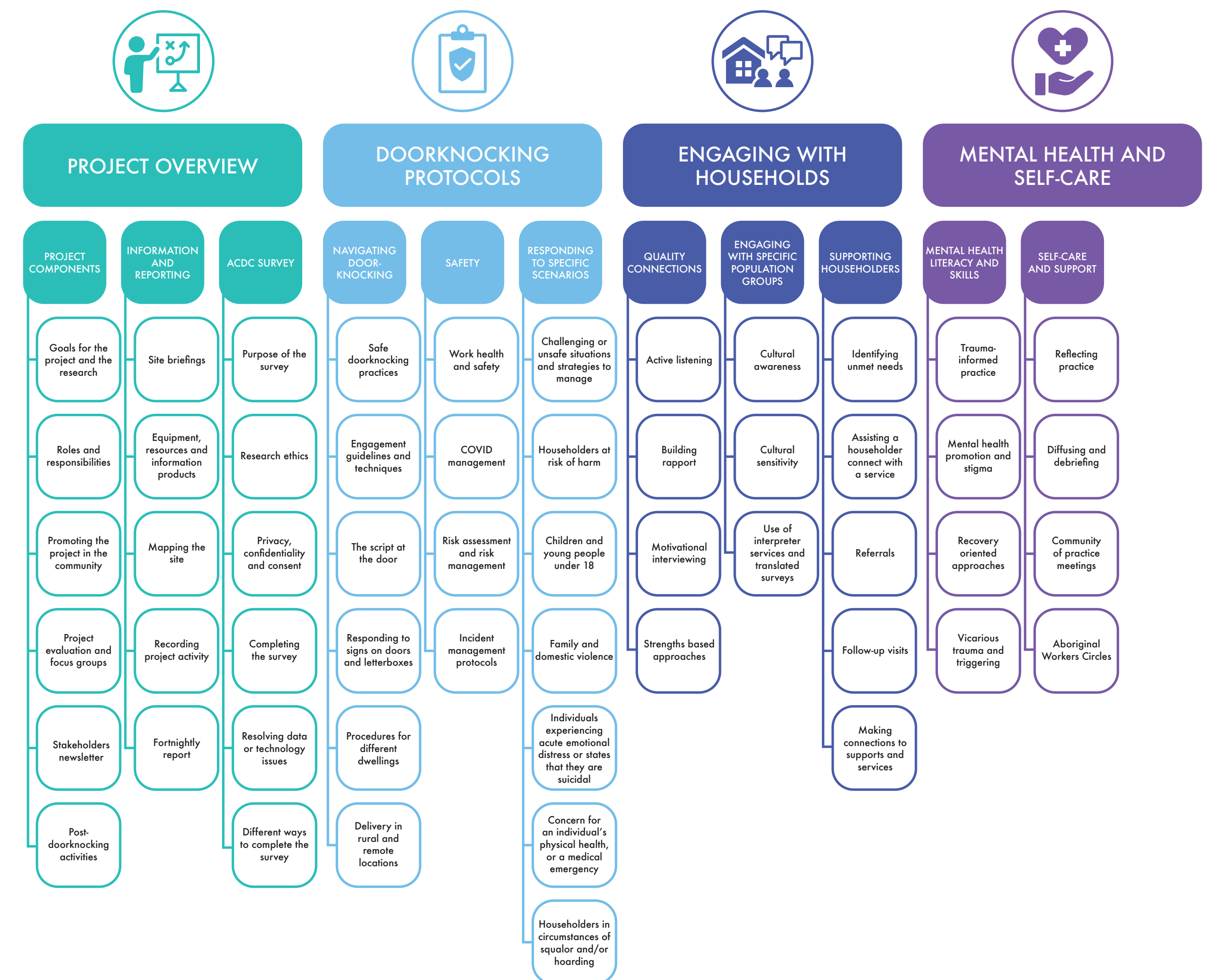
Prior to the commencement of doorknocking at each site, the DPO Line Manager and the CMHA Partnerships and Engagement Manager met with the local council and social housing providers at each site, to share information about the project about to commence in the community, but also to seek local information about the suburbs, including significant events, local issues, or any known or potential risks to People Connectors.

## People Connectors' skills and capacities

Each People Connector brought unique skills and expertise to their role and their prior experience varied. Some had certificates in mental health or had worked in helping professions (e.g., as a paramedic), whereas others had minimal or no experience providing support to others. Having a related qualification was preferred, but not essential. It was peoples' personality and communication skills that were crucial. Applicants needed to have the ability to put a stranger at ease, while showing genuine compassion and understanding and sometimes making rapid decisions about how to best support someone in real time.

After being recruited, People Connectors underwent one week of full-time training, delivered by a specialist consultant trainer engaged by CMHA. The training topics included modules to help understand the project intent and requirements; doorknocking methodology; skills to engage with householders effectively; work health and safety; as well as building capacity around mental health, including mental health literacy and the self-care needed to sustain the role. Figure 3 (Kaleveld, et al., 2023, p. 55) provides an overview of the training delivered to all the People Connectors.

**Figure 3. Overview of training delivered to the People Connectors.**




Note. From "*Doorknocking for mental health: Evaluating a novel outreach approach for addressing mental health. Round Two of the Assisting Communities through Direct Connection Project.*", by L. Kaleveld, et al., 2023, p. 55. Copyright CSI, 2023.

2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). *Health across socioeconomic groups*. https://www.aihw.gov.au

People Connectors often found that doorknocking for the ACDC Project provided a unique experience of connecting with people that was incredibly satisfying and meaningful. The opportunity to go door-to-door, with permission to be caring and curious, and having authentic and unhurried conversations, was novel and rewarding in unexpected ways.

Often, the Householder was not expecting to be assisted and the emotional support People Connectors could provide was immediate, which was gratifying for both for the Householder and the People Connector.

***"This one guy hadn't spoken to anyone for like nearly five months, not a single human being was in his home for five months, because of COVID. And then, he was stoked to just have a chat, have a general chat with me at the front door, which was kind of cool." (People Connector)***

Most People Connectors, however, also spoke of their experience doorknocking in terms of both physical and emotional intensity. The demands of walking all day in the sun or rain, carrying information packs, and not being able to rest or sit down, were significant, especially in sites or seasons that were very hot, very cold, and/or very wet. There was also the emotionally demanding work of listening without any of the typical boundaries that the helping professionals have (such as time limits, appointment protocols, or comfortable settings), or the tiring work of always being an unscheduled and potentially unwelcome visitor.

***"Even just the rejection of no-one answering the door…if we have like five in a row, and no-one answers you, the next one you sort of just expect them not to answer. Like, it sort of puts you down." (People Connector)***

It should also be said that the intensity of the role, the 'adventure' of doing fieldwork, and all the unexpected encounters that come with outreach work also added to job satisfaction in a positive way, and some People Connectors noted how hard it will be to go back to an ordinary desk job after engaging with their communities in this capacity. Nonetheless, supporting People Connectors over the course of their role through the regular Community of Practice and supervision meetings, was critical to sustaining their energy levels, wellbeing, and motivation in the field.

## Experiences in the field

When doorknocking commenced, the teams of People Connectors walked the streets of the selected suburbs, hoping to speak with willing householders at their front door. The People Connectors were careful and respectful in approaching houses (e.g., walking on pathways not lawns, standing back from the door after knocking etc.), and their interactions with householders.

The householders opened their doors to two people wearing matching white ACDC Project polo shirts, ACDC Project ID badges, and lanyards, holding information packs and an iPad. They presented as somewhat official, yet friendly and casual. People Connectors described these first few seconds as crucial, with the Householder perhaps assessing the 'agenda' and trustworthiness of the People Connectors, while the People Connectors were alert to the potential responsiveness (or non-responsiveness) of the Householder, including any environmental circumstances that they needed to accommodate (e.g., the Householder being preoccupied with a baby, an excited dog, a household member working from home, or rushing on their way out the door).

After greeting the Householder, one of the People Connectors in the team took a more active role in the interaction. People Connectors made this quick decision based on cues from the Householder or team agreements about who would take the lead and under what circumstances – for example, gender matching the Householder who answered the door, with either the male or female People Connector, or just a gut feeling about who might be most relatable. Some householders were initially hesitant and needed more explanation about the ACDC Project before being comfortable enough to participate. Many householders met the People Connectors with a cautious curiosity and wanted to chat before they relaxed into the conversation. Others were keen to talk from the outset, including about mental health and wellbeing.

The People Connectors explained that the first few minutes of every visit was dynamic as their intuition and judgement helped them engage with the Householder in the most natural way. Also, depending on their knowledge of the local culture, the street, or even their first impressions of the Householder, they sometimes decided not to mention 'mental health' upfront. Instead, they talked about wellbeing, or simply said 'we want to see how you are doing', or 'we are here to talk to the community about what is needed to help people stay well'.

Through the course of the conversation, however, People Connectors looked for appropriate ways to initiate conversations about mental health. Sometimes, householders reported being 'fine' and had nothing to say about mental health, however, when prompted and as the conversation progressed, they shared concerns about the mental health of their loved ones, the people in their social network, or those in their community. Sometimes, later in the conversation the Householder revealed (or perhaps even realised) they were not fine after all. People Connectors listened for indications of needs that could be met through local support options, and, if it felt appropriate to do so, they discussed these options with householders.

***"We're not going to tell you to do anything… We just want to have a chat and see if there's a way that we can assist and support before the wheels really fall off. Or if they've fallen off, let's do a bit of work for you and we can come back to you with some really informed choices and things like that. So I think trying to address the issue at the door just breaks down that barrier for people, the stigma of trying to get out and access a service." (People Connector)***

Where householders had a need for further support, the People Connectors could provide information about local services or community supports, assist with contacting services, or obtain consent from the Householder to follow up with them at another time – for example, if a referral was warranted.

Although the teams of People Connectors were provided with very structured training, clear guidelines and protocols around doorknocking, they were also highly adaptable to each household they approached. While going door-to-door could be mundane, facilitating positive connections with people was ultimately a creative role. Doorknocking teams needed the extensive skills and knowledge practiced in training, as well as compassion, values, insight, and detailed community knowledge to deliver the project effectively.

## Responsiveness to doorknocking

Householders were, in general, very responsive to conversations about mental health with a friendly stranger at their doorstep. Of those householders who answered the door, nearly half agreed to engage with the People Connectors, and over 6,600 people had an extended conversation.

The quality connection developed between the People Connectors and the householder was what householders emphasised most about their experiences. The chance for an open-ended conversation that the householder could steer, a caring person who offered listening and a willingness to engage with difficult topics of discussion if needed, meant a connection could be built rapidly and ultimately, this sparked something for householders.

Interviews conducted with householders indicated that, from their perspective, what stood out for them as being important in a cold calling situation was:

- The People Connectors' authenticity;
- The People Connectors' ability to create a connection;
- The information People Connectors provided to householders (e.g., quality or relevance);
- The People Connectors' personality and relatability (e.g., being friendly and caring);
- The People Connectors' work/life experiences (e.g., having lived experience was favourable for some); and
- The gender of the People Connectors and having mixed gender teams (e.g., male householders connected better with male People Connectors, whereas some householders did not feel safe with male People Connectors approaching their homes).

People Connectors also agreed that householders were generally open to the engagement. Despite some initial hesitation from some people they were surprisingly receptive to talking about mental health. Perhaps these conversations met an unmet need, or simply provided people comfort. Perhaps in many communities existing opportunities to informally discuss mental health and feel supported were limited or relied on people actively seeking them out.

## Case study

In one example, a householder was living with multiple unmet needs mental health, housing and financial support needs, with prior attempts to seek support having failed. This person experienced social anxiety, which prevented him from being able to talk to strangers on the telephone. People Connectors were able to make the phone calls on his behalf, to connect him to a case worker in an organisation that could provide more sustained support, and to ultimately connect him with NDIS supports. This illustrated how sometimes people are stuck in their attempts to seek support, and small inputs from a caring team that visits and listens, can be transformative and lead to practical outcomes for householders who would not have otherwise got the help they needed.

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## Outcomes for householders

For most householders, the People Connectors' visit was seen as valued, validating, and comforting. For a smaller number of householders, the experience was incredibly powerful and left an enduring impact. We used householder interview and householder evaluation survey data to understand the impact of doorknocking in terms of immediate outcomes, short term outcomes and longer-term outcomes.

- **Immediate outcomes:** Householders described how the visit improved their wellbeing and mood and were happy to keep the information resources handy.
- **Short-term outcomes:** As a result of the visit: approximately 80% of people utilised the resources provided by the People Connectors, 60% spoke to a friend/family member about their mental health or wellbeing, and notably, more than half of the householders surveyed reported that the visit had promoted them to seek, or plan to seek, supports for their own mental health and wellbeing.
- **Longer-term outcomes:** Although we do not know the true extent to which this happened, interviews with householders a few months after the visit indicated a sense of still feeling 'better' after the visit ("I am still buzzing"), often due to the opportunity to discuss concerns, challenges or feelings of distress with a caring stranger who had the skills to facilitate a safe space for offering support. Increased motivation for change (that was lasting) was also noted by a Householder. For at least one Householder, there was also an apparent reduction of stigma towards mental health and wellbeing.

## Outcomes for People Connectors

The People Connectors reflected on their 'connecting skills' that they had gained through doorknocking, which they said involved highly responsive interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. Interestingly, some People Connectors noted that when practiced everyday their connecting skills improved over time and they found this to be very empowering. They were now more confident about 'connecting with anyone' and found strength in this improved capacity.

People Connectors were sometimes personally impacted by speaking with householders with very urgent or complex needs, or people facing difficult life circumstances. They learnt, in more depth, of the challenges and concerns that typically impacted the mental health of the people in their community and were also able to see the service system from the standpoint of the people they had visited. Thus People Connectors gained insights about the common systematic and personal barriers people face when attempting to seek help.

Whether it was an intended or unintended outcome of the project, many People Connectors became personally aligned with the project's values and objectives, even though they may not have thought too much about them at the start of their contract. After walking through neighbourhoods and having conversations with householders, (and with one another), some People Connectors came to understand that people facing difficult times should be supported and not have to cope on their own. Further, some People Connectors said they gained understanding of the insufficiencies and injustices within Australia's service systems, which were not apparent to them at the start of the project. Through their experiences of going door-to-door, in some cases they developed the motivation to pursue more meaningful work that connected to community.

## Considerations for implementing a doorknocking approach

Our learnings about doorknocking conversations about mental health are based on analysis of multiple data sources, and overall, the evidence suggests that:

- Doorknocking is an **effective means of discovering people with unmet mental health** needs, who might otherwise remain unknown to services.
- With training, supervision and protocols in place, the **doorknocking teams' experiences were positive**; it was emotionally satisfying and stimulating, and generally people felt safe and supported in their role.
- **The emphasis on a quality connection** with the Householder, without any pressures or service-centric agendas, was critical to its success.
- This approach can **effectively link people into supports** for people who are otherwise not supported, by addressing barriers to help-seeking such as poor attitudes to mental health, or not knowing that assistance exists.
- Due to the flexibility and innate responsiveness of the conversational approach, it can be **effective for exploring and addressing a very diverse range of needs and access barriers**, including those felt by people experiencing disadvantage or living in lower SES communities.
- The approach may be worth trialling or investing in, for the potential positive gains. Householders perceived the visit from People Connectors as validating and comforting and in some cases was transformative, **with powerful and had sustained positive impacts**.
- The addition of a **short, voluntary survey was highly valuable** for providing evidence of local-level needs.



## Health equity outcomes

Seeing the ACDC Project through a health equity lens uncovered several key findings immediately, as noted in the evaluation report (Kaleveld, et al., 2023). Firstly, doorknocking removes many of the typical access barriers that vulnerable groups face when seeking help. One Householder said they were overcome by being able to have an extended conversation with the People Connectors immediately, without wait times or administrative work or appointments to navigate. It was, simply, an unexpected experience of support. There were no transport or cost barriers, nor extensive eligibility criteria that often prevents people from getting support. The benefit of doorknocking therefore could be a chance to connect with people who would not otherwise seek out the conversation or the supports.

***"From a health equity and human rights perspective, there is a need to 'take the risk' of connecting meaningfully with people who are not receiving care and support or engaging in 'help seeking' behaviour. A doorknocking approach offers an exciting opportunity and a simple novel way to do this." Kerry Hawkins, Commissioner, National Mental Health Commission (quoted in Kaleveld, et al., 2023, p. 5)***

The power of the ACDC Project to connect with people who may be easily deterred by other barriers is notable, although there are limitations to the one-off nature of doorknocking. However, follow-up interviews a few months later with some householders indicates that, for some people, once they have this experience of support and feel the benefits, they are convinced to seek more sustained ways of being supported (Kaleveld, et al., 2023).

## Concluding thoughts

The ACDC Project puts a spotlight on the 'connector role' and its possible significance in supporting the population's mental health. In Australia's crisis-driven, specialisation-focused mental health system there are very limited, dedicated resources for quality connecting skills and work can be overlooked or undervalued. Undertaking this role outside of service settings also brings with it unique benefits such as reaching people who may otherwise not reach out to services. It is also an opportunity to do community building work; gaining and sharing knowledge of what exists locally to support wellbeing.

It was not in scope for this paper to systematically explore the themes arising from the conversations, or the value of localised thematic analysis of doorknocking conversations. However, we anticipate additional benefits could flow from this rich qualitative data. On the other hand, we recognise that more scrutiny is needed about whether this process could increase expectations of being helped that could not be met. There is also a need to explore further the differences between individual and collective approaches to lobbying for better resources.

While it is important to consider these questions further, we also hold the hope that this proactive approach of 'going to the people' can be incorporated as a common practice in social service planning, and potentially deliver greater community inclusion and health equity outcomes.

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# Addressing complex vulnerability through a holistic relational support model: Findings from a place-based project in Western Australia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper builds on existing understandings of support models for addressing complex vulnerability through community work and partnerships examined in relation to findings from a mixed methods evaluation of a two-year project in the Peel region of Western Australia. The project provided a unique model of holistic, wraparound support tailored to individuals, targeting vulnerable parents (n=67) who may have experienced family and domestic violence, mental health issues, homelessness, un/underemployment or intergenerational trauma. The project provided both relational and practical support in a way that transcended traditional service boundaries, including through one-on-one mentoring sessions, group training sessions and access to a brokerage fund for immediate financial assistance. At the heart of the project was a partnership between compassionate mentors with lived experience of adversity, and vulnerable individuals who were often overwhelmed by life circumstances but also highly capable of self-directed action and growth. Findings showed significant improvements in participants' mindset and self-development, career development and life circumstances in a way that emphasised self-determination and agency. Empowerment among participants was both a strong process and outcome of the project, reflecting the value of localised, holistic relational support models as drivers and examples of high-impact place-based community work.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents evaluation findings from a project supporting vulnerable parents in the Peel region of Western Australia (WA). Bridging the Gap (BTG) obtained funding from Lotterywest (the official State lottery of WA) to run the Parents, Learning, Advancing, Nurturing (PLAN) project from October 2021 to June 2023, and the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia (CSI UWA) was contracted to evaluate the project. This paper presents findings from the evaluation (Atkins, et al., 2023), which found that the project had strong efficacy in terms of generating outcomes among participants and offering a well-designed bespoke suite of supports. Although some barriers to engagement existed and the project was only able to support a relatively small sample of vulnerable parents in the Peel region, we found that the PLAN project was a very effective model for supporting vulnerable individuals through community work and partnerships.

Material and psychological vulnerability is a felt phenomenon, and in the context of this paper, we define vulnerability as a person's risk of exposure to crises or adversity, the risk of having inadequate resources to cope with these situations, and the risk of being subject to consequences arising from this (Chambers, 1983; Watts & Bolhe, 1993). Being a parent can compound existing vulnerabilities or create new vulnerabilities for parent and child(ren). For example, postnatal depression is known to affect both sexes (Almond, 2009; Edward, et al., 2015; Reck, et al., 2008), and pressures related to being or becoming a parent include financial strain, fatigue, stress, time pressure, and changes in family dynamics and ways of life (Monaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Boath, et al., 1998; Ruppanner, et al., 2018; Delicate, et al., 2018). For single parents, the effects of stress may be compounded (Cairney, et al., 2003). This happens where allostatic load, i.e. the physiological burden from the accumulation of demands and life stresses, is increased; this can have the effect of more stress-related health issues and unhealthy coping behaviours as a result (Johner, 2007).

Financial strain and un/underemployment have strong associations with higher allostatic load (McEwen & Wingfield, 2003), and there is evidence to suggest that experiences of vulnerability as a parent may be increased by lower income and education levels (Field, et al., 2006). In some cases, women may experience more negative effects in the transition to parenthood than men due to gendered expectations of caregiving and insufficient supports (Baxter, et al., 2008) and a change in employment status and hours (Hynes & Clarkberg, 2005). When these experiences of vulnerability as a parent coincide with lack of support, and alongside other experiences of vulnerability such as family and domestic violence (FDV), housing instability or homelessness, mental illness, alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues, and chronic un/underemployment, a complex level of vulnerability emerges that may be intergenerationally transmitted. A child's exposure to a parent's vulnerability in the areas described here can create an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) which is strongly associated with future issues including depression, suicide, physical health problems, AOD problems and violence (Dube, et al., 2003; Dube, et al., 2001; Hughes, et al., 2017); thus, it is not just parents for whom vulnerability poses serious risks.

The co-occurrence of risk factors can increase an individual's vulnerability and cause downstream effects; for instance, financial strain is a known risk factor for FDV (Smith & Weatherburn, 2013; Pattavina, et al., 2015) and the effects of FDV can compound vulnerability in a number of ways. A severe and chronic stressor such as FDV can negatively impact the hypothalmo-pituitary-adrenocortical axis stress response and may cause ongoing issues if it does not return to normal (Chapman, et al., 2008; Crofford, 2007; Herman, 2013), and in stressful situations like these where depressive and/or traumatic symptoms occur, it is not uncommon for a 'learned helplessness' to be acquired where individuals feel a lack of control and perceive that a situation is inescapable (Seligman, 1975). Feels of entrapment and defeat often follow such experiences, and in the case of FDV, this can be facilitated by trauma and depressive symptoms (Bargai, et al., 2007; Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994).

Homelessness and housing instability is also associated with a range of other risk factors and experiences of vulnerability including unemployment, low education attainment, FDV, AOD issues and undiagnosed/unsupported mental health issues (Johnson, et al., 2015; Flatau, et al., 2022). The most common reason that individuals accessed Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in Australia from 2021-22 was FDV (41% of these people also had mental health issues), and financial difficulties were also cited in the top for reasons (AIHW, 2022). In Western Australia, those most likely to be represented in the homeless population are indigenous people; people experiencing FDV; people living with mental health issues; young people presenting along (15-24); and people with

AOD issues (Kaleveld, et al., 2018). Thus, a layering of risk factors deepens an individual's vulnerability across multiple facets of life and may see them entrenched in "the system" for some time.

Recognising this complex picture of vulnerability that exists for many Australians, there has been a growing emphasis on efforts to address vulnerability and risk (Parliament of Australia, 2021; Department of Health, 2021; Victorian Government, 2012; McLachlan, et al., 2013) and to facilitate wellbeing and empowerment (Dudgeon, 2014; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Yet the reality of seeking and accessing support is not always easy, and service delays and gaps in Australia span housing services, legal assistance, the justice system, child protection, mental health support, financial support, and protection for migrants (Flanagan, et al., 2019). Many additional barriers may prevent vulnerable individuals from attempting to access support at all – these include lack of knowledge or awareness of support options, cost barriers, mental health issues, being in a controlling relationship, and practical barriers such as transport. Thus, holistic support options which address the complexity of many experiences of vulnerability, and the barriers to accessing effective support among vulnerable individuals, may be extremely valuable.

The role of mentorship and relational support in addressing vulnerability is, at present, under-researched but significant; empathy and a display of care and support are generally understood to be important aspects of bringing about change in individuals (Warner, 1996), and there is evidence to suggest that a therapeutic relationship is very effective for supporting FDV victims (Roddy, 2013). Where vulnerability coincides with a lack of effective social supports, as is often the case with experiences such as FDV and homelessness, improving social supports and networks is considered important (Goodman, et al., 2016; Goodman & Smyth, 2011). Practically it may be necessary to 'match' people with different supports (Cutrona & Russell, 1990); central to this idea is the understanding that support should, ideally, be tailored to the individual since no two experiences of adversity are the same. There is growing evidence on the importance of respect, safety and autonomy in support settings for FDV victims specifically (Ford-Gilboe, et al., 2020; Nolet, et al., 2021; Chang, et al., 2005), but more generally, it is reasonable to assume that sensitivity to the unique circumstances of an individual, and a display of genuine care and connection alongside offering practical support to move in a positive direction of change, can address vulnerability with strong efficacy.

