

Community Connections – A Case Study

Nira was a youth worker in the disability sector in New Zealand. She had a disability herself and enjoyed her role as caregiver to support other young disabled people to live a full life. This case study outlines the beginning of a concept and planning of a project in general terms. This case study highlights one challenging yet outstanding session within that project.

Nira approached a work colleague whose expertise was in developing training and delivering and talked about doing a series of workshops where young disabled people could come together and learn how to 'live' in their local community. So much of their lives were spent having to rely on special centers that took them out of their local communities, and a lot of their appointments were made by other people. The young people with disabilities wanted choice and the ability to live a life they wanted; not just what others offered them. Nira wanted the focus to be on supports that occur naturally in a community as a primary source of services for all disabled people. After some discussion and collaboration, brainstorming and planning the Community Connections project was developed, put to management and funding sought.

The six-week program would comprise 9 sessions to be held in different locations around a large city, each location chosen would be close to the actual areas the participants lived in. This would allow those local participants to take a leadership role in the planning of the related workshop and activities in their own area and be the one to showcase their community to the other participants. Success for each participant would mean that they would know how to, and feel safe to, move around their own community unaided where and when possible. They would be given tasks to complete in between each workshop that would take them out of their normal routines for a required outcome. These included applying for a transport card, making a weekly menu with their family or flatmates, or booking and attending social events as a group of friends, having planned ahead, and knowing their specific needs would be met. This meant getting people within their communities and other disability services and social service agencies involved. The funding application was successful, so they proceeded with the program.

The program had 12 participants who lived with disabilities. Each individual was interviewed so that information about their location and their wants and needs while living in their community was established. Information was also shared about what their life looked like at the present time.

The first session outlined the project and the outcomes for the participants. The discussion was opened for input from the participants, who added what they wanted to get out of the experience and the places they wanted to go to as independent adults. These were grouped into the following categories: necessary (food, clothing, housing, transport), safety, social, health and wellness, and 'nice to haves'. The places identified included:

- Real estate agencies – how to find a flat without discrimination.
- Hairdresser – yes people with disabilities wanted modern haircuts too.

- Transport – local taxi drivers/bus drivers, pedestrian crossings (wheelchairs not seen, slow crossing, impatient drivers), how to get a driver's license.
- Restaurants – to be able to go as a group of friends without feeling different and that had suitable facilities for people with all disabilities.
- Police – invisible disabilities can be misinterpreted as misbehaviour or non-compliance and they wanted to introduce themselves and talk about safe places and keeping themselves safe.
- Supermarkets – lists, menus, specials and discounted items, dealing with any discrimination from staff/public.

The 12 participants had various disabilities that meant they were not always accepted or treated the same as 'normal' people. Some already had part time jobs while others were in training or unemployed. They wanted the program to focus on their abilities, and to focus on increasing their potential, not on their disabilities.

Contacts were established with various agencies that had a presence (or a branch) in each suburb of the city. Nira and the trainer held a meeting with their leadership teams to outline the program and what the business' role might be to support the youth, and to connect, communicate with and assist them. They were then responsible for telling their own teams what we were doing and that we would be visiting them, and that the youth would have something they wanted from the business or organization. The hope and expectation was that not only would the youth learn more about how to advocate for what they wanted, but that the employees and businesses would also learn more about working alongside people who have disabilities. All the businesses and organizations that agreed to participate were contacted and given specific dates when we would be visiting and the aim of the visit. The aim of the project was to allow the youth to approach their local businesses and be treated with respect and as a normal customer/client but also to feel a connection with the people in their communities. General life skills and soft skills were covered in a workshop prior to an afternoon wander through the chosen community.

The Extraordinary Event

On this day, a workshop was held first, with visitors from the local bank helping the participants with their bank accounts, account fees and how to manage their money, as some of the participants wanted to be able to rent a house themselves and be responsible tenants. The youth wanted to understand how their bills could be paid without them spending the money first and they wanted to be prepared with questions to ask the real estate agency when they visited to look at suitable houses in the area. The workshop also covered terminology like utilities, rates, rent, lease, interest, penalties, and online banking apps.

