Collaborating to support CALD families

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Introduction

The aim of this presentation is to examine the lessons learnt from working cross-culturally with newly arrived refugees in a regional centre in South East Queensland. Over the past two years, colleagues and I have been working with the African communities in Toowoomba on early intervention programs. I would like to share these lessons with everyone here, but particularly with those of us who are working in community development with CALD families.

To begin, I'll briefly cover the piloting of early intervention workshops in parenting for Toowoomba's African communities. I'll look at how we set up the Agencies CALD Action Group to build on the pilot and establish a framework for working together in collaboration. I will then examine a form of collaboration, which I term 'systemic collaboration', and how this affects program delivery. I will also look at what I'm calling 'incentivised pathways' and the role of these in program recruitment.

I will also discuss the outcomes of delivering the workshops and what our workshop evaluation process uncovered for us. Lastly, I'll focus on the lessons we learnt overall from our cross-cultural work with CALD families.

In the beginning

In February 2008, the Department of Child Safety and the Department of Communities invited Toowoomba's community agencies to take part in facilitating the Toowoomba Multicultural Child Protection Project.

It was believed by agencies that the reluctance among African families to engage with child protection agencies could amplify any risks posed to children within these communities. African families generally perceived domestic and family violence issues as a private matter that should be settled within the family and were unaware of how laws operate in Australian life and how these affect all families in the community.

The Strengthening Families Project set up four working groups made up of representatives from a wide range of agencies and organisations.

During 2008, the working groups developed three training modules on parenting to be delivered in a workshop format. These were Bringing up Children in Australia, Bringing up Teenagers and Family and Work.

The modules were piloted with Toowoomba's Sudanese community, using accredited interpreters.

Agencies CALD Action Group (ACAG)

To sustain the initiative's momentum, a number of agencies agreed to work together to deliver a yearly calendar of workshops. Those of us who had been part of the pilot project realised that no single agency had the capacity to provide ongoing this training without substantial support from other agencies willing to share their time and resources.

To this end, we set up the Agencies CALD Action Group, or ACAG, a consortium of workers from the three tiers of service provision: state government, local government and non-government agencies. Looking back over the last two years of ACAG's operations, I am happy to say that we have been able to develop a successful model for collaboration.

As the region's CAMS Worker, my role has been to chair the consortium, establish its operating framework and coordinate its efforts. I'd now like to spend a few moments describing how we collaborate via this framework.

How we collaborate: the ACAG operating framework

The terms of reference for ACAG were framed to gain real commitment from agency workers. We tried to ensure that workers would feel that they had an equal share in the venture, with support in tackling the problems we all faced. We emphasised 'work' as much as 'talk', as we wanted a mechanism for action as well as for dialogue about working with CALD families. We also wanted to maximise our resources and build up the region's skills. Thus, our terms of reference are task- and outcomes-oriented and spell out as clearly as possible what needs to be done.

We also did not want duplication of effort. We decided that ACAG would not act as a forum for general news about working with CALD communities. This exchange was already occurring in other interagency meetings.

We consolidated our collaboration by connecting it structurally with the core business of our individual agencies. We agreed that each participating agency had ownership of the consortium's effort. Group members have incorporated their ACAG work roles into their agency work plans and include ACAG outcomes in their agency reporting. I believe that this structured ownership of ACAG has meant that the consortium is strongly linked into agency work with CALD families overall and is the key element in its sustainability.

So which agencies signed up for ACAG? We can see here on the slide the wide range of agencies and organisations that have joined the consortium.

I would now like to move onto the delivery of the workshops.

Delivering the workshops

We treated the three modules as a single set of interconnected workshops. The overarching aim for all three was that African adults could share their parenting experiences in Australia and in Africa and, through facilitated discussions, learn about the complexities of parenting in Australia.

In 2009, over 100 participants attended 9 days of workshops. The majority of participants were from Southern Sudan and most were in the 25 to 44 years age bracket. Two thirds of the participants were female and one third was male. We are now halfway though our 2010 calendar of workshops.

I'd now like to talk about the lessons that we've learnt in delivering the modules. I'd then like to discuss broader structural issues, which I'm calling 'systemic collaboration' and 'incentivised pathways' and how these big picture dynamics affect early intervention.

Timetabling and childcare

The timetabling proved effective in enabling parents to take and collect children from school before and after the workshop.

While we found that childcare was essential, we found that it was difficult to predict childcare needs ahead of time, even where families had advised that they would attend and transport had been arranged. Families were making decisions about who would attend, and which children would come along, at the moment of pickup. Thus, childcare numbers could not be calculated in advance, making it difficult to arrange for childcare workers.

Recruiting participants

Flyers advertising each set of workshops were distributed where Toowoomba's African communities gather and announcements were made in churches and community settings. The local Sudanese association and elders were approached with workshop information and asked if they would pass these on within their communities.

Here are some examples of the flyers.

Recruiting participants from hard-to-reach communities proved to be our biggest challenge. The number of attendances per workshop varied over the year. Attendance figures could be very high or very low. A complicating outcome was that the modules Bringing up Children and Bringing up Teenagers were more highly attended than the module Family and Work, which covers gender, work roles and domestic violence.

In response, we adjusted timetabling and have delivered the modules during the day and in the evenings, during the week and at weekends. We have yet to see if this will succeed.

We encountered gender differences in responses to the invitation to attend, with men generally more resistant than women to attending. An African community worker who is an ACAG member suggested that men could be fearful that knowledge would affect family roles.