## The PLAN Project

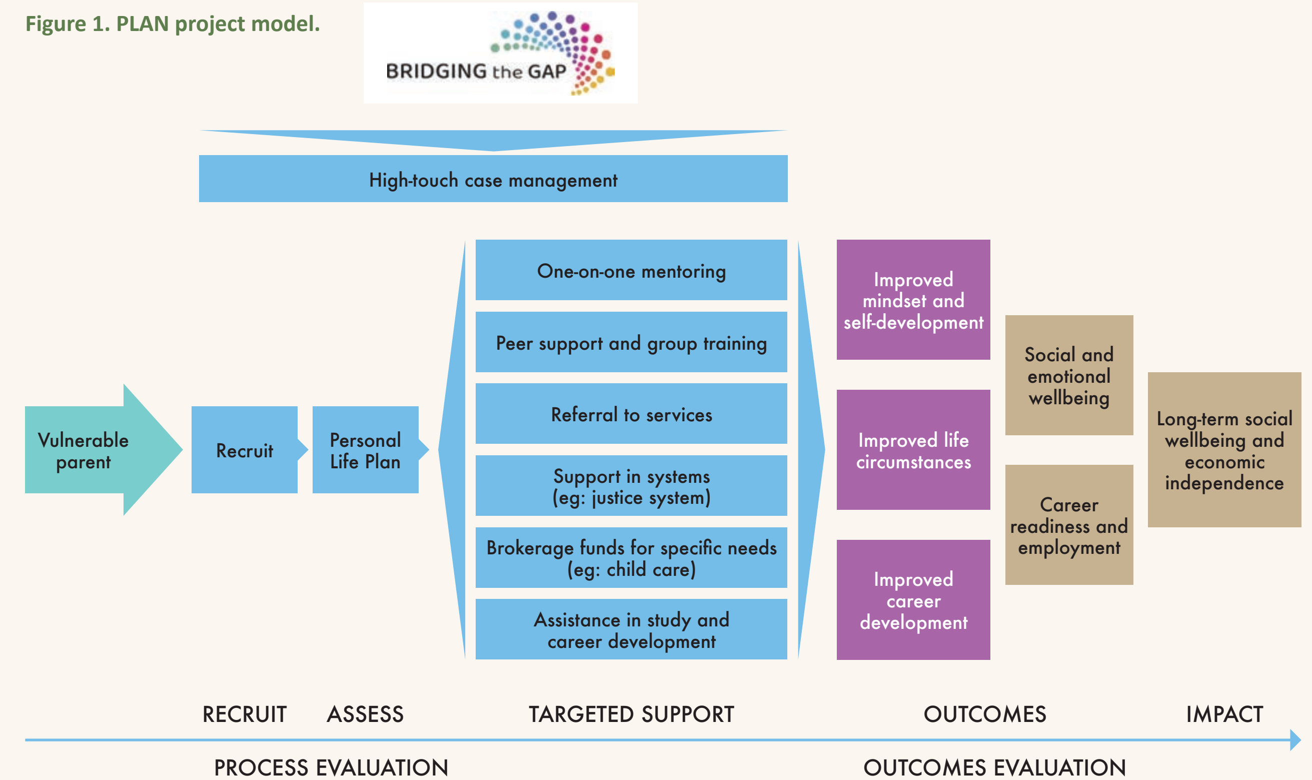
BTG identified a need for a holistic support options for vulnerable parents in the Peel region to address barriers to wellbeing, employment and financial and emotional stability. The PLAN project was created to help fill this gap by offering high-touch case management with an individualised model of wraparound support, building on the successes of the earlier Career Readiness for Young Parents (CRFYP) project (Atkins, et al., 2022). The PLAN project targeted vulnerable parents between the ages of 18 and 64 in the Mandurah, Kwinana and Rockingham local government areas of the Peel region in Western Australia.

Mandurah, Kwinana and Rockingham are in the southern parts of the Perth Metropolitan Region. Rockingham and Kwinana have a strong industrial sector and Mandurah is a satellite town of Perth, with many workers making the hour-long commute by train into the city. The areas are characterised by high incidence of youth unemployment, homelessness and family and domestic violence (FDV) which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 restrictions and impacts. This has disproportionately affected women and single parents. Whilst the area is well served by social services, the PLAN project is unique in the support they offer.

The aim of the PLAN project was to support vulnerable parents in three key focus areas of mindset and personal development, career development and life circumstances.

A vulnerable parent was defined as experiencing one or more of the following: family and domestic violence (FDV); homelessness or housing instability; long-term (or recent) unemployment; mental health issues; or financial hardship. Often, individuals who were experiencing a number of these things were recruited to the project (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. PLAN project model.




The PLAN project was delivered on a rolling start basis so that participants could join at any time and remain in the project until they achieved case closure (i.e. their goals were achieved). Parents were recruited to the project to receive support for crisis prevention and early intervention; typically they were referred by local service providers such as a child health nurse.

Two main sites were operated, in Mandurah and Kwinana, with one mentor at each site. An additional outreach service was added in Pinjarra one day a week in the later stages of the project.

Upon recruitment, individuals were supported by their mentor to participate in a bespoke suite of activities. These included:

- A guided self-assessment of participants' current situation;
- Development of a Personal Life Plan with immediate, medium, and long-term goals;
- Personalised advocacy through one-on-one mentoring sessions with mentors with lived experience;
- Peer supported training sessions to increase knowledge, confidence, self-belief, and resilience;
- Referral to services (such as housing support services and financial counsellors);
- Support in systems (such as providing participants support in the justice system);
- Brokerage funds for specific needs (such as childcare or transport); and
- Assistance in study and career development.

The logic of the PLAN project is that individualised mentorship enables participants to receive holistic support that looks at the 'whole picture' of their life, including their unique circumstances and challenges. As a result of ongoing support, participants are then enabled to increase their social and emotional wellbeing, life circumstances and, where appropriate, career readiness and engagement with employment. The hypothesis being that this support can facilitate long-term social and emotional wellbeing and economic independence, and the possibility of maintaining stable and safe living arrangements, healthy relationships, and improved parenting capacity. The evaluation gave strong evidence that this long-term impact could be achieved based on the successes of many project participants at the conclusion of their time in the PLAN project.

## Methodology

CSI UWA obtained ethics approval from the University of Western Australia (2022/ET000043) to evaluate the project. We employed a mixed methods approach to deliver a process and outcomes evaluation to investigate the effectiveness and impact of the PLAN project. The process evaluation assessed the efficacy of the project's model and support activities by examining engagement data, activity implementation, satisfaction levels, and key factors mediating success. The outcomes evaluation aimed to understand the impact of the project on participants, and to do so, the study evaluated the changes in participants' mindset and self-development, career development and life circumstances after (and during) their engagement with the project. The following evaluation questions were developed around the three key outcome areas of the project, and served as a basis to guide data collection and analysis:

1. To what extent did the project impact participants' ability to confidently feel an improvement in their confidence and sense of self?
2. To what extent did the project address participants' vocational barriers to understand the effectiveness of the project's model in addressing barriers leading to career readiness for employment or study?
3. To what extent did the project address participants' life circumstances, many of which were also non-vocational barriers to employment?

All participants who enrolled and participated in target support activities through the project (n=67) were invited to take part in evaluation activities. The sample sizes outlined below reflect the timing of final data collection for reporting, prior to the conclusion of the project.



Qualitative and quantitative data sources were used for the evaluation, including:

- Administrative data: including referral forms, database information, Bridging the Gap's monthly reports, Good News Stories and Personal Life Plans
- Domain assessment forms: adaptation of the Common Assessment Tool (CAT) Guide (State of Queensland, 2018) to observe changes across 14 issue domains between initial and case closure forms (n=31)
- Participant exit surveys: online survey completed by participants upon case closure to assess self-reported outcomes and experience of the project (n=26)
- Satisfaction forms: "How are YOU doing?" (n=50) and "How are WE doing?" (n=36) forms administered by mentors throughout the project to track participants' opinions, confidence and self-esteem levels, and satisfaction with the project
- Self-Esteem Scale forms: use of the validated Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) to determine pre- and post-project self-esteem levels of participants (n=49)
- Focus groups: two focus groups with participants at the PLAN project sites (n=14)
- Semi-structured interviews: with key stakeholders from service provider agencies (n=7).

A thematic analysis was used to investigate qualitative data that emerged from focus group notes, interview transcriptions and open-ended survey questions. This approach considered the perspective, understandings and knowledge provided by project participants and key stakeholders to analyse and determine key themes and patterns relating to the effectiveness and impact of the project. Quantitative analyses were mostly descriptive and univariate. CAT indicator ratings within domain assessments examined participant changes across 14 priority issue domains by calculating the difference between population means and individual raw scores at the initial and case closure stage (including percentage change). Priority domains were assigned to participants for analysis if they had responded using a CAT indicator rating between 1-3 for any domain (i.e., "can be a lot better", "can be better" or "OK – but can be better"). Self-esteem and confidence measures were also examined pre- and post-project by calculating the difference between population means and individual raw scores. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was also used to compare pre- and post- scores relating to self-esteem and confidence to assess whether population mean ranks differed significantly.

Participant exit surveys were analysed by presenting the proportion of responses across each of the response items (i.e., strongly disagree to strongly agree) to gauge participant change as a result of the project.

## Findings

### Engagement and demographic data

At the time of data analysis in January 2023, the PLAN project had recruited 118 vulnerable parents and 84 of these went on to enrol in the project. Of these participants who enrolled, 67 took part in targeted support activities. The majority of enrolled participants were female (90%) and three-quarters were between the ages of 25 and 44; 73% were born in Australia and 12% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Seventy per cent were single parents. At the time of data analysis, 37% had achieved case closure and several participants were near case closure. Most parents recruited to the project (93%) were referred by service providers such as a child health

centre, FDV support service or other community services provider, reflecting the importance of a local referral network, without which it is possible many participants would not have discovered the project.

The recruited parents had experienced various and often co-occurring indicators of vulnerability, and in many cases this had been longstanding. Because all PLAN participants were parents, it is fair to assume that children were impacted (often deeply) by their parents' experiences of vulnerability. Upon recruitment to the project, 79% of participants were unemployed and almost half were either homeless, experiencing housing instability, living in a refuge or at risk of homelessness. Of the participants who enrolled in the PLAN project (n=84), the main domains that they reported seeking help with were mental health (77%), financial hardship (73%), FDV (62%), employment (55%), housing (50%) and self-development (49%). In many cases, participants' situations shifted very positively in these areas as a result of engaging with the PLAN project.

### Barriers to engagement

Despite these positive aspects of recruitment, there were several identified barriers to individuals engaging with the PLAN project, both after referral and after enrolment. Twenty-nine per cent of referred clients did not engage with the project after referral, and of the enrolled participants, 22% withdrew or were exited by project staff. Reasons that were identified by local service providers for disengagement among the clients they had referred to the project included:

- Lack of transport: not having a way to get to mentoring sessions and activities, or it not being feasible (e.g. public transport taking too long)
- Childcare responsibilities: especially for single parents, parents with young children and parents with no childcare
- Mental health issues and/or low confidence or motivation: not feeling psychologically or emotionally able to engage, and/or not seeing the value of engaging
- Being overwhelmed: having 'too much on their plate' – sometimes stuck in survival mode, or perhaps adapting to becoming a parent
- Not feeling ready: for example, not feeling ready to consider employment and perceiving the project as focussed on this.

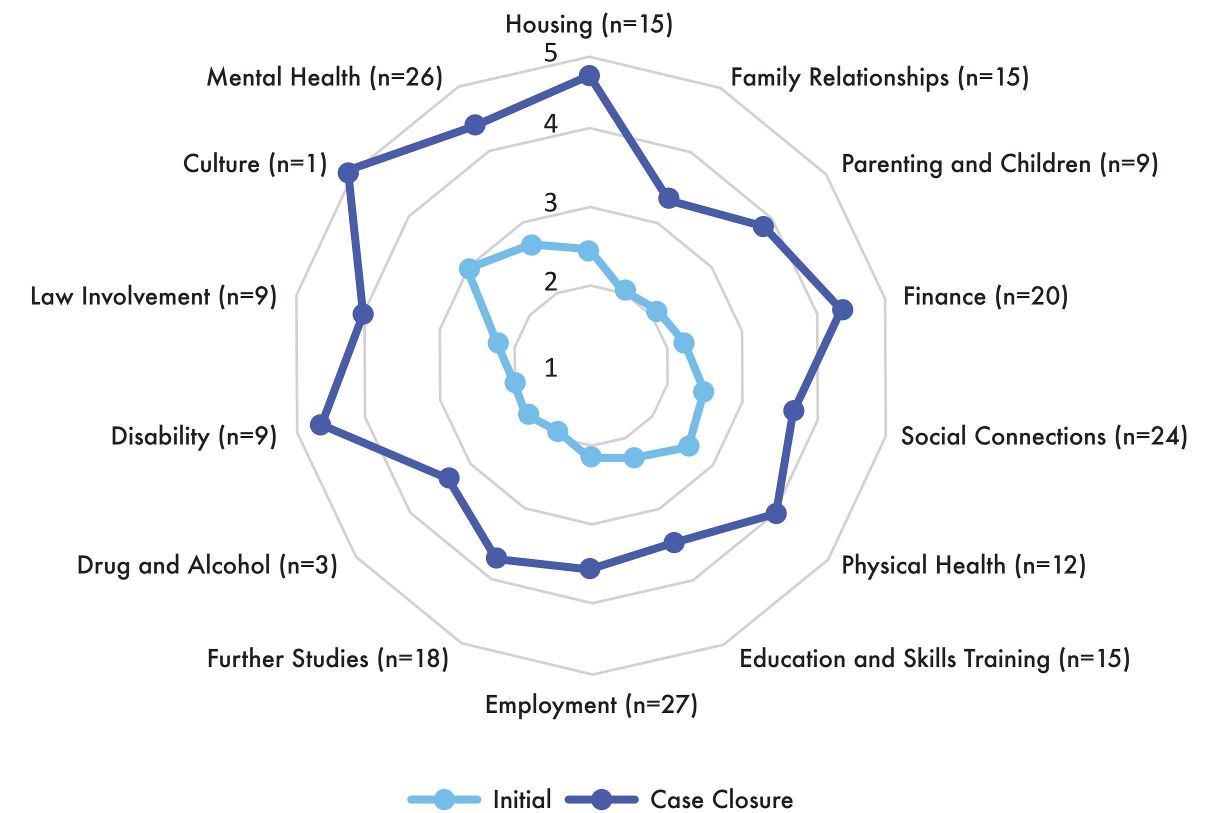
Thus, the PLAN project could not recruit and retain its target audience all of the time, and capacity issues put a limit on participant numbers. However, for the high-touch individualised support provided by the mentors to remain effective, limits to the number of individuals participating in the project at any one time was essential and not necessarily a negative aspect of the project.

### Key project outcomes in three target areas

The evaluation found that the PLAN project is effective for supporting vulnerable parents to progress towards goals and achieve positive outcomes across the priority areas. Average positive changes were recorded in all 14 priority issue domains for participants who completed the initial and case closure domain assessment forms (n=31) and identified those domains as priority areas, with the biggest average changes in the domains of housing, finance, disability, mental health, further studies, law involvement and parenting and children (see Figure 2). It is worth noting that many of the impacts of the PLAN project on participants will not be known for some time or could not be articulated at the time of data analysis, and the data sources represented a relatively small sample size, thus the findings presented are indicative but not conclusive of PLAN's capacity to generate positive and sustained outcomes among participants.



**Figure 2. Average improvements in domains among participants for whom the domain was identified as a priority area.**




(Source: domain assessment data)

*Mindset and self-development.* Improvements in mindset and self-development for participants happened in multiple ways, and this was a strong outcome of the PLAN project among the majority of participants represented in the evaluation. One focus group member reflected that "[my mentor] made me believe in myself", and this sentiment was shared time and again by a number of participants, revealing the power of the project to generate positive feelings of self-efficacy and self-perception. This, combined with improved mental health outcomes, made the PLAN project very effective at improving participants' mindset and self-development in many cases.

Participant Exit Survey data showed that 92% of question respondents (n=13) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more satisfied about their physical and mental health after joining the PLAN project, 62% per cent of respondents (n=13) strongly agreed and 31% agreed that they were better able to access help with their physical and mental health when they need it as a result of the PLAN project, and 83% of respondents (n=12) had accessed support from mental health and/or medical services as a result of being in the PLAN project. Additionally, for participants captured in the domain assessment forms for whom mental health was a priority domain (n=26), 88% had a positive change in their mental health as a result of the PLAN project, and for those for whom social connections

was a priority domain (n=16), 67% had a positive change in this area. Some participants shared that they have suicidal intent prior to engagement with the PLAN project, and that this was no longer the case after several months in the project.

The ways in which these improvements happened included through helping to alleviate symptoms and causes of mental health distress, building confidence and a sense of identity and self-worth, and achieving outcomes related to life circumstances. The effect of addressing, and in some cases removing, barriers to thriving cannot be underestimated, and in many cases participants revealed that the practical changes they were able to make in their lives as a result of the PLAN project (such as obtaining meaningful employment, addressing debt or leaving an abusive relationship) generated significant improvements in their mental health. Some of the things that were mentioned by focus group members in their reflections of the project included:

- Knowing I'm not alone
- Having a burden lifted
- Feeling empowered
- Being shown how to regulate emotions
- Understanding that "You are not just what's happened to you"
- Having a stronger sense of self
- Feeling like a 'good' parent
- Realising I'm not stuck
- Realising I can achieve and do things
- Having goals for the future
- Thinking bigger
- Feeling hopeful and confident.

The average confidence and self-esteem levels of participants (n=50) significantly increased from 2.5 and 2.32 pre-project to 4.02 and 3.82 post-project, respectively ($p<0.001$), on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (high). Similar observations were made from participants who completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (n=49) which highlighted an average increase from 13.78 to 22.16 on a scale from 0 to 30 ($p<0.001$). Eighty-eight per cent of participants who completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale form had a positive change in their self-esteem as a result of the PLAN project, with an average change of +8.38 places during their time in the project. The Participant Exit Survey also revealed that 96% of respondents (n=26) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they had a purpose in life as a result of the project, 88% felt better prepared to overcome challenges and 92% felt more confident that they could succeed at what they put their mind to.

While improved self-worth, self-esteem and confidence were strong outcomes of the PLAN project, they were also aspects that were built into project delivery and the implementation of activities. For instance, participants reflected that mentors gave them credit for the changes that they had been able to make, encouraging positive self-perception and confidence while also motivating continuous progress. The achievement of goals and ability to keep building on small, achievable steps helped sustain this confidence, which contributed to a positive upward spiral around mindset and self-development.

***"[PLAN helps with] realising there's a lot of authenticity and strength in you, it's ok to think about yourself… and there are just no barriers to what you can do" – Focus group member***

***"It's transformative… The person I was when I came into the project is not the same as who I am now. I feel empowered – there's that inner conviction that I'm willing and determined to win the day" – Focus group member***

*Career development.* Data showed that employment was a strong outcome for many PLAN participants and that vocational and non-vocational barriers to economic independence were often addressed and sometimes removed through participation in the project. Sometimes this happened as a result of improvements in life circumstances and mindset and self-development which had a positive flow-on effect, and in other cases it was because of direct opportunities for training, skills-development and job-seeking support – typically, a positive change in employment status was due to a combination of all these things.

Of the 67 PLAN participants who engaged in targeted support activities, 9 were already employed prior to commencement of the project and 3 acquired additional employment through PLAN. Twenty-three participants gained employment through PLAN after being unemployed prior to PLAN, and 12 of these people acquired more than one job. A further 14 participants were job ready, 15 did not yet consider themselves job ready, and 6 were unknown. Of the respondents in the domain assessment forms for whom employment was a priority area (n=27), 63% recorded a positive change in their employment status, and for those whom further studies was a priority area (n=14), 78% had a positive change in this area. Some participants obtained employment very quickly after commencing the project; in one case, a young woman had discovered Bridging the Gap while hiding from her partner during a conflict, and within a week had an appointment with a mentor to commence the PLAN project and had secured a job several weeks later (and had also moved to refuge accommodation).

***"By the first week [in the project] I knew I needed a job and childcare. By the second week I had written a resume and handed it around… I had 100% confidence in getting results with [my mentor]. Things just start happening. It didn't take long before I had a job, I had my license, [and] my son was in day-care" – Focus group member***

Regardless of employment status, the data indicated that most PLAN participants improved their job readiness as a result of the project. Seventy-three per cent of Participant Exit Survey respondents (n=26) felt career ready upon completion of their time with the PLAN project, 92% felt more confident to get a job, 81% felt more aware of different career pathways and 88% had identified the pathway they would like to take. The PLAN project offered a training program to support employment as a disability support worker, which 21 participants had completed at the time of data analysis, and this had facilitated a transition to employment in the industry for 7 of these participants. PLAN project mentors also helped participants to identify external training opportunities, and at the time of data analysis, 10 participants had enrolled in external training after commencing the PLAN project (for example, a Certificate III Individual Support, Certificate III English, Forklift Training and Diploma Beauty Therapy). It is significant that there were also

many cases where project participants were not yet employed but felt more confident about the possibility of being engaged in the workforce in the future, even where some barriers such as mental health difficulties remained.

***"Since I've come [to the project] I've got my purpose back… I feel like next year I'm ready to get back into the workforce. I feel like there's nothing I can't do now" – Focus group member***

Life circumstances. Most participants came to the PLAN project with significant levels of unmet need across multiple areas of their life, and the data showed that the project was able to support improvements in these areas. There were average improvements across all life circumstances domains in the domain assessment forms (housing, family relationships, parenting and children, finance, physical health, disability and law involvement). Of the participants for whom the domain was a priority area, 100% had a positive change in housing (n=15), 90% had a positive change in finance (n=20), 89% had a positive change in their experience of disability (n=9) and 67% had a positive change in family relationships (n=15). These changes happened in multiple ways. For example, participants shared that the PLAN project helped them to:

- Pay for urgent needs (e.g. household bills, childcare needs or food);
- Obtain a driving license and learn to drive;
- Make and attend needed appointments;
- Navigate the service system to get the right support;
- Find and move to safe and secure accommodation;
- Obtain a Violence Restraining Order and protect children;
- Obtain legal representation;
- Write a Victim Impact Statement for criminal sentencing;
- Pay off debts;
- Learn English;
- Start saving to buy a house;
- Safely exit an abusive relationship;
- Access NDIS payments and counselling for children;
- Get ongoing help with bills from an energy provider;
- Provide a more stable home for their children; and
- Make a plan for the future.

Three-quarters of Participant Exit Survey respondents for the finance questions (n=20) felt more confident about their financial situation as a result of the PLAN project, and 65% felt better able to address debts (the remainder possibly did not have debts to address). For participants who required assistance with their housing situation, PLAN mentors were able to support participants to remain in their existing accommodation through, for example, assisting with cleaning and short-term rent payment to avoid eviction, or to find and move to stable accommodation through referrals, application and logistical assistance, and bond payment. The personalised assistance and mentorship of the PLAN project enabled these changes to happen often rapidly and with a flow-on effect into other areas of life, with potentially significant positive long-term impacts.

***"I feel supported mentally, emotionally, physically… The things that had built up, they're not a problem anymore" – Focus group member***



## Discussion

**Relational support as a critical success factor**

*One-to-one mentoring.* Fundamentally, the PLAN project offered a level of cost-free high-touch relational support in partnership with practical support that could not be found elsewhere in the area. The PLAN participants who were engaged in the evaluation focus groups revealed that it was this individualised relational support provided through weekly one-to-one mentoring sessions which was particularly powerful aspect of the project, effectively underpinning its success. This was reflected across multiple data sources, with survey respondents articulating deep gratitude to their mentors. As one participant reflected, "[My mentor] gave me the keys to my life…". Although mentors were not trained mental health professionals, the sense that the mentoring relationship was therapeutic came across strongly.

In the sessions, mentors helped participants to work towards the goals identified in their Personal Life Plan. The frequency of these sessions often facilitated quick progress towards participants' goals, enabled by the skill of the mentors to meet participants where they were at and tailor sessions to meet needs as they arose. In the context of this physical and psychological 'safe space', sessions were both emotionally supportive and practical. This dual function transcended traditional service boundaries, and for many participants it was clear that this was their first positive experience of accessing holistic support that was compassionate, rapid and practical, having been put off by negative experiences in the past which were ineffective or distressing. For the participants we spoke to, by and large, the project was much more accessible and impactful than any support-seeking activities they had engaged with in the past. The structured support and guidance of the one-to-one mentoring was foundational to this, and this was affirmed by stakeholders who felt that many of their vulnerable clients needed "someone to hold their hand", in the words of one service provider, to improve their lives and work towards goals. This appeared to have a very empowering effect on participants who tended to feel a sense of ownership over the changes they were making in their lives. The support and encouragement of their mentor provided a 'safety net' and the mentoring sessions were a space for follow-through and clarity, allowing momentum to build and rapid change to take place.

***"It was a non-judgmental place to sit and talk and get a result… To arrive fully broken and with nothing, and come out whole… It catered for MY needs, it wasn't a cookie cutter approach. It was versatile and there was always a fast result. You need fast results because you're so desperate" – Focus group member***

***"It opened up the possibility to get back into the workforce in a job I want to do… [My mentor] is like, 'We can do it and this is how we're going to do it together'. Someone's there going 'You can do it, we can do it'" – Focus group member***

*Lived experience of mentors.* A unique aspect of the PLAN project was the mentors having had lived experience of many of the issues facing participants, including FDV. This was extremely valuable in terms of creating a sense of comfort for participants who felt understood and validated in their experiences and struggles;

it also meant that mentors had a strong awareness of participants' needs, and likely future needs and issues, including being able to sift through seemingly overwhelming challenges to create a plan of action and work on it together. One focus group member reflected that there was a "power" of lived experience that meant the mentor "can connect with you". Others framed it in terms of the "knowing and understanding" and intuitiveness that the lived experience of mentors provided. Another focus group member commented that the mentor's lived experience "makes it real, safe and targeted". It was apparent that in other contexts of support-seeking, a lack of lived experience and understanding on the part of the support provider did not generally facilitate a feeling of being well supported.

***"Relating to my personal story [was important]… My counsellor and psychologist could provide advice but no lived experience" – Focus group member***

In one case, a participant with a complex history of trauma and abuse felt so inspired by her mentor that she wanted to follow in her footsteps by supporting others who had been through similar circumstances. This reflects another function of the mentors' role which was 'modelling' the possibility of utilising adverse experiences for a fulfilling career helping others, which can inspire a vision for the future and a sense of purpose.

*Facilitating connection and safety.* In part because of the mentors' lived experience and their personal characteristics, including being warm and approachable, an environment of connection and safety was built in which participants felt supported. All of the participants who completed the Participant Exit Survey (n=26) strongly agreed (24) or agreed (2) that their mentor provided a positive relationship experience based on respect and trust, and that their mentor provided them with guidance and encouragement. Focus group participants reiterated this strongly, indicating that this psychological safety was essential to feeling supported to work towards goals. Some people emphasised the "bond" they built with their mentor and several people indicated that, because of this bond, there was an implicit trust that was created and this gave the mentor the ability to give participants a "push" towards goals where appropriate. Local service providers who had successfully referred clients to the project also overwhelmingly felt that the sense of connection and safety fostered by the mentors created an environment in which vulnerable parents felt supported to make positive changes in their life. It also facilitated a space in which participants felt safe to discuss personal and traumatic experiences – in some cases, participants had no other context or trusted relationships in which to do this. Given the common presence of shame and stigma in experiences of adversity and mental health challenges, this may be more significant than the evidence in this evaluation shows.

