



YouthAction
NORTHERN IRELAND

An Occasional Youth Work Practice Paper 5
Principles of working with young women
who identify as other than heterosexual

Lessons from YouthAction Northern Ireland
Out & About Group

"It's good to know that you're not alone."

"Before coming to the group I felt unsure about myself. I felt like I didn't know my true identity."



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

60
The Development Agency for
Young People in Community
YEARS



Northern Ireland
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2005

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Section One – Introduction, context and background

YouthAction Northern Ireland and the Gender Equality Unit

YouthAction Northern Ireland has sixty years of experience in working with children and young people throughout Northern Ireland. Our aim is to support them as active and equal citizens whose voices are heard, respected and valued.

YouthAction Northern Ireland values equality, diversity and inclusion. In everything we do we seek to respect the rights and responsibilities of each individual, to value young people and to include them in the social and economic life of communities. We strive to proactively challenge and address inequalities that exist within society. This is made possible by six different priority areas of work within the agency. Namely, Work with Young Men, Rural Development, Training and Accreditation, Area-based Strategies, Youth Arts and the Gender Equality Unit.

The Gender Equality Unit within YouthAction N.I. continues to tackle contentious issues regarding the place of young women in Northern Ireland. We pilot programmes to meet the needs of young women and work with those who are most excluded from resources and society such as young mothers, rural young women, young women with disabilities, young women from ethnic minority backgrounds and young women who identify as other than heterosexual. We also develop and deliver innovative training for Community Youth Practitioners and emerging community leaders.

1.2 Context and background

It has been evident through our on-going work within the Gender Equality Unit that when developing programmes for young women and training for other workers, young women who identify as other than heterosexual face particular difficulties engaging in programmes. This lack of engagement can be as a result of the attitudes, values and beliefs of the worker, inappropriate methods and materials, unacceptable language, behaviour of their peers or from the difficulties emerging internally from the young women in the acknowledgment, acceptance or understanding of sexual orientation (YouthNet, 2003:11). Over the past few years YouthAction has acknowledged this gap in youth provision and has responded by piloting and running developmental programmes with these

young women. The initial pilot programmes allowed staff to assess the real needs of this group of young women by mapping the specific issues, difficulties and/or areas that these young women wanted to address.

The group developed from this pilot programme into a group that has met consistently on a weekly basis throughout 2005/2006. During this time the young women involved have been instrumental in the creation of many creative and innovative pieces of work and resource packs which not only allowed them a means of talking about and highlighting personal issues but also raising these issues in a larger public arena. These materials are used to raise equality issues and place them on the agenda for young people, other young people who identify as other than heterosexual, youth work practitioners, teachers and policy makers.

The group developed what was initially planned as a 12 week programme, into a year-long endeavour which, thanks to further funding secured, will take the efforts,



learning and experiences of this group of very committed young women and offer it to other young women throughout Northern Ireland. Not only will this model benefit prospective participants but will build upon the skills already developed by current participants as they have the opportunity to pass on their learning by co-working future programmes.

What we intend to present here is both the underpinning principles of working with this group but also the stages of the group process and intended outcomes at each of these stages. It is hoped that this paper will offer information, guidance and ideas for those who work with young women regardless of their sexual orientation.

Section 2 – Underpinning principles of the Out & About group

2.1 Inclusion

This group was initially advertised as being for young lesbian women. Over time, however, we felt that this specific and tailored title was restrictive and failed to take into consideration the different stages that young people experience in relation to an understanding of their sexual self. It also failed to acknowledge bi-sexual young women. The title 'Young women who identify as other than heterosexual' has emerged over the life of the group and has become central to the ethos of the group. The non-specific nature of the title allows space to discover, grow, develop and removes the immediate need to define oneself.

The title of the group sends clear messages to participants about the value of not labelling, forcing or expecting people to fit into definitive boxes – it encourages them to not only see themselves in a broader light but also to see others in that light also. The programme title allows participants to "Self-Define", thus promoting an empowering process from the very beginning. This is quite progressive in terms of encouraging people to think through their identity in more than an "Either-Or" approach – perhaps acknowledging that sexual orientation can be fluid, changing or exists on a continuum depending on different levels of self-awareness (Lindsay et al, 1997). There is an acknowledgement in the title and an underlying ethos within the group that individuals are sexual beings rather than being narrowly defined by a prefix – hetero, homo, bi - and this allows growth and change based upon individual need. This further encourages participants to grasp or further form their identity and develop deeper self-regard.

