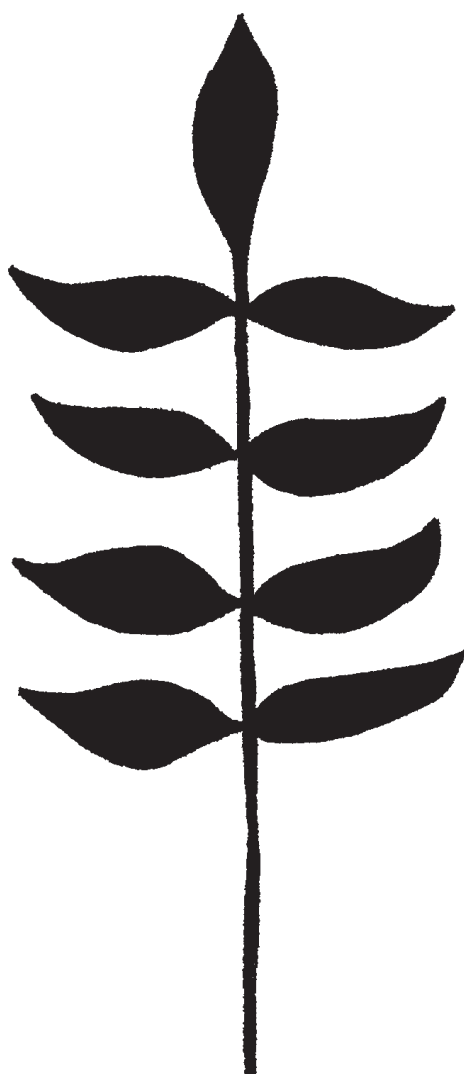


HOMEWORK CLUB
*Strengthening Refugee
Youth Achievement*

A Participatory Action Research Project
by the Homework Club &
Victoria University of Wellington
research team



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PROJECT AIM

The aim of the project is to provide information and recommendations to the Homework Club coordinator and sponsors about how best to improve student participation and attendance.

INTRODUCTION

This report is the product of a group research project carried out in partnership with Victoria University students, secondary school refugee students and the facilitators of the Homework Club. Set up in 2004 through the support of the Somali Council, the Homework Club aims to support refugee high school students to improve their educational performance and to encourage them into higher education. Initially a successful project, the Homework Club has experienced a decline in the number of students who attend regularly and research is needed to determine the causes for this and to develop strategies to increase student participation.

Our engagement in the research stems from our study in Geography 404, 'Geography of Development Studies: Young People and Participatory Development'. This paper aims to teach students about participatory development and participatory action research and how to best apply it in the community with and for young people.

The research has been carried out in partnership with Hussein Sheik who is the Homework Club Coordinator. Support has been available from Sara Kindon (Victoria University), Rachel Ward (Somali Council) and Rachael Soster (Ministry of Youth Development). Overall the research is being supported by the Ministry of Youth Development (MYD) and the Somali Council. It also has the support of the Changemakers' Refugee Forum.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Our research and engagement in this project has been carried out on the basis of participatory development and participatory action research principles. PAR is one of the most rapidly emerging approaches in human geography and is focused on facilitating, through research, changes that are desired by community groups.

PAR emphasizes effecting social change and actively involving research participants to set the goals and parameters of the research process itself. As researchers, we do not conduct research on a group, but rather work with the Homework Club sponsors and students, allowing them to own and direct the process and be agents of their own desired development and change. This process in which academic and social group members work together to define, redefine and analyze the issues facing them is central to the participatory development process. PAR encourages both researcher and the group they are researching to reflect on their misunderstandings and mistakes and jointly negotiate the relevance and impact of the information generated together. It is an approach which places as much importance on the learning process as the final outcome of the process itself.

