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FINAL REPORT

Grafton Community College

Learning Circles: Breaking Isolation Cycles

February 2008

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Contents

Introduction	4
Background	5
Recruitment of "Buddies"	6
Recruitment of participants	7
Project	8
Results	8
Baseline	
November 08	
December 08	
Caringa Enterprise Staff feedback	
Limitations of the Program	17
Planning	
Engagement	
Understanding the participant's capabilities	
Buddies commitment	
Reporting schedule	
Strengths of the Program	19
Funded Nongovernment Support Service commitment	
Participants	
Buddies	
Discussion	
Conclusion	
References	
Appendix	23

Introduction

This is the final report by the consultant re the Learning Circles: Breaking the Isolation Cycle conducted at Grafton 2008. This reports details the background to Learning Circles as well the project, participants, "Buddies" results of the original and revised project and a summary.

The use of Learning Circles has merit in situations where the participants can reflect on key issues that are relevant. Typically though the basis of Learning Circles comes from the "study circles" program as instituted in Sweden and is utilised in adult education. According to Suda (2001) "Study circles utilize the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point for exploring socially relevant concepts. Each circle consists of 5-10 people plus a trained facilitator (not teacher). Circles usually work through a study guide during at least 7 sessions of about 20 hours each. Study circles promote literacy education, since talking is recognized as a component of literacy to the goal of breaking isolation cycles" (p1). It has been used in many areas such a Bonner curriculum and defined as follows "A Learning Circle is a format for dialogue that invites participation in a manner that may be different from the typical conversational format, as it is not based on debate. It is a valuable and effective mode of communication that, when utilized correctly, can be a foundation for deep dialogue" (Retrieved December 20,2008 http://www.bonner.org/resources/modules/modules_pdf/BonCurFacilLearnCircles.pdf).

A fundamental question is whether such an approach is applicable for young adults with compromised cognition and limited functional literacy. Learning Circles has been used in Australia to empower unemployed people and develop a Reconciliation Kit (Suda, 2001). Its application to people with intellectual disabilities is questionable particularly as it is based on the premise that people with an innate desire to learn will improve one's knowledge and ability to understand and interact with the world (Brevskilan, 1980, Brophy,1999). The concept of a democratic process and an inclusive approach are relevant to all learners. Understanding the philosophy underpinning such an approach may be difficult for those individuals with an intellectual impairment. It is important to note that literacy has not featured as an issue in Learning Circles (Shires & Crawford, 1999). However, for people with a disability the need to become more interdependent rather than dependent is important for enhancing their own quality of life and reducing social isolation (Winn & Hay, 2009). The operationalisation of the revised project at Grafton Community College was about individuals making decisions about what was important for them to actualize their learning and social participation. In doing so the revised project provided a non-threatening learning environment by which each individual would need to be able to develop literacy skills in print and writing as well as oral literacy skills to be able to meet their own learning goal.

The revised Learning Circles Program: Breaking the Isolation Cycles is in theory a positive and proactive means by which a group of vulnerable people in the community could break their isolation and dependency on a service agency and or their parents/guardians and pursue an activity or interest that they would want to undertake. The concept of providing people with choice, focussing on their interests, is most appropriate for people with a disability. People with a disability are amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups in the Australian community and this has been highlighted by the work of the many researchers in Australia and

internationally. Typically people with a disability that involves moderate to high support needs and an intellectual disability are underemployed, or unemployed are reliant on their parents and or funded non-government support services for life-time support. In addition people who have a disability typically have limited means by which to be socially inclusive in the Australian society.

Background

This project was managed by Grafton Community College and funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Adult Literacy National Project. The author was asked to assess and evaluate the original program that was to be implemented.

Participants as it was revealed were not recruited from those who were unemployed or indeed studying as would be the usual practice of Learning Circles. Instead participants were recruited from Caringa Enterprises Incorporated which is based in Grafton.

Caringa Enterprises Incorporated provides a range of programs including Community Participation Program which replaced what was previously known as the Post-School Options Program. The program provides day options, primarily centre-based. It is a program that identifies young people transitioning from school to the community with moderate to high support needs. In addition the Transition to Work program replaces what was known as the "Atlas" program. It is funded to provide a bridge from school to work for young people with a disability who have moderate to high support needs. Clients are provided with training to acquire skills to assist them to be "work ready". Caringa Enterprises is a major provider of services for people with a disability in the Grafton region.

By the nature of its core business a majority of Caringa Enterprises clients have moderate to high support needs and are usually people with an intellectual disability. Having an intellectual disability can have a wide ranging impact on an individual that can have a major impact on the capacity to develop abstract thought or conceptualise some of the issues or constructs that could be developed using Learning Circles.