This journey of sexuality, identity and self-esteem is skillfully negotiated within the group. When asked, one young woman stated that she had developed in the following way as a result of being part of the group:

"I'm more comfortable with my sexuality now, I have learned to listen more to other people and I like myself more"

The confusion that many young women experience surrounding their sexual identity was highlighted by another young woman who states:

"Before coming to the group I felt unsure about myself. I felt like I didn't know my true identity."

2.2 More than a LGB Programme

As a Gender Equality Unit our primary focus in working with marginalised groups of young women has always been to address the inequality and discrimination faced by young women on the basis of gender. Our starting point with this group was no different; gender first. The programme does not ignore sexual orientation, but it is not consumed by this. The programme is built upon the most common denominator – the fact that we are a group of young women, first and foremost. This benefits the group in two ways: –

It allowed the young women exposure to other issues and groups. This dispels the myth of 'Out and About' as a secret group and allowed the young women to celebrate the activities that they had been involved in openly such as an art project, computer programme or photography exhibition. So rather than being embarrassed or secretive about what they were doing or involved in, which reinforces the societal messages of this being something out of public view, young women participants had the confidence to openly present their achievements and themselves.

It illuminated the thinking that as individuals we are more than our sexual orientation – this group acknowledged the value and importance of recognising and celebrating sexual orientation, but not at the expense of other aspects of self (emotional, physical, social). This holistic approach to the work is what makes this model unique, encouraging the development and nurturing of all aspects of young women's lives. A focus on sexual orientation alone can be limiting for individuals as it can restrict the limits of your programme and potentially fails to address other important factors. This can be negative and focus on introversion rather than expression, opportunities and creative pursuits. Introducing diverse agencies and activities reinforces this principle.

Nonetheless, Out and About does not underestimate the importance of the common bond of those who identify as other than heterosexual. An earlier project evaluation highlighted how young women really do value the opportunity to meet other young women, many of whom have had similar experiences, or who can empathise with their peers:

The young women involved in this research felt that they had nowhere to go to access information or to meet other lesbians (YouthAction N.I., 2003:8)

2.3 Alternately Open and Closing Group

The group opens sporadically (for approximately three weeks at a time) to allow new members to join, and then is closed for longer periods (approximately 6 months) for those who signed up only. This is an unusual feature of the group which offers a juxtaposition between safety and providing a challenge. This process accommodates the strong sense of ownership which individual group members feel towards the group while also challenging the unhealthy claustrophobic environment which can develop in a continuously closed group.

There are many benefits to this. First, the group avoids stagnation by bringing in new group members and changing group dynamics. This open/closed element also places a value on the group which may not exist otherwise – if it was a continuously open group, people could dip in and out without any real sense of commitment (which could also make it difficult for a sense of trust and openness to be developed). It might also mean that participants stay at the first level, that of mere identification with the group, rather than developing into a sense of ownership or belonging.

2.4 Worker Values

Within this work individual workers bring with them their own ideas about homosexuality, sexual orientation, morality and personal judgement. These all need to be continuously monitored and challenged to ensure the anti-discriminatory nature of the work. If the worker has a low level of self-awareness or if they are not fully conscious of the value-laden messages they may give out, they will undermine the validity of participants' experiences and lives, and the entire ethos and objectives of the programme.

The sexual orientation of the worker is not the primary consideration, but their openness to challenge prejudicial positions taken by themselves and others is crucial to the development of the group. The empathy of the worker to understand the position, feelings and experiences of the young women is more beneficial to group members than an alliance with a worker based purely upon a shared sexual orientation.

In recent research it was highlighted that 53% of young people who were/are members of youth organisations experienced negative attitude towards their sexual orientation (Youthnet, 2003:11) These statistics fail to categorise whether this negativity originated from staff or from other service users but the negative impact on young people who identify as other than heterosexual remains the same. It is vital therefore that workers are continuously aware of their own and the attitudes, values and beliefs of other group members.