Research Preparation

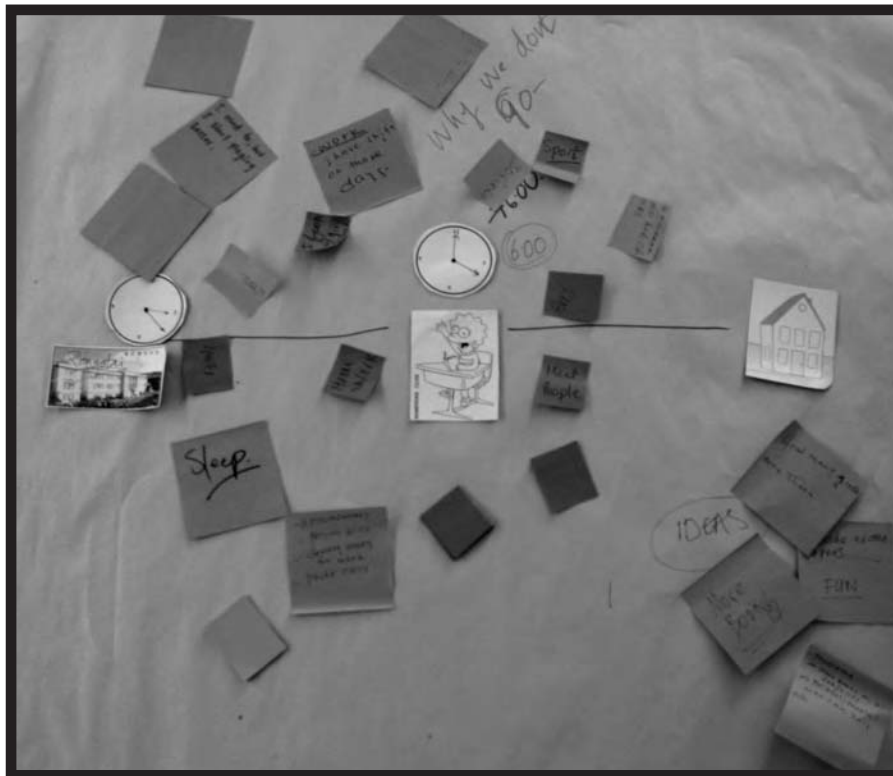
An initial meeting with Hussein Sheik was held in early August to discuss the Homework Club and the project. Hussein explained to us the way in which the Homework Club operated and what he envisioned the role of the research to be. During this meeting we also discussed strategies which would enable us to meet and work with students, allowing them to voice their thoughts and opinions. It was agreed the best way to access students would be through English as a Second Language (ESOL) departments at the participating schools, Wellington High School, Rongotai College and Wellington East Girls College.

Since the beginning of the project, members of our VUW research group have attended the Homework Club on regular occasions to gain a better understanding and to help support the initiative. However, we have not used the Homework Club as a site of research as we felt that this would detract from the purpose of the club, which is to concentrate on homework.

A research proposal was then developed outlining the aims and objectives of the project. This was distributed to Hussein and the ESOL teachers we intended to work with. An Information and Consent Form for the students was also produced for use in workshops to ensure participants were informed and happy to participate in our research.

Using the participatory approach, we then held participatory workshops with migrant and refugee students in ESOL classes at Wellington High School, Rongotai College, and Wellington East Girls College. Workshop times were set in liaison with ESOL teachers and students were made aware of, and encouraged, to participate. As a group, we developed a suitable workshop outline aimed at creating an environment and activities that would engage students, allowing them to participate and communicate freely. These sessions involved a participatory mapping and diagramming exercise to obtain information and support participants' comprehension and use of English.

The findings of these workshops were discussed in a second meeting attended by four members of our VUW research group, Hussein Sheik, Tina (teacher and Homework Club tutor), Penny Bond (Ministry of Youth Development and past Homework Club tutor,) and Julia Beresford (Dean of ESOL, Wellington High School). Finally, this report has been a collective effort by our VUW research group and draws together the findings from the workshops and discussions with teachers and supporters of the Club, and provides recommendations for the Homework Club sponsors.