Many participants had past experiences of support-seeking in which support providers were perceived as dismissive and judgemental, which at times had re-traumatised participants. There was thus a sense of relief among participants that they could develop a safe relationship with their mentors in which the mentor was understanding and non-judgemental, with a professional 'safety net' where, as one focus group member reflected, "you know they're not going to lead you astray". In contrast to many services which were constrained by bureaucracy and narrow focus areas, the mentors at PLAN had "the freedom to understand individuals" in the words of another focus group member. Fundamentally this fostered a sense of connection and partnership that had not been found elsewhere for the participants, and which was essential for practical action to take place.

***"It wasn't as a teacher-student [relationship], it was us working together as a team" – Focus group member***

**The role of practical support in overcoming barriers to thriving**

*The brokerage fund.* A brokerage fund was able to be accessed by project mentors to pay for a range of needs for participants. Mentors had the freedom to spend these funds on anything that would support participants' goals and help remove some immediate barriers they were facing; often, participants started the PLAN project with inadequate funds to pay for things which were essential, or extremely important, for their capacity to thrive and parent effectively. The brokerage fund was a highly regarded aspect of the PLAN project for many participants and stakeholders, and its power cannot be overstated. In many ways it was the 'key' that unlocked the ability to make rapid and significant progress in multiple areas, and to benefit from the other elements of the PLAN project such as career assistance. As in Maslow's hierarchy, it is difficult to reach a sustainable level of flourishing and self-actualisation without first addressing urgent, critical needs (Maslow, 1943). All participants who completed the Participant Exit Survey (n=23) found the financial assistance helpful to their financial situation, and some focus group members who had experienced FDV emphasised that it helped them make steps towards economic independence.

Some things that the brokerage fund paid for included food hampers; household bills; bed linen; appointments (e.g. dentist, counselling); rental bond; relocation expenses; birth certificate; police clearance; driving license and lessons; NDIS screening; work uniforms; emergency accommodation; car repairs; glasses; laundromat expenses; fuel vouchers; nappies; childcare fees; children's clothing; and cleaning products to start a business. Often, having these things paid for alleviated some of the burden of stress that was contributing to participants' overwhelm and inability to make positive steps forward. For instance, paying household bills that were overdue was able to prevent an individual from being evicted, and paying for driving lessons and a license could enable someone to get a job and drive to work. In other instances, the provision of basic needs such as food and shelter was urgent and essential. Because of the manifold effects of financial stress on an individual's sense of wellbeing and the material circumstances of their life – and that of their children – rapid access to these funds to meet a diverse range of needs was highly impactful.

***"First of all there is shame, like when the power is about to be cut… but a barrier is lifted when the power bill is sorted. It enables control" – Focus group member***

*Group training and peer support.* The peer-supported group training activities that were offered as part of the PLAN project provided an opportunity for knowledge-building and skills-development to take place, as well as social connection and emotional support. The group training sessions that were offered included:

- Self-Development Group Training (8 weeks; 37 participants);
- Introduction to Disability Support Training (8 weeks, 18 participants);
- Cooking/Healthy Living Healthy Food (6-8 weeks; 9 participants);
- Budgeting (6 weeks; 12 participants); and
- Women's Empowerment Project (6 weeks; 7 participants).

Participants could join these trainings at different points in their journeys according to their needs and goals as identified in their Personal Life Plan. The most common things that Participant Exit Survey respondents reported to be most helpful about the group trainings were: having the opportunity to socialise and make friends; having a non-judgemental space in which to share; being able to access guidance and encouragement; building confidence; sharing lunch together; and hearing other perspectives. Developing knowledge and skills was also emphasised by participants, particularly around disability support work (see below), and the sense of confidence and empowerment they built through the self-development course (which covered topics such as self-esteem, beliefs and values, stress, interpersonal communication and meditation and breathing exercises).

Building relationships and a sense of community was something that was not necessarily an expectation of PLAN participants of the training sessions, but was often a welcome outcome. Of the domain assessment respondents who recorded social connections as a priority domain (n=24), 67% had a positive in this area as a result of PLAN, and 76% of respondents in the Participant Exit Survey (n=26) felt they had been able to develop a support network through PLAN. Group training was thus able to offer both practical tools and an opportunity for socialising and connection – in some cases, this was the only support network that participants had. However, group sessions were not always the preferred support option for participants; for example, one woman shared that her level of trauma and overwhelm meant she did not want to engage with a group. Because of the PLAN project's flexible model of support with one-to-one mentoring at the core, these preferences could be catered for and there was no pressure for participants to engage with particular supports.

Stock image

***"It's an empowering thing to be in a group of women going through the same thing. One day I'll be crying, the next I'll be laughing" – Focus group member***

*Career development assistance.* Where appropriate, PLAN project mentors assisted participants in finding and obtaining employment if this was identified as a goal. Some individuals came into the PLAN project without an aspiration to be employed – most were on Centrelink payments and were trying to get basic needs met – but, after several weeks or months in the program where vocational and non-vocational barriers to employment were addressed, seeking a job became a possibility. Often this was (at least in part) a product of addressing issues such as poor confidence, self-esteem and mental health, or basic survival issues such as first seeking stable and safe accommodation. In many cases employment then became a viable option with the practical support of the mentors to, for example, write a resume; brainstorm and search for jobs; determine a plan of action; obtain necessary checks (e.g. Working with Children Check, Police Clearance or First Aid Training); learn to drive; and enrol in internal and external training programs (e.g. the internal Introduction to Disability Support Training or external certificates and industry-specific trainings). It was both the practical and relational aspects of support that facilitated a route to employment for many PLAN participants, and for many, there was a sense of being able to "think bigger" as a result – one focus group member felt that "now the world is my oyster".

## Conclusion

The PLAN project evaluation highlighted the value of a holistic place-based model of support with both relational and practical aspects and the ability to offer rapid, impactful assistance that removed barriers to thriving for vulnerable individuals. Critically, the way in which this was delivered by Bridging the Gap made its successes stronger, by enabling progress towards short-term and long-term goals which were identified early and sequenced in a way that reduced overwhelm and facilitated confidence among participants. The structure and support provided by the mentoring sessions offered a psychological 'safety net' in which participants felt valued, understood and supported to make meaningful changes in their lives, with a bespoke suite of activities to enable these changes in a way that logically made sense – once immediate concerns were addressed, attention could be turned to other goals, for which the activities available through the PLAN project and referrals to a network of local service providers could be accessed.

The anecdotal evidence collected for the project evaluation indicated that there was a positive domino effect of the PLAN project on participants' children and families. Some ways that this happened included through the improved mental wellbeing of parents, greater 'presence' and parenting capacity, accessing support for children (e.g. psychological), and addressing stressors such as financial strain, FDV or housing instability. This indicates the potential of the PLAN project model to help lessen the intergenerational transition of trauma in a community by empowering and supporting vulnerable parents as change agents. Qualitative data for the evaluation showed that the progress that participants were able to make often afforded a stronger sense of stability and control,

and appeared to provide or strengthen the building blocks from which sustainable life outcomes could be achieved. One focus group participant reflected that the project "offers life management… it's about the future, not just this week"; another framed it in terms of having "the ability to walk on your own". The confidence to be ambitious in improving life circumstances was implied by many evaluation participants, and this reflects the PLAN project's capacity to empower participants to self-determine their futures and support the thriving of their children.

This, combined with the outcomes and success factors described above, indicates that the PLAN project is an effective model for supporting vulnerable individuals to progress towards goals (and sometimes 'discover' those goals) in a community setting by combining the three key elements of lived experience mentoring, a brokerage fund for rapid financial assistance, and practical support to assist across multiple life areas. Potentially, this model could be scaled up to support a greater number of individuals across a larger area, and in different contexts (with consideration of local needs, dynamics and potential barriers to engagement). Additional, tailored support programs may be necessary for some groups such as culturally and linguistically diverse or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons, and co-case management of high-need individuals with other service providers may also be valuable. Overall, there is strong evidence to suggest that Bridging the Gap's PLAN project model could be an impactful method of service delivery for supporting vulnerable individuals across a range of needs and contexts.

***"PLAN is one of those services that's at the forefront before clients go onto other services. A lot of the clients I've had, they've gone through Centrelink and they've gone through the system and no one has really grabbed them to the side and said, 'Well how come you can't get a job, what's stopping you?'. Whereas I feel PLAN is the one that steps in and says, 'OK, well what is wrong here? You can't get to the job – OK, I can help you do that. You're having problems with your children, some of them have disabilities – well I can help you. You can't get this job because you can't drive, or you need to see a financial counsellor…' [The mentor] instils confidence in them that they're really worthy to go on and get a job" – Service provider***

***"All this mess, over time it all got smoothed out. I don't have savings but I'm not at threat of eviction. Our house is happy… We laugh, we play board games, there's a garden, we grow things now. I didn't fully understand that my role as a mother was so foundational… We can see future possibilities now" – Focus group member*** ■

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PEER REVIEWED

# People, Place and Purpose – Exploring Social Value in Rural Communities.

Heather Ellis (presenter at the WCDC)

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## ABSTRACT

Through the lens of the research project initiative of the Australian Livestock Markets Association (ALMA) 'Social Value of Saleyards' (Ellis and BlueWren Connections Pty Ltd, 2022), this article commences by exploring the concept of Social Value - how it is attributed to People, Place and the building of a sense of Purpose - through connected communities in rural Australia. Secondly, the article proposes a new hypothesis relating to the concept of Social Value. It also explains methods used to collect the data, given this is the first time it has been conducted this way here in Australia. Thirdly, there will be models and concepts discussed throughout this article that are relevant to community workers.

Rural communities require physical spaces and places to gather and build a sense of belonging and connection. Rickard (2019, p. 15) argues "livestock auction markets carry a social responsibility. Farming has become an increasingly isolated and lonely occupation, and the social networking the auction market provides should not be underestimated." Saleyards in rural Australia are often the backbone of rural communities and they provide substantial economic and social value to those who visit. This research represents a strong first step in capturing the social value of saleyards in rural and regional communities.

## Summary of the research 'Social Value of Saleyards'

**Background**: The research brief was to capture what livestock saleyards sale days mean to community members, service providers and saleyard stakeholders. The purpose of capturing the social value placed on saleyards was to provide industry and government decision makers with an understanding of the importance placed upon saleyards. Saleyards are a location that facilitates increased opportunities for a social connection that in turn builds a greater sense of wellbeing in rural communities. With no previous research on the social value of saleyards as a place for community connection in rural Australia, this research project was identified as breaking new ground.

**Method**: Three methods were used to collect data. Firstly, face to face, phone and video interviews were undertaken to conduct qualitative data at eleven saleyards with 105 people (30 women and 75 men) participating from Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Secondly, an online survey was developed for people across Australia to complete to collect quantitative data; 152 people (63 women and 87 men) participated in the online survey. Thirdly, observation of people's interactions and body language were recorded during site visits at six saleyards - three in Queensland and three in South Australia.

**Results**: Data indicated that when people have the opportunity to attend the sale days at the saleyards, they experience a sense of belonging and connection; an opportunity to socialise, share information and network; and access services and support. For this cohort of rural Australians, when they have limited access to attend sale days, they experienced loneliness and social isolation.

**Conclusions**: This research revealed that saleyards are critical to the social fabric of regional communities. Attending sale days builds a sense of purpose and legitimacy for people to gather together. Once there, people benefit from the positive outcomes of social connection. A visit to the livestock sale helps to improve social outcomes by reducing social isolation; providing physical connection to key services not otherwise

available in socially isolated locations; facilitating exchange of information and informal support; enabling time and space for deeper and more open conversations; and maintaining cross generational connection.

## INTRODUCTION

### Context

In the 1880s, almost every village town and settlement in Australia had its own set of livestock saleyards. A saleyard is a physical auction market where buyers and sellers trade livestock such as cattle, sheep, pigs etc (Australian Markets Association, 2023). On livestock saledays, partners would also go into town and meet with their friends and relatives and do some shopping. (Hassall & Associates, 2007). It has been recognised by Bennett (2021) that saledays provide a setting and an environment for social interaction. We also know that support systems that result from this interaction, particularly in rural communities, are vitally important for participant's mental health and well-being. Around the world there is an anecdotal history where people build connections and learn from each other by coming together on market days.

However, in modern times we've never captured quantified data. This research was the first of its kind in Australia. The research sought to capture what livestock saleyards on sale days mean to community members, service providers and saleyard stakeholders. Previous industry research has provided a measure of understanding of the economic significance. This project focused on measuring the social benefits that saleyards provide to communities. Industry leaders report to know anecdotally that, where saleyards are active, sale days bring a vibrancy and energy to communities. In addition, ALMA identified it is important to capture data to reflect and give evidence of the social value in having saleyards operating in rural communities in regional Australia. The central purpose of this study was to collate data that reflects what value saleyards bring to the social wellbeing of rural communities. This was a national project that worked with eleven key saleyard communities in Australia, engaging with people around the benefits of sale days and the impacts of when they are cancelled.

Overall, this research demonstrated sale days are a significant contributor to reducing social isolation, building community identity, and promoting well-being in the population.

### Methodology

A mixed method approach was adopted, combining both qualitative and quantitative research. The research used purposive, non-probability sampling; a method generally used in exploratory research using qualitative methodology. This is justifiable when seeking new information (Alston & Bowles, 2021). Research was conducted through observations, face to face interviews, and online surveys, recording people's stories and experiences.

The research team connected with a broad range of industry stakeholders, and participants were approached to be involved through established relationships and local connections. Information was collected by recording people's stories and experiences, through one-on-one interviews, attending saleyards and online surveys. The use of differing research methodologies enabled comparative data analysis (triangulation) of the findings.

The type of questions and interviewing used in collecting the data was through a semi-structured approach using Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI uses a positive line of questioning to draw out experiences including areas such as achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights and visions. (Hammond, 2013).

Each site had a local partner, a community connector, who was happy to work with the research team to promote the Social Value of Saleyards project through their networks. Those partners also provided other relevant local advice such as suitable days to visit, and whether multiple meetings might be required to capture the information. The research project was promoted through social media, radio stations, newspaper articles and ALMA, to encourage participation and strengthen the sample size.

As a researcher seeking to use community development practises it was important to encourage community engagement and build relationships with local communities in the process. Being present in the community is essential for collecting rich and meaningful data. Shevellar & Westoby (2018) advise researchers seeking to understand a community undertake broad dialogue and engagement, actively engaging members through conversation and storytelling. This supports gaining deep insights into the lived experiences, perspective and challenges faced by the community members.

Drawing on Westoby, Palmer & Lathouras (2020), a researcher listening to people's stories and relationships are key to understanding the importance of connecting. Kelly and Westoby (2018) expand further by noting stories have played an important part of culture. This requires courage from the researcher, it means being willing to step outside your own perspective and to immerse yourselves in others experience, it also means acknowledging and valuing the knowledge and wisdom that local community members bring to the process.

As a researcher, with a feminist lens after many years working in the women's sector and as someone who has spent 30 years on the land, I needed to be aware of my own world view. "The practitioner explores their self-view and their worldview. They acknowledge who they are and where they've come from." (Lathouras, 2010, p. 15) Judgment needs to be set aside to be able to deeply listen and connect with the participants of the research. This way a safe and comfortable place was able to be created for the participants to share deeply.

As one of the participants explained,

***"It's really important to have someone who can listen to us and understand us. To have someone who can walk alongside us and our stories."***

## Analysis

Due to the lack of previous research in this area, this investigation was conducted using thematic analysis with open coding to analyse the transcribed interviews. Rubin & Babbie (2007) define 'open coding' as creating code categories after examining data rather than starting out with codes from theories. Notes written directly after each interview and observations were reviewed when analysing the data. Difference in codes was discussed and resolved. The audio-recorded material was transcribed verbatim, providing a way of strongly contextualising the data. Alston & Bowles (2021) suggest coding each interview separately by using respondents' key words or phrases, looking for patterns and collating information under similar headings, into more uniformly defined categories.

## Key findings

Commentator on Australian culture, Mackay (1999, p. 256), asserted "Human beings are like mobs of kangaroos, like these animals we are creatures who thrive on connections and belonging with each other. We are at our best when we are fully integrated with the herd and at our worst when we are isolated." Furthermore Mackay (2014, p. 19) maintains "like most species' we humans are great congregators. There are times when peoples work forces them into isolation but mostly at some point, they like to connect seeking companionship and connection of community."

There were multiple findings from the research but for this article, they have been summarised into four broad areas:

## Socialising and networking

Peer interaction provides a major benefit for stakeholders. During the interviews, 96% of the respondents stated that they came together for social interactions. This was evident in the observations as a variety of age groups engaged in meaningful conversations with each other, sharing laughs, past experiences, industry knowledge and building friendships. Over half of the participants expressed networking as one of the main reasons to attend saleyards. Also, people experience being listened to and this in turn allows for people to feel better about themselves. Research from McKeever (2020) suggests that social interactions have a positive impact on personal wellbeing and has links to a stronger society and economy.

## Belonging and connection

Analysis of the data suggests that there are strong traditions that allow community members to feel like they belong and are connected. The interviews show that 78% of participants identified that they found a sense of belonging and connections to the saleyards. An example is that often after retirement, or when there was no stock to sell due to drought etc, sale days are still attended to continue the conversations and connections. "Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment, and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship" (Brown, 2021, p. 255).

The value of belonging and connection was visible through observations of physical interactions such as shaking hands, talking with elders and maintaining traditions. Finding happiness in a place and environment allows for stakeholders to experience better health. Bland, Drake & Drayton (2021) emphasise the significance of creating supportive cultural, social and physical environments as a strategy to promote positive mental health in communities. Social support, strong social networks, the sense of integration and inclusion are crucial factors that predict good mental health outcomes for individuals and communities.

## Impact of not being able to attend saleyards

There are several reasons that a community member might not be able to attend their local saleyards. Communities in remote, rural and regional Australia have been hit by a range of different adverse events, given they have faced everything from droughts, fires, floods, mouse plagues and COVID-19. Through it all they have been together to provide support compassion, and companionship to help their communities regroup and recover (Foundation for Rural Regional Renewal, 2021).

Experiences of social Isolation were felt by 57% of participants when they were not able to attend. Others reported feeling angry and frustrated and some stated that they felt like their rights had been taken away. Hasson & Butler (2020) conclude that loneliness and social isolation are contributing factors to mental ill-health, which can also affect physical health. The impact on the saleyard communities, when stakeholders cannot attend, is the potential for serious health implications both physically and mentally. For improved mental health outcomes Nye, Winter & Lobley (2023) found encouraging the development of informal support systems should be a high on the agenda of for all stakeholders concerned with farmers' wellbeing.

## Services accessed at saleyards sale days

On sale days many saleyards, particularly in Queensland, also offer supplementary services, including mental health awareness through community resilience workers, general health checks, hairdressers, knife sharpeners and rural financial counsellors.  Since the publishing of the report many other saleyards now offer significantly increased availability of similar supplementary services. The already well utilised places of connection are being nurtured and developed further. "The livestock auction mart is well-placed to act as a hub for business health, community health, and the physical and mental wellbeing of all of the stakeholders who use it" (Nye, Winter & Lobley, 2021).

## Participants voices

- For my Dad I see coming to the saleyard is like how the townies go to the Men's Shed without having to worry about being part of a formal group, they get to stay connected with people they know. (Producer, Queensland)

- Personally, I have bought my small children here today I'm getting to catch up with other mums and their kids, my kids get to see their dad who is an agent. We come every Thursday. (Producer/ Agent, Queensland)
- When you are at the saleyard it's a genuine happiness, it's an interaction, it's an engagement connecting with your fellow people. Not like "R U OK days, we're doing it in a genuine way every day. (Contract Service Provider, Victoria)
- Learn new ideas to take home to your own operation. If someone's cattle make good money, you might strike up a conversation with them to find out what they've been feeding them. (Service provider/ Producer, South Australia)
- Since the drought and COVID-19 people's mental health have been impacted; the government have had groups of people out and about and I'm not sure how many people access this information but for me, as an agent, I learned what was available so then I could provide it to my clients with information. (Agent, New South Wales)
- If we didn't have saleyards in rural Australia, we would need 1000 counsellors because the saleyards is a place where you can come and share your burdens, when you can talk about what's going on with someone who understands - doesn't make it go away but it makes you feel lighter. (Agent employee and Producer, Queensland)[1].

(Ellis and BlueWren Connections Pty Ltd, 2022)

## DISCUSSION

In reflections of the data and observations, what emerged from the research is that when communities have space where they come together and socialise, a sense of belonging develops, and a deeper level of connection is built. Connections then grow out of that experience and becomes a place where friendships and mateships form, and people care about one another. It is proposed that Social Value happens when people are connected to a place with a shared purpose. The characteristics of socialising, belonging, connection, friendship and community flow in and out of each other - they're all connected.

Using the concept of Social Value it could be argued that it should not just be about measuring the economic value of a project or intervention, it should also be about considering the impact it has on people's wellbeing and the wider community. Ultimately, is the goal of Social Value to create positive outcomes for society, rather than just focusing on maximising financial returns. By prioritising Social Value, we could build more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable communities that benefit everyone.

The data also showed that, although this cohort went to events like the footy, the local show, the races, and the pub they were in a purely social place where they didn't talk about the 'hard stuff'. However, at the saleyards they'd stand under a tree, and/or have a cup of tea with a mate, they then can talk about deeper issues. They stated that often it didn't change the situation or give them any solutions, but the power of being listened to and validated by someone with similar lived experiences allowed them to go home feeling a little lighter.

1 Further details are available in the Social Value of Saleyards Research Report, available on: https://australiansaleyards.com.au/social-value-saleyards/

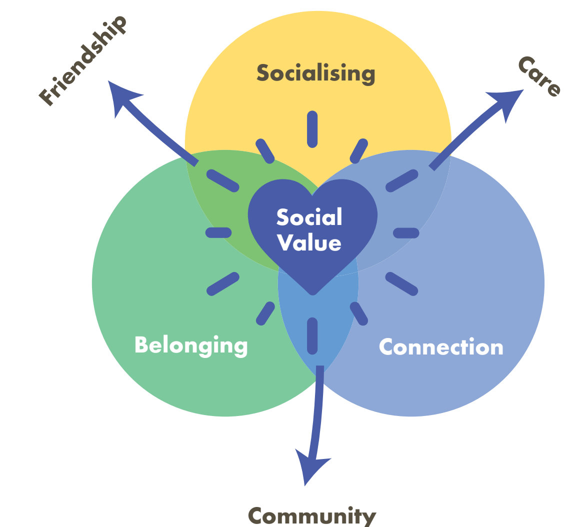


In another anecdote, a retired sheep producer arrived at the yard with a bag of lemons for the canteen team and informed us that 12 months ago his wife had passed away. He no longer had any sheep however the team at the canteen made him real cups of tea with a china teapot and cup. Once a week he gets a cup of tea the same way his wife would have prepared it for him. The canteen team welcomed and cared for him. Similar examples were found throughout the research.

"Care can also be understood in a broader sense when applied to practises that go beyond the walls of hospitals and private homes: as a civic activity, which amongst other things, concerns looking after communities and building connections between people" (Moebus, 2019, p. 74). The concept of care goes beyond the mere physical or medical aspects and embraces the emotional and social dimensions of human life. It involves building meaningful relationships based on love, respect, shared vulnerability and a sense of responsibility for one another. When care is approached in this way it becomes a vital human bond that enriches lives and strengthens the social fabric of communities (Picchi 2020). Kenyon (2020) has noted that This is in common with other community development practitioners' broader community observations and experiences in other areas of community life.

Many of the saleyard community members reported being able to respond to natural disasters, namely fires and floods, in their local areas because of the relationships and networks that were already established. In their report, 'Regionalisation ambition 2032: a framework to rebalance the nation' The Regional Australia Institute Report (2022, P. 52) states "participation in interest groups, and casual daily interactions can build trust and social cohesion. Well-connected communities are better able to cope with disasters and other crises and are more likely to take collective action."

## Social Value: People connected to a place with a shared purpose.




### Creating culture change through connected communities

At the heart of people place and purpose we have Social Value. It's often hard to measure financially however we'd be lost without it. This Venn diagram explains how Social Value happens when people are connected to a place with a shared purpose. "We are not only defined but sustained by our social networks. We thrive on being part of a community" (Mackay 2014 p. 20).

**Socialising –** the act of meeting for social purposes.

**Connections -** is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen heard and valued (Brown, 2021, p. 255)

**Belonging –** is one of the deepest sources of human fulfilment, we're at our best when we belong. A sense of belonging "implies that I am taken seriously; I am connected; I am supported" (Mackay, 2014, P. 20).

## CONCLUSION

The research on the Social Value of Saleyards represents a strong first step in capturing the social value of saleyards in rural and regional communities. It found that saleyards are critical to the social fabric of regional communities, and that a visit to a saleyard livestock sale helps to improve social outcomes for people living there.

Saleyards in rural Australia are often the backbone of rural communities, and they provide substantial economic and social value to those who attend. They are a place to connect and engage socially, uphold tradition, and share services and information that continues to grow the livestock industry, as well as maintain positive social, emotional and physical wellbeing. One of the recommendations that came from the Social Value of Saleyards' (Ellis and BlueWren Connections Pty Ltd, 2022) report was the need for future analysis of saleyards in the context of rural mental health.

It is a valuable endorsement of the organisations across rural Australia who have been innovative in using saleyards as a venue to provide various types of support. Those support services are needed (but may not ever be directly requested) by people living and working in rural and regional areas.

When exploring this new way of thinking about Social Value, one of the challenges for community workers is how to capture and measure the benefits of social Value? Another challenge for community workers is to identify where people naturally gathering and explore how to connect with people in those places - given sometimes it's not about delivering programs; it's about going to the people and providing support and advocacy in places of connection that already exist.

As well as providing useful data, many people who contributed to the research commented that they appreciated that this work was being undertaken, that their voices were being heard and that the social value of saleyards was acknowledged as a key outcome, and not just an added bonus. ■

**All photographs in this article have been kindly provided by Heather Ellis.**

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FROM THE FIELD

# Building Bridges – A Goal and Outcome of Work Placements

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## ABSTRACT

The Australian Health and Science Institute (AHSI), a high-quality training provider, has received recognition by the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) in the form of accreditation for its Diploma of Community Services course. Following this endorsement, and in line with its continuous improvement approach, AHSI has embarked on a journey to create opportunities for its students to share their culture and customs with their local community in Australia.

