Institute of Child Protection Studies

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Research to Practice Series

Identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

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The role of identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people

Issue 2 of this series discusses the role and potency of identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people, and the implications of this for support services. It is based upon the findings of a qualitative research project implemented by the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) in 2012, which interviewed 24 vulnerable young people about identity and meaning in their lives.

The content of this issue is from the project report published in 2013: Me, Myself and I: Identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.

Concepts of identity and meaning are central in the lives of vulnerable young people. Relationships and experiences that occur during their lives have a strong influence on how they construct their identity and meaning.

'My experiences with my family and what happened to me as a child… that has helped me to shape me as to who I am, whether it be negative or positive.'
(24 year old female)

The young people's experiences and how they made sense of these impacted on how they were able to cope with challenges and difficulties in their lives, how they lived out their day-to-day lives, and how they thought about their future.
The common themes that appeared to dominate the lives of the young people and influence their identity and meaning constructions included trauma and loss, instability, and a lack of caring connections. Underpinning these was the overall absence of any solid foundation to young people throughout their lives.

Section 1

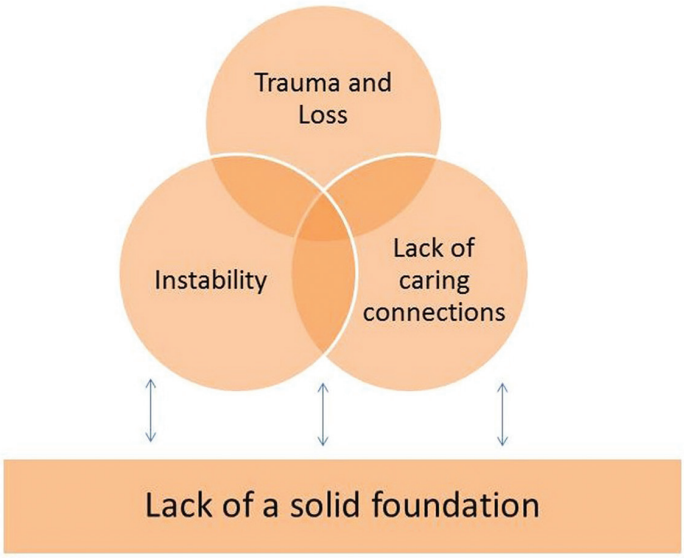
The role of identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people

- **Trauma and Loss**

  Loss appeared to be especially potent in the young people's identity and meaning-making. For some, losing someone shook their whole world view and any notions of security and stability they may have had. For others, feelings of loss and grief were compounded by experiences of emotional, physical or sexual abuse, which had most often occurred within their families. For many these personal experiences of loss and trauma caused them to retreat within, hiding away from what they perceived to be a cruel and unpredictable world.

'It made me feel alone. To this day if something happens…I feel like everything has deserted me.' *(18 year old female)*

A search for meaning was explicit in many young people's responses to trauma, grief and loss, though few were able to find a meaning that gave them any comfort or hope for their future. Importantly, young people were left not only grieving for the trauma and loss that they had experienced, but also grieving for the 'normal' or 'ideal' family life that they had missed out on.



- **Instability**

  Instability also had negative ramifications on how young people felt about themselves and the world around them. Instability was often apparent throughout their lives, such as through conflict and abuse in their families, and often leading to precarious out-of-home care experiences, early school leaving, homelessness and high levels of mobility.

  'I just want a home, I don't care about personal belongings or cares or anything like that, I just want to be stable.' *(23 year old male*

- **Lack of Caring Connections**

  Given the backdrop of their experiences, including the high level of disconnection from their families, the clear picture which emerged from the young people's accounts of their lives was one of isolation.

  Forming caring connections within their communities was difficult for young people, who perceived that they were 'different' to others around them. This caused the young people to either retreat into isolation, or seek attachment and connection to others - most often seeking a place for themselves with other young people who were experiencing similar circumstances to their own.

