

Creating a Positive Future For Yourself: An Interactive Game for Young People from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Sonja Schulze
Swinburne University of Technology
Australia

Collectively, my lived experience of being a homeless teenager, subsequent professional youth worker roles and knowledge of Strategic Foresight theories and methods have lead to the development of the “How to Get There” game. The game is designed with the aim of providing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with the tools to construct a meaningful future for themselves.

Rationale of the Game

The game was originally developed for the Swinburne University based Strategic Foresight II subject with the aim to improve the mindset of young people by stimulating a deconstruction of the present and a reconstruction of a meaningful and positive preferred future. As stated by Polak (1973): *Once he (man) became conscious of creating images of the future, he became a participant in the process of creating this future* (Polak, 1973, p 6.). In accordance with this sentiment, the game encourages young people to create scenarios and images of a positive life journey for themselves. The game process and toolbox facilitates this reflective process.

Throughout my professional working life, I have worked with over a hundred-young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and I have been involved in countless discussions regarding visions for their future. The majority of these young people did not have a positive vision for their future. This is partially due to the dysfunctional family backgrounds and a lack of meaningful role models for young people. This dysfunctional family background often incorporated a normalised criminal behaviour aspect that contributed to a negative vision for the future. As an anecdotal example, whilst transporting a residential care based 12-year-old boy to school, he stated: “School is a waste of time, once you drop me off I’m going to meet my mates at the train station anyway”. In response, I questioned his vision of the future and he replied: “Just like my Dad, I will end up in jail, if the cops get me”. At the time, this young person’s father was in jail for manslaughter. Several years later I met this young person begging and sleeping on the streets of Melbourne. Many of the young women I worked with in the youth worker role spoke of becoming prostitutes, as reflected in one young woman’s statement: “That’s all we know and it is quick and easy money”.

The Problem

Statistics conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) shows that from 1999 – 2000 to 2013 – 2014, the number of children in the Out Of Home Care (OOHC) system has increased from 16,923 to 43,009 (AIF, 2015). Furthermore, research has found that young people placed in residential state care

facilities are twelve times more likely to commit a criminal offence and, in transitioning from the OOH system into society, they are much more likely to fall victim to substance abuse, higher unemployment rates, crime, homelessness and general poverty issues (Whitening, 2015). Thus, most young people feel trapped in a cycle of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1965). Mikulincer (2015) explains that learned helplessness occurs when a person has been subjected to series of negative events that they had no control over.

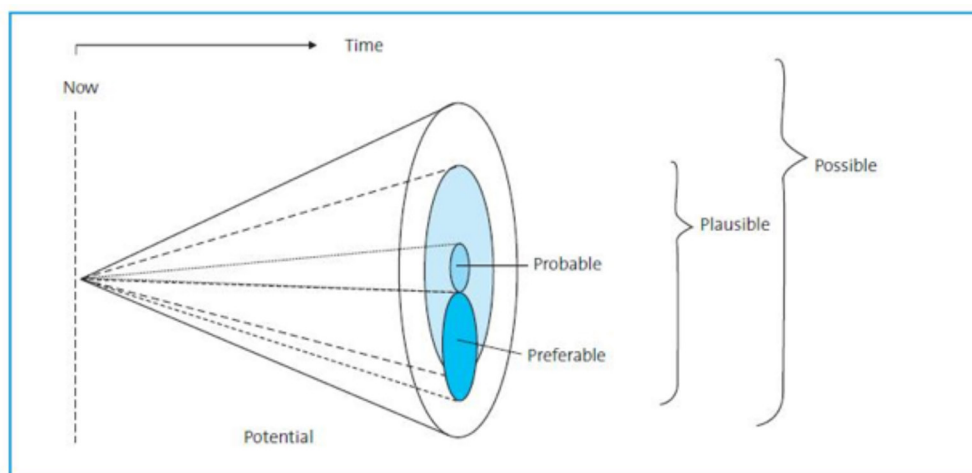
In better responding to these issues, the Department of Human Service has developed several papers, including 'The Best Interests framework for vulnerable children and youth, (2007), the 'Care and transition planning for leaving care: Victorian Practice Framework' (2012) and the National Standards for Out of Home Care - Consultation Paper (2014). This body of work; however, does not analyse how young people perceive their future as the core challenge.

The Game

Whilst studying Strategic Foresight II at Swinburne University I had to demonstrate my understanding of the subject in an essay, using Strategic Foresight theories, methods and tools. In applying some of the Strategic Foresight learning's, I chose to apply Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) as the method developing the How To Get There game. In accordance with CLA, the game begins with the young person understanding their own worldview and myths, preparing a path of self-discovery and by providing tools to create a preferred vision of their future (Inayatullah & Milojević, 2015). The game process involves a series of steps that will be outlined below.

Step 1: Explanation of the different futures:

The game starts with an overall explanation of the different futures, including possible, plausible, probable and preferable. Voros's (2003) diagram below demonstrates different future aspects. The potential future is a general term that perceives the future as a whole, whilst possible future depicts what might happen. Plausible futures look at what could happen, and probable futures ask what is likely to happen, whilst possible futures ask what do you want to happen.



