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ICGR: Work in Progress Paper: Gender and Education

Title: Evaluation of The Key: Lessons from a Gender Specific Educational Programme

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Abstract:

The Key Project receives Big Lottery funding to support disadvantaged girls and young women (aged between 13 and 25) deemed to be at high risk of abuse within the Leeds area, aiming to work with 324 individuals. The Key is hosted by a voluntary sector provider of gender-specific (women-only) health focused programmes. This paper presents the interim findings from an on-going longitudinal evaluation of The Key. The evaluation draws on data collection from creative focus group activities with young women, semi-structured interviews with project staff and referrers, as well as desk-based analysis of internal monitoring data.

The Key model of delivery provides young women with peer support (weekly group sessions) and additional one to one intensive support where required, to educate them and develop their knowledge and capabilities in being better able to identify and respond appropriately to abusive relationships. The Key aims to increase young women's skills to stay safe and to improve their mental wellbeing.

In the evaluation data so far, young women report a variety of positive outcomes as a result of their engagement with The Key, including being better able to recognise abuse, increase their safety and capacity to be in control. Many reported increased self-confidence.

Key words: educational intervention, young women, evaluation, peer support, abusive relationships

Context

The Key Project was established in 2013, funded by Big Lottery until 2015 receiving further Big Lottery funding to continue its work 2017-2020. The Key supports young women who have experienced or who are at risk of experiencing, domestic abuse or unhealthy relationships. Both group work and one to one support are available for service users. Group session topics include: healthy friendships, safety planning, consent, assertiveness, grooming, the impact of abuse on children and managing stress and low mood. The weekly group meetings are held in or close to the city centre in safe spaces, and attendees are provided with transport (taxis) and snacks. In summary the project delivery model encompasses:

- A weekly morning group for young women aged 16-25 (crèche facilities provided)
- A weekly evening group for girls and young women aged 13-18
- Group work programmes consisting of 6-8 sessions free to schools and other local youth settings

3 project workers take referrals, make assessments, provide support and links with other agencies for signposting and onwards referral, as well as delivering the group work and one to support.

Methodology

The evaluation is using a Theory of Change framework (Connell & Kubisch 1988) to provide an overall framework for data collection (Judge & Bauld, 2001). The Theory of Change is exploring the links between the programme's goals and the context in which it is being delivered. South et al (2012) argue that it is important to appreciating the context in which programmes operate in order to explore what makes them successful (or not).

The evaluation received ethical approval through Leeds Beckett University. The following practices were adhered to, to ensure ethical rigour: informed consent, risk management, guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity as well as secure information management.

5 service user focus groups were conducted between January 2018 and January 2019 with a total of 28 service users taking part. The focus groups used a range of creative methods as a mechanism to enable young women to explore and discuss their experiences (Warwick-Booth and Coan 2020 in press).

Semi-structured interviews with the project workers (n=2), and external referrers (family support workers, teachers, safeguarding workers) making referrals (n=4) were also carried out by the evaluation team in 2018. A further 6 interviews with external referrers were conducted in 2019 (family support workers, teachers and safeguarding workers).

For all qualitative methods, framework analysis was used. Framework Analysis develops a hierarchical thematic framework to classify and organise data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories. The framework is the analytic tool that identifies key themes as a matrix where patterns and connections emerge across the data (Ritchie et al., 2003). The matrix was constructed using the Theory of Change.

Findings

Increased ability to recognise unhealthy relationships

Young women reported learning about a range of different topics including domestic abuse and staying safe:

"I just know how to stay safe now." [October 2018, FGD 4, P1]

"I was just in denial for ages like I'm not a victim, don't call me that... I think it was just that word... You just tell yourself that you're not that. But in reality you are."
[January 2019 FGD 5, P5]

The group sessions helped young women to recognise abuse. This was particularly significant for women who had experienced abuse since an early age and considered it to be

the norm. For one participant, The Key supported her to stay away from an abusive ex-partner and to have her daughter returned to her care:

“It’s changed pretty much everything. My daughter’s coming home in six weeks and that’s due to obviously having support from this group.” [January 2018, FGD 2, P2]

Mechanisms of success

For many of the young women, being able to speak openly without being judged, in a safe supportive environment is one of the most important aspects of The Key:

“And they don’t judge you like if you say one thing and you feel like they’re going to judge they don’t, like they actually understand and actually say stuff to you to make you feel better.” [October 2018, FGD 4, P2]

Learning from peers’ stories and experiences also helped young women to gain different perspectives on their own situation and reduced the feelings of isolation stemming from the belief that no one else understands what they are going through:

“No one understands and here you feel like everyone understands because you’ve all been through it and it’s like a close little family.” [January 2019, FGD 5, P2]

The peer support was most appreciated when the young women were dealing with current challenges that would permanently change their lives, such as the removal of a child.