This approach has resulted in a range of impacts, including:

- Students embraced the opportunities and their involvement in work placements became more rewarding,
- The community appreciated their openness, learning about new cultures and their sharing,
- The students felt respected, valued, and honoured, and
- Eliminated or diminished the feelings of isolation, self-doubt and improved their mental health status.

This opened an exciting wave of creativity and innovation.

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Photo 1: Sharing food and activities at the important Hindu Festival, Ram Navami

Photo 2: Assisting PCYC children's craft activities.

Photo 3: Describing Indian Wedding celebrations to Lithgow community.

Photo 4: Colourful Yarn Bomb at the Blacktown Council Festival

Photo 5: Dancing and having fun at Lithgow Diwali

Photo 6: Helping out Vinnes at Christmas

(All photos provided by Monica Schlesinger, AHSI)

## Issues facing international students

International students are a growing community, and their education represents the fourth largest export industry in Australia. Predictions by Austrade suggest this will grow to close on 940,000 students by 2025 (Deloitte Access Economics & EduWorld, 2016). The Australian Bureau of Statistics suggest that the 2025 population will be between 25 to 28 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Based on this modelling, the percentage of the international student population in 2025 will be between 3.32% - 3.65% of the entire Australian population.

The community of international students is fragmented by different factors such as country of origin, religion, course of study, education system (vocational or ELICOS[7] or tertiary), and campus location. However many of their needs and challenges are common. International students can experience difficulties including language barriers, culture shock, isolation and homesickness. The OHSC[8] Worldcare submission to the Australian Parliament provided six high level recommendations to combat alienation and maladjustment experienced by these students. One recommendation suggested that any review of services should take a whole of community approach (OSHC Worldcare, n.d.).

In March 2020, the Prime Minister announced the COVID-19 social isolation rules and subsequently the effects of isolation exploded. Many of the issues facing international students have become exacerbated following the social restrictions and measures that were implemented.

In June 2020, research by Nyguyen and Balakrishnan described the Australian Government's refusal to provide international students with adequate support during the COVID-19 pandemic despite the mental, physical, and financial hardship and risk of homelessness that many were going through. A small amount of money was given by the Victorian Government to international students and no financial support in NSW. Some individual education providers provided support for these students, but Australia was lacking in broad government policy.

## Australian Health and Science Institute (AHSI)

AHSI is a small college delivering Healthcare, Childcare and Community courses to international students. It commenced operations in 2019 and was affected by COVID-19 only a year after its beginnings. From its inception, it had already adopted a corporate approach, stemming from the experience of its governing body and management.

In March 2020, as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing rules were imposed, businesses were closed, transport rules applied and AHSI took swift measures to ensure its students were supported and given real help, which included:

- Commencement of online delivery the next day after the announcement, so as not to affect student visas,
- Ensuring all students had a job (one third of them had lost their job due to the social distancing rules),
- All students were supported and had a network to fall back to with messages and engagement via phone calls and WhatsApp on a daily basis,
- In partnership with a charity, students were offered immediate food help (hampers delivered to their homes by the charity and AHSI management),
- Through its healthcare partners, AHSI offered students and staff priority vaccines against COVID-19 (based on the fact that they were working in healthcare facilities),
- Fee reduction for all students.

AHSI was one of the first colleges to reopen its doors once social distancing was lifted, as its courses involve a high level of interaction and practical exercises.

## AHSI's approach to work placements

From the beginning, AHSI signed up a range of partner organisations who assisted with work placements, industry consultation and as potential employers for our students.

Most of our healthcare partner facilities remained open during the pandemic and utilised the skills of our students, however many community organisations moved to remote operations, with skeleton staff. They did not accept students for a very long time (throughout 2020 and 2021).

In September 2020, AHSI embarked on a journey of accreditation for its Diploma of Community Services and followed a path of learning, discovery, and continuous improvement. It has not stopped after the college received the positive outcome - on the contrary, since then it moved on to an even higher search for quality. For the students, this resulted in changes such as undertaking longer and more complex work placements, higher academic rigour, and stricter rules for face-to-face attendance.

The pursuit of high quality and acceptable work placements meant that students were offered opportunities to work with organisations that serviced their local community. They covered a wide range of experiences from case management, planning, developing, and implementing educational programs, referring clients to agencies, liaising with community groups, welfare agencies, and government bodies dealing with housing, welfare, and other areas of community work.

The close connection between the AHSI students and the wider community, however, was only established later. This was due to AHSI's continuous improvement processes (based on the Kaizen principles[9]), part of its quality management system and innovative approaches.

## Lithgow case study

It was through this pursuit of quality work placements and the history and circumstances of AHSI opening a campus in Lithgow, that we started to create meaningful connections between the different student cultures and the local community.

We started working with our students and the communities around the campuses to bridge the cultural gap. When international students come here, their experience is centred around receiving new knowledge, new customs, new expectations with little opportunity for them to showcase their own skills, experiences, and memories.

Lithgow is a small city of 21,000 inhabitants that has an ageing population, with 33.2% over the age of 60 at the 2021 ABS census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). It was the perfect place to start this cultural exchange. The students were undertaking their first work placements with the Council and/or the library and had the opportunity to meet and speak to members of the community. Then we thought of creating events, which gave students the opportunity to share their culture

7 English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
8 Overseas Student Health Cover

9 See https://kaizen.com/what-is-kaizen/

with the community:

- Diwali (the festival of lights for Hindus) – the most significant festivity for Indian students. The students organised a Diwali party (P 5) for the community with food they prepared, dancing, costumes, and explanations about the significance of Diwali.
- In the case of Karwa Chauth, originally a women celebration of their husbands, including painting the hands with Henna – we changed it to be a celebration for all, where everyone was offered henna painting, bracelets, and specific foods.
- As three of our Lithgow students got married in January 2023, we thought of organising an Indian Wedding festivity for the community. Again, with dances, stories, photos from their real weddings, henna, and all. This was a fitting end to February, the month of love, following Valentine's Day.

Giving and sharing, was a joy, relief, and great honour for all the students. By appointing a project manager for each event, we give them the accountability and the opportunity to lead, plan, develop and implement projects for the community. As for the community, they love these events, and requested regular follow ups such as dancing classes, Indian cooking classes and to be invited in any upcoming event.

Equally, AHSI organises or takes the students to events celebrated in Australian culture: Easter, Christmas celebrations, Valentine's Day, Halloween, ANZAC memorial service, NAIDOC week, and others. In this way, the students embrace the Australian culture and become part of it.

## PCYC case study

Starting in NSW, the PCYC[10] (P 2) is a charity offering sports and recreational activities for children and young people across Australia. In the very beginning, AHSI students were attending the PCYC work placements and would assist with the activities run by the centres. We realised that alongside this, we could also contribute with new projects and activities for the children. We spoke to the management of one large centre, who were keen to see new projects that were never offered before.

Very soon, we commenced creating projects for this organisation - for their holiday and school term programs with children. For each project, our students start by researching and planning the activities, creating the budget, purchasing the materials, and preparing kits for the children. Everyone loved these programs: the students, the work placement providers, and the children at PCYC.

The most popular were the Santa bottle with thermometer, making ice-cream, making elephant toothpaste, making reed bracelets, face painting, wooden block painting, puppets, and story (sock, real puppets, shadow puppets), and many more. What is amazing is that everyone involved became a child and learned new things during the entire duration of these programs, giving to the little clients and receiving the joy and heartful thanks at the end of each day.

10 Previously referred to as the Police and Citizens Youth Club

Photo: unsplash

## Ram Navami

Ram Navami (P 1) is an important festival for Hindu communities in India. Ram is the 7th reincarnation of Vishnu (the preserver and protector of the universe) in a pantheon of three major gods: Brahma (the creator of the universe), Shiva (the destroyer, god of love and war) and Vishnu (the preserver). The celebration of Lord Ram's birthday is filled with music, dancing, telling the story of Ram and giving food to people in need.

We celebrated the event at AHSI, in Blacktown, with an Aboriginal leader as guest speaker. The students danced, brought food they had prepared and enjoyed the three specific food types eaten for this celebration. It was a feast for the eyes to see them dressed in traditional costumes, shining with amazing colours, jewellery and exuding the spirit of festivity. All students had brought along two boxes of food for the needy people. After the party, they made cards and bracelets for the needy people in Blacktown; at five, they left for the park and brought to those people their joy and festivity, food, and kindness.

## Combining festivals with acts of charity

Working closely with work placement providers like Mission Australia, Vinnies, and Baptist Care – HopeStreet, we realised the effects on the community of a number of events that emerged in close order:

- COVID-19 and breaking the shackles of isolation,
- Interest rates and inflation,
- Extreme weather events.

It is wonderful to celebrate, eat special food, dance and share cultural knowledge; we also thought about how we can embed charity in our events. We started by inviting various speakers or charities to our celebrations to remind us about those who are less fortunate.

Knit Bomb Blacktown 2022 (P 4) was a significant event – students learned to knit and participated in the festival organised by the Blacktown Council, to raise awareness against domestic violence. The main charity associated with the event was Harman, one of our partners. Harman has helped over 50 women find a shelter and have where to live after they fled domestic violence. This is a reminder to us that every week, a woman dies because of domestic and family violence in Australia.

For Christmas, we invited Vinnies (P 6); the students brought a small gift (with the age of the recipient written on it); they spoke to the CEO of a charity that mentors 52 children from a broken family background, who often do not have what to eat at home. They consequently learned about Vinnies. We are now involved in a Vinnies conference – organising and participating in the organisation's programs.

AHSI sponsored the Harman Foundation dinner. The students volunteered and helped in organising and running the event. Harman supports women who flee domestic violence, and people needing bereavement and other counselling. Being together at their fundraising dinner was a proud moment for us, to see how these young people are responsible, aware of the suffering world around us and trying to give wherever they can.

## Students and staff perspective

"I came from India, a country where white people are seen as superior, and we are made to feel like that for many generations. When I have the opportunity to share my culture, to explain words, to detail the recipes I cook, to tell the story of our festivals, to dance and bring food to other guests of AHSI, I feel I am respected, valued and it gives me a sense of cultural continuity, as by passing this knowledge to others, I think it will not be forgotten.

If our families in India would see how we are celebrating festivals like Diwali, Karwa Chauth, Raksha Bandhan, Ram Navami, Krishna Janamashtami or the traditions of our Indian weddings (P 3) with the community, they would be honoured and proud of us.

When we come to Australia, we learn and receive a lot of knowledge about the Western way of life, and we often make mistakes or don't understand what is expected of us.

Through the opportunities given to us, we learn so many things, that sometimes it can be overwhelming; even the colour of clothes you need to dress for a funeral (white in India versus black in Australia) is different. When people explain this to us, we change and adapt. *Jaisa des waisa bhais* = you should wear clothing appropriate to the country where you go to.

This extends to saying that if you go somewhere else you must behave in the way it is expected of you. But it can be tiring to alter everything all the time. This is why many people from another country congregate together, speak their language only, eat their food without trying something else and put effort in trying to recreate a small version of their own culture.

But apart from the feelings of being homesick, this further alienates people.

There are beautiful moments in my soul from the festivals and celebrations in India that I remember. The meaning of these festivals is about getting together, celebrating life and giving to people who have less. When I can share these memories, when I can try to recreate that joy I lived in my country, I feel I make a bridge, I give to the people who don't understand my festivals and culture and they come into my world. It is as if they come into my home.

I close my eyes and I see people in the temple, there is a special light and everybody is lining up, whether rich or poor to eat the food offering. Not only that they eat there, but they also take it home to their families. I see the lights of the dyias (our version of candles) and warmth of everyone around me. On that day, there will be no one suffering from hunger.

When I bring food here to share it, it is as if a part of that sacred light from my past fills the room; and I am back in the temple and I am at home in a different place."

**Neha Chatal** *(India, Hindu religion) – former student in Graduate Diploma of Management and staff member*



***"When I dance, I feel the pleasure of expressing my emotions and when I teach someone from another culture, I translate for them the words of the song, the meaning of the dance, and I feel that I contribute something special - and I share it with the world in that moment.***

***When you dance, smiling is the best make-up we wear, and it takes off the pressure from the other person, and it takes away all the differences, and we are all equal."***

**Shalini Sharma** *(India, Hindu religion) – student in Diploma of Community Services*

"For me, it's an honour to teach someone to dance the songs of my culture. I love to share my clothes so that my colleagues feel the same as I do when I wear them, I love to share my customs and meanings of dance and festivals and the way we talk about love in our songs."

**Varyam Kaur** *(India, Sikh religion) – student in Diploma of Community Services*

"It was a shock for me when I came to Australia; everything was different like people not living with families and because I came from Pakistan and I am a Muslim, I think that people have the pre-defined image that I am a terrorist. When I started to give back people started liking me and having a different picture; they found me to be open, kind and joyful. This is what I want to give

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back to this country and society – a different image of what people from Pakistan are and a different image for the religion in Pakistan. Back in my country, people live together, go out together, be that your parents or extended family and we are there for one another. Here, people can be a bit lonely and cut-off from their parents and other relationships. What I want to bring here is the spirit of community one can rely on, of being there for each other and knowing that no one can fall between the cracks. If someone has fallen down, they must learn that we can pick them up and take them with us."

**Saad Mujeeb** *(Pakistan, religion Islam) – student in Diploma of Community Services*

## CONCLUSION

By giving the students opportunities to share their culture and actively bring a contribution to the rich fabric of the Australian diverse society we achieved more than the initial goal of creating meaningful work placement opportunities. We created a bridge between cultures; we made them feel they are respected, valued, and needed.

Additionally, as most of the celebrations of AHSI now connect the community and charity with celebrations, we embed the spirit of community work in what we do on a day-to-day basis. This way, we support our students sharing, being involved in the community work, becoming part of this society, and contributing their own individual and collective gifts.

Maya Angelou once said "the person who receives gets the thing, but the person who gives gets the bigger blessing—your heart expands". We have seen firsthand the impact it has on the hearts our students as they feel welcomed into the community and valued. We endeavour to go on in this spirit of giving.

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# Sources of lived experience in the family violence sector


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## About Safe and Equal

Safe and Equal is the peak body for specialist family violence services that provide support to victim survivors in Victoria. The interests of people experiencing, recovering from, or at risk of, family violence is at the heart of everything we do. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving, and respected. We recognise the gendered nature of violence in our society, and the multiple intersecting forms of power and oppression which can compound the impacts of violence and limit people's access to services, support, and safety. We work closely and collaboratively with other organisations and support the leadership of victim survivors to amplify their voices and create change.

We provide specialist expertise across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery approaches and the inter-connections between them. Our work is focused on developing and advancing specialist practice for responding to victim survivors; building the capability of specialist family violence services and allied workforces, organisations and sectors that come into contact with victim survivors; building the capabilities of workforces focused on primary prevention; and leading and contributing to the translation of evidence and research, practice expertise, and lived experience into safe and effective policy, system design and law reform.

**We develop family violence practice and support workforces** to ensure that victim survivors are safe, their rights are upheld, and their needs are met. The prevalence and impact of family and gender-based violence will be reduced because we are building a strong and effective workforce responding to victim survivors that can meet the needs of the community we serve, while also having a growing and impactful workforce working to prevent violence.

**We work to strengthen and connect organisations, sectors**, and systems to achieve safe and just outcomes for victim survivors, irrespective of entry point, jurisdiction and individual circumstances. Joining efforts across prevention, response, and recovery, we work to ensure the family violence system is informed and supported by a well-resourced and sustainable specialist sector. Our contributions to primary prevention workforces, initiatives and alliances contribute to social change for a safer and more respectful community.

**We are building momentum for social change** that drives meaningful action across institutions, settings, and systems for a safer and more equal society. Our workforce and practice development efforts are coupled with a partnership approach that builds community awareness and commitment to change. Our expertise and efforts enable citizens across the community to recognise and respond to family and gendered violence, hold perpetrators to account, and support the ongoing recovery and empowerment of victim survivors.

**We are a strong peak organisation** providing sustainable and influential leadership to achieve our vision. The work we do and the way we work are integrated and align with our values. This is achieved through inclusive culture, and a safe and accessible workplace supported by robust systems and processes.

## Executive Summary

**Building on the research and findings** in the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework*, and with the goal of embedding the lived experience of victim survivors within the peak and the broader specialist family violence service sector, this issues paper seeks to explore and understand the different sources of lived experience and how they can be harnessed and integrated into our work.

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The specialist family violence sector is broadly underpinned by an intersectional feminist framework. In the context of embedding lived experience, it is essential to understand the significance and importance of engaging multiple forms of knowledge: **the diversity of lived experience.** This paper explores three different but equally valuable and reinforcing ways that lived experience can be embedded within the specialist family violence sector.

**Lived experience in the workforce** refers to individuals who work in the sector as practitioners, leaders, advisors, researchers, administrators, and in many other roles. This lived experience is the backbone of family violence specialisation, with its origins in the personal experiences of women who were instrumental in establishing the first refuges and support services for women and children. However, as the sector has become more professionalised, lived experience in the workforce has become less visible. It is important to acknowledge that while lived experience in the workforce is not essential, it should be recognised and viewed as valuable, meaningful and a strength of the sector.

**The lived experience of clients**, also known as client voice, is integral to the growth and strengthening of service delivery. Specialist family violence services are wholly accountable to the clients they support. Client knowledge and experience is a valuable asset for services to learn from and helps paint a collective picture of many different experiences and journeys through the system.

The third source of lived experience this paper explores is the **lived experience of survivor advocates** – those who apply lived experience to formal activities to influence policy development, service planning and practice, and contribute to broader systems reform, social change and community awareness. Despite issues around resourcing and sustainability, engaging survivor advocates in projects of any scope and size can have significant and invaluable impact and can contribute to the identification of systemic gaps and service improvements.

None of these sources can exist as representative of all lived experience – nor are any more valuable than any other. There exist multiple ways for the lived experiences and expertise of victim survivors of family violence to be embedded and drive the work of the sector. This paper encourages an understanding that all sources of lived experience are necessary to ensure responses to family violence are effective, inclusive, and safe.

In considering the progression of this work, we must acknowledge and understand that differing levels of access to power mean that different sources of lived experience are not representative of each other. Utilising a 'power with' approach, as well as co-production with clients and survivor

advocates, provides a way to distribute power more evenly and provides those with lived experience more opportunities to lead and contribute to decision making.

## INTRODUCTION

Safe and Equal has a role in leading efforts to embed the voices of victim survivors in all parts of the family violence system. This paper seeks to build on the findings of the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* research to define and explore different sources of lived experience which inform the work of the family violence sector.

**This paper is informed by:**

**The findings from the Experts by Experience Framework research**

**A review of literature and resources**

**Informal conversations and formal consultations with survivor advocates, including the Expert Advisory Panel**

**Workshops, consultation, and a survey of Safe and Equal staff[11]**

**Consultation with the specialist family violence leadership group.**

Consequently, this article captures thinking at a point in time. As the work to embed the voice of lived experience in the family violence sector progresses, so too will our understandings.

## Background and context

Lived experience as a concept and practice has been in circulation for decades, and over the years has taken many different forms and definitions (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Werner-Seidler and Shaw, 2019). Historically excluded groups, in particular First Nations communities, have been drawing from their lived experience as a source of knowledge, survival and resistance long before the concept was applied by the community sector (Cataldo, 2021). Community sectors have approached lived experience participation differently, with differing levels of intensity and different definitions (Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020; Lamb et al, 2020).

The term *lived experience* refers to the experience of people on whom a social justice issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct impact. The term lived expertise can be understood as the knowledge, insights, understanding and wisdom gathered through *lived experience* (Sandhu, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, these terms are used to describe a lived experience of family violence. Safe and Equal recognises that lived experiences are intersectional and people will bring different insights gained through experiences of overlapping systems of discrimination and oppressions. Lived experiences of patriarchal violence are compounded by colonisation, racism and white supremacy, ableism, homophobia and transphobia, among others.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the *lived experience* of family violence must be foregrounded in the historical and continuing context of white colonisation, and the resulting impacts of displacement from Country, cultural dispossession, systemic racism, and state-sanctioned disruption of community kinship systems. Despite the ongoing impacts of colonisation, Aboriginal communities are strong in culture and Country, and have the solutions to shape self-determined futures (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020).

The Victorian *Code of Practice: Principles and Standards for Specialist Family Violence Services for Victim-Survivors* recognises the inclusion of lived experience as a fundamental element that underpins all work undertaken by the specialist family violence sector; a critical component of the specialist family violence praxis; and a key indicator for quality governance and leadership (Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020).

There is increasing expectation from government and other authorities that client experience is reflected in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services to ensure quality service provision and governance (DHHS, 2019; Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020). One of the key messages from the Royal Commission into Family Violence was the need to embed the lived experiences of victim survivors in all aspects of the family violence system and responses to family violence (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). Subsequent reporting by the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor has found that the government's approach to embedding lived experience has focused on the establishment of the Victim Survivor Advisory Council (Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, 2019) and that more needs to be done to increase engagement with diverse voices and to increase engagement with lived experience across the whole family violence system (Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, 2018).

In 2019 - 2020, The University of Melbourne and the WEAVERs (Women and their children who have Experienced Abuse and Violence: Researchers and advisors) developed the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework* to support best practice engagement with survivor advocates within the specialist family violence sector. This work was commissioned by Safe and Equal (formerly Domestic Violence Victoria), with funding from a coalition of philanthropic funders through the Family Violence Philanthropy Collaboration Project.

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11 Safe and Equal Internal Report (2021) Embedding the Voice of Lived Experience in the Peak Body: Organisational readiness and culture.

The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework identified that the role of lived experience in the sector is not consistently understood or valued, and that practitioners with lived experience can be reluctant to disclose this in a professional context for fear of negative consequences (Lamb et al, 2020). The research recommended further exploration of how to harness the strengths and insights of the family violence workforce's lived experience.

Safe and Equal is now working to embed the lived experienced of victim survivors within the peak and the specialist family violence service sector more broadly. This includes exploring the different forms of lived experience that exist in the sector and progressing discussions about how these come together to generate knowledge, evidence and practice.

## The diversity of lived experience

The specialist family violence sector works from an intersectional feminist framework not only to address individual experiences of violence but also to collectively transform the social context that makes violence possible in the first place. This is achieved through primary prevention strategies, systemic advocacy, political reform, and social change campaigning. To be effective, prevention of and responses to family violence need to be informed by multiple forms of knowledge – that is, empirical evidence, lived experience and practice expertise - all of which are mutually beneficial and none more valuable, meaningful or relevant than the others.

Just as there are multiple ways to embed evidence in our work, or gain practice wisdom and experience, there are many ways that lived experience of family violence and of the service system can be harnessed and embedded into the work of the sector.

## Lived experience in the workforce

People with lived experiences of family violence bring their experience with them to this work every day: as practitioners, leaders, advisors, researchers, administrators, and in many other roles. Their lived experience, whether historical or current, informs and influences their knowledge and practice in both explicit and implicit ways.

In Australia, like other parts of the world, family violence specialisation grew out of the feminist movement, with a focus on women's liberation from violence and control within patriarchal power structures. The sector is the result of grassroots efforts by women's liberationists, many of whom had a personal experience of family violence and were instrumental in establishing the first refuges and support services for women and children (Theobald et al. 2017).

Over time, the specialist family violence sector has professionalised from grassroots responses to a coordinated service system, with formal education and minimum qualification standards. The sector has proudly honed and retained the skills and expertise that makes family violence specialisation so unique and important. However, through this process of professionalisation, lived experience in the workforce has become less visible.

While lived experience is not a defining feature, it remains common amongst this qualified and professional workforce. As lived experience is not critical or required to equip a professional to work in family violence, the fact that it exists within the sector is acknowledged and discussed inconsistently. For some working in the sector, there is even a sense that lived experience is devalued or stigmatised (Lamb et al., 2020). Professionals with lived experience make informed decisions about where, when and how much of their experience is safe to share, balancing bringing their whole self to work and not sharing 'too much' for fear it may be interpreted as 'unprofessional'. There is an opportunity to shift this to more explicitly acknowledge that while lived experience is not essential to working in family violence, it does exist within the specialist workforce and is a strength of the sector.

Broad and explicit recognition signals that lived experience in our workforce is valued and meaningful. This recognition can begin to build a workplace culture that is welcoming of professionals who are also victim survivors, without requiring individuals to disclose their experience if they do not wish to. This is part of resisting individualising the issue of family violence and shifting to collective understandings and action, while also fostering a space and an authorising environment for more explicit or visible engagement with different sources of lived experience – such as that of clients and survivor advocates. Recognition of workforce lived experience needs to be reinforced by appropriate infrastructure and industrial conditions to support the safety and wellbeing of the workforce, including staff with lived experience. Systems and structures must be put in place, including accessible recruitment and induction processes, appropriate supervision structures, and supports including Family Violence Leave and an Employee Assistance Provider equipped to provide family violence counselling.

## Lived experience of clients

The lived experience of clients, often described as client voice, provides rich information about the efficacy of service provision and is important for services to consider and learn from. (Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020). Engaging with client voice includes any contact with a worker, through risk assessment and safety planning, case planning discussions and records, as well as submitting complaints and providing feedback in direct service delivery. It also extends to organisational and systemic engagement through client contributions to monitoring and evaluation, quality audits, service reviews or policy consultations, and co-design activities to inform quality improvement, service improvement and system design (DHHS, 2019).

The governance processes and leadership of specialist family violence services must be accountable to clients. This is part of the ongoing development of specialist family violence practice, which must always be informed by victim survivors' own voices, lived experiences, knowledge and expertise (Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020).

Utilising client lived experience means specialist family violence services and practitioners can paint a collective picture of the many different experiences of and journeys through the system, including giving voice to the experiences of victim

survivors who are not engaged further as survivor advocates.

## Lived experience of survivor advocates

The expertise of survivor advocates is another form of lived experience which informs, influences and advances the work of the sector. Survivor advocates are people with lived experience of family violence who are engaged in formal activities to influence policy development, service planning and practice, and contribute to broader systems reform, social change and community awareness. This can extend to people who have experienced the grief and loss of losing a family member or friend to family violence and wish to advocate for change. The term 'survivor advocate' is commonly used within the family violence sector and in the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework*.

