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Title: The JOY of learning: lessons for community development practice from the evaluation of a woman's only project?

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Abstract:

This case study presents the findings from the evaluation of the 'JOY Project', which is a current woman only community project which aims is to empower women by enabling them take more control over their lives and develop a sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence. This is done by providing support to enable women to gain a variety of skills, enhance their confidence and empower them to make their own informed decisions. In terms of models, the JOY Project represents Keith Popple's (2000) community development model, wherein women accessing the service take an active role in both delivering and sustaining the support service for women.

The focus of the evaluation was the explicit outcomes from the JOY Project, as specified in the Project's aims. The evaluation used a number of methods to do this, including questionnaires, individual interviews with service users, individual interviews with staff, focus groups, case studies and input from other organisations that work with the JOY Project.

The evaluation provided evidence that the JOY Project is enabling the vast majority of service users to express increased levels of positive change in a wide range of areas including social, educational, volunteering, community participation and employment. The evaluation also highlighted that a significant feature of these successful outcomes is that the fact that activities are service user led, as a consequence of it being representative of the service users and being advocates for the women in the wider community.

These findings from the evaluation of the JOY project propose two overarching themes for the success of community development projects. These relate to how community development projects are initiated, and how the desired outcomes from community development projects can be achieved, and these are discussed in some detail.

The case study

The JOY project is 'a woman only community project which provides support to enable women to gain a variety of skills, enhance their confidence and empower them to make their own informed decisions' (WCT, 2018a). It does this through the provision of activities including skills such as sewing, cooking, courses to gain qualifications i.e. functional skills (literacy & numeracy), arts and crafts and drop-ins / coffee mornings. Participants are supported both individually and in group settings. A total of 158 service users enrolled on the 'JOY Project' up to July 2018. Service user data shows that the majority of service users self-referred. However, signposting or referral to 'JOY' is made by a range of organisations and agencies reflecting multi-agency

working by staff. The target beneficiaries of JOY include women who are disabled, of diverse ethnic backgrounds, religions and differing sexualities.

The 'JOY Project' evolved from the work of another project, the Asha Women's Centre, which supported women in Worcester for 20 years but closed in January 2017 due to lack of funding. The Asha Centre initially developed from work with women offenders and in its heyday, attracted attention from the Department of Health who cited it as a good practice model in 2003. Baroness Corston identified it as a model of best practice in her Home Office (2007) report on vulnerable women in the criminal justice system. The Asha centre expanded its work to incorporate supporting any women from the local community who needed any kind of support but in its latter years stopped self-referrals and initiated charging agencies for support given to the women they referred. Austerity measures introduced by the Coalition government in 2010 and since continued by the Conservative governments elected in 2015 and 2017 cut funding to the referring organisations and agencies, reducing available funds to pay Asha for referrals. This played some part in Asha's closure.

In the light of concern over what would happen to the women who were service users after the closure of Asha, the 'JOY Project' was launched in April 2017. The Worcester County Council (WCoC) 'Domestic Abuse and Violence Needs Assessment' (WCoC, 2016:16) highlighted that the 'numbers of victims appear to be increasing' in Worcestershire. Overall, numbers of victims in Worcestershire, according to police data, increased from 2,772 in 2014 to 4,762 in 2015 though this might be down to increased reporting, (74% of victims were women, with the most common age range of 35-44 years). The Report identified a high volume of children being involved (mostly witnessing), and apparent links between victims living in areas of high deprivation and the use of alcohol by both victims and perpetrators. This led to a successful Big Lottery Fund bid by Worcester Community Trust (WCT) in February 2017 for a 'Moving on Project' as a follow on. In the context of the austerity cuts to local authority funding, WCT was set up in 2010 to join together three charities and take on the management of community centres and youth and community work owned by both Worcester City Council (WCiC) and Worcester County Council (WCoC). The work of WCT is funded through income generated by letting out the community centres and from grants, charitable funds and contracts (WCT, 2018d).