Young women reported trusting the workers and their peers, enabling them to discuss their circumstances:

“I didn’t open up about anything, like there was stuff I didn’t tell anyone about and then I came here and I’ve told pretty much everything that I went through since I was about thirteen.” [January 2018, FGD 2, P1]

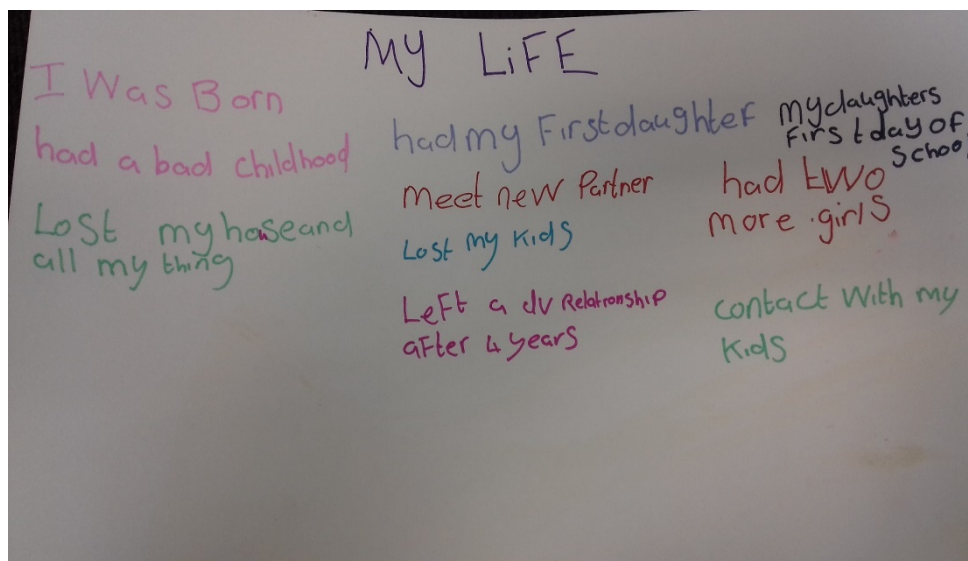
There is a strong rapport with the project workers, with young women listening to their advice. The group members also spoke about the value of the professional expertise of the workers as many had been given specialist support on matters such as health, housing and court appearances.