'I kept on trying to be someone I wasn't… I grew up without a Mum. I needed someone to attach to. I was like a little leech following everyone around so I never really learnt to be that independent confident person.' *(18 year old female)*

Constructing an identity and meaning based around 'difference' and traumatic experiences sometimes meant that young people placed themselves in peer groups that were entrenched with problematic or risk-taking behaviours. They often realised that some of these relationships could be harmful to them, but many perceived it was not possible to

reduce or cease their own risk-taking or harmful behaviours without disconnecting form the group; which would leave them completely alone.

Similarly, young people often found themselves in very intense, sometimes 'unhealthy' intimate relationships. These relationships were often the first real loving and caring attachment they felt they had formed with another person, and when these relationships ended, they were often left feeling devastated.

'… I was pretty down after my breakup, I felt really low and I just felt like I couldn't bear being in my house alone all the time and it was just really wearing on me. I stopped taking care of myself, I stopped eating really, and I forgot how to look after everything.' *(17 year old female)*

- **Lack of Solid Foundation**

  Family, school, youth support services or the church were the social institutions that young people relied on to provide a form of solid foundation in their lives, although many talked about having no, or only a very fragile, foundation or base to trust in, or fall back on, for support and guidance. The lack of, and longing for, a solid foundation was so potent in young people's identity and meaning constructions that it was explicitly named and discussed by more than half of the young people.

'In all honesty I feel like I have nobody.' (22 year old female)

Section 2

Identity formation and meaning construction

The young people felt their identity and meaning could and should be all up to them. When asked what it was that defined who they are, young people selected the factors they felt they had some control over, such as values, morals, ideas and personality; rather than the things they could not change (like culture, age or gender).

Young people felt they were the author of their own identity and they should do this alone, without seeking or accepting help from anyone. This determination not to rely on anyone around them often led to negative consequences as they tried to manage serious issues, such as alcohol and other drug and mental health issues, without the support of others. Most of the young people had come to realise this was unworkable.

'There's no one that's going to end up supporting you more than yourself.' *(25 year old male)*

'I'm trying to do it on my own, but it is so fucking hard, you can't. So you do need people.'(17 year old female)

The characteristics that young people felt defined them were often the ones that were missing from their own life experiences. They seemed to be deliberately building their own identity and meaning around the things they had longed for in their own lives. This often proved difficult to attain, as these morals, values and ideas existed as an ideal, and they were trying to be something they had not actually seen or experienced in their own lives.

'I didn't want to be nothing like my mum and dad and stuff like that, I actually wanted to be a better person than them.' *(23 year old female)*

The result of not always being able to live up to these high expectations of themselves meant the young people were often left feeling conflicted between who they thought they were or wanted to be, and the actual life they were living; which perpetuated their underlying feelings of shame and, again, caused them to remove themselves from the world around them. However, forming an 'ideal self' did not always have negative consequences for the young people, sometimes serving as a motivating force to make positive change in their lives and feel better about themselves and their place in the world.

Section 3

Factors contributing to positive identity and meaning

The detrimental effects that trauma and loss, instability and lack of caring connections had on young people's identity and meaning constructions could be mitigated by the presence of a number of internal and external factors. These factors had the ability to make a powerful and positive difference to how they felt about themselves, the world, and their place in it

- **Caring Connections:**
  The ability to develop genuine caring connections with others was especially potent. Through care for others and/or through others caring for them, young people began to care about themselves.

  '50 billion people can't do the job of one person you love.'
  (18 year old female)

- **Contributing or participating in meaningful activities:**
  Work, study, sport, volunteering, church group activities, youth group activities or music. These activities increased connections, enabled feelings of pride and worthiness and provided a sense of purpose and meaning in young people's lives.

  '…I find it really good [being a church youth leader] because… I get to be the person that there wasn't for me.' *(17 year old female)*

- **Feeling a sense of belonging:**
  Family, church, culture, services, or in some cases, the military. Some young people were searching for a deeper connection with other people that would provide them with a community in which they were fully accepted, that they could trust in and have reciprocal care and support relationships – they were looking for the 'solid foundation'.

  'I think sometimes I believe, sometimes I don't. Sometimes I just like the values. But I find that what keeps me going back is the people because I've got people that look out for me.' *(17 year old female)*

- **Being good at something and having this recognised by others:**
  Achievement provided young people with a purpose or direction in their lives, and allowed them to feel some pride in themselves, which could start to replace the sense of shame that many of them felt and experienced. They spoke of their desire to be recognised or affirmed as having done something valuable or having done a task well.