The author was engaged to assess the program as it was conceptualized in the submission. There were a number of methodology and design issues and delays in setting up the program. As a result of these methodology and design issues the program was late in being developed and recruitment became an issue for the participants and the "Buddies". The participants had little or no understanding of what was involved in the program and the "Buddies" had little experience of working with young adults with an intellectual disability. There were few protocols and procedures in place to a) recruit "Buddies", b) inform "Buddies" about Learning Circles c) inform and train Buddies in ethical behaviour, d) criminal record check of the "Buddies", e) procedures to ensure an interdependence rather than dependency model being developed between the participant and the "Buddy".

These key elements meant that the original program was compromised and needed to be revised. It was decided to modify the program to enable it to become functional and the

author was engaged to develop the program and protocols for the participants. The "Buddies" recruitment and training would be left up to Grafton Community College although protocol and program training was undertaken by the author. There was no trained facilitator available to develop or coordinate the process. Indeed if as Larssen (2000) writes "the facilitator is an equal participant rather than a keeper of knowledge" then the process would have probably stalled. Utilising such an approach for people with moderate to high support needs and an intellectual disability highlights a lack of understanding about intellectual disability and the impact it can have on people being able to conceptualise abstract concepts.

A base line assessment of each participant was undertaken in the revised project which included developing a specific target goal and subset of objectives for each participant. These goals were operationalised to concrete activities, tasks or personal goals that would provide participants with the capacity to break the isolation cycle and be able to participate in self directed activities. The emphasis was on developing literacy in a broad sense as well as engaging in productive activities that break down isolation cycles and create a sustainable activity.

Recruitment of Buddies

At the initial outset there were no identified "Buddies" to assist with the program. The "Buddies" were recruited by Grafton Community College, and were drawn from the Community Services Certificate 2 program. A total of 4 female "Buddies" were recruited from Grafton Community College". The initial enthusiasm by 'Buddies" diminished with no more than 4 attending when at least 8 would have been required to make the program function effectively for the participants.

All the "Buddies" needed police clearance to work with people with a disability as part of the Caringa Enterprises Incorporated policy of working with people with a disability. This is also part of contract compliance under the funding arrangements between Caringa Enterprises Incorporated and the New South Wales, Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care. At the start of this project some "Buddies" did not have this clearance and this process was initiated by Grafton Community College. In addition all Buddies needed to be trained in protocols and procedures when working with people with an intellectual disability. These protocols included appropriate use of language, expressive language, initiating a conversation and documenting their involvement in the Learning Circles- Breaking the Isolation Cycle. Particular emphasis needed to be placed on ensuring the accurate record keeping of activities engaged and undertaken as per the Project.

Initial enthusiasm appeared to be present but when it came to the time to start the revised project and undertake training a number of "Buddies" withdrew and did not attend. This had a major impact on the project particularly as the "Buddies" were to be the key facilitator for each participant. A number of the "Buddies" did not appreciate the need to allow choice or be a facilitator rather than act as a teacher as is required in "Learning Circles" (Suda, 2001). One of the "Buddies" who volunteered some did not want the participants to be self directed but rather direct the activities so that it was more in keeping with the "Buddy's" interests.

Two of the “Buddies” did not appreciate what role a volunteer has when working with people who are vulnerable. Volunteers in such a project involving people with moderate to high support needs need a regular commitment to the project. Unfortunately this did not occur and several times some “Buddies” did not attend sessions. Several “Buddies” had little understanding of the implications of “change” and the use of “expressive language” when working with people with moderate to high support needs and an intellectual disability. On several occasions the Caringa Enterprise staff had to initiate and provide leadership and direction for activities when the “Buddies” did not attend.

It appeared that most “Buddies” were under the assumption that the revised project would be the same as institutional community participation programs where they, the volunteer or “Buddy”, would arrive at a setting and then work with an adult on a specific task. Part of the objectives of training of the “Buddies” by the author was to educate and inform the “Buddies”. This appeared to be marginally successful with two buddies being consistent participants in the training and attending the sessions with the participants.

The level of commitment from the “Buddies” recruited fluctuated from 100% attendance in the first instance to 25% attendance in the latter part of the project. This intermittent attendance resulted in the on-going activities being compromised to the extent that 1:1 activity could not be actualized. The “Buddies” were requested to make a weekly commitment to the program and to ensure that they made every effort to attend. Any out of hours activity or activities with the “Buddies” and the participants was highly problematic however this has been successful in other programs such as “Teen Companion”. Many of the goals identified by the participants would require commitment beyond a Monday morning session.

Two “Buddies” did engage positively in the project and facilitated a positive outcome for two participants. Due to the inconsistent attendance of the “Buddies” two pre-service teacher educators were recruited. The involvement of two pre-service teacher educators in the program was also useful in that they were able to establish a rapport with the participants and assist in meeting the objectives of the program.

Participants

The involvement of the participants required the consent of Caringa Enterprises particularly as the Community Participation Program and Transition to Work facility of Caringa Enterprises is used Monday and Wednesday mornings. A consent form was developed by the author and provided to the quality assurance officer of Caringa Enterprises. All consent forms were signed and returned. Signed consent forms are held by Caringa Enterprises Day Program co-coordinator.