[Social and economic context of case study area](#)

According to the most recent Worcestershire Health and Well-being Board Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (2017), Worcestershire is less deprived on average than England but in Worcester city, there are significant pockets of deprivation, such as in postcodes WR1 and WR5. Most service users of the group are from the WR4 and WR5 postcode areas, which is unsurprising given the location of WCT hubs where 'JOY' activities take place. 'JOY Project' service users are most commonly in the age groups spanning the most common age group for domestic abuse in Worcestershire and WCT hubs where 'JOY' activities take place, the most common postcodes for reported domestic abuse. Joy project service users had multiple support needs when they first started attending 'JOY' but the majority cited issues related to 'confidence (57.9%) and loneliness (47.4%), and issues such as mental health and domestic abuse (34%).

Model of work

The theoretical underpinning of the 'JOY Project' is feminist, in that it is a woman only project that aims to empower women. As such it is part of the important legacy of second wave feminists, who created safe, women only spaces where women could live (refuges for abuse women), disclose sexual violence (Rape Crisis Centres), get support, socialise and learn (women's centres). Through the 1970's and 1980's, these became a vital part of the voluntary and community sector, providing much needed support to women (Women's Resource Centre, 2015).

In addition, it recognises that empowerment must begin from women's own experiences and the importance of the social, economic and environmental structures that shape women's lives (Carr, 2003). Lee (2001: 12) tells us that empowerment is an essential element of feminist theory which seeks to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalised populations for individual and collective transformation. As such empowerment is both a theory and a process (Carr 2003; Carroll, 2004), Almaseb and Julia (2007) believe that empowerment is best viewed as a theoretical framework which helps women take more control over their lives and develop a sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence, and this is evident in the work of the 'JOY Project'.

In terms of a community setting this method of working represents Keith Popple's (2000) community development model. The strategy underpinning this model encompasses the active participation of the women, with community workers acting as 'facilitators, enablers and Neighbourhood Workers', who support the women to 'develop the confidence and skills to improve their quality of life' (Popple 2000:56). The main focus of the work is to work alongside the women within this community. They do this by enabling individuals to develop the ability and confidence to take control of their lives by taking part in a variety of activities and learning, which are designed to build both a skill set and self-esteem of the individual or the group. Twelvetrees, in his book *Community Work*, felt that this approach to working reflected the 'uniqueness of community work' (1991:60).

The age, ethnicity and social status of JOY participants

The target beneficiaries are women aged 16+. There is no maximum age limit. Demographically, women in Worcester in 2011 were mostly in the 40-49 and 70+ age categories. 'JOY Project service users on the other hand, are most commonly aged 30-49 years. The number of women aged 60+ attending 'JOY' is low in comparison; as is the number of younger women.

Most service users were not in employment for a range of reasons including being full time parents or carers, including age, disability and childcare related issues that make it difficult for service users to enter employment. Most service users also predominantly lived in Housing Association or council accommodation.