  'I never got praised for the things I was doing well. I just got punished for the things I was doing wrong.' *(23 year old male)*

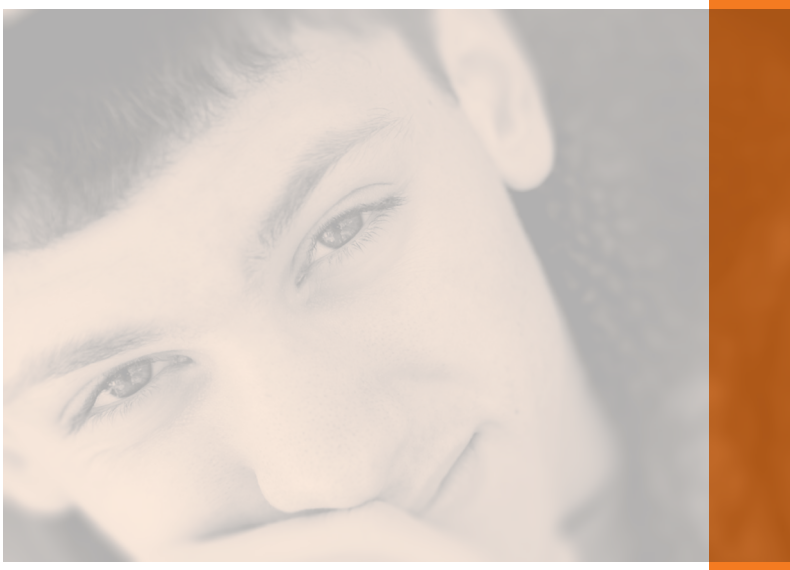
- **Hope for the future:**
  Having some hope or belief that things might improve in the future gave those young people who were still struggling to cope with past trauma the impetus to keep going.

  'What keeps me going now is the thought of the future.'
  (19 year old male)

Section 4

How young people want to be supported

The above factors that were identified as contributing to positive identity and meaning in young people's lives provide important insights into how they could and should be supported. Above all else, young people said they wanted to be engaged in genuine caring relationships based around notions of respect. They needed and wanted others to care for and about them. They sought these relationships within their natural environments and in their interactions with the service system.



'[We need] people that care more about the connection they have with young people than they do about the outcome of their work. Yes, do get that good outcome from your work…but please care about us more.'

(19 year old male)

The young people said they wanted workers to listen carefully and be able to hear what they wanted and needed. Young people stated that once a caring connection was made, the provision of practical support was a vital component of support, such as linking with options and pathways to participate in the world around them by locating stable housing, study or work.

'I think that knowing me as a person means they know the practicalities I wish for… what I hope to get by being here… Having that knowledge about me on a personal level will help them help me.'
(22 year old female)

Section 5

Implications for Support Services

Some of the young people talked about how their interactions with support services had enhanced how they felt about themselves, the world and their place in it. Others said that the support they received, or lack thereof, actively contributed to them feeling worse about themselves and resulted in them becoming more disconnected from the world around them.

It emerged that services need to consider how they build and provide connections with and for young people, and ensure that the support provided meets young people's needs. Some of the more urgent and important considerations needed to achieve this include:

1 **Providing timely and effective support for trauma and loss**:

The constant availability of someone or something to support young people through the process of coping with and making sense of their painful experiences is critical.

2 **Recognising the important role of 'family' in young people's lives:**

Family was selected by young people as having the most influence on their sense of self, the world and their place in it. Traditional frameworks of working with young people which view adolescence as a period for familial separation and autonomy should be challenged, so that service systems can recognise and address the role that family, or lack thereof, plays in the lives of young people. Where strong family ties and relationships remain elusive for young people, services need to work together to provide a secure base for young people.

3 **Building and maintaining caring connections:**

Encouraging and supporting young people to forge and maintain informal and formal support relationships is a critical component of youth work.

