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Young people's perspectives

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Abstract
Responses to youth homelessness have undergone significant changes in New South Wales (NSW), through the Going Home Staying Home (GHSH) reform. The stated approach is focused on ensuring service approaches are evidence-based and funding is needs-based. In this paper, we argue the search for schematic models and specification of pre-defined measurable outcomes do not give sufficient weight to evidence articulating the importance of practices of social justice, wellbeing and relationships based on care, respect and persistence.

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Young People’s Perspectives

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Responses to youth homelessness have undergone significant changes in New South Wales (NSW), through the Going Home Staying Home (GHSH) reform. The stated approach is focused on ensuring service approaches are evidence-based and funding is needs-based.1 In this paper, we argue the search for schematic models and specification of pre-defined measurable outcomes do not give sufficient weight to evidence articulating the importance of practices of social justice, wellbeing and relationships based on care, respect and persistence.

Our research investigating the Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS) approach to assisting young people avoid and/or exit homelessness suggests that service models and outcomes specified in program reforms risk overlooking what matters most from the perspective of young service users.

The concept of youth homelessness as a ‘career trajectory’ where young people become, remain and exit homelessness is often used. As a result, responses to youth homelessness can become targeted to specific ranges on the ‘trajectory’, for example, early intervention, crisis/transitional support and/or support in making sustainable community connections and gaining self-sufficiency. SYFS offers a ‘wrap around’ service model,2 integrating service responses across the full spectrum of the trajectory. The integrated approach has common systems for referral, assessment, case management and data collection. Young people can enter the service system at any point and receive multiple services while developing a network of relationships and building a sense of belonging and connectedness.

A young resident succinctly explains her experience of the approach: ‘With SYFS, there is no beginning or end; you are always in the middle’.

This description is elaborated by another young person: ‘It’s like an umbrella — you can see where you want to go, you can see yourself progress. It’s really good because there are all these sorts of services in the one place, you don’t have to keep going to different places’.

Underpinned by a practice-based approach and using a participatory action research (PAR) framework, a University of Wollongong and SYFS study investigated and articulated the experience of over two hundred young people involved with the service who were at risk of homelessness, currently homeless or who had exited homelessness. Employing both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods the study identified organising practices that have the most significant impact and benefits for the young people.

The research describes SYFS’ model characterised by youth specialist practice and a philosophy embedding social justice, advocacy and whole of community engagement. Analysis of the data demonstrates sustainable outcomes in assisting young people to avoid or exit homelessness and a reduction in the likelihood of re-occurrence. The literature3 demonstrates that people who experience homelessness when they are young are more likely to experience persistent homelessness. This research provides some evidence that participating past clients had reduced likelihood of persistent homelessness. Additionally practices facilitated improvements in young people’s well-being and satisfaction with life that are sustained and continue to grow post their involvement with the organisation.

So what are the factors that contribute to these outcomes, according to the young research participants? In surveys, interviews and group discussions young people were asked to nominate the aspects of involvement with the service that had facilitated the most significant changes in their lives. In descending order, the top six response groups were:

1. relationships with and the care practices of staff — helpful responsive, reliable, caring workers providing unrelenting parental-like support and guidance
2. self-care and improved well-being — learning to look after one’s self, to be independent, turning life around, greater sense of well-being
3. sense of belonging and connectedness — including improved connections to own family and community/s, participation and inclusion
4. housing — access to supported accommodation and / or stable housing
5. sense of control over one’s own life — significance of agency, decision-making and leadership opportunities
6. sense of hope for the future.

The young people’s experience is consistent with the findings in Barker et al’s review of national and international literature that identifies relationships and long-term support as essential to effective service delivery for vulnerable young people,
especially for homeless or at risk young people, due to their reservations and distrust and the instability of their situations.* What may be of particular interest to readers of Parity are the young people's articulation of concepts and practices that are currently marginalised in current policy discussion and system-wide reform design.

When the young people described why they nominate relationships with the staff and their care practices as facilitating the most significant change in their lives they emphasise the trust and persistence that characterise the relationships. For example:

'The support from the workers is my fondest memory of the service... just their attitude and understanding really. I think it just comes down to their care. They're just always willing to listen. Since their help, I haven't been in a psychiatric ward for four years.'

Young people identified that it was important to them that the relationship was based on genuine caring, was consistent, continuous and often long-term. One young adult stated:

'I have been involved with the organisation for about 10 years and they really care. They have helped me through my struggling times, and when I need someone to talk to they are always there or just a phone call away.'

Young people nominated the practices that taught living, social and life skills assisting them to look after themselves, manage relationships with others and become independent as significant:

'Being with [the service] has changed many things within my life. I have learnt how to look after myself, be safe, respect and care for others and have made many new friends.'

Another young person stated:

'Just learning to live as a family... without [the service] I would not be as grown up as I am today.'

The study shows how developing a sense of belonging and connectedness is threaded throughout the organising practices of the agency. Practices include those that are beyond delivering any one particular service type and are often not 'counted' as outcomes. They include opportunities for social engagement across the organisation/community, such as large group excursions, attending performances, concerts, sporting and organisational events. An ex-client describes it this way:

'They made me feel like I was part of something... They had all the extra activities to do and they took us out to — once they took us to the Easter Show. They actually made us feel welcome and part of a group rather than, a lot of other organisations that make you feel like an outsider too, not just to the organisation but to society... Whereas yeah, they kind of incorporate you into everything.'

Not surprising, but lower on the identified factors contributing to making significant differences to young people's lives was their access to stable and secure housing. A young parent commented:

'Housing was the biggest and best change in my life. Without the
help of being placed in a house with my partner and daughter, we would be homeless and really stressed.’

The fifth significant change factor described was the development of a sense of control over their lives.

A young client explained:
‘It’s completely changed my life so much... now I’ve got control, I have a sense of control in my life. I can see things getting better.’

In this comment, the links between developing a sense of control over one’s life and experiencing a sense of hope for the future are evident.

Indeed, sense of hope for the future was also identified by young people as making a significant positive change in their lives.

A sense of control over one’s life and hope for the future is enhanced by practices that deliberately provide opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making as well as advocating for themselves and others. For example, a routine practice is to encourage young people to participate in government consultations and in the media.

The aspects nominated by young people as making a positive difference in their lives encompass indicators of wellbeing, care and social justice. It is the organisational commitment to enacting social justice that acts as a catalyst to practices that facilitate young peoples’ experiences of and struggles over hardship, homelessness, humiliation, belonging, representation and respect. Accordingly, such practices encompass the four dimensions of social justice discussed in contemporary discourses; economic (redistribution and the material aspects of poverty and inequality); social (social inclusion, belonging and connectedness); political (representation and participation) and cultural (respect and recognition).

As governments move towards increased focus on pre-determined outcome measures to assess performance and search for evidence-based models, this study argues that the incorporation of indicators of social justice, wellbeing and relationships based on care, respect and persistence could enhance policy. If the voices of young people were heard in policy and program design, perhaps we would see more emphasis on continuity of service provision and less on whole-scale re-tendering and reconfiguring. Such a shift would encourage youth-specific approaches that facilitate and preserve the sense of belonging, control, hope for the future and experiences of respect and recognition that young people want when they seek support.

Endnotes
1. NSW Department of Family and Community Services 2012, Future Directions For Specialist Homelessness Services; Consultation Paper, NSW Department of Family and Community Services, Sydney.

Image by Evolution participant Beck.