Workshop Methodology

Workshops were facilitated at each of the three high schools, with two VUW research group members facilitating relationships and research within the schools. The goal of the workshops was to provide the Homework Club coordinators with an insight into student perceptions of the Homework Club, the barriers facing student participation, and possible strategies for increasing student attendance. It is also hoped that the participation and sharing of knowledge by the students in the workshops would raise awareness of Homework Club within the schools.

The workshop at Wellington High School had a group of about 12 students, 4 girls and about 8 boys, and ran for 25 minutes. The workshop at Wellington East Girls College attracted 11 girls, and took 45 minutes. The workshop at Rongotai College had 12 boys and took thirty five minutes.

TYPICAL WORKSHOP OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION: The two facilitators introduced themselves and the note taker (if present). The project and workshop process was explained to the students and consent forms distributed to sign. A warm up game to create an environment in which to engage students and encourage participation and communication, was facilitated when appropriate.

COMPILE PROFILES: Groups were divided into two groups, those who had attended Homework Club and those who had not. A profile of each group was collected which included sex, age, ethnicity, number of years in New Zealand, which suburb they live in, the number of children and youth at home, and the individuals position among them.

TIMELINE EXERCISE: The Students were facilitated in the construction of a timeline beginning when they finish school on a Tuesday and Friday through until when they get home. The exercise followed a series of questions to gather information about particular issues relevant to the students' attendance, or non-attendance at Homework Club, such as after school activities and transport to and from school. Students used symbols or words to show the times, their activities, and other information. Notes were taken over the meanings and reasons for their choices. A full copy of the workshop facilitation questions is listed in the appendices.

RANKING EXERCISE: The students were asked to rank their preferred school venue for the Homework Club out of Wellington High School (current venue), Wellington East Girls College and Rongotai College.

ASSESSMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The following discussion outlines what worked in the research process and the constraints and limitations we encountered.

Constraints and Limitations

We recognise that our position in this project is as outsiders to the refugee community and the secondary school environment. As a group of participatory researchers, we are aware that we each bring to the project preconceived ideas and social perceptions, which may influence our observations of the project and issues attached.

Our research population was non-representative of the refugee student population.

- * The workshops were limited to the three major schools associated with the Homework Club as communicated by Hussein.
- * Within the schools the workshops captured a non-representative portion of the refugee students. This is likely to have excluded some potential participants.
- * We were reliant on teachers to provide information that would encourage the students to attend the workshops.

Knowledge and awareness of the club was limited, for many this was the first contact they had with the Homework Club.

- * There was a lack of information about what worked at Homework Club and what the achievements and benefits of attending were.

The workshops were held in students' free time, which inhibited their willingness to participate.

- * The behaviour at one workshop was particularly disruptive, which placed limits on the quality of the information gathered.

There was the potential for language to be a barrier, however the use of verbal communication and symbols minimised this as a constraint.

There were a number of time constraints placed on the project.

- * Workshops were conducted within one lunchtime period in times ranging from twenty-five minutes to fifty minutes. Ideally we would have liked to have held more than one workshop per school. This excluded the opportunity for students to respond to the findings from the previous session, limiting the extent to which the process was truly participatory.

- * The amount of time which we had also limited our ability to form relationships with the students. The only contact that they had with us was through our workshops, this could limit the amount of information the students were willing to share.
- * Every effort has been made to carry out the project in the eight weeks available. This short period restricts the changes that can be achieved. Ideally this project is the launching pad, forming the foundations of a much longer process, which would be picked up by Homework Club sponsors and attendants.

Issues of power and inequality are inherent in any participatory process, and it is anticipated that this would have been an obstacle to facilitators in gathering reliable information from students.