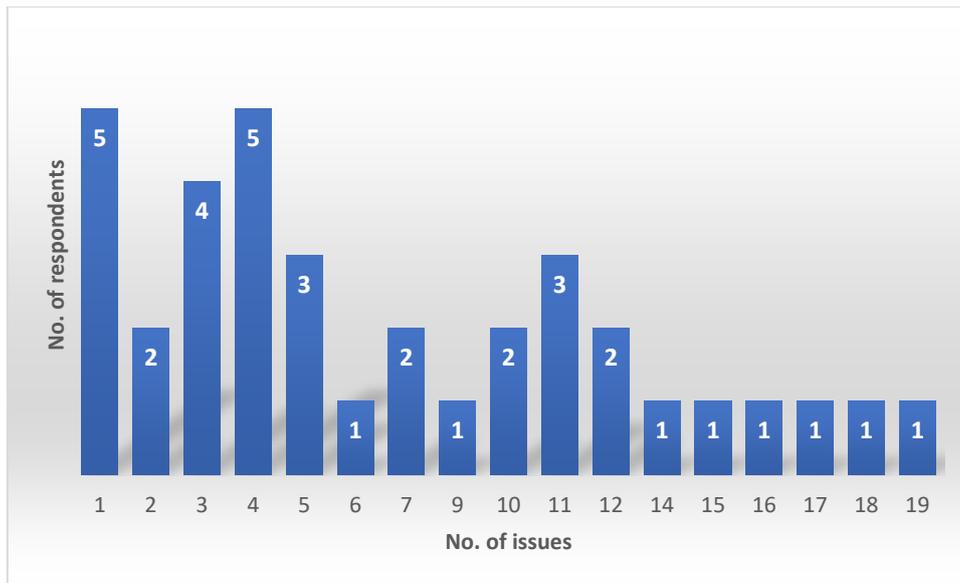
The priority is to support women who live in the city of Worcester but, 'JOY' can support women out of area for group work. The majority of service users enrolled to date are, and have been 'White British'. However, a much lower proportion of service users were 'White English' than was expected according to the target set for the funder and

a lower number of women from 'other' white backgrounds. A higher number of Pakistani women attend the project than the estimated target set for the funder but a low number of Bangladeshi women.

Survey data shows that the majority of service users need help with issues that can impact negatively on community and employment participation, and on health. 57.9% needed support with their confidence levels for example and just under half (47.4%) cited loneliness, wanting to make friends and wanting to get involved with community as reasons for first attending 'JOY'. 44.7% said they needed support in relation to their motivation, 39.5% needed support with social skills and mental health issues and 13.2% needed support due to domestic abuse. Substance use and sexual abuse were the issues that fewest women said they needed support with though these issues are notoriously difficult to disclose (Elkins, 2008; Ullman 2010). Fewer respondents said they attended 'JOY' for 'hard outcomes' such as gaining educational qualifications (23.7%) or help with gaining employment (15.7%), though 39.5% said they needed help with finances / debt. This correlates with responses given by questionnaire respondents, when asked about the activities they participated in (see illustration 26) (backed up by the 'JOY' database: 2018), and what they hoped to achieve by attending 'JOY' (Illustration 27).

Survey data also shows that JOY service user have multiple issues that they needed support with, seen in Graph 1 below.

Graph 1. Number of issues questionnaire respondents said they needed support with when they first attended 'JOY'



34.2% of respondents highlighted ten or more issues (see Graph 1). Of these (53.8%) were aged 40-49 years and predominantly lived in postcode areas WR4 and WR5 (two lived in the WR3 area, and two did not give their postcode). This is to be expected given that the majority of respondents were from these areas. The fact that only one service user from the WR1 area participated in the questionnaire means that information is missing about the needs of women in that area which is one of the most deprived areas. All issues listed are related to the ONS (2011) 'Dimensions of Deprivation', based on employment, education, housing and health and disability, which are discussed below.

The planned outputs and outcomes

In identifying the need for a service to replace the closed Asha service, JOY emerged from a concern over what would happen to the women who were service users of this closed service. WCT consulted with stakeholders (including Asha service users and potential referring agencies) to develop the projects structure and governance and recruit and train staff and volunteers, including a service user steering group. All members of the steering group are current service users and their role is to represent other women who attend 'JOY' and suggest activities. Though the project answers to the funders in terms of meeting set outcomes, it can be argued then that it is service user led, in terms of what activities take place to meet the outcomes. This is supported by regular service user consultations and evidenced by forms requesting women to state what activities they would like to do each term. The specific outcomes for the project are shown below:

OUTCOMES	INDICATORS
1. Disadvantaged women will have improved motivation, confidence	The number of women who demonstrate increased self-confidence, motivation and

and social skills leading to reduced isolation and increased community participation	improved social skills by actively participating in project & community
	The number of women who self-report improved & sustained self-confidence and interpersonal skills via activity & course questionnaires & evaluation
	The number of women who self-report improved & sustained self-confidence and interpersonal skills via activity & course questionnaires & evaluation
2. Disadvantaged women will acquire new skills and aspirations and enhance learning, leading to sustained change and improved future volunteering and employment opportunities	The number of women who have improved educational achievement by completing a JOY skills-based activity and obtained a certificate
	The number of women who have progressed from service user to become a volunteer or mentor and have provided mentoring support to at least 2 other women
	The number of women progressing to external opportunities including mentoring, volunteering, further training and paid employment

Targets are set by the funder in order to measure if the outcomes are being met, and it is clear that the funders require positive change to be measured quantitatively.

Activities are facilitated by project staff, volunteers, wider WCT staff, freelance tutors and external bodies such as the Heart of Worcestershire College (HOW). With support, each woman is directed to suitable activities during the one to one discussion when they first attend the project (though referrals from probation may be more directive) and they choose activities thereafter (Heywood, 2018). WCT states that 'each woman will access a journey tailored to their specific needs and abilities' (2018d:3). Timetables of group activities are produced each term. There is no limit to how many activities women can attend.

What Happened?

An evaluation of the JOY project outcomes was completed in September 2018 by the University of Worcester (Jones *et al*, 2018). This evaluation provided evidence that the vast majority of service users show increased levels of positive change in a wide range of areas including social, educational, volunteering, community participation and employment as a result of engaging with the 'JOY Project'. This shows that 'JOY' is effective in enabling service users to improve their personal and social circumstances. Informal, leisure activities result in a range of important 'soft outcomes' that should not be underestimated in terms of service user health and wellbeing. The 'JOY Project' has also had a massive impact on the mental health of service users, far exceeding what was expected by staff. One of the biggest additional outcomes is the important

friendships women make, highly relevant in the context of the recent emphasis from government on 'social wellbeing' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2018). Staff and service users said friendship should be an outcome in its own right. Service users are active in volunteer and mentor work at 'JOY' and externally. It is also evident that 'JOY' is identifying hidden and unmet needs of service users in terms of basic literacy and/or numeracy skills.

The project has a positive impact on the relationships of service users and on community participation. The project benefits local communities by having community hubs, via internal and external volunteering and mentoring, and entry into employment. For example, twenty-nine service users moved into external opportunities (volunteering, education and paid employment), since the project launch to February 2018. This exceeds the 'Big Lottery Fund' target. Representatives from partner agencies state that it is highly unlikely that without accessing the JOY project, some service users would have had the impetus to move on to external training and employment. The money that the local council saves by not having to spend on supporting the service users must be astronomical.

Additionally, JOY also enables the integration of women from a range of ethnicities and social / educational backgrounds and abilities, who would not normally come together and interact in the way that they did.

A significant feature that the evaluation identified as important to the project's success is that the fact that activities are service user led, as in line with the project's theoretical underpinning. In practice, this means that as service users constitute the project's steering group, they initiate and are consulted about what activities they want to do. The timetable is then agreed on, in consultation with staff. The evaluation highlighted how the organisation and function of the steering group in this way is an important aspect of the success of the project to service users and staff, as a consequence of it being representative of the service users and being advocates for the women in the wider community. The relevance of this is identified as ensuring attendance and retention, and the completing of courses and gaining certification. As a consequence of this, the WCT now have JOY steering group members on the WCT Board, and vice versa.

What was learnt?

An important aspect of the JOY project is that it historically developed from an identified need within the community, by the community. This means that without the initial and continuing hard work of members of the community in which it operates, it is highly unlikely that the JOY project would exist. As an example of this, it is important to note that the staff are not academically or professionally trained as community workers but are 'experts by experience, having lived through a variety of traumatic events themselves, and this means that the staff consistently stated that what they did felt intuitively right (Jones et al 2018). It is evident that they are part of the community first and foremost and their role as JOY members of staff is a secondary consideration in the relationship they have developed with the women.