4 **Facilitating opportunities for participation in and contribution to community:**

Young people indicated that these activities have to be meaningful to them, and will look different for every individual. This may require workers to think beyond usual frameworks (of study and work) and extend their common work practices or program 'outcomes' to invest in more creative and flexible linkages and solutions.

5 **Providing holistic support:**

Services need to provide consistent and persistent support to young people and be curious and hopeful about their lives, so that avenues for growth, change and connection can be made with each unique individual.

6 **Promoting and facilitating hope for the future:**

Young people emphasised the role of formulating goals, or having something in their future to look forward to, to maintain a future focus and instill hope.

About the Identity and Meaning for Vulnerable Young People Project

This project was funded in 2012 by the Institute for Catholic Identity and Mission, Australian Catholic University. It explored the role and potency of identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people, and the implications for this in the way that vulnerable young people are supported. 24 vulnerable young people in Canberra participated in in-depth interviews about their lives.

More information and the full report is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps.

References

Noble-Carr, D., Barker, J., & McArthur, M. (2013). *Me, Myself and I: Identity and meaning in the lives of vulnerable young people*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU.

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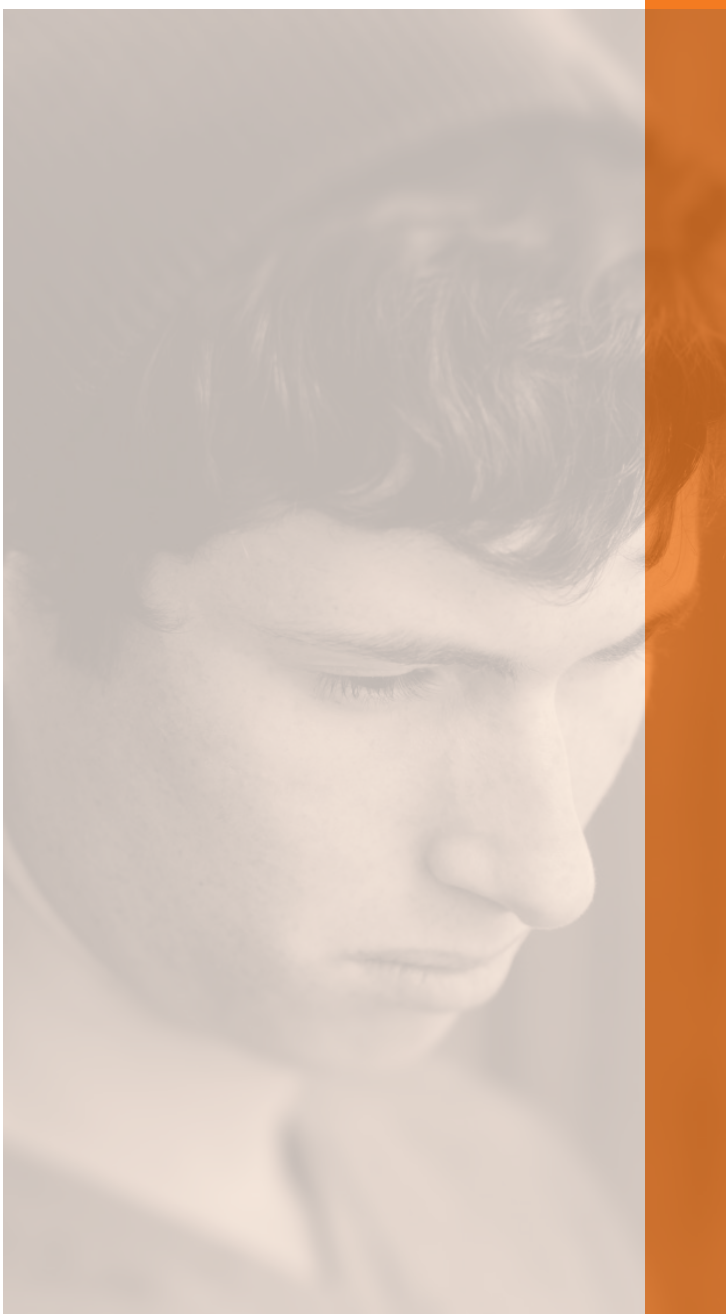

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