What Worked Well

- * Our proximity in age, and being students ourselves, provided us with an advantage in our ability to relate to the students.
- * By attending and helping students at the Homework Club we gained a first hand experience of the Club and an appreciation of its importance and value to the students.
- * The workshops served to raise the profile of the Homework Club and awareness among staff and students.
- * The design of the workshop was successful in its ability to collect new and valuable information in a short period of time.
- * The participatory research process was successful in that the workshop aims were driven by the needs of the coordinator and sponsors of the Homework Club.
- * The workshops have drawn in the knowledge and perceptions of the students. This has started a process in which the Homework Club can become a joint initiative between facilitators and students, increasingly grassroots, and with a greater sense of ownership by the students.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Transport

FINDINGS

WHS: Most would walk or use the bus to travel to and from school. If they went to the Homework Club, they would stay on at school until it begun. Transport was not portrayed as a problem.

WEGC: Transport was not portrayed as a problem among the girls. But they did discuss having a shuttle to drop off students living in the Eastern Suburbs. Most thought that parents would pick them up or they would catch a bus home from the Homework Club.

Rongotai: Walking, driving, or buses were the modes of transport used. There was concern that buses on the way home would be late. One student living in Miramar would need two buses to get home. Some expressed that transport was not an issue. Those living in Newtown would walk home. Some felt that it took a lot of time to get changed out of their uniforms after school and catch a bus to WHS.

The boys were concerned that it was unrealistic to expect them to arrive at the Homework Club by four.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- * For the majority of the students transport does not appear to be a major barrier to participation at Homework Club. However, the facilitators at the club and the teachers spoken to, felt that transport was a major issue which needs to be addressed.
- * Wellington East had initially provided funding for the provision of a shuttle to take students home. It was envisioned that this service would alleviate the perceived problem. This service has not materialised.
- * The students at Rongotai however, did identify transport as a hindrance. This is understandable considering the distance of the school from Wellington High.

Time and Day

FINDINGS

WHS: Those who went would stay on at school until four pm. Some thought that the Homework Club finished later than it really does. Friday was not a popular choice of day for the Homework Club.

WEGC: School finishes at three thirty pm. It was okay to get to the Homework Club by four pm. Some expressed that the Homework Club finished quite late, particularly in winter. Tuesday is good, but felt that Friday is a day to relax.

Rongotai: School finishes at 3.25pm. Some were concerned that they wouldn't make it in time for the 4pm start of Homework Club. Tuesday was good, but Friday is the end of the week and students said they feel too tired. Friday also clashes with a regular soccer match. Many would go to work or play sports, but this applied to any day of the week, not just Tuesday or Friday.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- * Friday is very unpopular, discussions with Tina and Hussein confirmed this point.
- * Homework Club was initially held on these days because this is when Hussein works at Wellington High School.
- * The Homework Club will need to start at 4pm to allow volunteers to travel.
- * The students at Rongotai were assured that the times are flexible and that students may come and go as they please.

Assistance with homework at home

FINDINGS

WHS: One girl said she was able to get help if needed at home. The girl who came regularly said that she does not get help at home. The boys said that they get help from family members.

WEGC: Most of the girls confirmed that they were able to get help at home. Family members, often siblings were named and one girl stated that she had help from a neighbour.

Rongotai: Some said they had access to help at home, but said that homework was beyond their parents and there was little help available. One said that he got help at home from a sibling; others had no help at home.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- * Although many students expressed the availability of help at home, ESOL teachers were of the opinion that this assistance was insufficient and was far from meeting the needs of the students.

After school activities

FINDINGS

WHS: Among the boys eating, sleeping, playing sport, playing video games, watch TV and going out with girlfriends were all popular activities. Girls; tend to go home after school, some do homework.

WEGC: The main activities were eating, watching TV, and relaxing. Many do homework. One has a part time job.