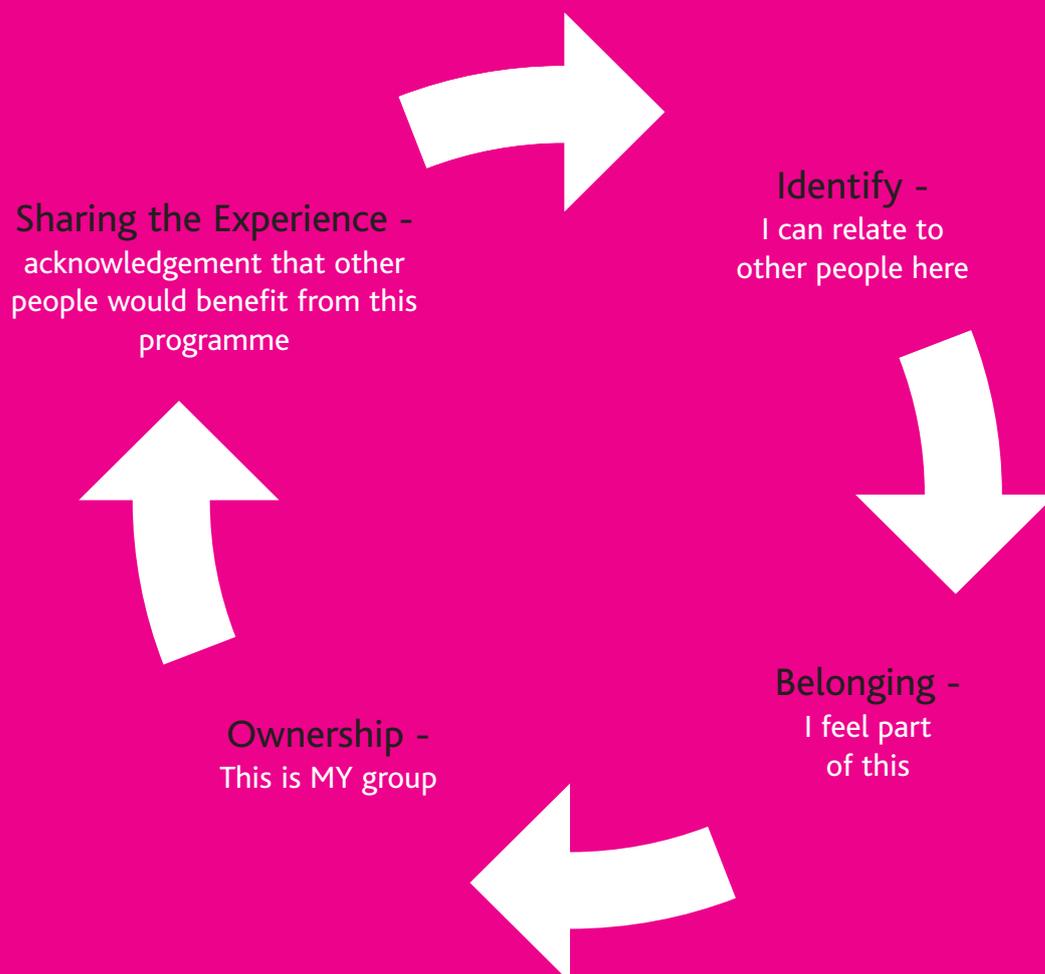
Section 3 – Process for participants and expected outcomes

An analysis of group and individual development has identified a clearly staged process which Out and About participants experience. This knowledge has been used to develop a model of practice firstly for working with young women who identify as other than heterosexual, yet potentially with wider application to community youth groups.

The following is a simple 4 stage model that outlines this process. It is worth noting that the model is not prescriptive or always sequential. There are times when external or internal factors impact upon the group and consequently the group may feel threatened and move back into a previous stage which offers more protection and less involvement from 'outsiders'.

It is a model that we have seen working and which has afforded many young women a positive, safe and active place within the life of a programme and a model that we seek to continue implementing in our work with young women who identify as other than heterosexual.

