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SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTION

Drop In and Be Uplifted: Creating a Safe Place for Young People in a Regional City

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a community-led, place-based initiative in Rockhampton, Queensland, to create a youth drop in centre: a safe, welcoming space for young people who are homeless, unsafe at home or in their community, or disengaged from schooling. The centre does not yet exist; the article distinguishes work completed to date, including a community needs assessment and the formation of a working group, from planned next steps. It outlines the origin of the concept within a local community development committee, the vision for a 24-hour space co-designed with young people, and its intended role as a 'circuit breaker' that supports young people to reflect on their educational experiences and re-engage with school or alternative pathways. The article positions educational justice as involving access and readiness to participate and learn, supported by safe third spaces and by young people and adults working together in advocacy and service development.

KEYWORDS: educational justice; youth drop in centre; community development; school re-engagement; safe spaces; regional communities

Acknowledgements

The work described in this paper takes place on the Traditional Lands of the Darumbal People. Their Elders have been and continue to be custodians of these lands, and have sustained community for millennia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a significant role in education justice in this place. Too many people are involved in this project to acknowledge them all. It would be remiss to leave out the Drop In Centre working group—Fabian Webber, Jessie Conway, Dan Smith, Ann Davie, Friederike McCartney, Danielle Gillespie and Tanya Shield. The author would also like to acknowledge PhD supervisors: Professor Olav Muurlink PhD, Doctor Melinda Mann PhD and Doctor Lisa Caffery PhD.

Introduction

Picture a building for young people at the fringe of a city centre, well-lit, colourful, including both boisterous spaces and quiet spaces; a kitchen where you can smell a hot meal being prepared; access to first aid, sanitary items and free clothes if needed; a laundry; and a hot shower. There are also welcoming staff willing to listen and to talk about home, school or friends; finding a place to sleep and services; and providing advocacy as needed. This is a place for young people who are homeless or not safe at home, don't feel safe in their community, are unable to participate in schooling for whatever reason, just need to get their head together, have a friend they are concerned for, or are just 'part of a group' wandering in the daytime or at night.

This place does not yet exist, but people in Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia are planning and seeking funding to create the space you pictured.

Geoff Higgins

Geoff Higgins spoke about this project at the 2026 Educational Justice Symposium, as he is deeply mired in the work. He was involved in discussions which led to this initiative, conducted a needs assessment on behalf of the community, and leads the working group for the initiative. This paper is about a community-led, place-based solution in Rockhampton.

The Origin Story

The place, Rockhampton, is a regional city of about 80,000 people a day's drive from the state capital of Brisbane. It is a lot like a large rural town. People are living their lives together in this place. They have struggles and confrontations; and they have prejudices and assumptions, especially about young people and the education system.

Educational justice must involve access and readiness to participate and learn; and in the background, young people and adults working together in advocacy, service development, and the creation of safe third spaces. This concept originated with a passionate group of people (mainly providing social services through the third sector and government) on a committee with a focus on community development, called the Community Based Crime Action Committee. Many of these

people work in education, housing, child protection, domestic and family violence, youth justice, police, health, and social services.

At the time of the initial discussions, there was already a youth drop in centre called OurSpace operating out of a shopfront at the local shopping centre. This initiative had a good relationship with centre management, security and police. However, they were constrained by their location and opening hours; and success led to noise complaints from neighbouring businesses. Due to funding limitations, this initiative is not operating as a youth drop in centre at the time of publication.

The Concept

The Community Based Crime Action Committee had been talking about early intervention, where young people congregate, young people wandering at night, vandalism and youth crime, safe spaces for young people, and adult's fraternising with young people and fencing stolen goods. And the discussion moved to potential solutions, one of them being a new hangout space outside the shopping precinct. As the concept grew, it was agreed it should operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and have a kitchen for hot meals, hot showers and laundry facilities, and no direct police involvement. A working group formed to progress the vision of a community run drop in centre, co-designed with young people, and perhaps managed by young people.

Ongoing discussions about the Drop In Centre continue to stress its future role in relation to the wider educational ecosystem, and in particular the role of 'circuit breaker' for young people disengaged or disengaging from school. Teachers and school administrators have described the Drop In Centre as a place where young people will be supported to reflect on their educational experiences, consider their options, and seek to re-engage with targeted in-school or external supports. In some cases they will return to their school of origin, and in others a different school, which may be in the alternative schooling system.

The Youth Drop In Centre Needs Assessment was completed in 2024 and found strong support for a youth drop in centre in surveys of 25 young people and 50 not so young people in the community. It involved interviews with nine people running similar initiatives who encouraged moving forward, but with caution. Crime statistics were scrutinised, as was media handling of youth crime stories. The working group mapped out a Program Logic, designed a service model and business model with target ages, locations and personnel, and created a risk matrix.

In Glasgow, Scotland the author observed similar spaces in action. They are mostly run by enthusiastic, committed adults, doing valued work in their communities; and they are vulnerable to funding fads of local government and philanthropic organisations. These examples demonstrated that the Rockhampton community has a long way to go; and that bureaucratism and apathy are significant risks to the work.

The next steps for the working group and the community are to gather a group of young people to be co-designers and advocates; develop a detailed budget; identify potential sites; and create a glossy prospectus for potential funders.

The Timeline

The events and anticipated events are depicted in Figure 1.

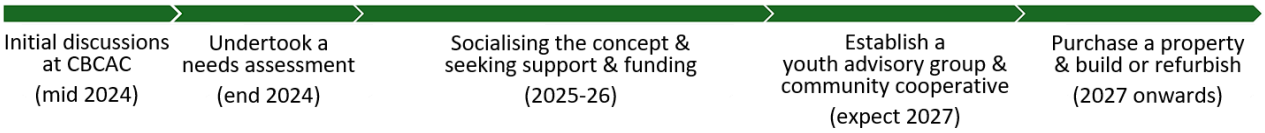


Figure 1. The Youth Drop In Centre Timeline

Conclusion

The Drop In Centre working group and the wider supportive community look forward to seeing the fruits of creativity, collaboration, sustained connection, determination and striving in bringing this important project to fruition in the near future.

Author

Geoff Higgins (he/him) is a PhD candidate researching community development at CQUniversity—examining why people continue to show up to participate in social change in the face of continuing disappointment. Geoff lives on Darumbal Country in Rockhampton Queensland. He is a volunteer and practitioner involved in community development in his community, and at times supporting other communities. Professionally, Geoff has a boutique business consultancy in a regional city mainly assisting the third sector and government with leadership, governance and organisation. He takes great joy in facilitating progress towards a group's imagined, desired future.

Reflection

The Educational Justice Symposium was a wonderful gathering of people from various parts of the world who are not just experiencing the challenges that late stage capitalism put in our path, but are actively working and researching to find answers for our and other communities now and in the future. It was also reassuring to see the delight with which colleagues from afar greet and encourage and support each other, with genuine commitment to each other's diverse endeavours. For me, working in and researching my community, this was reassuring, as I am looking for a safe harbour to support and nurture my work, and to feel that I am part of a community of practice that is enlightened, progressive and humanistic. Thank-you. ...Geoff Higgins