Importantly, survivor advocates can provide input not only through responding to proposed plans or approaches, but also through leading and imagining different and innovative prevention and practice approaches. Survivor advocates are collaborators of the specialist sector in our efforts to hold the broader system to account, as well as contributing to identifying gaps and service improvements within our family violence services.

Survivor advocates that are advocating from within or on behalf of an organisation are both advocating alongside and against a system. This can present a tension with survivor advocates balancing relationships, influence and speaking their truth. Through the course of their work and advocacy, it is common for survivor advocates to receive disclosures from others. This can be difficult to hold, and family violence services have a responsibility to ensure advocates are provided with adequate support and debriefing. To date, there have been some outstanding initiatives within the sector to support and amplify survivor advocacy through formal mechanisms, though resourcing and sustainability continues to be a prevailing issue. Initiatives have included media advocacy programs, victim survivor advisory groups, project reference groups, policy consultation and engagement as consultants, among other approaches (Lamb et al., 2020).

Survivor advocates, both as individuals and collectives, also organise and undertake advocacy activities independent of any single organisation or sector, through strategically leveraging networks, news media, social media, and coalition building.

There is no single way for specialist family violence services to enable or engage with survivor advocacy. The most appropriate approach will depend on the type of activity in focus, and level of participation and resourcing available. Engaging advocates in even seemingly small projects can have invaluable impact and be aligned to best practice principles of the *Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework.*

## Key considerations for progressing this work

Each source of lived experience is distinct and comes with a different position on issues and level of access to social power. Social power can be understood as being attributed through structural or physical characteristics, from which societal systems assign meaning in a way that privileges people with certain identities or experiences at the expense or oppression of another social group. This could include formal education, socioeconomic class background, current economic situation, level of employment or hierarchy within an organisational structure; it can be gender, sex, sexual orientation, height, weight, and skin colour. Social power is contextual, that is, it can change depending on the environment and relies on external hierarchies. Conversely, personal power is internal and developed through an awareness of self and is independent from societal culture.

Someone speaking at the table as a client holds a different subject position to that of a survivor advocate or service provider. Similarly, a survivor advocate holds a different subject position to a service provider. For this reason, we must not conflate different sources of lived experience as representative of each other. We must also acknowledge and recognise that an individual's lived experience can exist across these sources – for example, a person may currently be accessing support through a family violence service, whilst also working in the sector, and/or advocating.

It is important to identify and address power imbalances. Unexamined power dynamics can uphold structural hierarchies and marginalisation, undermine rights and safety, and reproduce control over victim survivors' lives in a way that can be similar to family violence. Equally, power can be positive and transformative. Utilising the intersectional feminist approach of 'power with' can meaningfully support people with lived experience to experience their own empowerment and uphold dignity and control over their lives.

As we work to embed lived experience more explicitly within the family violence system, some sector representatives have raised concerns about creating or reinforcing a hierarchy of expertise – where some forms of knowledge are seen as more important or valuable than others. This suggests that lived experience, evidence and practice expertise are necessarily discrete or mutually exclusive forms of knowledge, and that empowering one must come at the expense of another.

However, the concept of 'power with' can be applied in this context to meaningfully embed all forms of lived experience in all parts of the system. Co-production is a way to distribute power more evenly, giving those with historically less power - in this case clients and survivor advocates - more opportunity to lead and contribute to decision making. This requires a commitment to coming to the work without preconceived ideas, assumptions or solutions. Instead, we need to remain open to radically listen, which requires a suspension of judgement, curiosity to understand, and a willingness to act and truly centre lived expertise (Bilston, 2022).

Additionally, there is a need to build pathways for people with lived experience of family violence and the services system to access paid opportunities in the sector. The family violence sector is experiencing strain and stress with increasing demand and complexity, and without adequate resourcing this is impacting on workforce retention. There is an opportunity to attract and retain a skilled workforce that is representative of the community through removing barriers for people with lived experience. There is also a need to foster intentional and supported pathways for victim survivors to step from contributing to client voice into advocacy and the workforce, noting that this is not necessarily a linear pathway.

## CONCLUSION

There exist multiple ways for the lived experiences and expertise of victim survivors of family violence to be embedded and drive the work of the sector. Each source, whether through the workforce, client

voice, or survivor advocacy, is mutually beneficial, reinforcing, and valuable. No source undermines or overrides the others. No source is sufficient to meet our broader objectives of ensuring responses to family violence are effective, inclusive, and safe; and ultimately ending family violence, on its own. A combination of all sources of lived experience is necessary. The sector now has a role in applying this approach and beginning to demonstrate how to meaningfully integrate lived expertise, empirical evidence and practice expertise into our practice, policy, and advocacy.

As a sector, we have an opportunity to acknowledge and articulate the lived experience which exists within the workforce, while also strengthening the formal pathways for embedding client voices and increasing best practice engagement with survivor advocates in the work. These are interrelated sources of lived experience, and one cannot succeed without the other. ■

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# FROM THE STUDY DESK

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This edition introduces the new section, 'From the Study Desk'- a place where students contribute their experiences as they move through their learning and practical experiences into employment within the community services sector. The five undergraduates presented here are all social work students from Victoria University who are undertaking their community development practicum placements at Borderlands Cooperative in Melbourne. Commencing with Jodie, who left high school after Year 8 and initially undertook a two-year Diploma of Community Services, these five students – in varying stages of their degrees, have generously provided their personal stories.

Students from L - R: Visina, L., Fraser, P., Tran, S., Elchamaa, F., & Kennedy, J.

## Students undertaking community development placements

Kennedy, J., Elchamaa, F., Fraser, P., Tran, S., & Ilic, S.

Hello, my name is **Jodie Kennedy**. I am in my third year at Victoria University, Footscray Park Campus. I am Australian-born; my parents immigrated to Australia in 1964 from England under the 10-pound scheme. I have two sisters and the eldest travelled to Australia with my parents; my younger sister and I are Australian. My journey into studying has been a work in progress as I left high school in 1985, only completing up to year 8. In 2020 I started the 2-year full-time Diploma of Community Services at Victoria University Polytechnic, which enabled me to pathway my degree straight into the 2nd Year of my degree. All my life I wanted to be in a profession where I could help people, and I was able to achieve that by working in the Optical field, helping people with the health of their eyes.

# FROM THE STUDY DESK

Unfortunately, like most things, the focus became less on helping and more on the dollar value, which I found wasn't in line with why I went into it in the first place. In 2019 I lost my mum suddenly and found myself re-evaluating life, and the first thing that came up was changing my work, and there came studying. As a mature-aged student I bring 52 years of life experience. I have lived experience and so much empathy and love to give, my future goal is to work with our young people and hopefully be that person who can make a difference in their lives somehow.

***

Hi, my name is **Faida Elchamaa**, I am one of five siblings and the eldest. I'm an Australian-born Muslim woman with a Lebanese background. I am currently in my third year at Victoria University. I chose to undertake studies relating to the community sector because of the desire to see people reach their full potential, which is rewarding and admirable. On the other hand, in my religion it says to always help, to be kind, and caring, which allows me to be tolerant and open-minded which are some of the values I uphold and hope to foster in those around me. Islam really influenced my decision to undertake study in this field because of how cruel the world is, how society has undervalued cultural identity and how we have internalised those values, and to question how our identities impact on our beliefs as - well as the stereotypes and biases we hold. Moreover, pushing through all that, I've always been the one to take care of those around me and I feel community service work is where I can best use my abilities.

***

Like many I — **Peter Fraser** — didn't always know I wanted to work in the community sector. Even after completing 18 months of my degree, I was still unsure whether this field was for me. I was chasing the ideal and was trying to measure myself up to all the expectations of workers across dozens of different fields within the sector. It wasn't until recently that I realised I was already doing this work. The commitment to lifelong learning, constantly challenging my own beliefs and questioning why I think the way I do while valuing honesty, justice and being true to oneself where all aspects of myself that lead me to studying this field in the first place. It became clear that working in the sector was more than a certificate of completing a course and a set of skills that can be ticked off as completed. I realised it is a commitment to all these afore-mentioned ideas, not something you switch on and off when entering or leaving work. I learned that from the beginning of my day until the end and I will continue to work in the caring profession for the rest of my life.

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Hi, my name is **Sophie Tran**, and I am currently finalising my degree at Victoria University. I come from a Vietnamese background, and in our culture what we value the most is kindness. Showing kindness towards others and being respectful to everyone, especially elderly people. What inspired me to want to study this field is it has always been my passion to help people who are facing problems or issues in their lives and need help. Studying in this area has given me the opportunity to step out of my comfort zone, and I believe by studying this course it has given me the courage to speak up more and take risks in life. I am the eldest with two younger siblings, and I always believe that I should be a good role model so that they can look up to and be proud of. As a child growing up I have always been a kind person, always wanting to help people. For example, I would go out of my way to help an elderly person on the street, if it looked like they needed help. Or it could be as simple as picking up things people accidently drop on the streets, and hand it back to them. I believe that I should always show an act of kindness towards others, because that is what makes this world a happier place. It's been a great couple of weeks so far with Borderland Cooperative, I have had the pleasure of meeting impressive people and getting to know the students from Victoria University better.

***

My name is **Vishna Ilic** and I am in my final year of my degree. This is my 4th year placement and after completion I will have only 2 units left to study before graduation. In my twenties I never truly believed I would go to university as I did not have confidence and I didn't think I could cope with the workload. As I moved closer to my thirties, I started to fret a bit because I didn't have a career or a solid plan of what I wanted and what was going to keep me financially secure. I'd worked in jobs like childcare, hospitality and promotional work and I was never overjoyed or felt very valued in these roles. Deep inside I knew I wanted more; I wanted job security - a role that made me feel good about myself. I wanted to make a difference in someone's life as I believe people can do anything if they put their minds and hearts to it. I looked back through the 'magical crystal ball' and remembered how in year 12 I saw a poster advertising a new company that was hiring workers to support people with disabilities, and would look elsewhere and the areas that caught my eye were always helping/assisting in settings like community centers, youth drop-in centers, food banks and rehabs etc.

The year I turned 30 I decided to go to university. Throughout my life I have had people tell me I should do this work or similar, and because I was unsure that I could achieve it I decided to listen to other people and not my head. Because I believed in people, I decided to trust the people that believed in me and go to university, to do the best that I can and give myself a chance to grow. I can honestly say that I have tried my best and I am even a bit surprised at my stamina to have almost finished four years. I didn't think I had the commitment and the interest to do this. Thank you, Victoria University and Borderlands, (even though only a couple of weeks) for having welcomed me and inspired me to always keep growing and learning more.

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The Borderlands Cooperative[12] is a not-for-profit cooperative involved in community and international development, ecological sustainability, and social justice, as well as participatory approaches to research and evaluation.

The St John's Anglican church building, where Borderlands now has its offices, was first built sometime in the late 1800's next to the Maribyrnong River. However, the river did have a habit of flooding as it flowed towards Port Phillip Bay to the Yarra River. Church members decided to move the building away from that river location, taking it apart and transporting it 'blue stone by blue stone' to its present location in Pickett Street, Footscray.

The building is no longer used for religious services but has become an office for us - as well as a meeting place for a variety of groups, organisations, and initiatives, including housing our extensive library.

**Jacques Boulet** - *Borderlands Coop, and on the WCDC Organising Committee*

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12 For further details see: https://www.borderlands.org.au/purpose

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INTERNATIONAL PEER-REVIEWED

# Inclusive and Participatory Community Development: Building on Ubuntu to Leave No One Behind

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## ABSTRACT

Community development in principle ought to be inclusive and participatory. But this is not always the case in communities internationally through to locally. Drawing from the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, leaving no one behind, it is important to repackage this practice to ensure understanding, mobilisation, and action to work with populations often not easily reached and/or underserved. While this inclusive practice has majorly focused on persons with disabilities, other vulnerable populations also at risk of being left behind include children, youth, older persons, minorities, indigenous peoples, displaced populations, and even the poor. All these categories have unique needs which ought to be served. The ethic of Ubuntu offers a time-tested humane way of ensuring inclusivity and participation in community work. The core of Ubuntu is that "I am because you are". Thus, all actors ought to realise they share a common fate and journey. As travellers on the journey of community life it is best if the interest of all is served. Social capital ingredients of trust, social bonding, and reciprocity become core in underpinning actions that ensure no one is left behind. There is an ethic and duty of care that should inform the community development practice. There is a challenge when groups at risk of being left behind and/or of exclusions are focused upon on their own needs. Profiling becomes a norm and so are prejudices and complexes of patronage (superiority versus inferiority complex), as well as failure to address the socio-structural contexts that perpetuate tendencies for exclusion and being left behind. Therefore, building upon Ubuntu disabuses these and calls upon practitioners to develop a community development practice that is not just inclusive and participatory – but humane and transformative.

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive and participatory community development involves processes whose salience cannot be gainsaid and has consequently been selected as the relevant overarching framework within which to explore and discuss Ubuntu. In addition, there are many reasons that justify inclusivity. A fundamental one being the adoption of a holistic approach that is grounded on the principles of empowerment, human rights, inclusion, social justice, self-determination and collective action (Kenny, 2007), areas discussed throughout this paper.

Moreover, the push towards social inclusion has also garnered extensive support over the years courtesy of the rallying call of the Sustainable Development Goals to Leave No One Behind - the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development global plan of action. Importantly it is also a comprehensive blueprint through which the 193 member states of the United Nations pledged to ensure sustained and inclusive economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection, and to do so in partnership and peace. It calls for the participation of all segments of society, irrespective of their race, gender, ethnicity, and identity (United Nations, 2015).

Social inclusion is broadly seen as the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society (World Bank, 2013). It also entails improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society (ibid). Social inclusion is advanced when individuals or groups who feel excluded assert their agency through social and political participation (Bordia & Espinoza 2020). Incidentally, much attention has been given to people living with disabilities and rightly so. However, in every society across the globe there are also other groups that face barriers to their participation in all spheres of life – be it political, economic, or social life.

Inclusive community development practice has hitherto majorly focused on persons with disabilities – largely because of it being unjustly seen as an obvious basis of exclusion. Nevertheless, even when people with disability have been included in processes patronising attitudes still remain within the inclusion process – which can result in further psychological disconnection and exclusion.

There are many bases for exclusion from community development processes, and this is despite all efforts over decades to ensure inclusive and participatory practices. The major basis for exclusion for an individual or group of individuals has largely been their identity, based on attributes such as gender, race, caste, ethnicity, religion, and disability.

It is important to also point out that there are other vulnerable populations at risk of being left behind and these include children, youth, older persons, minorities, indigenous peoples, displaced populations, and even the poor. Further, around the world, indigenous people and minority groups continue to face exclusion that is rooted in large part in their displacement from their traditional lands (Hall & Patrinos, 2012). Excluding all these categories of the population from participating in community development discourse and practice hinder them from exercising their autonomy, voice and agency and as such things are likely to be done for them rather than with them – with a likely potential of missing their core concerns and contribution to overall development in society. Agents for social change ensure social inclusion is sustainably achieved among all the population categories in society. In addition, they mobilize forces and organize for participatory decision-making processes to enhance fairness and justice among the community members. However, their capacity to solve exclusion practices sustainably is limited, which calls for training and development of theoretically rigorous and easily applicable models to guide their undertakings (Bell & Reed, 2022).

To ensure inclusive yet participatory community development practice, we propose the use of Ubuntu which offers time-tested humane principles. The core of Ubuntu is that "I am because you are". Thus, all actors in community work ought to realise that they share a common fate and journey – and as travellers on the journey of community life – it is best if the interest(s) of all is served.

### The focus of this paper

To ensure inclusive community development, there is a need to focus on social inclusion to understand who is left out, from what, in what ways, and why; and in the process seek ways of redressing this exclusion. We all matter and as Ubuntu implores

us – I am because you are. This paper, therefore, seeks to highlight how to leverage on our humanity – Ubuntu – to ensure no one is left behind and we are better and richer when we undertake and partake community work in an inclusive and participatory manner.

## Why focus on inclusive Participatory Community Development

Drawing from the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, leaving no one behind, it is important that community development practice is repackaged to ensure understanding, mobilisation, and action to work with populations often not easily reached and/or underserved.

First, the lessons learnt across the globe as communities and governments responded to the challenge to humanity posed by COVID-19 brought out the fundamental role played by community members – from all walks of life - as first responders and guardians of humanity in the advent of adversity. Containment measures imposed in controlling the spread of COVID-19 has meant traditional government and other development agencies' support could not be easily accessed and/or available. Communities were consequently left to use their designs and interventions to address their needs and of those at risk. The extent of inclusiveness and participation of all actors underpinned the success of people accessing the basics to survive. Community members were able to reach segments of fellow members who otherwise would not have been reached with basic lifesaving supplies. Humanity was at play – Ubuntu was at play – as people driven by love and concern for others beyond self, shared whatever was available and served the requirements of those in need. The same lessons have also been drawn from emergency response initiatives during disaster response measures. The interests of all humanity are interlinked and thus community development in principle ought to be inclusive and participatory. But this is not always the case in some communities.

Secondly, all the categories of human populations have unique needs. Conversely, all members of society, whatever their station in life have resources which can and should benefit humanity. Being inclusive benefits all of us – all humanity. The excluded groups ought to be brought on board to contribute, and benefit from opportunities that are available in their communities.

Moreover, there has been a tepid commitment to addressing the needs of all populations in society. For instance, social inclusion interventions targeting people with disability have had positive effect on their socio-economic well-being (Saran et al., 2023, & Santilli, 2018). More can be done to ensure inclusiveness by reaching out to those other categories of population at risk of exclusion and marginalisation. Given people with disability form the largest group considered in inclusion interventions, this can discriminate against other vulnerable groups - bearing in mind that all such persons are excluded in the community in one way or the other. Focusing more on disability makes negotiating for access and inclusion of other less disadvantaged a challenge. According to Chiwandire (2020) notes students with disability receive social and financial support from community development practitioners in public and private organisations. Therefore, similar efforts should be applied to support other excluded population in the society, focusing on reducing inequality. To achieve this, peer to peer learning and practical exchanges can equip community workers with the prerequisites to carry out their tasks. Specifically, this can build practitioners skills for inclusive practice that ensures:

a) inclusion of all people at risk of exclusion in all development programs and at all stages,
b) the participation of all persons at risk of exclusion in all decision-making platforms so that their voice can count,
c) generation, of as well as building, resources on stories of change, and
d) mainstreaming of inclusion issues in community development.

However, inclusion alone will not create sustainable solutions and therefore systemic intervention is called for, with learning together being crucial for community workers to synergise processes. In any case, if inclusion interventions are not participatory and holistic, they can lead to creation of further social inequalities.

Thirdly, the World Bank (2013) observes that solving the problem of social exclusion is urgent. This recognises new categories of excluded populations are emerging regularly as tensions across the globe rise due to, among other shocks, demographic shifts, migration, climate change, economic shocks due to extreme poverty, high food prices and high energy costs. Equally, competition for resources within and across communities portends risks of exclusion.

Fourthly, exclusion is costly to all of us and, if anything, to community development practice. When all resources and opportunities are not optimised by having all stakeholders at the table, we erode the very basis of our humanity – connectedness and warmth of humane interaction. The monetary cost is another price that is best left to economists – but nevertheless uncalled for. For instance, most developing societies are agricultural. The World Bank (2013) reports that studies in Bolivia estimate that ethnic exclusion reduces agricultural productivity by up to 36 percent.

Lastly, inclusion and participation are by right values, as well as principles, of community development (IACD, 2018). Inclusiveness by itself does not assure empowerment for those excluded or at risk of exclusion. As Arnstein (1969) indicates, participation comes at different levels – ranging from nominal participation where tokenism is not ideal to the highest level of genuine participation - community control. So, if the inclusion does not lead to participation at the level of control where individual's voice, autonomy, and agency count – all is lost. Inclusiveness ought to be at a level where all individuals and groups count - and therefore, the humanity of all resonates with the rhythm of an inclusive and genuinely participatory practice – where Ubuntu thrives.

## Drawing on Ubuntu to ensure inclusive participatory community development

Ubuntu is an African human ideology and indigenous approach that has resurged due to the quest for peace and security following post-colonial conflicts in Africa (Rodima-Taylor, 2022; Waghid, 2020; Akinola & Uzodike, 2018; Metz, 2019). Other than security and peace initiatives, Ubuntu has a place in ensuring inclusive and participatory community development. However, according to Valiani (2017) globalisation has to some extent compromised the spirit of Ubuntu. For instance, technological advancement has contributed to social disorganisation by invalidating physical community and promoting individualisation. Besides globalisation, Mhlanga (2014) points out that Ubuntu has suffered an unprecedented decline through cultural pluralism. Despite these

challenges the spirit of Ubuntu is still evident in many societies, especially in Africa, and adherences to its principle of reducing prejudice and discrimination, and consequently creating just and inclusive societies.

Inclusion that does not reflect a human face may disgrace a society. This is because the spirit of Ubuntu emphasises individuals should be seen as a social self, as depicted by the aphorism "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (Tutu, 1999; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Mandela, 2013). Mbiti (1990) further states that "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual." These axioms highlight the importance of communal aspect which we, as humans, have interdependent relationships with others - leading us to care for them, be sensitive towards one another, and embrace communalism.

Ubuntu philosophy originates from Nguni group in South Africa and its application in African countries is evident. However, it is also applied beyond Africa. According to Mequwanint and Onsando (2022) African students in Australian educational institutions express their Ubuntu through formation of social groups as a way of overcoming some of the challenges they face. Tran and Wall (2019) also point out that Australian teachers apply humanness, interconnectedness and situatedness in their pedagogical practices with an aim of accommodating international students. A semblance of Ubuntu is also discernible in Polynesia amongst the Maori. Their set of cultural values, customs, and practices (Tikanga) value the caring for one's community and is a most effective mechanism for enforcing and ensuring community accountability (Mead, 2016). Moreover, Akina (2015) posits about Aloha in Hawaiian Kingdom also bring people together through creation of love, peace, compassion, affection and mercy. It reflects a deeper cultural background of the indigenous Hawaiians and generally teaches that all human action towards inclusiveness often draws from our deep-rooted humanity.[15]

Due to social change, most communities are no longer at ease as things have fallen apart through discriminative practices. When the 'wheels are coming off' an urgent solution that is sustainable and efficient needs to be harnessed, and therefore, Ubuntu becomes a long standing solution for inclusive thinking (Van Niekerk, 2022).

Ubuntu, as a solution, might not provide quick fixes in solving the inclusion challenge and menace, but rather aims to unlock new opportunities that open people's minds and change their thinking rightfully while working with others. Ubuntu emphasises fairness, humanness, and justice. Therefore, the overriding goal of Ubuntu is to strengthen human capacity and promote social solidarity. Through social solidarity, individuals consider each other as human beings worth being respected, supporting common welfare (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018).

Inclusion should reflect a society's social fabric and cultural affinity (Xulu, 2010). Analysing the socio-cultural environment of society helps in understanding the needs of every person or group, and developing interventions based on such needs – to reflect on aspects of human existentialism. Therefore, incorporating Ubuntu in inclusion interventions is critical because it depicts the pursuit of justice, human dignity, holism, and solidarity for all in the society (Chigangaidze, 2021). On the other hand, a fragmented system disowning the spirit of Ubuntu produces a dysfunctional society with acute social exclusion, which could be a possible cause of underdevelopment (Gwagwa et al., 2022).

15 It is recognised that Australian, Maori and Hawaiian cases provided are brief and warrant further investigation. Unfortunately that is not within the scope of this paper. Links to references in this article can offer further exploration and debate.



Ubuntu has brought tremendous changes on the inclusion of vulnerable groups. According to Engelbrecht and Kasiram (2012), Ubuntu has changed how to care for people with mental illnesses, a burden previously left to individual families to shoulder amidst stigma and isolation. Moodley et al., (2020) also points out that through Ubuntu, the youth and the aged have a chance to participate together in the decision-making of community affairs. In this way, the young people can learn from the aged and vice-versa, thereby sowing seeds of transforming the generations to come. Thus Ubuntu advocates for extensive psychosocial and economic support for youth transitioning from residential care to interdependent living, a phase characterised by poverty and crime in some marginalised communities. Therefore, embracing Ubuntu can smoothen transitions in society.

Ubuntu brings freedom and people from all walks of life can share the same table and discuss their issues without biases. As a preferred ethical approach, Ubuntu creates freedom through fellowship, community friendliness, harmonious relationships, and reconciliation (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

**For community development practitioners**

- Ubuntu goes beyond concerns for human-to-human relationships but also to concerns for environmental sustainability.
- Ubuntu appreciates that humanity cannot be at peace with itself if it is also not at peace with nature.

Besides caring for each other as sisters and brothers, a human face is also needed in environmental conservation. Through Ubuntu, a harmonious relationship is created between human beings and physical nature, countering individualistic practices that distract the ecosystems. This relationship opens a way for dialogue on matters to do with environmental conservation, dispute resolution, and helping vulnerable communities, which are majorly seen as threats to environmental sustainability. Ubuntu nurtures and embodies ecological ethics currently being used to combat climate change (Mabele et al., 2022; Chibvongodze, 2016; Terreblanche, 2018). Since time immemorial, Ubuntu has played a key role in conserving the natural environment. However, due to the application of science in modern times, Ubuntu has been forgotten (Mawere, 2012). It is recommendable to blend science and Ubuntu as main strategies for sustainable conservation of the natural environment.

Community development practitioners work towards environmental conservation in different sectors and regions. Their efforts on enhancing ecological ethics, however, have over time been compromised by factors such as environmental capitalism and ignorance (Taringa, 2020). Therefore, it is important to enlighten them about thinking sustainably; how to use Ubuntu for transformative learning; and, importantly, how they should be assimilated in communities that embrace Ubuntu. Through this, they will find themselves building communities from inside out, and thereafter can become a norm.