3.1 A MODEL OF PRACTICE



3.2 IDENTITY

At this stage, participants who join the group do so because they identify with the other participants and title of the programme. This is about an individual need – the immediate gratification or relief of finding other people like you (of your identity). The immediate need is one of addressing insecurity or loneliness at this stage. When asked how she felt as a member of the group, one young woman responded -

“Confident, happy, not alone, secure”

Although many participants join the group due to loneliness, they are not necessarily without significant social groupings. On the contrary, many Out and About participants have large friendship groups, but this group allows for that complete freedom of expression. In a previous report by YouthAction it noted the extreme guilt that young women felt as a result of not being able to be honest about their sexuality (YouthAction, 2003:7) This group provides them with the space to be completely honest about all aspects of their identity. And while at this stage it may not address the issues the young women face in relation to honesty with their family and friends, it affords them an acceptance from their peers and a worker which can begin a process of self-acceptance.

The freedom to open up and discuss issues which affect individuals was highlighted as one reason why the following young woman attended the group and why she enjoyed attending:

“It is a safe and positive environment to discuss issues that affect our lives on a regular basis.”

As stated many of the young women who belong to this group have large social networks but the young women see the group as a place where there is freedom and a place to develop relationships which acknowledge and recognise more than a single aspect of self. One young woman, when asked what she enjoyed most about the group, recognises this in her comment:

“Gathering as a group off scene (LGB social settings)”

There was a strong sense of safety created at this stage. Protection by staff and peers is a feature of this stage, where group members have the opportunity to create a contract which will ensure that the group is both fun and safe, with workers providing constancy. From this stage forward young women will have the knowledge and experience that they will be kept safe.

“It not only provides a safe environment, but also one where you have support.”

This safety is carried through every stage; with new opportunities and challenges being presented but in a relatively protected space. Young women draw on the experiences of not being exposed, embarrassed or left vulnerable and therefore perhaps undertake challenges which may have been previously unattainable. The creation of this sense of safety is crucial at this stage if group members are to develop and progress to the following stages.

3.3 BELONGING

At this stage there is an affiliation with the group where needs are being met and where boundaries are understood. There is a sense of belonging to a group rather than just surviving as an individual within a group.



“I also love discussing issues that face us. Learning about other people’s experiences and how they relate to mine. It’s nice to know you’re not alone.”

There is some sort of reciprocal relationship between group members and a loyalty amongst them. At this stage, the group is content and have established norms – they are keen to keep things as they are, don’t want the group to change and don’t want others in the group who may threaten this stability. In terms of safety at this stage, group members may feel more comfortable within the group and they may be prepared to take risks within this setting. These risks may be personal risks where individuals show their vulnerability (such as doing presentations to or sharing stories with each other) or the risk may be through engaging with the ‘outside world’ (such as a new worker coming to their environment and working with them on a new project). They feel in control of the environment and take calculated risks based on that creation of safety developed in phase one. Actions and risks at this stage allow individuals to develop a greater sense of security and prepare for the next stage of development. If the group does not take up these challenges and attempt to take these risks, the group can stagnate and can become more like a social club or a meeting point.

A strong bond is created here:

"I really enjoy myself with these girls and they are like family. Thank you girlies for being good friends to me."

While extremely beneficial to individuals and to be welcomed within the group setting, if a group remains at this stage it can act as a barrier to its development and to the progression of the group as a whole. This strong sense of belonging can become threatened by the prospect of new members joining the group. Individuals are happy and content within this new 'family'. To introduce new people or open the group may destroy these relationships. The danger for the youth worker therefore is to keep the group closed and to risk the decline of the group, which may begin to run out of steam, lose members or to simply exhaust the issues which can be explored within this setting. Moving to the next stage of development is essential in leading to a healthier richer experience for participants.

3.4 OWNERSHIP

At this stage, there is a greater loyalty than before. This is more than just loyalty to other participants, but a loyalty to the group and to the purpose of the group. At this stage the group is established and individuals are established within it. This gives rise to a reduced perception of threat when new members join.

Young women value their input and can see the benefit of their involvement not merely as participants but as young women with the power and ability to guide and direct the course of the programme:

"We have ideas that we explore and always follow through with."

"I like the fact that your ideas are listened to."

Ownership, in this context, is connected to a sense of pride which is promoted by doing activities which are not secret or clandestine, but can be celebrated openly. Public displays or tangible outcomes all add to this. Out and About group members presented art pieces, delivered public speeches, made Cd-roms and attended conferences and workshops – all of which encourage participants to proudly represent themselves, the group and their collective achievements.