This project involved 12 adults who were part of Caringa Enterprises Incorporated (8) and Clarence Valley Community Services (4). The activities were conducted at Grafton in the Caringa Enterprises Incorporated Community Participation Centre.

All participants had a disability. The degree of disability varied from that of learning difficulty to moderate intellectual and physical disability that included Down syndrome and autistic spectrum disorder. All participants were verbal and none had a hearing impairment that required an assistive device.

Literacy levels of the participants varied with some participants having difficulty reading basic words or using a telephone book to be able to write words legibly or read brochures and pamphlets distributed by government agencies that specifically target people with a disability.

Project

Recognising the limitations of the original approach and delays in initiating the project, the project was modified to provide participants with choice in three areas. These areas were, What I know? What do I want to know? What do I want to achieve. The participants were motivated and engaged. Where participants could not write a scribe was used to record their responses.

A base line assessment of each participant was undertaken which included developing a specific target goal and subset of objectives for each participant. These goals were operationalised to concrete activities, tasks or personal goals that would provide participants with the capacity to break the isolation cycle and be able to participate in self directing activities. These self-directed activities are detailed in the Results section of this report. The emphasis was on developing literacy and social inclusion in a broad sense. The Buddies were provided with detailed recording sheets as per Progress Report documentation.

This refocused the revised project to look more closely at the participants' abilities and wishes and how the two can be more closely aligned whilst still developing literacy skills and breaking isolation cycles by engaging in community activities that require self initiated direction and greater familiarization with their community.

Results

Baseline

There were 12 participants (7 females 5 males) involved in the learning Circles: Breaking the Isolation Cycle project. Four female participants withdrew before the project concluded

Participant A:

What do I want to do? Play basketball in a local team.

What I know? How to play basketball.

What do I want to know? How can I practise and also be part of a team. How do I get there if it is at night time or far away?

What I want to achieve? To be able to play basketball in a team and make new friends.

Participant B:

What do I want to do? I want to get my driver's licence but more my speedway licence.

What I know? I know about go-karts and karting. I have done it a few times but I want to be able to get my licence so I can race.

What do I want to know? How can I get my licence? What do I need to do? What do I need to do from RTA?

What I want to achieve? I would like to be able to have a driver's licence or a licence that can help me get a job.

Participant C:

What do I want to do? Work full-time

What I know? Have a driver's licence, Certificate IV in computer IT, Have a car.

What do I want to know? I want to work full-time. I want to learn more social skills. I have few friends from school and very friends at all. I want to learn more about computers.

What I want to achieve? I want to have friends, play sport and be with people who like the same music and interests as me.

Participant D:

What do I want to do? Live independently

What I know? Have a driver's licence, Certificate IV in computer IT, Have a car.

What do I want to know? I want to work full-time. I want to learn more social skills. I have few friends from school and very friends at all. I want to learn more about computers.

What I want to achieve? I want to have friends, play sport and be with people who like the same music and interests as me.

Participant E:

What do I want to do? Improve my gardening skills

What I know? On Tuesdays I go to the South Grafton community gardens to do gardening.

What do I want to know? I would like to know about vegetable

What I want to achieve? Watch them grow and eat them.

Participant F:

What do I want to do? I want to learn belly dancing, waltz, salsa, tap and ballroom dancing.

What I know? I love music and dancing. I dance at home and I can teach myself.

What do I want to know? Where can I learn to dance in Grafton? How much will it cost? Where are the classes? How would I get to them?

What I want to achieve? To be able to dance and meet new friends.

Participant G:

What do I want to do? Be employed

What I know? I want to work at the Grafton Clud(b) meat frosts for jobs for nights. Only Wednesday night.

What do I want to know? Making drinks and serving drinks in a bar. How people do their job.

What I want to achieve? Work at nights.

Participant H:

What do I want to do? Money management

What I know? The value of notes and coins. I can recognise the prices. I no (know) how to give the rite (right) change.

What do I want to know? Budgeting could be better. Get a part-time job, improve my money skills improve literacy and numeracy skills

What I want to achieve? Independent living skills. I have money skills but they could be better like getting the rite (right) change and serving. I want to get a part-time job. Improve my numeracy and literacy skills. I would like to learn belly dancing.

Participant J:

What do I want to do? Manage my mobile phone

What I know? How to make calls. How to answer and hang up. How to text

What do I want to know? I want to learn about different phone plans. How much is a call going to cost(s) me. I want to learn how to use my phone within my budget.

What I want to achieve? I want to keep my mobile phone bill to be in my budget.

Participant K:

What do I want to do? I want to do art. I love drawing and am very interested in drawing and different techniques.

What I know? I know about drawing I can copy and draw and have done lots.

What do I want to know? How to use water colours, oils and pastels.

What I want to achieve? To be able to go to an art class and learn how to do my art and improve my art work.

November 08

Participant A: At the end of the Learning Circle session A went to the basketball stadium with his new basketball and observed other teams playing. After consultation with A's carers they decided to take him though at first they could not. A has attended a couple of times and is meeting new people. A's carer said he will organise a lift for A with another team member once they build that trust. A's aunty has also attended and is aiding with the logistics of joining A with a team and getting him some court time.