## Ubuntu is an Antithesis to Neoliberalism

On the converse, societies that support individualism may deny individuals autonomy, where a person seeks to maximise the satisfaction of their long-range interests rather than counting on others. The predominance of neoliberalism has become an archilles heel upon which exclusion

prevails. Neoliberalism, a term coined by Austrian economists Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig Von Mises in 1938, argues that markets allocate scarce resources, promote efficient growth and secure individual liberty better than governments (in Kammas, 2022). Unfortunately, markets are not sensitive to true dynamics in communities where deliberate action might be called for beyond market considerations. Consequently, socio-economic and political exclusions are evident in a majority of the countries embracing neoliberal frameworks (Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2018). Neoliberalism has resulted in critical challenges denying citizens their rights. Ubuntu can be applied beyond the confines of South Africa to Western societies in solving racial politics, which destroy moral fabrics (Ogude, 2019). In any case, Ubuntu is not a fight against neoliberalism and capitalism but rather its application reduces discrimination and prejudices within these economic systems. To that extent, social order and functioning does not rely on western ethical or judicial systems – but on sets of practices that bind the community together.

The presence of communalism and community participation should be acknowledged to address the problem of social exclusion, and this reflects Ubuntu. Change driven by Ubuntu requires not only the total but active participation of all members of society, including the traditionally marginalised community (Mabingo, 2022). It is not easy to achieve social inclusion if it is only defined and implemented by the government and non-governmental organisations officers. To harness the spirit of Ubuntu, community development practitioners have the role of mobilising and encouraging willing participation and openness among the community members and groups. Ubuntu becomes a cradle – leaving no one behind - through inclusion in participatory development. Equally, celebrating beyond individual triumphs should be a norm to bring everyone on board through participatory practices.

For purposes of sustainability there is a need to widen the policy formulation table to accommodate diverse development stakeholders. Ubuntu acknowledges that everyone in society should have unique input into development. Reasonable approaches bring on board all concerned actors of development endeavours. The ideology of "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" is an ideal philosophical concept that can help remedy concerns of groups in the society who are lagging behind in terms of development. For instance, through gender mainstreaming, women can be empowered and have freedom; children can access education comfortably; the elderly can get the care they deserve; the marginalised can be supported to alleviate their vulnerability, and the people with disabilities will receive the space to be supported through inclusion practices. Ubuntu is a less costly intervention that societies should adopt to solve inclusion problems.

## Drawing Lessons from *Harambee* (Self-Help) Movement in Kenya

Harambee meaning 'let's all pull together,' is a Kenyan indigenous tradition of self-help. It was retained as other traditional approaches were abolished immediately after Kenya gained independence in 1963. It enhances local resource mobilisation and encourages participation and development from below (Ngau, 1987, GoK, 1965). Today, self-help groups in Kenya cut across all gender, ages, village to village, and most people have adopted them to solve their basic needs. Some self-help groups are formal, while others operate informally. Formal self-help groups are currently registered in the Department of Social Development, and they stand a chance of receiving support from the Kenyan government and other organisations through various developmental programs. More importantly, the aspect of Ubuntu is seen in both the formal and informal self-help groups. According to Mbithi and Rasmusson (1977), members of self-help groups come together to pull their resources mainly through income-generating activities such as table banking, animal husbandry, fish farming, operating kiosks, and catering services, among others. They also carry out welfare activities such as merry-go-rounds, settling hospital and burial expenses, paying school fees, supporting social events like weddings, and managing community projects like water catchments and cattle dips. The spirit of Ubuntu reflected in these activities brings fewer disadvantaged people in to participate in community work, hence getting a chance to socialise with other members. Consequently, Ubuntu in the self-help groups is not pegged on every member's financial contribution but also on welfare activities that provide care for each member, despite their class and status in the community. Chitere (2018) points out community development practitioners access self-help groups while working with community members on matters concerning their welfare and development. Through this approach, community members participate in their own development, hence improving their well-being.

**Lesson for community development practitioners**

- Self-help groups are important entry points for those seeking to undertake community development from the inside out.

## Ubuntu, Social Capital and Inclusive participatory development

Ubuntu thrives in societies that are rich in social capital. Social capital is a concept that has been with us since it was first formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), James Coleman (1990) and Robert Putnam (2000). Bourdieu viewed social capital as assets of an individual, rather than a group, resulting largely from one's social position and status. Social capital permits an individual to exercise power on the group or individual who mobilises resources. Bourdieu's social capital is one that is not homogeneously available to members in a group or collective but one that is accessible to those who put in efforts to attain it by positions of power, status, and goodwill. So one needs to, out of concern for self and others, deliberately seek to appropriate social capital by reaching out to others. This is more so when it is noted that social capital influences benefits attained from social networks. However, all these benefits are attached to social, economic, and cultural structures that often develop variance in power and status for specific individuals, and not others in any social network. To gain more from any social network one should have a potential social position in that network, besides taking into account the size of the network (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, to actualise that position, one needs to have a humane disposition that enables him/her to reach out and work with others.

Coleman (1990) conceptualised social capital on the rational choice theory and saw it as individualistic and calculative. Rational choice theory explains how individuals always act on self-interest to fulfil their needs and wants – but by working through the society's social structure and the attendant social networks and social norms

which ultimately enable continued participation in the formation of social capital.

According to Putnam (2000) social capital is the connections among different individuals in their social networks and within norms of mutuality and trustworthiness among them as they engage together in various activities that require participation. Through this Putman demonstrated the most important parts of social capital, including bridging (inclusive) and bonding (exclusive) social capital. In communities with bonding social capital their networks are often inward-looking and incline to strengthen exclusive identities and more homogenous group composition. On the other hand, bridging social capital as outward looking networks can include people across different social cleavages. Bonding social capital networks has been found to be the most useful when in need of specific mutuality and organising solidarity. In summary Putman believes that social networks provide value to individuals in communities, in that social capital can (and usually) exists in both in bonding and bridging forms concurrently.

Social capital, then, is the total sum of all potential and actual resources that are achieved from being part of a durable network of relationships that are based on mutual association. Thus, social capital development builds a community – that is, connected by mutual interest resulting in inclusiveness becoming a norm. Social capital formation is also beneficial when, as Luoma-aho (2016) states, social relationships once formed, nurtured and developed and these approaches benefit individuals and their communities beyond their original expectations. To that extent, building social capital enhances social participation and this leads to social inclusion of otherwise excluded members in society.

Asset based community development approach (ABCD), pioneered by Kretzmann & McKnight (1993), has enabled communities to be seen as unique entities in which each and every community has different assets that enable them to enhance their future. The approach sees communities characterised by a web of gifts and assets, which are typified by:

a) individuals, as everyone in a community has assets and gifts;
b) associations into which individuals belong, the basis for mobilisation;
c) institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, through which civic responsibility is exercised;
d) physical assets which are the tangible resources available to the community; and lastly,
e) connections that enable people to build lasting relationships in support of community development.

Consequently, this approach has supported communities to focus more on their strengths as a community - rather than putting focus on their problems. They start by mapping out what is readily available in the community spaces, such as the skills and gifts among the community members, their natural, physical and general human assets. Assets based community development triggers them to work from within, and then progressively move towards outside communities. Hence the conception of doing community development from inside out (Kretzmann and John McKnight, 1993). Most importantly, the asset-based community development approach, is fundamentally a strength-based approach and therefore identifies and builds upon existing community's assets.



Under the ABCD approach community assets are also identified through social networks that are developed and nurtured in the community. Often social networks help by indicating ways in which community members are connected through numerous social familiarities that range from casual social contact to close familial ties. The concept 'social network' was first coined by J. A. Barnes (1954), focusing on understanding how the social structure around an individual, group/s, or organisation affects different beliefs or behaviors. In networks relationships are analysed based on the nodes and ties. Nodes are individual actors within a set of networks, while ties are relationships among various actors. Social network analyses are important for the sole purpose of trying to understand how the relationships and ties with different actors within a network are important (Dunn, 1983). Simply put, social networks ground an individual in a community.

Social network analysis[16] within the community networks helps in identifying different capabilities, these include the assets of individuals, groups, local associations and institutions, physical assets and economic or financial assets, formal and informal relationships among the individuals, and skills and capacities amongst all members of the community (Blickem et al. 2018; Russell 2015; Serrat 2017). Social capital is one of the community-based assets in which the community is able to develop in their relationships, and trust levels over time – all which in turn helps them to work together – for mutual benefit.

For social capital to work, individuals should invest in trustworthy social networks and relations that will enable them to form partnerships (Halpern, 2005). Through partnerships, their social capital becomes beneficial only if they are able to mobilise, ensuring high levels of trusting relationships. For one to benefit from social network it calls for participation in which he or she joins as a member and becomes part and parcel of the network's activities. Social capital ingredients of trust, social bonding, and reciprocity become core in underpinning actions that ensure no one leaves anyone behind and in need – as at the end of the day one realises that they can only be as good as the community they belong to. In relation to ethics and duty of care Ubuntu becomes even stronger with continuous social capital development.

**Ubuntu, social capital and opportunity for Community Development Practitioners**

- The emerging reality is that community development practice should be more about social capital development – guided by the ethic of care.
- With strong social capital - the rest will follow – communities will work together to resolve areas of concern.

## CONCLUSION

Ubuntu, by entrenching the social capital ingredients of trust, social bonding, and reciprocity, underpins actions that ensure no one is left behind nor in need. Ubuntu acts as a counterweight to exclusion where, based on prejudices, profiling might become a norm, along with complexes of patronage, resulting in failure to address the socio-structural contexts that perpetuate tendencies of exclusion. Building upon Ubuntu disabuses exclusion and calls upon community development practitioners to develop a practice that is not only just, inclusive, and participatory – but also as transformative as it is humane. Therefore, endowing the practitioners with sustained

16 Social network analysis' is a way of understanding the patterns of social connections and links between people, groups, and organisations.

education on inclusion is important in solving exclusive practices that compromise the wellbeing of community members.

**For Community Development Practitioners**

- Ubuntu – anchored on social capital underpins actions that ensure no one is left behind
- In an increasingly neoliberal world - Ubuntu is a counterweight to exclusion and neoliberalism
- The call is for a community development practice that is just, inclusive and participatory - but most important - as transformative as it is humane.

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# Umuebu Neighbourhood House and Community Development in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the place of Umuebu Neighbourhood House (UNH) in Community Development practice, theory, and the history of the Settlement House Movement in Nigeria. The House operates in Umuebu community, Ukwuani Local Government Council, Delta State, Nigeria. It is a registered Non-Governmental Organisation with the Corporate Affairs Commission in Nigeria and serves two populations in Delta and Edo States. It facilitates community development in the context of the definition of community development by the United Nations (UN), International Association for Community Development (IACD), and the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD).

UNH offers community activities centered on community soccer for children and young people. UNH also provides opportunities for community/work and community development students from the University of Benin and other institutions of higher learning to undertake their practicum. The difficulties involved with the operations of the neighbourhood house model are great, but the accomplishments outweigh them. The concept makes it easier for communities to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This article determines the neighbourhood house model is more sustainable than any other top-down paradigm. It suggests that the Nigerian government acknowledge the neighbourhood house concept as a veritable model to facilitate the realisation of the UN SDGs in other communities in Nigeria.

## Introduction

Neighbourhood Houses are also known as Settlement Houses. They are welcoming places where people of all ages, ethnic groups, nationalities and abilities can attend, participate, belong, lead and learn through programs and services. The international settlement house movement contributed to the foundation of the social/community work profession and the philosophy of social justice and fundamental human rights (Association of Neighbourhood Houses of British Columbia, n.d.). The article identifies and explains the different stages that UNH has passed through and how the participatory methods inform community development initiatives. The organisers share the assumption that everyone has a gift; and that change must start from within (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; IACD, 2016; Jennings, 2022).

## History of the Settlement House Movement

Samuel and Henrietta Barnett established the first Universities Settlement House in London in 1884. It was named Toynbee Hall to acknowledge the contribution of historian Arnold Toynbee to the settlement house movement at Oxford University. In 1886 Stanton Coit founded the first American settlement house: Neighbourhood Guild (later the University Settlement). In 1889 Jane Addams and her friend Ellen Gates Starr founded the Hull House in Chicago (Scheuer, 1985).

The Alexandra House is the first neighbourhood house in Vancouver, Canada; it started as an orphanage in 1894 and became British Columbia's first Neighbourhood House. On 28th June 2010, this author founded Umuebu Neighbourhood House (UNH) in Nigeria - after a brief exposure to the knowledge of the Settlement House at the University of British Columbia in 2009 and a practicum at the Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House, Vancouver, British Columbia. Umuebu Neighbourhood House. However, does not explicitly follow the model of Jane Addams because the environments are different.

The settlement house model of Jane Addams serves the urban- poor by residing among them, researching them, advocating for reforms in the policies, and transferring the long-term responsibility of their effective programs to government agencies. The UNH model serves the entire residents of a rural community in Delta State. Some of the UNH workers and volunteers originally reside in the community. The component of 'Residency' is absent in the UNH Model. The volunteers and students on practicum come to the agency during their placement and complete their daily assignments without residing at the Neighbourhood House. The elite in England and the US supported the development of the Neighbourhood/Settlement House to respond to the challenges of poverty in areas of high need, but in Nigeria, the 'Neighbourhood House' concept is still new.

However, the goals remain the same: to be effective in working for improvements in the social issues in the community. The services offered to the community are similar. The UNH Model provides services to children, young persons, adults, women, and aged persons in the community. The present-day Neighbourhood Houses share the original beliefs of Toynbee Hall and believe in working to create a new society by learning and sharing cultures, predicaments community values and fostering leadership and strong relationships in the community.

A neighbourhood house provides opportunities for community members (community leaders, gatekeepers, men, women, and young persons) to engage in conversations and actions directed at meeting community challenges. They exist to promote relationships among people of all ages and ethnic groups through various programs, events, and opportunities for leadership and service. Brown (1995) maintains that neighbourhood houses are grassroots, non-governmental organisations supporting settlement. They do not rely on external professional staff and volunteers. Neighbourhood houses differ because they are grounded in their own communities, yet they all share the desire to empower and connect people. Overall, Brown notes this is part of community life, not just an agency but the heart and soul of the community.

## Overview of Community Development in Nigeria and the Need for a Neighbourhood House

In Nigeria, community development is a tool for improving peoples' access to social amenities and infrastructures. It has remained basic and works better in rural regions than urban areas (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Since 1960 there have been considerable changes in the types of efforts launched, political recognition and the degree of integration into development plans in Nigeria.

Nonetheless, the government is making substantial efforts to foster community development at all three levels of government, but several social and economic issues impede the efforts. These challenges include a lack of community development personnel and operational concerns (inadequate transportation facilities). Other problems are the negative impact of government policies and government budget cuts.

The top-down approach often involves partnerships with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). This partnership concentrates authority in the hands of the NGOs and compromises the elements of common concern in the community, collective

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identity and responsibility, internal motivations, and initiatives. The top-down approach tends to create high levels of dependency, poor sustainability, and low community ownership. Umuebu Neighbourhood House attempts to bridge this gap in community development in Nigeria.

The Neighbourhood House Model is a 'Bottom-Up' approach that ensures community members participate in the programs' planning and implementation to respond to collectively identified needs in the community. This model promotes a genuine claim of ownership and ensures meaningful contribution to project sustainability. It involves high levels of participation and a strong sense of accountability by a diverse population, responding to challenges by promoting community life and place-making community development, creating opportunities for training and learning for all involved - the community, social/community workers, and community development students.

## Umuebu Community

Umuebu is a farming community in Ukwuani Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. There is one primary school, one secondary school, one town hall, one Primary Health Care Centre, one market, one Neighbourhood House and several churches. The Ebu of Umuebu Kingdom is the traditional leader of the community. The Prime Minister (Onotu Uku) of Umuebu Kingdom assists the king, followed by twelve chiefs elected by the twelve families in the community.

Community development in this context refers to the coming together of community members to undertake self-help collective actions to generate solutions to common problems. The Indigenous people in the community operate on

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a four-day week. They go to farms on the first two days, and on the third day, to the market in the neighbouring town or prepare their products for market. On the fourth day women go to the market while the boys and men engage in meetings and community development activities. Leaders initiate action in response to real problems in the community. Technology has also made it possible for community members to support developmental activities of these Indigenous people.

To add value to the Indigenous practices and promote participative democracy, UNH draws on the UN definition of community development as:

***"a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems."***

(UNTERM, 2014), and the IACD definition:

*Community Development is practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organization, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings. (IACD, 2016).*

The definition identifies eight themes, key areas and statements about community development practice to include:

**Theme 1: Putting values into practice**
Key Areas: Understanding the values, processes and outcomes of community development and their application to practice in the other practice areas.

**Theme 2: Engaging with communities**
Key Areas: Understanding and engaging with communities, building and maintaining relationships with individuals and groups.

**Theme 3: Ensuring participatory planning**
Key Areas: Understanding, developing and supporting collaborative working and community participation.

**Theme 4: Organising for change**
Key Areas: Enabling communities to take collective action, increasing their influence, access resources and participate in managing and delivering services.

**Theme 5: Learning for change**
Key Area: Supporting people and organisations to learn together for change.

**Theme 6: Promoting diversity and inclusion**
Key Area: Designing and delivering practices, policies, structures, and programs that recognise and respect diversity and promote inclusion.

**Theme 7: Building leadership and infrastructure**
Key Area: Facilitating and supporting organisational development and infrastructure for community development, promoting and providing empowering leadership.

**Theme 8: Developing and improving policy and practice**
Key Areas: Developing, evaluating, and informing practice and policy for community development, using participatory evaluation to inform strategic and operational practice (International Association for Community Development, 2018).

The operations of UNH are consistent with the specifications of the IACD (2016) definition of community development methodology of Organising, Education and Empowerment. The Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach recognises five assets and principles that facilitate the development of communities: The assets include individuals, associations, institutions, physical assets, and connections. ABCD principles of: everyone has a gift; relationships build a community; asking for ideas rather than giving solutions; and listening, caring for people and involving others are also adopted. (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Project organisers draw on these principles to facilitate collaboration with the community members in the planning and delivery of community service is consistent with the UN definition of community development.

Umuebu is a patriarchal society where women and children hardly participate in the general decision-making process in the community. However, there is a high degree of cohesion among the women in the community. In line with patriarchal values, community leaders often exclude women and children from decision-making processes in matters affecting them (Ibobor & Isenmila, 2013). Traditional practices and customary prohibitions against the girl child are prominent features in Umuebu. Traditionally, soccer is for the boys while the girls help their mothers in the kitchen.

## Umuebu Neighbourhood House activities

The UNH is registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission as Umuebu Neighbourhood House Centre for Community Development. (UNHCCD). It is located in Umuebu community in Ukwuani Local Government Area of Delta State., Nigeria (Ibobor, 2012; Ibobor & Isenmila, 2013; Ibobor & Imafidon, 2015, 2016) and runs a liaison office in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

UNH provides community sports and recreation programs for children and young people (both male and female). Umuebu Neighbourhood House organised the maiden community soccer competition from 1st September 2010 to 1st October 2010. The second competition took place from 1st October 2011 to 23rd October 2011. The third competition was held from 15th April 2012 to 27th May 2012 (Ibobor & Isenmila, 2013). Umuebu Neighbourhood House (UNH) provided the first soccer competition to restore unity and trust in the community and to set the community on the path of development. UNH organised the youth in the community into teams. Each team consists of young people from all the families in the community. At the end of the tournament, all the participants celebrated the winning team (Ibobor, 2012).

This maiden edition of the tournament restored trust, harmony, and peace in the community. The community was on the verge of disintegrating into smaller units following a major communal war in the second quarter of 2010. The intervention improved social interaction in the community, increased participation in community visioning, planning, and community building (Ibobor, 2012) and saved the community from disintegrating into three different disconnected groups. Only the youth participated in this project in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, UNH enlarged the program to include boys aged 12 years and below.

In 2013, UNH enlarged the program to include girls aged 12 and below. The soccer competition for girls started in 2013 with initial funding from the King (Ebu) of Umuebu during the final soccer competition for boys in 2012. To ensure full participation from the girls in the community, UNH provided other resources for the competition, while the community provided volunteers who mentored the girls. The organisers assume that by building decision-making capacities and team spirit, the girls can participate in future decisions that affect their lives and develop self-confidence, additional income, recognition, a sense of gender equality and the opportunity to participate in public spaces previously dominated by their male counterparts. Decision-making is the core of community development. The organisers assume that improved decision-making abilities would facilitate the community's decisions on how to use the resources or assets of the community: labour, financial capital, environment, natural resources, infrastructure, and enlightenment. This process is reducing gender inequality and subtly challenging the patriarchal structures in the community. These learning opportunities will affect economic opportunities in the future.

The outcomes of the female soccer competitions are consistent with the African Union Agenda 2063, the Doha Declaration Global Programme (2016 -2021), the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, n.d.). The overall objective for organising these soccer competitions among children, adolescents and young adults is to promote teamwork and collaboration as veritable instruments for addressing the challenges confronting the community and promoting community development. UNH draws on the soccer competitions to demonstrate how the community can respond to the development and sustainability challenges in Umuebu through active collaboration, working together and team spirit. Participating in UNH Community Soccer provides the opportunity to display how to address community challenges.

The neighbourhood house also organises several educational projects annually. Projects are consistent with the SMART agenda of the Delta State Government. Nigeria and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The projects include:

- School Social/Community Work Services
- Community Library Services
- Adult Education Programs
- Educational Programs for Children
- Community Skills Acquisition and Micro Financing Services
- Awareness and Sensitisation Campaigns: Umuebu News (Information, Education and Communication)
- Practicum Internship/Industrial Training/ Fieldwork Programme

About 193 University of Benin students (Postgraduate = 53; undergraduate = 140) have participated in practicums since 2010. The fieldwork at Umuebu Neighbourhood House benefits the students in several ways. The training starts with a review of relevant concepts, theories, philosophy, principles and values of social work and community development. It proceeds to guide students' observations and interventions during their placement. The placement provides opportunities for the students to integrate classroom learning with the development of social/community work practice. It also provides

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opportunities for students to develop critical perspectives on the associated theories and practices. In addition, it provides opportunities for the students to build self-reflection and self-awareness skills. These opportunities help them to evaluate their strengths and needs for further personal and professional development.

Umuebu Neighbourhood House also organises several health, environmental and welfare programs. The projects are in line with the SMART agenda of the Delta State Government, Nigeria. They include Primary Health Care Programs, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Malaria Control Programs, and Care Giving Programs for the elderly and children. Some health programs collaboratively organised in the past include Free Eye Care for the Elderly (2014) and World Malaria Day (2016, 2017. 2018, 2022; Umuebu Primary Health Care Project ongoing, Health and Wellbeing Workshop Series (2022).

The organisers assumption for the Primary Health Care program is that as the world enters the last stages of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, a well-staffed and equipped Primary Health Care (PHC) Facility in the Community is required to achieve some SDGs. An efficient, effective, and functioning PHC facility will help end hunger and ensure healthy lives, inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities.

The community development activities at Umuebu contribute in several ways to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

## UNH Services, Activities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Several services and activities of Umuebu Neighbourhood House (UNH) contribute to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are different types of educational, learning, and observational skills programs for pupils in primary school and students in secondary school in the community. The learning programs seek to improve participation in community development. The community soccer programs transcend the boundaries of sex, age, religion, and ethnic groups. This promotes health and wellness, improves self-esteem, and facilitates leadership, collaborative skills.

The female soccer competitions promote gender equality, self-esteem for girls, defy gender stereotypes and present boys and girls as equals. The participation of young people in sporting activities as a form of recreation reduces exposure to several criminal activities and violence in the community. The United Nations recognises sport as a viable opportunity for development, women empowerment, and gender equality. Primary health care and well-being programs advocate for well-equipped and staffed facilities in the community as another alternative to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. Services and activities of UNH contribute to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) listed in next column.

**Goal 2:** End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote accountable agriculture.

**Goal 3:** Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages.

**Goal 4:** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

**Goal 5:** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

**Goal 11:** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

**Goal 16:** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, promote access to justice for all and build effective accountable and inclusive institutions for all levels.

**Goal 17:** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development (UNODC, n.d.).

## Funding Modalities

In 2010, the Neighbourhood House started building togetherness in Umuebu by providing community soccer with the support of volunteers from students at the University of Benin, private funding, and donations from fellow residents at Green College, University of British Columbia. Over the years, the funding modalities have changed to include membership dues, donations from members, friends of the neighbourhood house, and community members at home and in the diaspora. Practicum students also fund their small projects as a part of their training in fundraising to ensure potential beneficiaries participate in the programs without paying.

## Volunteer and Paid Staff Members Education and Training

Volunteering at Umuebu Neighbourhood House is open to people of all age and educational qualifications. Volunteers from Universities and other institutions of higher learning are either undergraduate or postgraduate students studying any of the following courses, Sociology and Anthropology, Social Work, Mass Communication, Sports Science, and Nursing. They return to work as volunteers to develop their community development skills.

Similarly, volunteers from the community have different educational backgrounds. Some have no education; the children volunteers are either in primary or secondary school. Some of them are either undergraduate or postgraduate students. The paid staff members also have different educational backgrounds. They hold either a Secondary School Leaving Certificate or a degree in any discipline.

## Australia: Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre

Similar projects and activities are provided in Australia. The Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association (ANHCA) supervises the activities of all the neighbourhood houses and community centres in Australia. The ANHCA consists of over 1,000 community development organisations from six regions of Australia: Tasmania, Victoria, Linkwest (WA), Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. This article focuses on the roles of Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood House (CHNC) in New South Wales (Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association, 2022). Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre (CHNC), for example, provides several

services and programs designed to build community well-being and strength by connecting the community (Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre, 2022). The programs link and support people in the community.

They organise several activities that include:

- Counselling
- Community Visitors support
- Computer access, printer, and photocopying
- Conversation groups for people from mixed cultural background
- Craft groups for carers
- Creative Arts for Kid
- Digital Mentor Training
- Family activities
- Filling out form's assistance
- Food and other emergency support
- Free Tax Assistance
- Homework Assistance
- Legal Advice
- Low-cost rental list
- Low-cost Hire of meeting rooms and offices
- Information, referral, and advocacy
- Support for Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma
- Support for individuals, families and friends who support someone with an addition.

(Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre, 2022).

Umuebu Neighbourhood House Model, Jane Addams's Model and Coffs Harbour Neighbourhood Centre Model are alike because they focus on building social capital and promoting social justice in their respective societies. They are so different because they operate in different continents: Africa, the United States of America and Australia.