Rongotai: A few boys had employment after school, and many had sports they attended (soccer on Friday afternoon). Other after school activities included eating, sleeping, watching movies. Many said that they did homework.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- * It is clear that the after-school activities of students are clashing with the Homework Club. However, it is also apparent that the majority of these activities are not officially organised.
- * Homework Club needs to become something that through the success of its attendants outweighs the other activities and becomes the priority.
- * A lot of students wanted to integrate other activities e.g. movie watching, eating and socialising into the club. Facilitators need to be aware of this and perhaps reinforce that the purpose of the Homework Club is to assist students with their education. Information may be given to students about other avenues where they can meet and socialise with members of their community e.g. Africa Night.

Awareness of Homework Club

FINDINGS

WHS: Many knew about the Homework Club, but tended to have negative attitudes towards it. The comments were that it was boring, one didn't like the teachers, and it was too noisy.

WEGC: Those who had been (there were no regular attendees) said the Homework Club was noisy, boring, and that they didn't get much homework done. They expressed the need for more teachers. Some were put off because they were tired after school, hungry, and sick of being at school all day. The fact that there were boys at the Homework Club was a concern among the Muslim girls – or at least they thought it would be for their parents. Parents of two girls were concerned that they were being negatively influenced by other students.

Rongotai: Few knew about the Homework Club, and one who had been thought it was more for students wanting help with math and science. Most were very interested in the concept and felt it would help. One had come to look, then left because he saw little happening. The students had questions about what kind of skills the tutors at the Homework Club had.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- * There seems to be a lack of awareness among the students about the Homework Club. It would be interesting to know whether the students had simply forgotten about the Club, were not willing to acknowledge their involvement in it, or genuinely do not know about it.
- * The experience of students who attended the Club in its initial stages was not positive because of too many students and not enough tutors. This accounts for much of the negative feedback from students who no longer attend because of this. Many students felt that attending the Homework Club was a waste of time. They were disrupted by disorderly students from within and outside of the Club. However, the facilitators have since dealt with this issue and these perceptions of the students about the Club are no longer valid.
- * The facilitators and ESOL teachers have repeatedly mentioned that the parents' involvement and approval of the Homework Club is vital for its success. Parents are concerned that the activities that happen at the Club, and are not homework, have a negative influence on their children.

- * Penny Bond, MYD, brought to our attention a similar initiative set up at Hagley College', Christchurch. Its ongoing success can be attributed to the co-ordination of ESOL classes for parents at the same time as the Homework Club, through a community education scheme which ran at the school. There is great potential in the idea of coordinating student and parent activities as it would allow greater contact between parents and the Homework Club, allowing them to monitor what was happening, and promote broader community involvement.

Venue

FINDINGS

WHS: The response was to continue the Homework Club at WHS.

WEGC: The first choice of venue was Rongotai College. It was close to home for some of the girls, plus the chance for some to meet boys was appealing. The second rated choice was mixed between WHS and WEGC. Having it at WEGC was convenient and some did not like to go to WHS. Others did not want to remain at WEGC after being at school all day.

Rongotai: One group expressed a strong dislike for WHS and ranked Rongotai as their first choice. The second group of boys also wanted Rongotai as their first choice, but saw WHS as a good second choice because of its central position for others. WEGC as a venue was very inconvenient and not popular.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- * It has been suggested that the Homework Club should be moved from Wellington High School to an alternative venue. This would give the Homework Club a 'fresh start' as well as encouraging a more focused environment away from the disruptions that take place outside of the Club.
- * Linda Todd, WEGC ESOL teacher, had expressed a wish for the Homework Club to take place at her school and felt it would be easier for her students. This supports the suggestion by others that an alternative venue from WHS is found.
- * The Mosque in Kilbirnie was suggested, which would also encourage greater community involvement. However, Hussein and others were unsure about this as it would inhibit non-Muslim students from attending. Ideally the Homework Club is to be as open to as many students as possible.