Participant B: B had a goal of getting hid forklift licence, After research and consultation with Bs work experience provider, it was found that B could sit the forklift theory at the Community College and practice operating a forklift at the recycling centre on Fridays. Caringa Enterprises found an experienced forklift driver who would volunteer his time on a Friday to train and guide B. Nearing the course date B was informed by Caringa Enterprises that the theory would be two days on a Friday and Saturday. B then refused to undertake the theory and decided not to go for the forklift licence as he played cricket on a Saturday. B was given a choice and informed of the consequences of his actions. B decided to think about his decision and returned the next day having decided not to miss any cricket matches.

Participant C: C wants to further his ability to socialise and communicate more effectively. C was given some advice and met some new people through Learning Circles. As a positive outcome C independently went to the astronomy club to establish new networks. C contacted Caringa Enterprises and his "Buddy" via phone to express that he had a great time and spoke to a variety of new people who had common interests.

Participant D: D had a goal of independent living research was carried out on the traditional means of living independently including accessing real-estate agents, and looking at his budget for affordability. After discovering the high expense D realised that possibly moving in with his older sister in the spare room would be cheaper and realistic. It was also suggested to D that independent living could also mean remaining at home with his parents but living independently by doing his own washing, cleaning and cooking as well as having his own space for which he would pay rent. D was encouraged and verbally supported the idea to approach his parents which he did. The response was "We will think about it". D now has options to peruse and the knowledge to be able to make some steps.

Participant E: Wants to continue activities around gardening and growing plants including vegetables. After purchasing gardening equipment E liked the idea of extending the gardens at his home as well as continuing to access the community gardens on a Tuesday through the Community Participation Program. When working at the community gardens E was asked if he would like to do more gardening at private residences with the volunteer horticulturalist J who is in charge of community gardens. This did not occur but the opportunity still exists as E is available on Friday afternoons when J does this work.

Participant F: Absent for the last couple of Learning Circle meetings. She has attended belly dancing classes and as it is on a Saturday, F will sometimes be taken by her father who does not always get the opportunity to share activities with his daughter. F has reported that she enjoys the classes and has met some “cool” people.

Participant G: Withdrew from Learning Circles

Participant H: Withdrew from Learning Circles

Participant I: Withdrew from Learning Circles. Participant's comments, "I though (sic) I was going to Learn about manage money but it didn't happen at all" "I felt someone was going to help me but they didn't".

Participant J: J set the goal of trying to pay her outstanding mobile phone bill. A great deal of research was done regarding the pitfalls of having a mobile phone on a plan in comparison to a prepaid option. Eventually the Department of Fair Trading was contacted by the “Buddy”. A Department of Fair Trading official contacted the mobile phone provider and worked with J to have the mobile phone reinstated. The bill was negotiated down to approximately one-quarter of the original invoice. This was organised by J making instalments. J was advised to make payments via the Centre Pay option through Centrelink. The negative aspects of this option was that because the mobile phone account had been inactive for so long the number was issued to another customer and the mobile phone she had was not allowed to be used for prepaid services. The positive outcome was a reduced account and the option to go back onto a plan without the access to internet services.

Participant K: K began Learning Circles with the intention of learning new skills in art and associated activities. K is now attending belly dance classes on Saturday. This was an independent decision made by K. It is not sure if K was influenced by F to attend.

Participant L: Withdrew from Learning Circles. Participant's comments "I did not like the course because I seemed to learn more at cooking than I did with the course.

December 08

Participant A: Still involved in playing basketball. Plays in a team and practices in the evenings. Enjoys playing basketball and is able to recall where he plays on the court but not the position.

Participant B: Still does not have licence for a forklift nor a learners' permit to drive a car.

Participant C: Still has difficulty in initiating a conversation. Avoids large groups and does not engage in sports.

Participant D: Still seeks independent living although not necessarily away from home. Engages in hospitality by working at the cafe in the community centre preparing and serving meals.

Participant E: Wants to continue activities around gardening and growing plants including vegetables.

Participant F: Still continuing with belly-dancing on Saturday afternoons

Participant G: Withdrew from Learning Circles

Participant H: Withdrew from Learning Circles

Participant I: Withdrew from Learning Circles. Participant's comments," I though (sic) I was going to Learn about manage money but it didn't happen at all" "I felt someone was going to help me but they didn't".

Participant J: Managing her mobile phone much better with limited functions available and a monthly cap on calls. Will still have to repay a fortnightly payment over a set period of time to clear the previous account.

Participant K: Currently not attending community participation program and is situated in the Day Program

Participant L: Withdrew from Learning Circles. Participant's comments " I did not like the course because I seemed to learn more at cooking than I did with the course.

Participant feedback December 08.

Only five of the nine remaining participants were available to answer the following questionnaire. The others were out on an excursion. The following series of five questions was asked of each participant who was available on the day. All participants were asked to answer truthfully and not just answer what they think people might want them to write. Overall the responses were very positive.