## Implications for Community Development Practice

There are substantial implications for drawing on the Settlement House Model in facilitating community development in Nigeria. UNH has progressed from community soccer in 2010 to other programs that bring people together to engage in developmental conversations in the community. In collaboration with the community, UNH now provides social welfare, educational, sports and recreational services, skills acquisition and infrastructural development services.

In this article, I have presented the history of the Settlement House Movement and how UNH is contributing to community development in Nigeria - helping to realise the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Evidence from Umuebu is consistent with the outcomes of the Doha Declaration Global Programme 2016-2021.

The neighbourhood house project is a new project in Nigeria. UNH is still working on the visibility and acceptance of the neighbourhood house approach to community development in Nigeria. Meanwhile, UNH is mentoring Chibok Neighbourhood House in Bornu State and Makoko Neighbourhood House, Makoko, Lagos State. Evidence from Umuebu is transferable to other communities with similar socio-cultural characteristics in Nigeria.



Umuebu Neighbourhood House has demonstrated the efficacy of community sports in community development and improved the visibility of the neighbourhood house approach in social work and community development literature in Nigeria. The UNH community sports programs are consistent with the Doha Declaration Global Programme (2016 -2021), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since 2010, UNH has organised about one hundred events and reached two thousand five hundred beneficiaries from the sports, educational, health, welfare, and infrastructural programs.

The lesson learnt from the public participation in UNH activities and outcomes is that the model is a vibrant and promising community development option in Nigeria. The way forward is to intensify advocacy for government to support and adopt these models in community development practice and to encourage social/community work and community development educators to promote the settlement/neighbourhood houses models of community development in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article concludes that the neighbourhood house model is more sustainable than any top-down paradigm. It suggests that the Nigerian government acknowledge the neighbourhood house concept as a veritable model to facilitate the realisation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in other communities in Nigeria. There are difficulties involved in the operations of the neighbourhood house. They include poor or inadequate funding, lack of recognition by the government and shortage of personnel and volunteers. However, the accomplishments of Umuebu Neighbourhood House outweigh the difficulties. The model is transferable from one community to other communities in Nigeria, and the concept makes it easier for communities to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. ■

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FROM THE SECTOR

# Graduating University as a Woman with Down Syndrome: Reflecting on My Education

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper reflects on the experience of being a woman with Down Syndrome who completed an undergraduate degree at an Australian university. This autoethnography is based on a year-long research project completed as part of my studies. I did a literature review about the experiences of other students with an intellectual disability at university. Then, I wrote about my own university experience. I found that the parts of my own educational journey were linked to each other like stepping-stones. Four main things came from my research: the importance of the journey before going to university; the isolation experienced by students in this situation; how stereotypes might affect students; and teaching methods that can be used to support students during their time at university. This experience changed me as a person. I gained skills and confidence whilst being at university, as well as the ability to see where I am going in life. This experience made me feel more part of society. While there were many wonderful parts, it was not an easy journey. People with an intellectual disability have a right to have an education. What makes the biggest difference is the way we are treated by other people. It would be good for students with an intellectual disability to be accepted and treated with respect. People may have a different way of learning, and it would be good if this was recognised.

Rachel High and Sally Robinson at Rachel's Graduation from Flinders University (Photo: Sally Robinson)

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an autoethnography of a woman with Down Syndrome who has recently completed an undergraduate course at Flinders University, South Australia. This paper is a reflection on my own experience of being a student at university.

It was written from work I did in a year-long research project as part of my studies. Sally helped me by supervising this project and writing this paper with me. First, I did a literature review about the experiences of other students with intellectual disabilities at university. Then, I wrote about my own university experience.

In this paper, we talk about how I completed this project, and some of the important things about my experience of university. I found out four main things in my research through both my own experience and by learning from other people's experiences at university. In this paper, the following are discussed:

- The importance of the journey before going to university;
- The isolation experienced by students in this situation;
- How stereotypes might affect students; and
- What teaching methods can be used to support students during their time at university.

## Materials and Methods

The methodology used for this project was autoethnography. Autoethnography is a relatively new qualitative research approach which involves researchers critically analysing their experiences and providing an understanding of how these compare to the experiences of others from a similar social group (Chang 2016). By collecting personal accounts and reflecting critically on the social meanings of these experiences, it allows researchers to develop an understanding of their own experiences and how they have shaped them (Liggins et al. 2013). Autoethnography also asks the researcher to think about how analysing their experience can help them understand other people's experiences by thinking about social and cultural meanings (Chang 2016).

At first, I found it hard to think about this unfamiliar word and how it related to my own life and experiences. So, I broke it into parts. I thought about it as auto—referring to yourself; ethno—looking at your own journey; and graphy—referring to the research. Therefore, for me this word described the study of my own 'journey of learning' when compared with those of other people.

## Methods

This research was conducted in stages. Firstly, I did my literature review. The aim of the literature review was to find out about the experiences of people with intellectual disability at university and their ideas for improving university education. Sally conducted the first review, using university databases. The review set terms to search for qualitative research; literature about the views of students with intellectual disability themselves; and research in university settings. To make the project manageable, we reduced the scope of the literature review and selected the most relevant nine articles for me to read in full. Some of the papers were hard to read because they were very long, and it was difficult to find the information needed. The Read Aloud program on the computer was useful. I am a visual learner, so I worked with my mother to help me understand the main ideas in the papers. She drew diagrams of the ideas,

and we talked about how the ideas affected the people who were in the research. I then looked for information which might answer some of the questions. These were selected and recorded on to templates under the heading of the questions. Each author's comments supporting the discussion was combined to relate to the question.

I had a student mentor, Kathryn, who helped by summarising some of the reading for me too. We were interrupted by COVID-19, which made it very hard. We had to go online, which made it very hard to work together when we did not know each other well. When the lockdown had eased, we were able to all meet face to face in the university. This was better because we exchanged easier conversation together, and there was a warm feeling between us. For example, with Sally, we were looking at the paper together and trying to figure out which sentence should go where, and she could write instructions straight on to the paper. This was helpful because we worked as a team. I also audio-recorded the sessions so that I could listen to them again.

All of this work helped us when it was time to start the next stage—my autoethnography. The first step in my autoethnography was that I related the educational story of my life in conversation with Sally. I found that the parts of my own educational journey were linked to each other like stepping-stones. The next step was to write in more detail about each of the stepping-stones on my education pathway. This took a long time and a lot of energy—I worked very hard. I conducted a series of interviews with people who were involved in my education, and I did a lot of personal reflection.

I needed to work out how these ideas fitted together. Once I had words written down in each of my main stepping-stones, we looked together for things that came up more than once, and where my experiences connected to the big ideas that were in my literature review. This is how we came up with the themes.

With the same kind of assistance as I used for the literature review, I critically analysed the themes and compared my experiences of university with the information I found in the literature review. This allowed me to identify the importance of the themes and how they contribute to new ways of thinking about the social world of university education for people living with intellectual disability.

## 3. Results

In this part of the paper, I have written about the major 'stepping-stones' in my education. These are about my high school education, the Duke of Edinburgh's award, starting university life, film studies, the foundation course, and the Bachelor of Arts degree. They are all important because each one opened a door to the next opportunity.

### 3.1. High School

I lived in a South Australian country town until I was 28 years old, and all my formal schooling was there. In primary school, I was in a special small class but in regular classes for some of my subjects.

When it was time to go to high school, I wanted to be with people I already knew, not just people with a disability. I had the choice of two high schools, and I visited them both to see which one was the best for me. When I arrived at the second one, my friends from primary school rushed over to meet me; so I decided this was the school I wanted to go to.

In high school, I was included in mainstream classes for subjects like English, history, and drama. For other subjects, I went to the learning centre and had a Student Support Officer to help me with the more difficult lessons.

I learnt some other skills: one was using the computer, and another was in the drama class. I learnt about work experience and some sports. I learnt how to play basketball, hockey, as well as weightlifting. I felt comfortable with these lessons and enjoyed gaining self-confidence. Some of my friends in high school were Indigenous Australians and they involved me in an Indigenous Australian school club.

In the last years of school, the principal allowed me to go to Adelaide every Friday as one of my school days to go to dance workshops with a well-known inclusive dance organisation.

I had a great time when I went with the school to Mount Hotham in Victoria, during a week's holiday in July. There was snow everywhere, I had a whale of a time being on the snow and having an instructor teaching me how to ski.

When I left school, I was very pleased to get my modified SACE (school leaver's) certificate. I then went to TAFE (technical college) for computing and mathematics.

### 3.2. Duke of Edinburgh's Award

From ages 14 to 21, as well as schoolwork I was doing the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme for people with special needs. The purpose of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award is about expanding people's vision and introducing them to a wider knowledge of what is around them.

There are four different areas: (1) Volunteering; (2) Physical; (3) Skills; and (4) Expedition, with levels of Bronze, Silver, and Gold. I volunteered with the Salvation Army and the special needs

program where I did secretarial work, copy typing, and photocopying. I helped the teachers by playing with the children, reading them stories, and helping with hydrotherapy. I took up physical exercise and went to line dancing and swam in the Special Olympics.

I wanted to learn how to play the piano and study some classical music. I took some sessions in culinary arts, as well as poetry and theatre. The expedition was about going camping, lighting a fire, putting up a tent, learning to use a compass, bushwalking, horse trekking, and safety precautions if ever we got lost. The last project for my Gold Award was talking to Prime Minister Mr John Howard about the value of arts for people with disability. He was very friendly.

It did a lot for me. It was a lot of fun; I had to learn how to find people in the community to help me with each project. So, I met new people and learnt many new things. I had to meet up with my mentors regularly to work on the project, and I had to write it up and present it to a panel.

### 3.3. Starting University Life

After I received my Gold Award at Government House, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award director asked me what I was going to do next. She then introduced me to the idea of applying for the Up the Hill program at Flinders University. This program includes people with disability in classes, with support from student mentors. They participate in the learning by auditing subjects and gain the experience of being at university. People learn what the atmosphere is like and how the student feels by stepping into higher education. So, it was the link for me to the next experience in my life.

I was invited to the university for afternoon tea. I had a conversation with the director of the program, where he asked what subject I was interested in. I said I was interested in drama. I later learnt that the conversation had been my interview for the program. I was incredibly happy to be offered a place.

Over the three years in the Up the Hill program, I audited many subjects—English, Creative Writing, Drama, Poetry, Cinema and Fantasy, Film Appreciation, and Screen Studies. I was totally included in the classes, and I was involved in the discussion groups. The film studies class went on location to make a short film. I enjoyed being part of the team and to be included in a filmmaking experience. I helped with the lighting, and I played the voice over in the film.

***When the three-year course was finished, I crossed the stage in a graduation ceremony with beautiful music playing. I was very proud because some of my teachers from my secondary school came to the ceremony. It was a wonderful experience and I enjoyed it. The program was an inspiring experience for me. Later, some of my friends followed me in enrolling in the program.***

### 3.4. Film

During my time in the Up the Hill program, I met the lecturer of screen studies, a man named Tom Young. He found out I wrote stories and suggested that I could make a film out of one of them. He said he would mentor and guide me to direct the film. It took me a while to write the film script, it was much more complicated than just writing the story. After the Up the Hill program, it took me a further two years to do film production. During this time, there were some media students who were involved with me in the making of the film. We were all learning what the filmmaking industry was like. The lecturer worked with me on characters, costumes, music, finding a site, and everything else that was needed to make a film. This film was shown in the cinema and went to film festivals in different parts of the world. The film was shown on television at Christmas time.

### 3.5. Foundation Studies Course

It was after this experience that coordinators from the program suggested the idea of me taking the Foundation Studies Course. This course is the beginning of academic study at university. At first, I was not sure if I could do it; however, I gave this a try. I asked permission from the course director for my parents to come with me to the classrooms so that they could help me with the course. The tutors agreed with this, and I went to the classes three nights a week. Some of the topics were Mathematics, the Ecology of the River Murray, and English. There was also a survey on Nuclear Power Stations. I interviewed some people on that topic, hearing their point of view. I also did a topic on China and how it was building up bases in the China Sea.

The study was hard and all very new to me. I learnt a lot about tutorial work as well as having to write assignments. This felt different to going to the Up the Hill program because, when I was auditing topics, I did not have to do any assignments. Now I was working to get a pass in my studies. There was also a lot of homework. At the end of the course, I was pleased to learn that I managed to gain enough marks to apply for a Bachelor of Arts Degree.

### 3.6. Bachelor of Arts Degree

I began attending Flinders University as an Arts Degree student when I was 35 and have undertaken one, or sometimes two, topics each semester. Coming to university as a student became a great thrill to me, but daunting at the same time. From this experience I feel I have learnt so much during these semesters and about so many different topics.

The topics I enrolled in were Drama for my Major and Screen Studies for my Minor. There was the Stanislavski Workshop, this involved about learning the history of the dramaturge himself. He taught that acting is something you do instead of something you show. This motto gave me the inspiration to understand not only myself but to understand the techniques of theatre. There were acting workshops and learning about the history of the stage, including from different nationalities such as Asian Dramatic Traditions, the way both the Japanese and the Chinese use their craft theatrically including the way they use their body movements. These styles of movement are called 'Noh' and 'Kabuki'. This influenced me in my own dance movements. I also learnt about stage and film directors and had to make some short films myself.

In Aboriginal Studies I learnt about the children being taken away, and how much I related to their sadness. I learnt about the history of the Aboriginal Australians, including what they struggled with over the years through their historical art. What stories they brought out whilst crafting their baskets and how the DNA of the original people is connected to these baskets. Some of this I did not know before. Another subject I studied was English. I was very fascinated with writing at the time.

Studying at university was very different to being part of the Up the Hill program, or even the Foundation Studies Course. Now I was studying to gain results, working towards an actual degree. Before the beginning of the first semester, I went to the Disability Office to find out what support

was available. I was informed that I could have an access plan towards my studies, for example extra time for assignments and exams. With this, I could have a room of my own to take the exam and have somebody with me to assist me to understand the questions. When I queried about having a mentor, they said they could not provide that. They did not do it for people with intellectual disability, only for people with physical or visual disabilities.

I soon found that at university I was on my own and it was all very different. As a student I was by myself. I had to learn how to get to the university on the bus, and I had to try to find the rooms where lectures and tutorials were located. This became extremely hard for me because I felt very lonely on the campus, and I did not know anyone. People did not talk to me, and every so often I could not find the class or felt too shy to go in. So, I missed some lessons. Being on my own around the campus, at times I felt that I wanted to go home and not come back to university.

Some of the activities I had done in the Up the Hill program with a mentor were going to orientation week, dancing with people at a community fair in the university hub and trying out the wonderful food they had there. I learnt how to socially interact with mentors outside of the university environment, as an example taking a mentor to a show. Now, I felt very lost without this contact.

The university did not fund mentors for students with intellectual disability. For me to have support at university, my family and circle of support had to raise funds. It took a lot of effort to organise. With this support, I was able to pay a student in the class to be my buddy. This made all the difference to me being at university, I got to know the student as well. I met their friends and I felt happier being safe at university. We also worked on the topics together. We sometimes went to the library to look at my studies, and we enjoyed having lunch together. On a social aspect, we went out either watching a show or just hanging around talking about anything we wanted.

## 4. Discussion

My journey through education has been very rewarding, but it has not always been easy. In the next section of the paper, I reflect on the isolation I felt once I got to university how the stereotypes about people with disability affected me, and what helped me in my studies. In this section, I am also using the literature to draw on the experiences of other students who have been in my shoes and have been involved in research projects.

### 4.1. The Importance of the Journey before Going to University

From my experience, something that stands out to me is how important it has been for me to have had lots of activities and experience before I went to university.

I have been involved in many community projects as well as drama for many years. Through this I have met lots of people and learned lots of new things. My parents and other people were always finding new activities for me to get involved in. This was fun and it always led onto the next exciting thing to do. Being involved with the Up the Hill program where I was auditing topics and had a mentor with me helped me to get ready for university life.

Other people have said they felt like this too. Philip and Heidi shared their views in Wilson et al. (2012), saying that their early experiences were important in building their confidence and readiness for university study: “They felt that these were difficult but important years in their development during which they matured, volunteered in the community and maintained entry-level jobs” (Wilson et al. 2012, p. 40).

Like me, both Heidi and Philip were supported by their parents to become included in community activities. They both felt that it was extremely important to state how significant the advocacy of their parents had been in their development, especially in preparing them to succeed at school, to access opportunities and supports at work, to participate in the community, gain access to post-secondary education, and to feel ‘normal’. I agree with Philip and Heidi about how lots of experiences in the community can be very helpful before you go into higher education. For me, it was the same.

They thought their opportunities reflected a combination of what their parents wanted for them, what was available, and what they enjoyed and interested them (Wilson et al. 2012). For me, it was the next thing I was introduced to. If something I was interested in came my way, people guided me along that pathway. For me, it was my parents, but also my teachers at school, people from the Up the Hill program, and other friends and family. So, each of the things I did led me on to my journey to university.

### 4.2. The Isolation Experienced by Students in This Situation

When I first started attending university, I found it was different to going to the Up the Hill program. On my first day with Up the Hill, I was introduced to my mentor who helped me to find my way around and build friendships with other students. The mentor attended classes with me, helping me to understand what was being said by the tutor, and supported me with the end of semester presentations. Rillotta et al. (2020) explained that mentors attend university classes with students, and they also support them with social activities inside and outside the classroom. They help them learn their way around the university. Other students with intellectual disabilities also said they felt they developed more confidence when they were supported by mentors (Rillotta et al. 2020).

In her research with nine college students with intellectual disability, Paiewonsky explained how certain aspects of being new to college affected students: “feeling different, adjusting to new expectations, having a new identity, transportation, new routines, self-determination and new relationships” (Paiewonsky 2011, p. 37). All these aspects needed to be dealt with by the student. This has been a common experience for students, and several studies have shown that students with intellectual disability feel unsure about what to expect, find it stressful, and find it hard to concentrate (Rillotta et al. 2020; May and Stone 2010; Wilson et al. 2012). This was also the situation for me, because all these things affected me in this new experience. I found it to be rather hard without a mentor to guide me. Even though I had been in the Up the Hill program and knew the university well, now being on my own turned out to be a big challenge for me. I also found it hard to concentrate.

Other students have also found this support to be important for feeling more comfortable in the classroom (Kubiak 2017) and for encouraging tutors and lecturers to be more confident in supporting students with intellectual disability (Plotner and May 2019). This individual support was found to help people find their way around the campus and get settled in, as well as start to discover what their strengths are and what they prefer as a subject (Paiewonsky 2011).

### 4.3. How Stereotypes Might Affect the Students

It is extremely derogatory for people to say negative things about people with disability. This topic matters because to be unkind to others is the wrong thing to do. It is hurtful and makes them feel like a knife stabbed them in the heart. It makes them feel they are the worst thing around, and that they are not important. This affects them emotionally and they feel useless. In my experience when you are new to university and trying to fit in, these comments and being ignored makes people feel very low. I felt alone when this happened to me and I felt I could not speak. I could not concentrate because these feelings made me so unhappy. I did not feel I wanted to be there. I still find this very hard to talk about. It makes me feel ashamed.

Being harassed or possibly overlooked is not a helpful thing to go through in life. This would scare the person with disability, who may not know what to do and would not know where to find the guidance to do something about it. This is not a good way to go for people with disability, feeling alone and as though they are not allowed to be there.

Other students with intellectual disabilities have experienced stereotyped thinking and discrimination as well. These damaging views include thinking that people with intellectual disability are stupid, cannot learn concepts, and are lower achievers (May and Stone 2010); and that they are not able to learn or even to think for themselves, so may not be able to learn at university (Lightner et al. 2012). Some people have the idea that people with a disability sometimes scheme to get extra support so that they can ask for special privileges and pity (May and Stone 2010). These negative attitudes have a strong impact on students with intellectual disability. It is very hard for students with intellectual disability when other students were judging them and behaving badly towards them (Kubiak 2017), and when tutors talked down to them (Stefánsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2016). Wilson et al. (2012) relates how one student's mother introduced her to the class and as a result she was teased or ignored by other students. Other students agreed that it was not good to point the disability out to the rest of the class, as it highlighted differences, not similarities (Rillotta et al. 2020).

There were some great times when I did not feel dismissed by the students or by the tutors. This was in media. I felt so much involved in this subject because there were people I was teamed up with and we became very friendly: they did not look or seem fazed about me at all. The conversations we all had were basically getting to know each other, and to help each other with the technological areas about the camera. Here I felt I became part of the group; we were learning together.

The positive experience of being on the stage in my subject 'Drama and the Stage' with people I found easy, and a good way to get along with people I barely knew. They were able to be open enough just to have a conversation with me. As I was teamed up with practically all of them, they made it easier for me working on scenes. The comfort I felt made me feel I was on cloud nine. I felt so at ease with all of them; the environment of the stage made me stronger inside because I managed to be able to have new friends. I got along with a man who made me feel included with anything. I felt more accepted in the practical sessions like media and drama, than I did in the tutorials and lectures. In the hands-on experience, it was easier than in the lecture topics. The students included me in these classes.



### 4.4. Teaching Methods That Support Students during Their Time at University

The reason this topic is important is because it would be helpful if teachers found a way to understand what things make it hard for students with disability to work out what the teachers are asking them to learn. Teachers using visual aids make it easier for the students to be more involved in the topic.

Most of the time I felt welcomed by all the tutors in their classes, but I sometimes found it hard to follow what was being said. Some of the tutors spoke quite fast, and when they moved around in the class, while talking, I could not hear them, especially when they walked behind me. I also found it harder to follow the lesson if the tutors did not use a power-point presentation: this is where I got confused and could not concentrate. Sometimes they said things I really did not understand; this is because the academic language is too hard. I tended to blank out at times, not understanding the content of the subject.

Some of these points are also highlighted by some other students and teachers. For example, Kubiak (2017) comments that when it comes to communication for people with disability, this can be hard if they were not getting the opportunity to be involved in the class. This would make them feel as though they cannot contribute to be part of that community. To use their own voice and to be heard by other people would be essential.

Other students with intellectual disability told Kubiak (2017) how they can be supported in the class. It was easier for students to learn at their own pace, with nonjudgmental teachers. He suggests that for some students, it was helpful if they already had the information before the class so that they were prepared for the lesson. The use

of brainstorming on the blackboard in addition to color-coding mind maps was helpful. Additionally, if students kept a daily record of what happened in the class, they could recollect what they had done. Students in both the Kubiak (2017) and Plotner and May (2019) studies found the use of power-point presentations very useful, where students could see the words as well as read them. Including a printout of the power-point slides to remember the lesson was also helpful.

What helped me was having mentors, recordings of the lectures and tutorials, having information before the lecture, and power-point presentations. It helps if the tutors speak slower and stand in front of me because I need to see their faces and what they are saying. Read aloud software on the computer is extremely helpful to learn what the lesson will be about ahead of time, and for the readings. I have a recording device where I record the sessions being given, and I can then listen to them later when I get home. Sharing this information with other people at home makes it easier to understand the essays or trying to get my head around what I was supposed to do for the assignments. In these conversations at home, I can take my time to learn more about what I have to

do. It would be good if the university accepted that students with intellectual disability can manage the study with the right support and teaching modifications. For example, aids for visual learners and extra time to complete studies. It has taken me a longer time than other students to bring together all the information I need to understand the assignment. It took me nine years to complete my studies because I only did one topic a semester, sometimes two if it was a workshop.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

I feel I have gained so much from being at university. Gaining this much knowledge is worth it because this is what I want to be. This experience has changed me as a person in ways that have made me more confident in myself. I think I have broken new ground, because the results that have come from the work that I have done have been very positive.

I have learnt to reach up to the point where I could possibly make a career out of some of the new thoughts and skills in my life. I believe I have gained some skills whilst being at university, and the ability to see where I am going in life. I have also learned about how there are different ways to learn about a subject I am interested in. There are so many things I have learnt, and I can talk about, and this has made me feel more part of society. This can be so educational—for example, cultural theatre. In the future, I will always look back remembering what it was like obtaining that experience.

While there have been many wonderful parts, it has not been an easy journey. The thought of going to university is exciting, but I was not always sure where it was going to lead in the future. There are many things which are confronting when you are the only person with intellectual disability in your lecture or tutorial group. How does a person with disability cope when stepping into the class seeing people who saw them as being different? How do people with disability cope with the loneliness when other students do not talk to them? This was something I had to face every day.

Knowing you are not alone makes a big difference. I remember how it felt when I was with mentors: I had someone to talk to and become friends with. To me, it felt as though someone actually listened and guided me all the way through my university experience. Once they have a mentor with them, people with intellectual disability know they are not alone. The reason is because they feel there is a safety net, but the major reason is that people with disability have someone to turn to.

I was born with Down Syndrome, and it is part of who I am—I do not know anything different. One way I know about myself is the way other people treat me. Sometimes this makes me feel good about myself, when I am made welcome and like I am wanted in class. Other times, I have been ignored or treated badly. This makes me feel there is something wrong with me. There is nothing wrong with me. I know I can learn, I can feel, and I can see the world the way I choose to see it. People with intellectual disability have all the feelings everyone has, and we want to belong. We have a right to have an education.

What makes people with intellectual disability different is the way they are treated by other people. It would be good for students with intellectual disability to be accepted and treated with respect like other students are. People may have a different way of learning, and it would be good if this was recognised. ■



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**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS:** Conceptualisation, R.H. and S.R.; methodology, S.R.; validation, R.H. and S.R.; formal analysis, R.H. and S.R.; writing—original draft preparation, R.H.; writing—review and editing, S.R.; supervision, S.R.; project administration, S.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** We sincerely thank Rachel and Sally for their openness to allowing AJCW to republish their paper - first issued as:

High, R., and Robinson, S. (2021). Graduating University as a Woman with Down Syndrome: Reflecting on My Education. *Social Science*, 10(11), 444. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10110444

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AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY WORK

# END OF YEAR UPDATE FROM ACWA

Stock image

Earlier this year the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) became a proud founding member of HumanAbility, the new Jobs and Skills Council (JSC) selected by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to provide advice and leadership to the following industries:

- Children's Education and Care
- Health
- Human Services (including Aged Care and Disability Support)
- Sport and Recreation.

HumanAbility will work with industry stakeholders, such as ACWA, to research and articulate the jobs demand in our area of interest, ascertain the needs of employers for future and current skills, develop qualifications and training packages that are responsive to and meet the needs of the human services industry.