The "futures cone" (illustration taken from Voros (2003), p. 16)

Figure 1. Voros's future's cone

During the game process, the young people are divided into groups of four to discuss those different future aspects. The process involves a facilitator for each group to assist in stimulating the

discussion, as most young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have not really thought about any future. In my observation they have lots of tacit, token and taken-for-granted' (Gough, 1990) ideas about the future. The game is bringing these implicit ideas into their consciousness, making them explicit and then from there they can start the process of more thought about their futures – through engagement with their preferred (as well as avoided) futures.

Step 2: Do something for yourself and your future self will thank you!

Following on from the previous discussion, the young people are then given the front page of a leading newspaper and they are asked to create a headline for their future selves. The facilitators have a key role here in encouraging the young people to 'dream big'. The facilitators need to be mindful that game participant dreams will be diverse and facilitators need to remain non-judgemental in their role.

Step 3: Reflecting on the Present

The next stage in the game involves a brief discussion regarding the present situation of the young person and what needs to occur to enable their preferred future. As most young people from disadvantaged backgrounds disengage with the education system, the aim of the game is that the young people realise that an education is the foundation for most pathways.

Step 4: The Toolbox

Following the preferred future discussion, game participants are then provided with a toolbox for collating tools that will assist them to get to their preferred future. Within the toolbox, a series of cards displaying a quote and a famous role model are available. The young person selects their favourite card, and then, within the group, they are asked to backcast the role model that they have chosen. By backcasting, game participants can envisage their preferred and desired future, taking on a future role and then define the steps that they took to attain that future. In discussion with the group, each of these steps will be added to the individual cards for collation within their toolbox. This backcasting process is a valuable aspect of the game, as it positions the young person as the hero of his or her own story in the creation of a powerful individual.

Step 5: The Superpower Cards

The final stage of the game involves the development of a 'superpower' card. The point of this stage is to recognise that the preferred future for the game participant is attainable; however, they will need help. The 'superpower' card allows game participants to choose a special power - including, for example, an invisible cloak, a magic wand or - to overcome challenges on their way to their preferred future, becoming their own hero with a thousand faces (Campbell, 1949).

Final Steps:

At the conclusion of the game, a representative young person from each group can present to the larger group, in sharing learning's and building a community of support that encourages everyone to begin walking towards their preferred future. Each game participant leaves with their individualised tool kit to encourage ongoing reflection and analysis.

Conclusion

Having had the lived experience of being homeless, rejected and the feeling of being unwanted I deeply understand the impact of 'not being cared for'. During my years working as a youth

worker I found that the young people I worked with also experienced a lack of caring, and a lack of empathic understanding, which can create an environment, that nurtures a sense for self-initiated experiential learning (Carl Rogers, 1975, pp.2-10). Noddings (2002) argument is that care is basic in human life, caring should be a foundation for ethical decision-making – all people want to be cared for (Noddings, 2002, p.11). Nodding further explains that caring-about is a significant force in society. As well as being a significant part of our sense of justice, it also contributes to the cultivation of social justice (Noddings, 2002, p.13).

Correspondence

Sonja Schulze
153 Marroondah Hwy
Chirnside Park, Vic 3116
Australia
Email: sonjaschulze@live.com.au

References

- AIFS (2015). *Trends in child protection notifications and children living in out-of-home care in Australia: 1989–90 to 2013–14*, tabled 20 March 2015
- State Government Victoria (2007). *Best Interest Framework for vulnerable children and youth*. Published: Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Victoria, Retrieved from http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/586081/ecec_best_interest_framework_proof.pdf, viewed 22/3/2017
- Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. NY:Pantheon Book, (1st edition).
- Gough, N. (1990). Futures in Australian education—tacit, token and taken for granted. *Futures*, 22(3), 151-162.
- Milojevic, Ivana and Inayatullah, Sohail. (2015). *Transformative Research in Research and Practise. CLA2.0*, Tamkang University Press, Tamsui, Taiwan.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring, a Feminine approach to ethics and moral Education*. London: University of California Press, p.4
- Mikulincer, M.(2013). *Human Learned Helplessness: A Coping Perspective*. NY:Springer.
- Polag, F. (1973). *The Image of the Future*. NL: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, p 6.
- Rogers, C., R. (1975). *Center for Studies of the Person La Jolla, California, The Counselling Psychologist*, 5, No. 2-10.
- Voros, J. (2017). The Future Cone, use and history.*Foresight, Futures Studies, Method*, Retrived from <https://thevoroscope.com/2017/02/24/the-futures-cone-use-and-history/>, viewed 13/09/2017.
- Whiting, N. (2015). *Juvenile Crime, the link between offending and out of home care*. Retrived from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-12/juvenile-crime-the-link-between-offending-and-out/6307710>, viewed 12/08/2017.