Once this finished, the group walked down the street. The first visit was to the hairdresser so participants could make appointments for the following week and explain what sort of hair cut they wanted. It was the participants' responsibility to ensure the hairdresser knew of any special needs they had such as sensitivity to bright lights, loud noises, or unexpected needs such as special seating (wheelchairs). The next was the local dairy where formal

introductions were made with the local participants. The participants wanted to be on a first name basis with the owners/employees, but also wanted to ask the people in the dairy if they would become a point of safety if the young people ever felt unsafe or were being hassled. For the youth to be able to just walk in and know that the person behind the counter was friendly and would help them until support arrived would help them to remain as an active part of their community.

The third stop was the real estate agent. The participants all entered the premises which they found only had a very small reception area. A man came rushing out from the office behind the reception area wildly waving his arms and telling everyone they had to leave because they were blocking the entrance for some customers he was waiting for. He told them they had no right to be there. He asked what they were doing but didn't take the time to listen to the reply. A second (nicer) person came out from the office and explained to him that these were in fact the people who were here to see him – these were his customers. The first man left and reappeared out on the footpath opening the door to the shop and asked everyone to come outside. The group filed out including Nira who used a wheelchair.

Some of the youth started to move off, away from the real estate office, mumbling about how unfair it was and that they wanted somewhere to live too, but Nira called them back as she spoke to the person concerned and explained that they had an appointment. Looking at his name badge, she pointed out very nicely that they were all actually there to see him. He got the group to follow him around the back of the premises and showed them into a lunchroom. As the group waited, they could hear him telling the second (nice) person that he was going out!

Finally, the nice person came out, introduced himself as John, asked them all to sit down at the large table, and started asking for each person's name.

He directed all questions and answers to the youth, and he organized cups of tea, hot chocolate, and plain biscuits. While handing out brochures, he talked about how location affected the price, and told them they should consider how much it would cost them to travel into town from where they rented, so cheaper rent was not always a money saving option. He pointed out that they would also need bus stops close by. He spoke about house inspections and what their responsibilities would be as a renter. He asked if they knew how to use a vacuum cleaner and do dishes. John spent an hour of his time to ensure the youth had the information they wanted. He joked with them and asked questions about them and what they liked to do. He openly addressed the fact that there were not a lot of houses that catered for people who lived with disabilities, with larger bathroom areas, differently designed kitchen and dining areas, and wider doorways and ramps on entrances and exits.

He handed his card to the people who lived locally and told them to contact him when they were ready, that he would help them personally. He showed everyone out the front of the office and introduced them all to the receptionist on the way out.

As the group later evaluated their day and shared their individual experiences, the key learnings everyone agreed on were:

- Not everyone is going to like them or respond in a positive way.
- They have the right to visit businesses in their local areas and be treated with respect. They may have to walk away at times, but they can ring, send emails, and contact managers or head office staff to discuss or complain about their treatment after a bad experience. Don't be afraid to stand up for your rights.
- Always ask to speak to someone else if the first person doesn't understand or won't listen but be willing to walk away from confrontation.
- When feeling unsafe go into a shop or business where someone knows you and will support you until help arrives.
- Sometimes they will have to teach other people how to treat them if they have special needs. This can be done on the phone prior to an appointment, or once they arrive for an appointment. Not everyone knows about disabilities.
- The local housing availability for people with disabilities was very limited. They could help raise awareness and encourage new social housing to include facilities for disabled clients.

The group acknowledged that once they realised the reception area in the real estate office was small, some of them could have left and waited outside so it wasn't so crowded (but they were excited at the time and didn't take the time to consider their actions). They thought the first man might not have seen so many people with disabilities together at once and it may have scared him. They identified that when they felt scared, they acted differently too.

At the end of the 9-week period, the project had successfully met all its required outcomes. But it was during the final evaluation with their families, that Nira was especially pleased to find that solid relationships had been established between the youth involved and these had been extended to include each other's families. They had built friendships and were already socializing as a group when they could. Some went to the movies together, catching buses at nighttime. One parent was teaching some of the young people to learn how to drive and was supporting them through their tests, and to have vehicles modified for special requirements. They were sharing meals and being invited to each other's birthdays and special events if they had no family to go to. The participants felt safer in their own communities and were using public transport to travel between communities and to share new experiences and spaces with their friends. Participants visited new places, the zoo, the museum, bars, and restaurants with more confidence and with an increased safety awareness of the areas they went to. Real friendships were established and being nurtured, and self determination skills were being utilized every day.

Parents expressed raw emotion as they shared how the program had changed their child. Friends would visit the house, other parents would invite whole families over for a barbecue, and so many more people knew their child's name and would call out a greeting to them. Because of the program, there had been a lot more going on than even Nira had realised or planned for.