What did you learn from being involved in this project?

Participant A: Learnt about basketball. Joined a team, Nathan's team. I play on Monday nights. I have a grey shirt with words on it and black shorts and long socks.

Participant B: It was good to learn. I liked talking about the program.

Participant D: Looking on the internet for places to live. The cost of living.

Participant F: Belly dancing. I found the place and I used the telephone. Mel runs the class and she charges me only \$5 a session on Saturday from 4-5pm.

Participant J: How to have fun. Meet new friends, Use my mobile phone. Have a time repayment on my phone bill which was reduced from \$1268 - \$400

What is your view of the program?

Waste of time Boring Okay Good Very good

Participant A: **Very good.** Interesting

Participant B: **Very good.** I listened and learned somethings. I learnt about how to get a forklift licence.

Participant D: **Good.** Something different. I hadn't done anything like this before. Interesting being with other people.

Participant F: **Very good** I liked it. Talked about things. What we are doing. What you would like to do and I got to do it.

Participant J: **Very good.** It was interesting. I learnt things and entertaining activities

Are you still doing things that you started in this program?

Participant A: Basketball in Nathan's team. We finish at 9pm Mondays.

Participant B: No dairy farming. I drive a tractor and a quad farm bike. I milk cows, wash and clean the yards at Ulmarra. I work with my mum and dad.

Participant D: No

Participant F: I am doing belly dancing until Xmas. In 2009 I want to do art, cooking and photography.

Participant J: Not really using my phone as much. Paying off my phone bill.

Do you know more about your community now than before? Why?

Participant A: Yes I play basketball outside with other people.

Participant B: Working in the Community Centre at Dukes Cafe.

Participant D: No only a few places out of town.

Participant F: Yes I know about belly dancing. I know more about using a telephone. I feel more confident.

Participant J: People are nicer. I want to study some more. Yes about the Department of Fair Trading. I have been helped personally.

How could the program be improved?

Participant A: More practice. My sister went to basketball. I am teaching her how to play

Participant B: Having fun, working hard and less activities. I would like to do it again.

Participant D: Do more things. Less talking more doing. Look at accommodation. Do it again

Participant F: Do more activities. Every day of the week with someone else.

Participant J: More activities particularly leisure activities. More time. More 1:1

Caringa Enterprise Staff feedback December 08

Staff

What does Learning Circles mean to you?

Staff member A: Learning Circles means assisting young people to overcome barriers and help them to achieve a goal.

Staff member B: Helping people with disabilities to pursue special interests.

Staff member C: To give opportunity for clients to gain skills in obtaining and achieving goals that will enhance their lives.

Staff member D: It is an opportunity for participants to target a goal and follow all available avenues to achieve success. This (Learning Circles aids the Transition To Work program in providing more for service users.

What did you think this project would achieve?

Staff member A: It would hopefully achieve putting people in contact with others who could assist them and empower the participants.

Staff member B: Helping people to attend hobbies and interests independently

Staff member C: An outcome for all clients in their chosen area.

Staff member D: It could and would achieve anything if given consistency and time to do so. It would achieve networking, sustainable outcomes and information and opportunities for all participants that wouldn't otherwise have them.

Do you think this project achieved these goals? Why?

Staff member A: I think that this project achieved some of these goals for some of the participants.

Staff member B: Unsure I had minimal involvement.

Staff member C: No the program and funding was mismanaged from the start. No communication in regard to all parties. No real understanding of what Learning Circles was about.

Staff member D: As the project concluded the participants presented more and more outcomes through independently acting on the information they had and following through with their goals.

How do you think that this project could be improved?

Staff member A: More pre-planning prior to starting up the project. Having buddies sourced and available. Less paperwork for participants. Faster paced activities.

Staff member B: Better organised. More background information for volunteers and clients.

Staff member C: Better communication and advance preparation before commencement. Regular meetings.

Staff member D: Ensuring, experienced/qualified staff and volunteers are consistently available for support of individual participants. Also at least one whole day a week for lessons and activities.

Discussion

Overall from a participant's perspective the feedback was positive. It must be borne in mind that it was a diverse group of participants with three participants having learning difficulties and others with moderate to high support needs.

Having to reorganise and restructure the program had a less than positive impact on some participants and the Carinya Enterprise staff however both remained committed to the revised project until its conclusion.

A fundamental flaw in the original program was the lack of a co-ordinated plan and organisation and communication to participants, Carinya staff and Buddies. The revised program addressed many of these issues although most of the "Buddies" were not committed to the project. Fundamentally Learning Circles as a means by which people may come together to talk and develop ideas and then be supported by those involved in the Learning Circle is not applicable where participants have impaired cognition or developmental delay. It is a cognitively demanding process and challenging for the participants.

What is applicable to a group of participants with impaired cognition and or developmental delay is the need to be active and undertake concrete tasks. This is reflected in the comments received from the participants at the end of the project. The capacity for people with an intellectual disability of moderate to high support needs to operate in an abstract medium or consider auditory literacy constructs such as "How do you think you would feel if....." or "What would make you feel....." is seriously compromised.