Operating projects in this way can produce a number of positive benefits. For example, the workers know exactly what the women needed and how to engage with

them, developing strong bonds and high levels of trust both with individuals and groups. The underlying feeling from the workers is that they had received similar support in their lives and understood the impact and benefit of engaging in mutually supportive relationships. It can bring benefits such as a greater sense of community cohesion, ownership of the project, a sense of belonging and a shared understanding of protection and security for the women.

However, it can also act a barrier to progression of either individuals or the project. For example, it can impact negatively when it comes to supporting transitions within the lives of the women involved in the project. There is potential for this issue to occur when discussing how the women would cope if the project were to close with many suggesting that they recognised how dependent they were on the project and could not envisage being able to deal with this concept (Jones *et al* 2018).

It can also have a negative impact on the project when seeking to make the community more inclusive or when recognising the importance of exploring more sustainable methods of funding for the project. This was evident in an Evaluation Study (Jones *et al* 2018), which identified that there were 'gaps' in the provision of service, particular in the 16 – 25 age group but this was not identified by either the staff team or the women as they felt that the programme of activities catered for their (own) needs. There is a danger that the women involved in the project would cease to operate as a community and instead would become a 'closed shop', valuing the exclusivity rather than the potential for inclusivity of the project. These were all issues highlighted to the group in the Evaluation Report.

Literature underpinning the development of this work and the analysis of it?

The outcomes from the JOY project underlie the significance of two overarching aims and objectives for the success of community development projects, as outlined below.

The first significant point relates to the overarching aim of community development as 'to transform reality through the involvement and actions of people as their own agents of change, (McArdle, 2014:12). What this means is that community development cannot be done on people, it has to be done with people, with the problems or issues of focus first identified by the relevant community. Practically, this involves drawing on the skills and expertise that already exist within the community, as a method to meet the identified needs (Walker 2016). Significantly, this relates not only to the way the project is designed, but also to the outcomes of any project, wherein:

the intended outcomes from community development have to be linked to the concerns of communities themselves, linked to their agendas as defined in their own terms. The issues that communities themselves are concerned with and want to change are the defined outcomes that those concerned with community development must look towards' – McArdle, 2014:12

Often, the protagonists for community development live in the community in which they work, and this provides the opportunity for the authentic legitimacy and enduring

legacy of community development (McCrea *et al*, 2017). The composition and function of the JOY steering group is a good example of how this can function in practice, and also how it can have beneficial outcomes for the project.

A second, linked, overarching aim is that the desired outcomes from community development occur at the collective rather than the individual level (Crickley, 2014). What this means is that community development works with and develops communities, not individuals. The significance of the previous point to this cannot be overlooked, but just as importantly is the emphasis on the long term rather than the short term in community development, which implicitly acknowledges that change is a process, and not an output (Stuart 2018). The implication of this is perhaps best exemplified by contrasting the outcomes from social work, which is a practice located in the individual and so has outcomes located in the individual, and the wider implications that community development can have on a community (Crickley, 2014). Another linked differentiation from social work is community development's inherently political nature, meaning a focus not just on the management of a problem, but a commitment to social justice and social inclusion in its outcomes.

Arguably, the success of the JOY project has been built out of the fact that it has these two significant features of community development at its core. In relation to the JOY project, the emphasis on such community outcomes is evident in a number of ways. For example, the 'JOY Project' has added a positive impact on service users' community participation, through for example increased volunteering, education and paid employment. Additionally, the money that JOY saves the local council by not having to spend on supporting the service users provides a financial benefit to the community which reinforces the wider collective benefit of the project.

These reinforce the importance of ensuring that community development projects are grounded in the community, for the community, by the community.

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