



An Empowerment and Support Group for Transgender Youth Living in Iowa

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Abstract

This poster describes an empowerment and support group for transgender youth in Iowa, where recently gender-affirming care was banned. The group will be open and conducted virtually and will draw on models of empowerment and mutual aid. The group will incorporate the sharing of lived experience between members of the transgender community. This poster aims to provide a model for group work with transgender people living in environments that are actively harmful to them.

Background

- Iowa is estimated to be home to 2,100 transgender youth.
- In Iowa, 48% of transgender people were verbally harassed in kindergarten through 12th grade. 15% were physically attacked.
- Senate File 538 was signed into law March 22nd, 2023. The bill bans gender-affirming care for any transgender people under 18 years of age. Youth already accessing care have six months to discontinue.
- Gender-affirming care is shown to be significantly beneficial to the health and well-being of transgender people.

Group Foundations

- Co-construction by group members and social worker
 - Social worker as facilitator
 - Environment for facilitating empowerment process
- Active and conscious disruption of binary, cisgender norms

Models

Empowerment

Empowerment-based practice is described by E. Summerson Carr as a “cyclical process of collective dialogue and social action that is meant to effect positive change.” Participants move from a place of powerlessness into active conscientization, which involves interpretation, identity-building, and mobilization. During interpretation, groups examine the reality of their personal and collective situations. Exploring and analyzing possibilities for transformation based on these experiences then mobilizes participants to enter the political action and change stage of empowerment. When action fails to effect change, participants return to conscientization with new information and experiences to analyze. If change is effectively made, the participant’s position of power shifts and so the empowerment process continues within that new context of interacting with the world.

Lived Experience

Research has shown that sharing lived experiences, especially within transgender communities, can be a particularly effective means of moving through the interpretation and identity-building stages of empowerment. Specifically, there is evidence to suggest that sharing knowledge generated from marginalized, intersectional experiences is crucial in helping others understand and accept their own experiences as reality. Furthermore, sharing lived bodily experiences is extremely significant for transgender people who have undergone or hope to access gender-affirming medical care. These findings suggest that sharing lived experiences is integral to empowering transgender youth who are seeking gender-affirming care.

Recruitment

- Targeted recruitment utilizing existing LGBTQIA+ community resources and networks (word-of-mouth, snowball)
- Social media of LGBTQIA+-affirming local and national organizations
- Iowa clinics that offer(ed) pediatric gender-affirming care - ~15 clinics across 8 cities in Iowa
- Individual gender-affirming practitioners across Iowa

Group Composition

- Open to all transgender youth (under 18 years old) living in Iowa and wishing to access gender-affirming care
- Contracting based on “What do you need in this group to feel safety, interaction with others, commonality, support, relationship, trust, acceptance, validation, and interdependence?”
- Facilitated by transgender adult, preferably who currently resides in Iowa

Virtual Group

- Secure web-based meeting platform (Zoom, WebEx)
- Security measures (password protection, headphone usage, screening members)
- Removes barrier of finding reliable transportation to group meetings
 - Adds barrier of reliable technology/internet access
- Potentially increase comfort with physical space during group meeting

Future Directions

- Separate group meetings based on heterogeneous characteristics (e.g. under the age of 14, BIPOC, transmasculine)
- Separate group meetings for caregivers/families of transgender youth

Activities/Discussion

- Determined by group members
- Related to empowerment processes
- Space made for sharing lived experience
 - Example discussions: relationships/romance/sexuality, options for transitioning, transgender joy, school and bullying, transgender history
- Example activities: crafting packers for transmasculine people, transition mood boards

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