Participants were more concerned about the physical aspects of doing and engaging rather than passively sitting, listening and talking. In addition activities need to be connected to their individual needs and wants rather than what might be self serving for a group or volunteers or staff. The revised program specifically addressed this issue and directed the project to participants' needs and interests. As a program that seeks to improve social inclusion, improve sustainability, diminish dependency and encourage interdependence the approach of the revised program achieved this in part.

The sustainability of activities and social inclusion from the revised project is reflected in the results over a time period of 6 months. Six months on from the revised program being introduced there have been some very positive changes for the participants. This highlights the issue that providing choice and adequate support can enable individuals to be involved in socially inclusive activities in regional centres.

Limitations of the original and revised project

There were many limitations associated with the original project. The lack of initial planning and direction had major implications for how the project would be conducted, sustained as well as developing positive relationships with funded non-government support services. There was clearly at the outset a lack of direction about what the program would look like in its operation, the recruitment and retaining of "Buddies", the commitment of staff from funded non-government support services. The revised project had the limitations of the experiences of the original project and as such a degree of scepticism was evident about how successful such a project could be given how it had been initiated.

Planning: It was evident from the outset that the original project was floundering and not having any clear direction as to what was involved and what was likely to occur. The delayed start to the project did little to enhance the quality of the program that could be developed. Recruitment of "Buddies" was limited and there appeared a lack of commitment and understanding about what was required by the Buddies in the first instance including what was involved in being a part of "Learning Circles".

Planning of the revised project was limited by time with the original project having started but stalled. The revised project required booklets to be developed for the "Buddies", consent forms to be written and reviewed by the quality assurance officer at Caringa Enterprises and a detailed plan of the project including a time frame for when and where events would occur.

Engagement with key personnel of the funded non-government support service. In the original project there was a clear lack of communication and understanding about what was required by the funded non-government support service (fngss) as highlighted in the staff surveys. The manager of the community participation program and transition to work program had little idea what the original program would entail including involvement of staff and facilities both of which would have an impact on the service.

The revised project required meetings with Caringa staff as well as what would be required in regard to facilities and access to equipment. This had an impact on the individual service plan that had been developed by Caringa for each client. Although compliant the revised project did limit what the outcomes would be for each client's service plan.

Understanding of the participant's capabilities

In the design of the original project there appeared to be a general lack of understanding of how compromised each participant's cognitive ability would be and this led to the need for the "Buddies" to be in-serviced about the needs of the participants and how best to engage with the participants given each one's particular circumstance. In the revised project the consultant

was acutely aware of the limitations of individuals with compromised cognition and took this into account when designing the revised project.

In addition as reported in the Interim report in the original project there were limited clearly identified goals for the participants who all have a disability. This is a crucial factor as it highlights a fundamental aspect of not recognising the limitations an intellectual disability can have on an individual and as such utilising any approach that has as its main focus a cognitive-therapy focus is compromised by the capacity of the participants. As it was conceptualised an operationalised Learning Circle where individuals sit, discuss and reflect is bound to be compromised where participants have compromised cognition.

“Buddies” commitment

Prior to the revised project and even after the revised project was implemented there was a general lack of commitment from the “Buddies” to be involved including giving support to the individual needs of each participant. On one occasion one “Buddy” wanted to change what the participants wanted to do and undertake an activity that suited the “Buddy”. The main reason for this was probably due to the limited work that was put into the initial recruitment of “Buddies” to work with people who have compromised cognition or a disability and the impact that can have on an individual's literacy development.

Reporting schedule

There was no initial reporting schedule set up in the original project to record objectively what was achieved by the participant for each week nor a reporting schedule for the “Buddy” to record activities and reflection.

Strengths of the program

There were many strengths of the revised project as it was operationalised. The key strengths being the capacity of individual participants to be able to have choice and specify what they wanted to achieve. Choice for participants in Community Participation Programs is in many ways limited by the available resources. The specific resources included human resources to provide 1:1 support with participants and the capacity to engage in community activities. The revised and redeveloped Learning Circles: Breaking the Isolation Cycles" was able to develop confidence in participants that they can achieve many of the following such as developing literacy skills such as the capacity to interpret information on seed packets, be able to use a telephone book, communicate orally the issues surrounding a mobile phone bill, be able to orientate and locate specific items in a large variety store, be able to identify currency and be able to associate auditory information with money when purchasing an item.

The capacity to keep detailed records is also important for such a program. The revised program offered a reporting schedule that would allow “Buddies” to fill in as they went activities and outcomes in an organised manner.

The revised program also highlighted how adapting to specific needs of individuals can have long term benefits if there are adequate supports provided. A strength of the program was the engagement of other institutions that undertake training of people.

Funded Nongovernment Support Service commitment

There was a clear and unequivocal commitment by the FNGSS to support its clients and the original and revised program and this was demonstrated by providing staff, a facility and transport to the program throughout the period it operated as well as record keeping.