Positive Feedback

FINDINGS

WHS: The few girls who had been to the Homework Club enjoyed the casual chatting with teachers. Going to the Club was a good way to get their homework done.

WEGC: The girls who had been said that it had improved their achievements. It provided an option to go to if they had difficult homework. A few saw it as an opportunity to meet boys.

Rongotai: Many of the boys were very keen about the Homework Club and saw it as a much needed place of help. They also saw it as a place to meet other boys and open new social opportunities

DISCUSSION POINTS

- * The regular attendants of the Club were particularly positive about the scheme and enjoyed the one-on-one attention they receive and the relationships that form between them and their tutors.
- * This success and the positive experiences do not need to be confined to such a small number. From this feedback we know that this is a scheme with a lot of potential. Its major problems do not lie within the concept but rather the perceptions of students.
- * The negative response to the Homework Club is a likely product of disproportionate number of students with false impressions of the Club because of their feelings associated with the word 'homework'. Others who had been and were negative were often those who formed their opinion during the initial stages of the Homework Club.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Find a neutral venue within the community. Options include community spaces or alternating of host school.
- 2 Change the days of the week on which the Homework Club is held from Tuesday and Friday to Tuesday and Thursday. Reinforce to students that the starting time of four o'clock is flexible.
- 3 Strengthen relationships and increase contact between teachers, parents, students, and Homework Club facilitators.
 - * Regular information from Homework Club to parents with updates and reminders in school and community newsletters or other accessible media.
 - * Reinforce the openness of the Homework Club with regular invitations to parents to visit.
 - * Regular contact between all of the ESOL teachers and the facilitators will increase feelings of joint ownership over the Club.
- 4 Include initiatives in schools to raise awareness of the Club
 - * Regular reminders in daily notices
 - * Posters in ESOL classes
 - * Ensure that all of the students' subject teachers' are aware of the Club and can recommend students attend if need be.
- 5 Introduce structure into the Homework Club, initiatives include:
 - * A form for each student to fill out the first time they arrive. This could include details such as
 - The suburb in which they live
 - How they intend to get to and from Homework Club
 - What subjects they take at school
 - Where their problem areas lie.
 - * Starter Pack-
 - Loyalty Card: A stamp will be given each time a student attends the club. After ten stamps the student will be offered a reward.
 - A contract for students to sign, which includes information about the aims and objectives of the Club and outlines expected behaviour.
 - An item which is fun and appealing to students, for example a badge, a pen, a book bag... (the appearance of this item needs careful consideration, a badge which says 'Homework Rules' for example will not work!)
 - An information sheet for home which includes an invitation to parents and welcomes the student to the Club.

6 Effective co-ordination of volunteers

- * Ensure that a plan is in place to increase the number of volunteers prior to an increase in student attendance, not in response to.
- * Ensure volunteers are aware that there may be a lag in the increase in their number and the increase in the number of students.

7 Continuation of participatory processes.

- * An ongoing assessment of student's opinions with regular meetings to allow expression of their needs and wants. This will enforce their feelings of ownership over the Club.
- * Parents and other members of the community should also be included which would encourage the community to take ownership of the scheme. However, it must be kept in mind that their presence could also inhibit the students from expressing their opinions.

CONCLUSION

We hope this report will be useful in supporting and improving attendance at the Homework Club. It is intended that the completion of our research with the Homework Club is only the beginning of an ongoing process.

There is now an opportunity for those involved to collaboratively discuss and learn ways in which they can create a successful Homework Club that supports the academic achievements of refugee students. The findings and recommendations of this report form a foundation for the facilitators and the sponsors of the Homework Club to enact any changes they wish to make.

Throughout this project we have been convinced of the need for the Homework Club's success. Its value lies in the positive impact that it has on the achievements of refugee students. We wish it every success for the future.

Our thanks to Hussein Sheik, the Homework Club facilitators and sponsors, the ESOL teachers, Sara Kindon, and most importantly the students who participated in the project.