Journeys through The Key

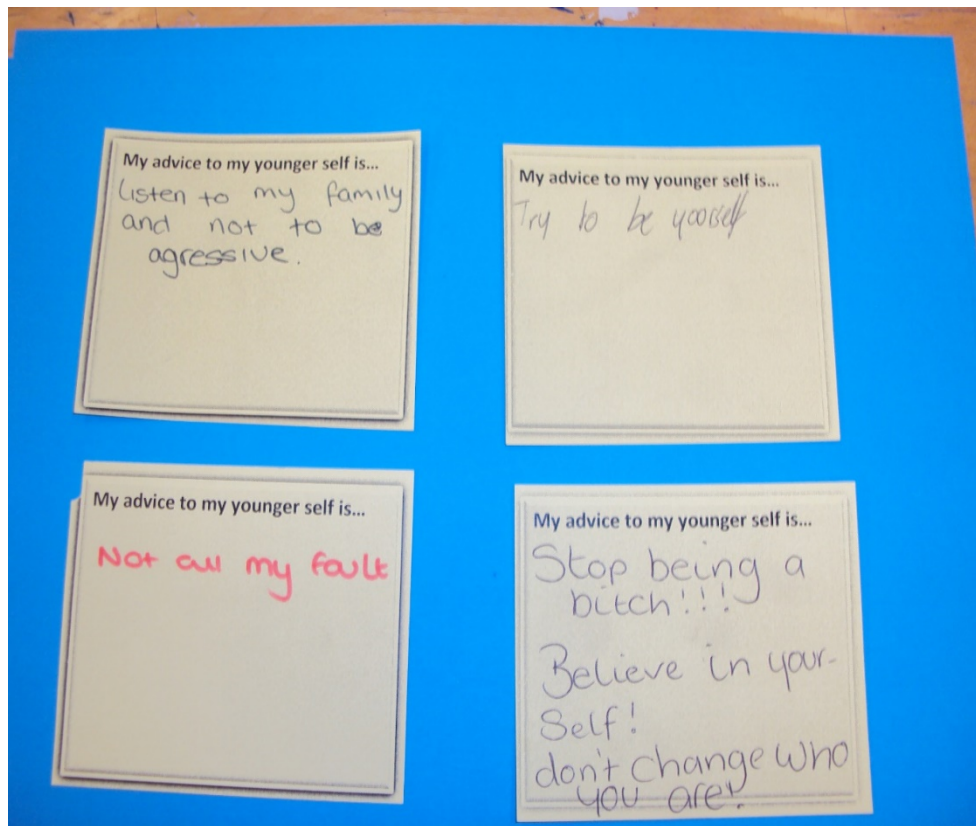
Photo 1 shows the complexity of a young woman’s life in terms of experiences of living in different home environments during her childhood, and domestic violence over a 7-year period but notes that, *“my life in 2019, I’m in a good place now”*.



Photo 2 similarly illustrates the complexities of a young woman’s life detailing her experiences of childhood (not positive), domestic violence and children being removed. She then notes that she was able to leave the relationship and has some positive progress to report, such as being able to have contact with her children.



Some of the younger women (participants in January 2018 FGDs) wrote messages to themselves, as well as to other young women who may find themselves in similar situations. Their messages reflected learning about disclosure and unhealthy relationships. Increased self-confidence was illustrated via self-expression, not blaming themselves for their experiences and taking responsibility for their own negative behaviour: “stop being a bitch” (see photo 3).



Stakeholder views

External referrers reported similar outcomes to those outlined by the young women. The project was also described as filling a much needed gap:

"I don't know of many other projects who would have taken the girls that I've referred either, because...they don't fit into a specific category..." [Referrer 2 2018]

"I think The Key gives them those messages about 'it's not their fault' and you know self-worth, value, all those things that they need and we don't have time to do that sort of work." [Referrer 4 2018]

Stakeholders also observed that the approach in The Key is notably different from the interaction that young women have with teachers and other professionals, with the youth work approach being described as an important mechanism for the success of the project:

"It has a 'youth club' feel approach within a service based within that. Young people don't define their needs by the services on offer." [Referrer 8 2019]

Discussion

The academic literature suggests that organisations offering women-centred approaches to service provision, can be a viable and effective setting for providing interventions to meet client needs. Women's community services can support clients in making positive changes

to their lives and in reducing demands on other services whilst improving outcomes for their children (Warwick-Booth & Cross, 2019 in press). Outcomes from The Key further support this evidence. Other evaluation evidence shows that what matters to young women is being listened to and being able to talk to and trust someone (Warwick-Booth & Cross 2018), all of which is included in the relational approach offered via The Key. Voluntary sector support, flexible service delivery and support to those excluded from other services are also mechanisms of successful gender-specific interventions (Warwick-Booth & Cross 2017) and are evident in The Key.

Conclusion

Our evaluation evidence thus far shows that The Key is improving outcomes for vulnerable women in a range of ways. For example, self-reported changes in young women's lives include increased knowledge about staying safe and being happy with their lives. Some young women had been able to either gain or retain custody of their children, and others had exited harmful relationships.

Young women identified a range of mechanisms of success underpinning the delivery of The Key including a non-judgemental approach from workers, peer support and a trusted space in which to meet and learn. However, our evaluation data does not report the views of young women who chose not to engage, or who left the groups, therefore negative experiences remain undocumented. Quantifiable changes are also missing from our data set.

Stakeholders' views echoed those of the young women, highlighting the need for The Key and its successful educational youth work approach.

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