ACWA also had the distinct honour this year of serving as the local host for the 2023 World Community Development Conference in Darwin. The conference played an important role in creating a dynamic and enriching environment for participants from around the world. It provided a platform for practitioners, experts, and academics to exchange ideas, share best practices and engage in meaningful discussions on community development. In addition, it presented the welcome opportunity to meet many of our members face-to-face; an opportunity not often afforded to national organisations.

The revised ACWA Code of Ethic was published and widely distributed this year, reflecting our unwavering commitment to maintaining the highest standards of professional conduct. This code serves as a guide for all members of the community work profession, ensuring integrity and excellence in our work. Revising the Code is a precursor to the revision of all ACWA's founding documents, including the practice guidelines and assessment tools.

ACWA has been appointed as the Assessing Authority for Aged or Disabled Carer ANZSCO 423 111 under the new Aged Care Industry Labor Agreement (ILA). Additionally, we have been selected as a member of the Skills Assessing Authorities Co-Design Representative Group (CRG) by the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Both opportunities assist us in our quest to ensure workers in human services are appropriately skilled, qualified, and trained.

We are proud of the way this Journal is developing and adding to the body of knowledge about community work. We are immensely grateful to our Editor, Dr. Anne Jennings, for her dedication and hard work and thank her and all the contributors for this year's edition of the Journal.

**JESU JACOB**

*Chief Executive Officer*

Australian Community Workers Association

# BOOK REVIEWS

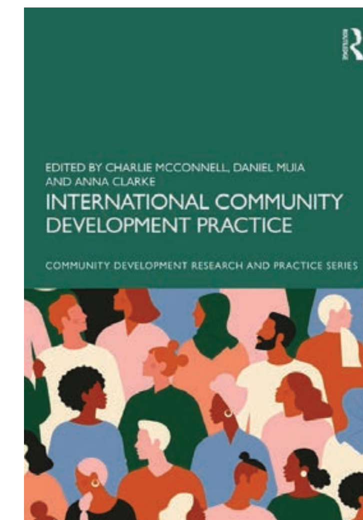
## International Community Development Practice

Editors: Charlie McConnell, Daniel Muia and Anna Clarke

CHARLIE MCCONNELL

DANIEL MUIA

ANNA CLARKE (EDITORS)





*Book Reviewer:*

EMERITUS PROFESSOR MARJORIE MAYO

*Goldsmiths University, London*

## INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

This collection of chapters and case studies could hardly have been published at a more opportune moment. There are unprecedented challenges for community development practice in the coming decade, as the final chapter reflects, with growing poverty and inequality, conflict, and climate change. Further, too many countries democratic rights have been coming under attack from increasingly authoritarian governments from the Far Right.

Meanwhile the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the effects of structural inequality and systemic discrimination, still further underling the continuing relevance of community development in the contemporary context. Community development practitioners and activists have, for example, been mobilising mutual aid support systems in response. They have been lobbying, campaigning, and raising awareness of the extent to which inequality and disadvantage, racism, xenophobia, and gender discrimination continue to be endemic - and further reinforced by the pandemic.

As the final chapter emphasises '[c]ommunity development agencies and practitioners have never claimed they alone could abolish poverty, end discrimination, and create a just and sustainable future' (McConnell et al, 2022:255). Even so, they do have relevant contributions to make enabling communities to take collective action in response to their immediate problems, whilst addressing the underlying causes for the longer term. This collection sets out to provide practitioners, educators, activists, and policy makers with examples of good practice in these respects, reasserting the significance of community development approaches in the contemporary context.

### Background, structure, and content

In 2016 the International Association for Community Development (IACD) set out to consult with its members as the basis for drawing up guidelines based on shared international understandings of community development practice. This was a controversial project, as the introductory chapter on 'The Making of an Empowering Profession' explains, with a minority of members concerned that this could lead to increasing managerialism, strengthening professionals' accountability to their employers

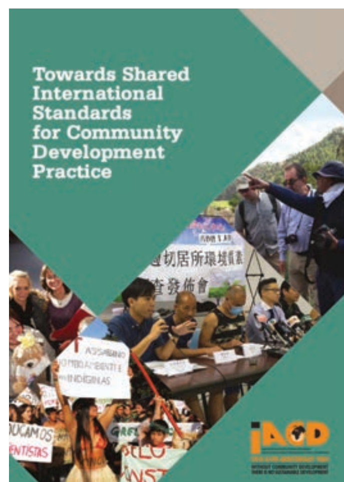
22 IACD. (2018). Towards Shared International Standards for Community Development Practice. Available on: https://www.iacdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IACD-Standards-Guidance-May-2018_Web.pdf

at the expense of their accountability to the communities within which they worked. But the majority was strongly in favour of the initiative.

*Towards Shared International Standards for Community Development Practice*[22] (cover picture below) was published two years later, presenting key themes and identifying the purpose of professional community development practice, the values that should underpin practice and the key methods used by the practitioner – to be applied and adapted for different contexts internationally. The report focused on the following themes:

- Values into practice,
- Engaging with communities,
- Participatory practice,
- Organising for change,
- Diversity and inclusion,
- Leadership and infrastructure, and
- Developing and improving policy and practice (including the use of evidence from evaluation processes).

These eight themes frame the structure of 'International Community Development Practice' section by section, from 'Putting Ethics and Values into Community Development Practice' through to 'Evaluating and Improving Policy and Practice'.




Each section opens with an overview chapter setting out the key issues involved, followed by five case studies for illustration. Between them these sections provide evidence of the range of IACD's membership across continents, engaging with a wide variety of issues and approaches as evidenced through the accompanying case studies. There are illustrations from the Global North as well as from the Global South, from rural Mongolia as well as from densely populated urban contexts such as Hong Kong. Whilst the book testifies to the diversity of IACD's membership there is also evidence of a number of cross cutting themes. The promotion of equalities and inclusion emerge as key concerns across different sections, along with concerns for environmental sustainability for future generations.

There are, of course, differences of approach as well. As one of the 'Learning for Change' chapters explains the IACD Standards approach is eclectic, encouraging practitioners to draw upon a range of models for promoting learning, knowledge, and skills within a community. Between them the chapters cover a variety of theoretical underpinnings and practice methodologies. This provides the reader with a broad overview of the field across a wide variety of contexts, which is one of the book's strengths.

## The book's strengths

*International Community Development Practice* provides a wealth of information about activity that has emerged over time, both in theory and in practice. The sections and case studies are preceded by an overview of community development history, from the ways colonial legacies were challenged in the 1960s through to debates on the implications of the rise of neo-liberalism, the financial crisis, and the pandemic.

This edited book goes on to focus on the possibilities for sustainable development, linking the local with the global in the contemporary context. The case studies within each section provide illustrations of the range and variety of community development practice that has evolved in different locations over time. There is so much material here to encourage further analysis and collective reflection.

## Aspects that I'd love to see developed further in future publications

This publication includes chapters that I particularly appreciated for the ways in which they were raising questions for further discussion, as well as including some contexts providing dilemmas rather than straightforward answers for the practitioner. What about the prospect of possible pushbacks for vulnerable communities, and how to take account of these when standing up for their rights, for example: how to weigh up the pros and cons of particular courses of action in very unequal and sometimes potentially violent contexts? This type of dilemma would provide valuable material for education and training purposes, stimulating students to engage in processes of critical reflection.

Some of the chapters and case studies also raised issues of power inequalities and the possibilities for participation in such contexts. There is so much potential learning here. I would welcome further reflections on these issues, together with reflections on the use of tools such as power mapping and Gaventa's Power Cube. These types of tools have so much to offer practitioners and communities in so many situations.

There are, of course, powerful pressures on evaluators to steer clear of some of the most challenging questions about the dilemmas practitioners have been facing, for instance, along with questions about their experience of powerful interests that have been impacting their communities. These pressures are just as relevant for evaluators in the Global North as in the Global South. Again, there is so much potential learning to be gained from exploring International Community Development Practitioners' experiences of addressing such challenges.

## CONCLUSIONS

*International Community Development Practice* provides so much relevance to its target audiences of community practitioners, teachers and lecturers, activists, and policy makers. There is a wealth of evidence here, documenting a wide variety of community development practices across a range of contexts. The book is clearly structured and presented in very accessible ways. I look forward to further publications, reflecting on the dilemmas as well as the possibilities for community development practice in the context of contemporary challenges. ■

## REVIEWER:

Marjorie Mayo is Emeritus Professor of Community Development at Goldsmiths University, London. Her research interests are concerned with community development and adult community education, with a focus on decolonisation.

The AJCW team expresses sincere thanks to Marjorie for her contribution from the UK.

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***Book Reviewer:***

**ANDREW HAMILTON**

*Editorial Consultant,*
*Eureka Street, 2023, Vol 33, No 11.*

# CRUEL CARE: A HISTORY OF CHILDREN AT OUR BORDERS

**Author: Jordana Silverstein,**
**Monash University Publishing, 2023**

## The refugee children of colonisation

Like other Australian observances 2023's World Refugee Week has been overshadowed by the Referendum on the Voice to Parliament. The conjunction of the two causes is appropriate because the First Peoples and later refugees have suffered in similar ways. A recent book by Jordana Silverstein, *Cruel Care: A History of Children at Our Borders*, fleshes out the connection. She discerns a direct link between the way in which the colonial settlers delt with Indigenous Australians and the treatment of refugee children.

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A recent book by Jordana Silverstein, *Cruel Care: A History of Children at Our Borders*, fleshes out the connection. She discerns a direct link between the way in which the colonial settlers dealt with Indigenous Australians and the treatment of refugee children. The colonists wanted free land and secured it by driving off the First Peoples, corralling them and destroying their links with their culture. They justified this by seeing themselves as the builders of a more advanced, more hospitable white world. They saw Indigenous children both as people in need of salvation through assimilation to white society and also as a threat to colonial society if allowed to grow into an uncontrolled Indigenous population. They therefore stole and dispersed their children, controlled Indigenous lives in detail, and saw themselves as benefactors. Underlying the way in which they treated Indigenous people and their sense of themselves was anxiety about the fragility of their colonial possession of the land. This found expression in control.

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In "Cruel Care" Silverstein focuses on the actions, the laws and the rhetoric of Government ministers, politicians and public servants in their treatment of child refugees. The reflections of those who agreed to be interviewed – mostly in office during times of a comparatively liberal policy – are most illuminating. They reveal the challenges they perceived to manage the public response to the suffering of children and to finesse the understanding of what was in the children's best interests. These challenges were most exigent when introducing such inhumane policies as turning back boats and sending people who sought asylum to Manus Island and Nauru. This was represented as a humanitarian measure to prevent children from being exploited by people smugglers, dying at sea and being used as a means for relatives to join them in Australia. Detention and exclusion of children were accordingly seen as in their best interests.

The parallels that Silverstein draws with the Australian response to Indigenous children are compelling. They exhibit the same anxiety, the same overriding culture of control, the same appeal to crisis as the justification for inhumane policy, the same avowal of compassion, and the same unshakeable assumption that the officials are the best arbiters of what is in the best interests of the children. The one group that was not consulted in either case comprised the children. Yet in the case of refugee children their art and their poems speak consistently of their craving for freedom above all else.

The continuity between the treatment of Indigenous Australians and of refugee children helps explain why in both cases it is so difficult to abolish policies that are so repugnant and unreasonable. Although those who advocate change might win small concessions, sooner or later through a perceived or manipulated crisis governments then introduce an even more brutal regime. We need to think only of the introduction of changed Bail regulations in Queensland shortly after raising the age of criminal responsibility, and the reopening following the closing of Don Dale in the Northern Territory. In Indigenous and in refugee policy control always trumps justice and reason.

***'For refugees to seek hospitality in Australia takes enormous courage. To offer that hospitality calls for a corresponding courage.'***

Silverstein argues persuasively that the enduring effects of colonial settlement in Australia are reflected in the treatment of refugee and Indigenous children. I am not convinced, however, that colonial settlement is the sole or major factor. The same dynamic can be seen elsewhere, as for example in the brutal treatment of boys in many nineteenths' century English boarding schools. There, too, the primary consideration was anxiety about control. The ability to control students was the primary criterion by which teachers were judged. Events that represented children as out of control led to more brutal discipline. This was seen to serve the best interests of the children and of the society they would enter. Sayings such as 'Spare the rod and spare the child', and 'This hurts me more than it hurts you' justified the measures of control and served to display teachers' compassionate, even self-denying, benevolence.

This example suggests that underlying the toxic

colonial culture in Australia so well described by Silverstein is a deeper and more universal blight. I believe that it lies in the instrumental ethics that weighs policy by assessing the greatest good of the greatest number without respect for the dignity of each human being. This justifies making the harsh treatment of persons the means to a larger goal, in this case of control. Because the instrumental logic breeds anxiety at the possibility of exclusion from the favoured greatest number it inflames the need to control. It also requires the faces of persons to be hidden and their personal interests to be disregarded. They are significant only as an impersonal and problematic group.

In the absence of an ethic that emphasises the personal value of each human being and prevents seeing them as means to an end, any attempt to reform policy will always bring only partial and temporary change. It is therefore essential to insist on a policy that respect persons for their innate dignity while at the same time seeking freedom for as many Indigenous and Refugee children as we can. Jordana Silverstein's careful and trenchant book is a model of this enterprise.

Finally, a word of sympathy and encouragement for the politicians and officials responsible for refugee policy. They must take account of the necessities of their task: the latent xenophobia and racism in any society, including in Australia, that can break out in times of genuine crisis; the political pressures to manipulate it; the need to situate policy within the common good. For refugees to seek hospitality in Australia takes enormous courage. To offer that hospitality calls for a corresponding courage.

Silverstein, J. (2023). *Cruel Care: A History of Children at Our Borders*. Monash University Publishing.

Jordana Silverstein is a senior research fellow at the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness at the University of Melbourne. She has also been a visiting scholar at the ANU's Humanities Research Centre.

**REVIEWER:**

Andrew Hamilton Editorial Consultant for *Eureka Street*. Special thanks go to Andrew and Editor David Halliday for their permission to reprint this book review.

# SECTOR INFORMATION / REPORTS

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Have you heard about proposed new addition to training and professional development opportunities, called 'microcredentials'? The following article provides an overview of the Commonwealth Government's pilot program established to gauge if this could be an additional tertiary level skills development process.

## Thinking about a microcredential course? 4 things to consider first.

Simon Leonard

*Author:*

SIMON LEONARD

*Associate Professor in STEM Education,
University of South Australia.*

### What are microcredentials?

They focus on updating or gaining new skills in a short time frame, typically ranging from a few weeks to a semester of study. They are viewed as a way to meet industry and employee needs quickly and address critical skills gaps. For example, the pilot program includes a microcredential on phonics for teachers to develop their skills

in literacy teaching. It also includes a course in disease management outbreaks for GPs and other health-care workers.

The cost varies but can range from a few hundred dollars to more than A$4,000. At the end of a microcredential, you may receive a stand-alone certificate, or the microcredential may provide a credit transfer pathway and count towards a degree.

They have been part of Australia's industry skills landscape for a while now and have been delivered by TAFEs, industry organisations, and even by employers. However, they are still quite new in universities and many of the professions that universities have traditionally supported. At the end of a microcredential you may receive a certificate or credit towards a degree.

## The benefits of short-term study

Microcredentials can address critical skills gaps. They offer a way to update and progress your career without the long-term commitment and expense of a traditional graduate qualification. You can also mix and match education and training to form a more bespoke study plan. So it is no surprise microcredentials are gaining a lot of attention in the higher education sector. Most universities already offer "short courses", "professional certificates" and "executive education". These are all microcredentials by another name.

However, all this flexibility can be confusing, and it may not be clear whether a microcredential is the right choice for you. Here are four things to consider.

## 1. What do you want out of further education?

If you need a specific skill, then a microcredential is a good idea. Ivan Samkov/Pexels.

Microcredentials have a different purpose to traditional degrees.

Microcredentials can feel more like vocational education and training – highly targeted to cover precise competencies in a specific setting. This means they are rarely designed to develop broader capabilities and frameworks of professional practice you can normally expect from a degree program. So in your career and educational planning, it is important to think through what you really need.

In a nutshell, if you need a specific skill, then a microcredential is ideal. However, if you need support bringing together diverse skills, knowledge, and dispositions to extend your professional practice, then a traditional degree may be a better investment.

## 2. What specific skill is on offer?

If your career plan does call for an improvement of specific skills, there are some important questions you should ask yourself before you enrol in a microcredential course.

The first is simply "does this course offer a skill I actually need?" Unlike the vocational system (such as TAFE), universities' microcredential catalogue is still relatively small. The skills government and industry are choosing to support at the moment may not be the skills you need in your context or to advance your career.



## 3. Am I suited to this type of study?

In the hustle and bustle of a microcredential course, it is often assumed participants will be well prepared to manage their own learning. Because they are so short, microcredentials generally focus very strongly on the content itself. How you learn it, is often up to you.

To be successful, you may be required to take greater personal responsibility for all your own learning strategies. This might include recognising what you already know (or don't know) about the topic, taking a quick look at the readings to get an overview before reading them carefully for more details, and adopting processes to critically question learning materials.

## 4. How will I use this in my job or profession?

You also need to think about how you will transfer your microcredential learning into your everyday work habits. A science teacher who learns some physics content, for example, may need to alter their wider assessment strategies to incorporate what they learned. A physiotherapist with a new treatment technique may need to decide how to explain it to the clients they work with.

Traditional degrees are usually designed to help with this translation-to-practice work. Part of the trade-off with microcredentials is they can throw this translation work back to the course participant. For this reason, microcredentials will work best for people who have established good professional development practices like reflection and peer-review, or for those who can engage in active and ethical experimentation with the new skill in their real-world practice.

## Choose wisely

Preparing people for professional environments has always been a core purpose of universities, and the adoption of microcredentials will likely expand the ways this can be done. A microcredential, however, is a different educational proposition to a traditional degree. So it is important the consumer chooses wisely.

But even though they are different, the two are still compatible. You may even find yourself engaging in both traditional university courses and microcredentials as you evolve and adapt throughout your career. ■

AJCW extend sincere thanks both the Author, Associate Professor Simon Leonard, and *The Conversation*: https://theconversation.com, for this article.

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# "Care" economy to balloon in an Australia of 40.5 million: Intergenerational Report

Michelle Grattan

Professor Michelle Grattan, from the University of Canberra, recently reported in *The Conversation* "Australia's care economy could increase from its present about 8% of GDP to about 15% in 40 years, according to the government's Intergenerational Report" released in August 2023. Further, she noted, "[t]he projections say in four decades' time Australians will be living longer, with more years in good health - but the larger cohort of aged people will increase the need for care".

Of specific relevance to the community services sector Grattan highlighted Treasurer Jim Chalmers saying growth in the care economy "is set to be one of the most prominent shifts in our society" - with the care sector playing a bigger role in driving growth. "Whether it's health care, aged care, disabilities or early childhood education – **we'll need more well-trained workers to meet the growing demand for quality care**[24] over the next 40 years. The care sector is where the lion's share of opportunities in our economy will be created," he said.

The Grattan article is available 'Care' economy to balloon in an Australia of 40.5 million: Intergenerational Report (theconversation.com) [25].

The 2023 Intergenerational Report is available on https://treasury.gov.au/publication/2023-intergenerational-report

AJCW extend sincere thanks both the Author, Associate Professor Michelle Gratton, and *The Conversation*: https://theconversation.com, for this article.

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24 Bold applied to this text by AJCW Editor.
25 Or on https://theconversation.com/care-economu-to-balloon-in-an-australia-of-40.5-million-tntergenerational-report

# Australian Government Labour Market Insights (current 2023)

## Interested in finding more information and potential options as they relate to your community work profession and career?

The Australian Government's Labour Market Insights website reports on labour market research, involving analyses of employment information and statistics across industries, occupations, and regions.

Community Workers are included in the broad area of Community and Personal Service Workers, notably with the skill level required indicated as High. This occupation group commences with

4117 Welfare Support Workers - then moves on to:

- 411711 Community Workers
- 411712 Disability Service Officers
- 411713 Family Support Workers
- 411714 Parole and Probation Officers
- 411715 Residential Care Workers
- 411716 Youth Workers

The website provides valuable data relating to the community work field including employment outlooks, earnings and hours, and main industries for employment. Additional information relating to State and Territory data; work profiles, with age and gender; employment pathways, and skills and knowledge is also included.

The conclusion of the website page also provides direct links to related occupations including Welfare, Recreation and Community Arts Workers; Social Workers; Social Professionals; Counsellors, and Health and Welfare Services Managers – all rated as High skill level.

**For access to this information please see:**

https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/occupation-profile/community-workers?occupationCode=411711

# Report on Government Services 2023 – Part F Community Services

The Productivity Commission has released the Community Services section of the Report on Government Services 2023. The Commission describes the sector's context in relation to government service delivery as follows:

'Community services' includes services providing assistance to specific groups with an identified need for additional support. This may include children and young people, families, older people and people with disability. Community services can overlap with other sectors, including health and early childhood services'.

The Report provides detailed performance information on the equity, effectiveness and efficiency of the following community services:

- Aged care services
- Services for people with disability
- Child protection services
- Youth justice services.

Further details: - *F Community services - Report on Government Services 2023 - Productivity Commission* available on: https://pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-servlces/2023/community-services

# Beyond the standards: motivators of high-performing RTOs

**Research by Joanne Waugh, National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], (2023).**

A great deal of work has been done in attempting to quantify and compare the performance of RTOs [Registered Training Organisations], with the aim of promoting improvement in the overall quality of training and delivery. Such endeavours have had limited utility due to the operational complexity of the VET [Vocational Education and Training] sector and the variety of purposes served by RTOs. Also unclear is whether performance-ranking systems are likely to result in an overall quality boost since, until now, no examination of the motivations of RTOs that pursue high performance has been undertaken.

This research sought to understand both the motivations of high-performing RTOs and how they embed these into RTO operations. Several novel findings, with the potential to inform initiatives designed to boost performance, emerged from the research.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- Altruistic intentions and business security motivations were the key drivers of high performance among the RTOs in this study. These motivations reflect the challenges inherent in maintaining a financially viable business while providing the highest quality service.
- RTO leaders view strong relationships with students and employers as vital to high performance and prioritise resources to ensure open communication and create safe environments for students and staff.
- Leadership style appears to drive the way in which motivations are translated into action. Using a transformational leadership style, leaders prioritise inclusive and supportive practices for staff, students and employers alike. Targeted guidance and professional development support for RTO leaders may improve provider performance.
- Some RTOs may welcome resources and reliable guidance on ways to pursue high performance and to assess their efforts, but they see no requirement for further regulation in this area.
- RTOs' own definitions of high performance included not only measurable outcomes, such as completion rates, but just as often their aspirations for the organisation. RTOs considered that evidence of established responsive student support, along with mechanisms for ensuring industry knowledge; for developing excellent trainers; and for dedicating resources for engagement with industry, defines an RTO as high performing.

The report is available on: https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0050/9678479/Beyond-the-standard-Motivators-of-high-performing-RTOs_Research-summary_F.pdf

# ACWA RESEARCH AGENDA

As the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) is the national professional organisation for community workers it recognises professionals/workers comprise a wide variety of occupational titles, disciplines, and educational backgrounds. While this diversity is the very strength of community work it can create fragmentation that undermines the ability of the sector to present itself as a coherent profession able to claim recognition, career development, suitable pay levels and quality employment conditions.

In addition the Association has found current research into this vital workforce is ad hoc – often underpinned by misconceptions regarding professional standing of community workers. Consequently ACWA has developed a research agenda designed to encourage researchers, governments, the community sector, and educational institutions to identify areas of inquiry that will lead to improved understanding of this vital profession.

ACWA's full research agenda is available on https://www.acwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACWA-Research-agenda.pdf. Research articles relating to ACWA's Research Agenda are strongly encouraged.

As part of her role as Editor of AJCW, Anne Jennings participated the *National Vocational Education and Training Research Conference* at RMIT in Melbourne, July 2023 (yes, I live in Broome and went to Melbourne in July – brrrr!!).

Facilitated by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), which is the national professional body responsible for collecting, managing, analysing and the communication of research and statistics relating to the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector.

This includes gathering and publishing research directly related to the sector through their extensive database VOCEDplus (https://www.voced.edu.au) - which has now expanded to include Higher Education/University research, accessible via their online library. The breadth and depth of presentations at the conference was extensive, with people sharing learnings from all states and territories, as well as from overseas.

Recent NCVER publications relevant for those studying/working in the Community Work field include:

Trimboli, D. (2023). *Skilling Australia's current and future workforce*. https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/skilling-australias-current-and-future-workforce

Griffin, T., Andrahannadi, U. (2023) *VET delivery in regional rural and remote Australia: barriers and facilitators.* https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-delivery-in-regional,-rural-and-remote-australia-barriers-and-facilitators

Wibrow, B 2022, *VET and higher education pathways — do outcomes differ for the same occupation*, NCVER, Adelaide. www.ncver.edu.au/publications/57067

Lim, P. (2022) *VET as a re-engagement pathway for early school leavers*. www.ncver.edu.au/publications/57030

Waugh, J., (2023). *Beyond the standards: motivators of high performing RTOs*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], (2023). https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A97189

ACWA
AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY WORKERS ASSOCIATION

AJCW WORKS COLLABORATIVELY WITH AUSTRALIA'S NEW COMMUNITY JOURNAL, SEE INFORMATION BELOW:

## NEW COMMUNITY

(Australia's community development journal) publishes articles relating to community development theory and practice. The Journal supports practitioners to to become more effective in promoting the social wellbeing of their community.

Each quarterly issue of the **New Community** journal contains **four main sections**:

The first section of each issue is devoted to a theme relevant to contemporary community development. A second section is dedicated to more academic contributions not dealing with the theme of the issue; it is dedicated to refereed work. The third section is an open forum for local, regional, and interest-specific networks. Finally, a fourth section includes news from everywhere, from websites, book reviews, letters from readers and debates.

We are happy to invite and include papers from conferences and the last issue of every year is concerned with community development in remote, rural and regional Australia and elsewhere.

JACQUES BOULET
*Editor of New Community and Director of Borderlands Co-operative Ltd.*

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