



The emerging role of the urban-based aboriginal peer support worker: A Western Australian study



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 August 2016

Accepted 17 August 2016

Keywords:

Peer support

Aboriginal parents

Participatory action research

Aboriginal parent support

ABSTRACT

Purpose: To explore the self-perceived role of the Aboriginal peer support worker working with families with young children. This study was a component of a larger participatory action research study undertaken in a Western Australian metropolitan setting to develop and evaluate the suitability, feasibility and effectiveness of an Aboriginal peer-led home visiting program.

Methods: Focus group interviews were carried out with peer support workers using unstructured and semi-structured interviews within Action Learning Sets. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The overarching theme on the self-perceived role of the Aboriginal peer support worker was Giving Parent Support, with subsidiary themes relating to development and ongoing sustainability of the support.

Discussion: The peer support workers viewed their role as providing parent support through enabling strategies which developed client acceptance and trust, delivered culturally relevant support, advocated for families, developed therapeutic engagement and communication strategies, and created safe home visiting practices. They recognised the importance of linking families with community support such as community child health nurses which was important for improving long term physical and psychosocial health outcomes for children.

Conclusion: Aboriginal Peer Support Workers identified their emerging integral role in the development of this unique culturally acceptable home visitingsupport for Aboriginal parents. Innovative approaches towards client engagement demonstrated their value in developing creative ways of working in partnership with families, community support services and child health nurses across a range of challenging psychosocial environments.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, support for parents with young children is a significant issue. Affirming and enhancing parental competence in the early years positively influences lifelong physical, learning and socioemotional trajectories of children (Hertzman, 2010).

In Australia there is concern regarding vulnerability of Indigenous parents and their children (Australian Government, 2013; RCYO-OPHO, 2015). The capacity of Aboriginal parents to develop positive health and wellbeing environments for their children is influenced by social determinants such as poverty, unemployment and substandard housing (Eckermann et al., 2006; Irvine, 2009). It is imperative for immediate and extended families, communities and governments to support parents in providing safe, stable and responsive relationships with their children (AMA, 2013; NSCDC, 2010).

Traditionally, developmental child health for Australian Aboriginal families has been supported by health professionals (community child health nurses working as sole practitioners or Aboriginal Health Workers) (Department of Health Western Australia, 2007). Recent studies have highlighted the need for new approaches including peer support and home visiting. Peers, it is argued, can facilitate meaningful program strategies that integrate important cultural influences of culture, language and lore into health care provision (Boulton, Brown, & Long, 2010; Larson & Bradley, 2009; Walker, 2010).

International studies highlight positive impacts and families' self-perceived benefits from voluntary and remunerated peer support in non-Indigenous populations (Barnet, Liu, DeVoe, Alperovitz-Bichell, & Duggan, 2007; Heaman, Chalmers, Woodgate, & Brown, 2007; Jack, DiCenso, & Lohfield, 2005). However, a recent systematic review investigating peer led home visiting parenting support programs identified only one study relating to Aboriginal populations (Munns, Watts, Hegney, & Walker, 2016). That study was conducted in a remote area of Western Australian (WA), using remunerated Aboriginal peer support workers, and was found to facilitate positive parenting support approaches. In their role in encouraging parental confidence, these workers were recognised as integral to a culturally secure model of parent support (Walker, 2010). A defining feature of Aboriginal peer support workers is their ability to engage and work in partnership with community health and support services and parents in developing culturally appropriate strategies for children's care and development relevant to each family's unique circumstances (Munns, 2010). As there is limited evidence on the effectiveness and structure of this form of family support, including the role of the Aboriginal peer support worker in urban settings (Munns et al., 2016), a study was commenced in 2013 in a metropolitan region of WA, to investigate development of home visiting peer support for Aboriginal families with young children.

2. Background

In this study region, 4.2% of people self-identified as Aboriginal, compared with 1.5% for the total metropolitan area of WA (ABS, 2007, 2014). Adverse social determinants of health influence this population group with the region scoring 888.2 on the most recent Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) – Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, indicating high disadvantage in state and national contexts (ABS, 2011). Aboriginal families in this region encounter potentially harmful psychosocial and environmental impacts including poverty, lack of suitable housing and unemployment (ABS, 2012; Profile.id, n.d.), subsequently affecting parents' ability to develop healthy physical and psychosocial environments for their children's developmental wellbeing.

Homelessness in particular heavily influences parents' capability to provide healthy environments for their children and on the capacity of support professionals to facilitate empowering parental strategies. Statistical information on homelessness for this region is limited, but national evidence demonstrates that 23% of people accessing accommodation assistance in 2013–2014 were Aborig-

inal Australians (AIHW, 2014a). In 2011, overcrowding among Aboriginal homeless people was estimated to be 79% in WA, including multiple temporary house sharing (AIHW, 2014b).

In 2013, a WA non-government family support agency was exploring contemporary, innovative models of engagement with Aboriginal families in an outer metropolitan area where previous programs had not produced expected outcomes. The agency worked in partnership with an academic child health nurse researcher who had established experience with Indigenous and non-Indigenous home visiting peer support programs in remote and metropolitan WA settings (Munns, 2010; Munns & Walker, 2015).

The researcher and the agency's Indigenous parenting coordinator liaised with local community agencies working with Aboriginal families, who endorsed the development of a home visiting peer support program and confirmed interest in engaging with the research. The agency provided finance to undertake the program. This involved the employment of an Aboriginal Program Coordinator and four part time Aboriginal peer support workers. The team was supported by a non-Aboriginal support officer for six months and an Aboriginal education support officer (employed nine months into the project). They also provided infrastructure such as an office, computer and car.

The aim of the overall project the program team (as described previously) to work in partnership with the researcher, families and community agencies to facilitate a peer-led home visiting parent support program. The Aboriginal coordinator's role was to work with the researcher to recruit peer support workers and manage the peer support program. The potential peer support workers were interviewed and selected by the coordinator and researcher. Interviews were undertaken with selection criteria being: positive standing in the community as evidenced by referees; willingness to support parents with young children in their community; stable residency in the local area and good communication skills with the ability to maintain confidentiality (Munns, 2010). The non-Aboriginal support officer assisted the newly recruited workers to develop visiting strategies such as appropriate communication and door step introductions. The Aboriginal education support officer continued this support, also identifying resources to assist parents to effectively engage with their children. The researcher's role was to facilitate program development by incorporating features identified by the workers, families and supporting community agencies. The aim of this study component was to explore the self-perceived role of the Aboriginal peer support workers while they were working with families to develop home visiting support. Their perceptions were investigated as their role had the potential to benefit local Aboriginal families along with informing national and international policy relating to peer support of these vulnerable communities.

This study, therefore, is the first study to investigate the self-perceived role of Australian Aboriginal peer support workers providing support to urban based Aboriginal parents. It also provides data on the similarities and differences of the role during provision to rural/remote Aboriginal families (Walker, 2010) versus urban families.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

This study employed Participatory Action Research, a critical, respectful overarching methodology (Roberts & Taylor, 1998) which is relevant to critical theory paradigms, employing a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to engage participants (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). This methodology enables

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