At this stage group members have a track record of being kept safe both by the group in general but also by their peers and are therefore prepared to take greater risks in terms of public speaking. They are also more willing to publicly align themselves to the group, as their confidence has grown and also their belief in the beneficial value of the group, both for themselves and other young women:

'Good way of getting involved in something worthwhile and purposeful'

"It's a great educational programme. You learn and have fun at the same time – but you enjoy everything you're learning."



'Learning new skills'

The confidence at this stage outweighs the fear, as they trust that they will continue to be taken care of by the group, by the individual members and by the organisation (YouthAction NI, 2003:11-12). The level of ownership which individuals feel at this stage is the overriding factor in people moving to the next stage.

3.5 SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

At this stage, individual participants not only see the benefits of the group for themselves and how it has impacted on them (in terms of personal, social and psychological development), but also recognise the value that a similar experience would have for many of their peers. Individuals want to share the benefits of the group with others, as they are well established and they no longer fear that their role or the group will be threatened through change. There is a sense of generosity at this stage; of wishing others to experience what they have experienced. They are not willing, however, to give this experience away and to leave the group, they simply feel secure enough to share it with others. They have progressed in terms of their own roles and they feel that their involvement within the group has marked their place within this. Through the various projects and many shared memories young women are secure in the fact that they have made their mark and that their contribution will not be forgotten. This acknowledgement of what has been contributed and which can never be erased gives individuals a sense of self-importance, achievement, ownership and history.

These young women are at the stage where they are the best representatives or advertisement for the group as they talk about it with a great sense of pride and value. This overwhelming willingness to share the experience is crucial if the group is to be opened and potential new members recruited.

This stage can offer a new role for existing participants to take a tangible step forward:

'I feel I have developed my communication skills and find it easier to talk to people and would also like to be able to talk to big groups ...'

It can also offer a new function for the group (e.g. strategic roles) whereby the group can meet their own needs but look to the needs of other young women:

"Being involved in more youth work training and getting opportunities for further experiences."

Different roles will suit different individuals. For some it will be the progression into peer support worker posts, others will take on more responsibility while for others it may be a matter of subtly talking to friends and advertising the group. One young woman was clear at the end of the first year as to her aspirations for the group in year two. She states:

"Bringing in more new people, helping them and the prospect of developing splinter groups"



Section 4 – Conclusion

- The development of this model of practice highlights key issues for youth work and the community youth sector to consider.
- Primarily this is a model that can be implemented by all those who engage in work with young people regardless of the sexual orientation. It is a model that takes on board the wants and needs of young people but also allows and encourages their development and role within the group. We feel that this model sits very comfortably within a framework of peer-led initiatives and actively encourages young people to take on roles of responsibility and ownership.
- There is a need for specific service delivery with young women who identify as other than heterosexual. We would suggest the need for single gender initiatives as opposed to mixed sex LGB programmes, as they allow and encourage the experiences of young women to be paramount.
- Fundamentally, there needs to be a shift in perception that work with young women who identify as other than heterosexual is specialist work.
- The only reason it is regarded thus is because few community youth workers engage with it. With youth clubs, church groups, uniformed organisations and schools there are young women who question and are confused about sexual orientation, and others who are entirely aware and confident of their sexuality. There is a growing need to ensure that these young women are acknowledged, accepted and given a voice within existing provision. Skilled youth workers, who can take account of the many issues within this model of practice, would be well equipped to undertake this work. Training in relation to inclusive practice would remind youth worker practitioners of key principles of anti-discriminatory practice which inform all their work.
- The invisibility and vulnerability of this group continues to present challenges and concerns. Although the recruitment for Out and About is very thorough and targeted, this group cannot reach all young women who identify as other than heterosexual. As such, a published resource highlighting specific services and help lines would offer a very tangible way of supporting those who do not engage in current youth work provision.



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YouthAction
NORTHERN IRELAND

YouthAction Northern Ireland, through its extensive work with young people, has produced a number of occasional youth work practice papers which put forward models of good practice alongside issue based recommendations.

Papers available to date include –

- 1 Young Men and Education
- 2 Gender Conscious Work with Young People
- 3 Involving Young People in Action Research
- 4 Working with young women with disabilities on the issue of employability:
Challenges and strategies to effective practice

These papers can be obtained through contacting our central office at the following.

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Issues relating to this paper or other work of the Gender Equality Unit can be forwarded to –

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