



RECLAIMING MY PLACE

EVALUATION SUMMARY

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Reclaiming My Place and its evaluation took place on Awabakal and Wonnarua lands. We acknowledge the unceded lands on which we work and we pay our respects to Elders past and present.

What is Reclaiming My Place?

Reclaiming My Place (RMP) is an arts-based program delivered by the University of Newcastle's Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education in partnership with community-based service providers. The program engages with women who have lived experiences of gender-based violence and stalled education histories. RMP seeks to open up opportunities for engagement in education pathways and in lifelong learning more broadly.

Since RMP began in 2018, sixteen programs have been delivered in the Singleton, Cessnock, and Newcastle areas, with approximately 100 women participating along with practitioners from 14 partner organisations. Thirteen community exhibitions of participants' artwork have been curated to date.

Why is Reclaiming My Place important?

RMP creates a space for the participants to have positive life-long learning and educational experiences. The program works with gender-based violence as a wide-spread social problem as well as a traumatic personal experience. Working with perceptions of self-value and capability, the space created provides a platform for conversation about the role education can play in participants' lives. The program aims to generate relationships of learning and support between the participants themselves, the practitioners who participate, the art, the facilitator and the space created by the program.

What happens in a Reclaiming My Place program?

Program sessions run once a week for two hours over an eight-week period. Participatory learning is incorporated into each session, with a focus on art materials and practice applications, rather than direct instruction. Women are encouraged and supported to acquire confidence in their work with diverse mediums, colour and design. All participants' work is valued regardless of art-based experience. This support is collaborative, coming from the facilitator, practitioner participants and from the women themselves to each other. At the conclusion of Reclaiming My Place, a community-based exhibition of participating artists' work is held and is also curated online.

What role does evaluation play in Reclaiming My Place?

Critical reflection is embedded in all RMP program practices. Activities are designed for reflection to be undertaken by practitioners and participants. Whether it be focused on the art practices, on the experiences of learning new skills, on support offered to others, or on how life outside the workshop is being managed, the participants are supported to reflect on their role and capacity to explore who they are and want to be in the world. RMP views critical reflection as a key tool to creating and building new imagined futures. With such a foundation, those involved with RMP (the women participants, the practitioner participants and the facilitators) were in a strong position to participate in more formal evaluation of the program itself.

What happened in the evaluation?

The aim of the research was to explore the experiences and impact of RMP, both for the practitioners of the family services and the women who have completed the program. Evaluation workshops were designed to follow a similar format to the RMP style and drew on art to support discussion and represent ideas. All the workshops were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis. The transcribed dialogue was synthesized into themes that were presented back to the practitioners and participants to stimulate more insight as well provide rigour to the knowledge created.

What have we learnt from the evaluation?

- RMP creates safe, supportive spaces for gentle reflection on capability that gets nurtured as the program progresses.
- RMP creates spaces where there is no agenda to try to "fix" something in the participants.
- Exploring and learning through the art and other workshop practices enabled participants to let go of prior categorisations and self-judgements to develop a new sense of themselves and their capability and potential.
- The learning and reflection practice of RMP allows for positive learning/education experiences. The transformative potential of positive learning experiences was identified by the participants as one of the most important successes of RMP.
- The workshops create space and time for self-care and group-care. As the program progresses the sense of support, care and connection steadily develops in the participants.
- Practitioners were exposed to (and mostly embraced) new forms of social work practice that challenge traditional notions of hierarchy, boundaries, vulnerability, risk and strengths-based approaches.
- Art is a key aspect of RMP's success. It is both a means and end in itself. It facilitates many other processes of positive learning and reflection as well as providing an end point through an art piece that gets celebrated.
- Life-long learning and access to diverse forms of education is a crucial part of rebuilding the lives of women who have a history of gender-based violence.

The cover artwork was produced by participants in the Reclaiming My Place program. Elements from participants' artworks were collated by Anna Rolfe at the University Galleries.