Grafton Community College

The Grafton Community College was proactive in responding to changing the original project. The Community College responded by working with the "Buddies" to reinforce the commitment that was required to be involved in the project. In addition the Community College responded positively to the changes and remained committed to the project until its conclusion.

Participants

The participants who were directly linked to the FNGSS continued to want to be part of the revised program. Once engaged in an activity that they had chosen and had experienced the activity they were committed to continuing. Examples of this include belly-dancing, art work, gardening, basketball, meeting people, and developing an awareness of resources in the Grafton Community.

In addition the revised program provided the opportunity for participants to have control over what they wanted to learn, the context in what they wanted to operate. Some of the positives that were achieved because of the program included;

"A" being able to engage in basketball have his own basketball, be part of a team and have his carers change their attitude to his involvement in organised sport. As reported by Caringa Enterprise the lack of independence afforded to A was a limiting factor for him to be involved in activities that were socially inclusive.

"B" wanted to gain a driver's licence and more specifically a speedway licence. He later modified this to a forklift licence. Being able to undertake training was not an issue as was the support from various people in the community. The "Buddy" facilitated most of the initial contacts and the requirements from B. The limiting factor for B was making a choice between what he did and enjoyed (cricket) and what he would like to do and maybe not be successful. In the end there was no choice for B. Perhaps in a much larger town or city there may have been other options as far as the timetabled theory component hours. Living in a town choice is limited and this meant that B could not do the theory. On a positive note this was a choice B made himself that is a positive step along the pathway of interdependence.

"C" continued in the program with the goal of improving his social contact. A number of sessions focussed on protocols and procedures which C was able to learn and put into practice. Example of these protocols included how to respond when asked a question. Responding with more than a one word answer was also undertaken. C responded very positively recognising his own limitations and worked towards improving his oral communication.

"D" was able to develop his aspiration of living independently from a position of moving out of home to living at home and being more independent. This was achieved through examining in actual contexts what would be required to live independently, the cost involved in living independently and D's capacity to self fund such an undertaking. All these aspects were positives from being involved in the program.

"E" was able to purchase tools appropriate his needs as well as protective gloves and a range of seeds. E demonstrated a keen interest in wanting to be involved in the Community Gardens

as well as doing gardening for people in the community. The “Buddy” facilitated a great deal of the initial contact and follow-up with the local clubs and organisations in Grafton. E demonstrated a strong interest in gardening and horticulture and this continued and grew throughout the program. Having those community connections broaden his social network and contact with people in the Grafton community.

“F” being able to undertake belly dancing at a local studio b) at times which were convenient for F, c) at a rate that was reduced and did not have a serious impact on her disposable income. This was achieved by utilising the telephone directory to locate dance classes. This highlighted F’s limitations in reading and her ability to use a directory to locate dance in an alphabetical directory. Her capacity to read the advertisements was also limited due to her literacy levels. Telephone skills, in particular dialling a number and then using a set of questions as a guide was something F had difficulty undertaking. Specific training in protocols and procedures was undertaken with F to enable her to a) make a telephone call, b) ask a range of specific questions c) respond appropriately. The use of a hands-free telephone was very useful for this exercise.

“J” was able to negotiate with the Department of Fair Trading to have a significant reduction in her mobile phone bill. This was only achieved through the work of the “Buddy” facilitating J to a) understand what the Department of Fair Trading role is b) locating and going to the local DFT, c) assisting J in the process of explaining what had occurred d) negotiating with the DFT a resolution which would be amenable to all parties and not compromise the quality of life of J.

“K” being able to access art equipment was achieved as well as providing independence for her to a) locate art material b) select the material she required c) purchase the material independently.

In the course of this project K changed her objective to that of belly dancing and was able to successfully enrol and attend belly dancing classes at the same location as F.

Buddies

The “Buddies” who remained involved in the project of which two were volunteers with Caringa Enterprises would have seen individuals develop interests in areas and operationalised these in different ways than previously undertaken. The “Buddies” who were committed in the program attended training sessions and actively undertook to facilitate the specific objectives of each participant they were involved with and assisting.

Two preservice teacher education students became involved in the project and supported the participants in achieving their goals.

For those who remained with the program until its conclusion it appears as if they were prepared to actively participate and facilitate rather than control the learning and learning environment of the participants. This is a very strong element of the program. Typically disability support services are seen as a helping, caring profession with variable aspects of delivery to the clients and self efficacy to for the clients. Lack of choice is a recurring element in many services provided to individuals with a disability. This program was about “Buddies” facilitating the objective set by the participant.

Conclusion

The project of Learning Circles as it was originally conceived and as interpreted from the literature was not successful and was flawed from the outset as inappropriate for people with moderate to high support needs that have an intellectual impairment or compromised cognition. The nature of intellectual disability and the need for structure, time-on-task, concrete examples and active engagement means that any setting and operation that assumes people can reflect, think abstractly about complex issues will be unsuccessful.

