



...the ...
...the ...
...the ...

...the ...
...the ...
...the ...

Michael said
I glanced at
Right above

I'd had a chance to
feel, but long before
he said, "O."

Handwritten text in a stylized, bold font, possibly a signature or title.



RECLAIMING MY PLACE

EVALUATION SUMMARY TWO: PRACTITIONERS PERSPECTIVES

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Reclaiming My Place and its evaluation took place on Awabakal, Worimi 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 (CEEHE) in partnership with community-based service providers. The program engages with women (client participants) who have lived experiences of gender-based violence and stalled education histories, with the purpose of opening up opportunities for engagement in education pathways and in lifelong learning more broadly.

This evaluation summary builds on existing evaluative research that had a focus on the client participants' experience of RMP. This document is focused on the service provider practitioners' experience of RMP and provides an overview of how RMP, from the perspective of practitioners, offers new and innovative social work practices. In unsettling professional notions of expertise, hierarchy, boundaries and vulnerability, RMP creates spaces for group- and self-care to nourish positive experiences of life-long learning.

The evaluation was carried out by CEEHE in partnership with the Family Action Centre. The evaluation framework has been developed in alignment with gender equity and social justice principles. An overarching goal is to build service provider capacity to undertake, and further develop, RMP in a way that is sustainable for their organisations, for partners they work with in RMP and for the sector more broadly. Relatedly, the evaluation aims to sustain the program's underpinning commitment to fostering gender equity through valuing the diverse lived experiences of women engaging with RMP.

1 By "service provider practitioners" we mean social workers, family services managers and case workers.

Why is the practitioners' experience important to RMP?

"it kind of makes you look and think differently. So, it just opens a space. When I say that I feel like I have learned so much more than I ever have by just asking a question because it just opens it up, it opens up safety to share".

As well as a focus on producing learning opportunities and new possible futures for participants, RMP has also emphasised the value of offering practices of self-care for practitioners and opportunities for critical reflection on professional practices. RMP is intentionally designed to have practitioners participate in all the program activities alongside their client participants fostering non-hierarchical practices.

A key part of RMP is embedding reflective practices throughout the eight-week duration of the program. The safe and supportive environment created by RMP allows for the reflective practices to facilitate an emphasis on what has been achieved and foster an acknowledgement and celebration of capacity. This may have a focus on the art practices but equally may also focus on aspects of the participants' lives outside of the workshops. Practitioners play a crucial role in facilitating this process by participating in and modelling these reflective practices. How the embedding of reflective practices has been experienced by practitioners has been the focus of this evaluation research.

With a foundation of reflective practice embedded in the RMP program, more formal moments of evaluation offered productive insights into the practitioners' perspectives. Through yarning methodologies and collaborative critical reflection, the research interest was directed towards the new roles practitioners had to undertake in the context of RMP and what these roles allowed to happen.

What did we learn about the practitioner role in RMP?

"I think it is very powerful for us to be vulnerable, because we're asking clients, who are going through very vulnerable transitions in their lives, to trust us in the space ..."

In the evaluation research, practitioners spoke of how they needed to "step into" new roles that positioned them as being alongside or with the women participants. This was contrasted with more traditional hierarchical expert and client type relationships. These new roles were seen as an opportunity to embrace new professional insights and practices which have the capacity to transform the power relations between practitioner and participant. RMP facilitates spaces of co-learning to create new imaginaries around professional identity, being and action. "Walking alongside" the participants, "potential" is explored in new ways, with practitioners considering what this might mean for their sense of being a professional and for their lives more broadly.

In "stepping into" new roles, the practitioners spoke of how the art making created a "level playing field" of co-vulnerability that in turn allowed participants to see their strengths in the art making process. Practitioners contrasted this dynamic of RMP to more traditional social work spaces where clients attend with the main objective of fixing something that is 'wrong' in their lives. One participant described their experience of this relationship with practitioners in RMP as "opening up space to begin thinking about goals". The expanding of horizons through engaging in creative expression as a form of collaborative learning emerged as part of the possibilities presented by RMP.

Practitioners spoke of their experiences of mutual support, a sense of reciprocity and self- and group-care. The connections made during RMP with other women (both participants and other practitioners), created a positive contribution to their professional work overall. Taking time for themselves to engage in regenerating, restorative, and grounding practices through art was an aspect of the program felt to be transferrable to other and/or new professional contexts.

What is the impact of RMP for family support services?

"It's an immersive experience, it's a different way of working."

For some practitioners, "stepping into" the RMP role proved quite a challenge. A discomfort was experienced from the competing responsibilities of having to focus on the wellbeing of their clients as well as the need to immerse themselves in the program activities and "walk alongside" their client. In the former, more traditional notions of support work are enacted while in the latter, permission to let go into the experience was believed to be important. The different ways of working required of "walking alongside" clients caused concern for some practitioners that it would not be perceived as 'proper' social work.

Practitioners discussed the broader implications of engaging with RMP for services and their professional practice. An understanding of and commitment to a more explorative, relational and reciprocal dynamic between practitioners and clients was identified as underpinning the success of RMP. Practitioners expressed a sense of "learning how we can grow together" to foster mutual care and a sense of community with clients.

Related to this, the nature of how art practices are embedded in the program offered practitioners opportunities for self-care. Furthermore, the art enabled different ways of working with clients, requiring different sets of skills, in which the creation of shared meanings through the art were seen as transformative to professional ways of working. The art also provided moments of time to "slow down" and "ground" oneself within both professional and personal contexts, embedding practices of critical reflection or reflexivity.

The cover artwork was produced by participants and collated by Brontë Naylor at the University Galleries.

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