However the modified project Learning Circles: Breaking the Isolation Cycle was successful for those participants who continued throughout the project. The modified project is applicable for people with moderate to high support needs as it provided them with choice and control. In addition it facilitated social inclusion and provided sustainability for participants as highlighted by the evidence from the results of the project. The modified version of the project Learning Circles: Breaking the Isolation Cycle proved successful where there was adequate support, the individual was motivated to achieve and the goal was achievable within the social environment of Grafton.

Improving the outcomes for the participants of this project could have been achieved by better planning from the outset, engaging "Buddies" who had police clearance and were committed to be involved and recognising the limitations of people with an intellectual disability. Where local community people were not available there should have been engagement with TAFE and or the university to have students involved. As was the case in the program tertiary pre-service teacher education students were more than willing to be involved and were engaging with the participants.

Funding for resources should have been made available at the time of the project to enable participants to either a) acquire equipment, b) purchase sessions c) provide support to the agency Caringa Enterprises to assist in travel and transport costs.

In principle such a project has merit and can have a positive long term impact on the social inclusion and literacy development of people who have an intellectual disability and moderate to high support needs. There is a need for such projects to be implemented in rural and regional Australia. Such projects can assist in creating sustainable social inclusion. The participants were very positive and engaging and should be commended for their efforts to remain in the program. For regional and rural programs projects such as this one, it highlights how successful such a program can be and the positive impact such a program can have on individuals with a disability particularly within their own environment.

This project also positively highlighted how collaboration between services such as funded non-government support agencies, Community Colleges and tertiary institutions can achieve positive outcomes for people who are at risk of social isolation and becoming disengaged.

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Appendix

Activity schedule

Breaking isolation cycles

The Learning Circles

Date:

Participant: E

Buddy: _____

Goal: **Develop gardening skills**

Activities for Buddy to consider

- Off TTW site of Caringa Enterprises
- Visit a hardware gardening store
(consider the language, the visual imagery, symbols)
- Examine the various tools, equipment
(reading labels, communicating about the tools,
equipment, developing a knowledge base)
- Examine various plants, flowers, vegetables
- Visit the local Council Parks and or gardens

Procedures:

What does E want to learn?

Gardening

What does E already know?

Planting out seeds

Different types of seeds

For Buddy to consider

How can I get E linked up with a group or organisation that can enable him to experience gardening skills/activities?

Who in the community would be positive to E spending at least an hour a week in their business/activity?

Is there a way for E to undertake tasks in a garden centre? Such tasks could be potting out plants, watering plants, using hand tools.

Reporting schedule: (filled in by Buddy)

What we attempted

Date	Activity	E's reaction	Outcome	
			Positive	Roadblock
8/10	<p>Big W. Visited the garden section</p> <p>Looked at gloves and selected orange gardening gloves.</p> <p>Looked at hand tools. Looked at spades. Selected the most useful spade to use.</p> <p>Looked at vegetable seeds</p>	<p>Found gardening section.</p> <p>Was able to locate seeds independently</p> <p>Selected seeds.</p> <p>Looked at gloves Selected a pair of gardening gloves</p>	<p>Selected the following seeds Rockmelon Watermelon Carrots Pumpkin Sweet corn</p> <p>Selected a suitable garden spade</p> <p>Selected gardening gloves.</p> <p>Went to the check-out</p> <p>E was given \$21</p>	<p>Difficulty in reading bill.</p> <p>Difficulty in being able to read the amount. Able to do so after being given a trial run.</p> <p>Unable to read bill for number of items. Was able to recall after counting items.</p> <p>Unable to read bill for change.</p> <p>Difficulty with money.</p> <p>Recognising coins and amount with a combination of coins.</p> <p>Recognising and decoding cashier bills.</p>

Sustainability of activities

How sustainable are the activities without a Buddy?

- **Limitations to activities**

Limitations may be due to E being able to effectively communicate to the people involved in gardening club activities.

What would be required to sustain activity?

Transport specifically the capacity of E to be able to attend the activities. It will require E to be dependent on others to transport him to and from the gardening activity.

Positive aspects of the activities

Gardening is an activity that E enjoys and has prior knowledge. He has been growing vegetables at his home for some time. It is an interest where he can undertake activities with adaptive equipment and be able to do so with a reasonable degree of independence.

Reporting schedule

Buddy name: _____

Participant name: _____

Activity _____ Location _____

Date	Language	Positive	Needs development	Not recognise

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Reporting schedule (Example)

Buddy name: E

Participant name: Stephen

Activity: Visit to Bunnings Location: Bunnings GardenCentre

Date	Language	Positive	Needs development	Not recognise
15/09	Potting mix	Easily able to read the label		
	Fertiliser		Could make out part of the label but had difficulty recognising the word. Knew the purpose of the product. Told E what the label meant and then said the word. Troy was able to repeat successfully on two occasions	
	Herbicide			Did not know what the product was. Went through the label with E and seemed to understand what it was used for