We learnt how the intersection of gender and community hierarchies can affect a program's reach into a community. We are not sure of the effectiveness of speaking with community leaders, who are generally men, as a means of recruitment. It was unclear whether the message was actively passed into families, as it would have to go initially to the male head of the household, who may not support the idea of family members attending.

In addition, and importantly for agency workers generally, within African communities being visited by government services can mean that a family has come to the attention of the authorities.

Finally, however, the greatest difficulty in recruiting participants has been the lack of organised leadership within the African community that could be approached to champion the delivery of early intervention programs. While African elders were engaged in the pilots and African agency workers are currently members of ACAG, the role of community leaders in supporting recruitment and encouraging attendance remains undeveloped.

By lack of organised leadership, I do not mean that the African communities in Toowoomba have no leadership. These communities are active in supporting their members and organising activities. The leadership I am talking about is the structured organisational leadership that formally represents its community and actively, routinely and consistently engages with mainstream life. Our experience in Toowoomba has been that, unlike mainstream community leadership structures, local leadership within the African community is generally:

- inward looking and focused on issues emerging internally within their own community
- invisible to the wider community
- based on cultural practices that we do not yet clearly understand
- not practised in using mainstream organisational systems, such as planning, communication, governance and, importantly for agencies, advocacy
- not sufficiently attached to wider community organisational practices to work effectively with agencies in delivering services to their communities.

All of this is understandable given the challenges facing emerging communities in work, education and family life. In addition, community organisations are not resourced sufficiently or available to engage with mainstream services on their community's behalf. But I believe that the lack of formally structured community leadership is the biggest single problem facing these communities and those who seek to work with them. Working out ways to develop this form of leadership and supporting communities to do this should be our priority.

I would now like to turn to the module content.

Module content

We were aware that participants would bring strong perceptions about service providers that we would need to address. These included that agencies believe the views of children and not adults, intervene in what should be private family matters and do not always understand Africans as parents or that teenagers are adapting to Australian culture while not valuing their African heritage. In particular, we knew that we were grappling with an African community view that domestic violence should be worked out in the 'African way' and that this should not involve Australian laws and agencies.

In the workshops, there were lively discussions around problematic issues such as changing gender roles. Some argued that traditional husband and wife interactions within African families were being misinterpreted as domestic violence. Some male participants in particular felt that culture around gender roles in the home should be maintained in Australia.

Participants were unsure of the boundaries in bringing up their children and the definitions of children's rights. They wanted to know how to talk with their children on the parenting issues that had emerged since arrival, particularly around discipline and new cultural ways.

Participants were critical of Australian parenting styles, which were described as 'too lax'. Some feared losing control over their children by adopting Australian ways of disciplining them. At the same time, participants valued good parenting and believed that their children's behaviour reflected on them as parents.

Parents reported that teenagers did not relate to what had happened in Africa. Young people were becoming parents themselves without having absorbed African cultural values. Many had not experienced the cultural journeys their parents had travelled as refugees.

Finally, the majority of participants said that they wanted to become clear about the law in Australia in relation to their children and their roles as parents and how to talk with their

children about this. They also wanted to understand the legal consequences of failing to support their children and of family violence.

Learning styles for an oral culture

The second greatest challenge for us, after recruiting participants, was developing a delivery method that was appropriate for adult learners from an oral culture.

The adult learning style was speaking and listening. Participants would listen to a brief exposition of a concept by the facilitator. They would then discuss the concept at length within the group, with elaboration and digression onto other, seemingly unrelated, topics. This process was slower than expected. The amount of digression made exploring topics convoluted, but we learnt that the digression ultimately came back to the issue at hand.

We believe now that learning in this context builds up through interleaving layers of stories and shared experiences and not through receiving bite-sized chunks of knowledge from an expert, which is a more linear and technocratic form of exchange. We saw that participants brought well-developed strategies for learning through discussion within a group.

I'll now talk briefly about our experiences delivering workshops with interpreters.

Facilitation with interpreters

We arranged for workshops to be delivered with accredited interpreters. We came to understand that language differences are not always the problem, but rather that some concepts might be culturally absent. For example, participants said that they found it hard to understand the concept of 'punishment of children' from an Australian perspective.

The biggest challenge for the interpreters was translating complex new parenting and legal terms, as well as the service delivery language, into terms that could be understood in daily life.

Participants' practice of speaking at length and in detail, rather than the Western practice of 'getting to the point' in order to use limited time efficiently, proved to be a challenge. Working with an interpreter when an elaborated communication style is being used meant that facilitators had to adjust the pace of teaching.

'Systemic collaboration' and 'incentivised pathways'

I'd now like to return to the key problem of recruitment that I discussed earlier and talk briefly about two aspects that I term 'systemic collaboration' and 'incentivised pathways'.

I outlined earlier how program recruitment can be made more difficult when the leadership structure in a new and emerging community is undeveloped and inward-looking. I would now like to take the concept of collaboration to the next level and argue that the presence or absence of systemic collaboration and incentivised pathways also has an impact on recruitment.

We have been unable to find structured pathways that move new and emerging communities towards government-led programs that introduce key cultural messages articulated in government policies. There is no mechanism for encouraging newly arrived CALD families to attend early intervention programs, other than the promotional activities of the program deliverers themselves. We also struggle with the common problem of agencies siloing into settlement and post-settlement work, which means that referral pathways can be weak and potential program participants can be unaware of what is available. At the same time, there is little incentive to attend these workshops for people engaged in settling in a new country. Getting housing, language skills, a job and children into school are the priority. Learning about how to strengthen the family in Australian terms can take a back seat.

To build pathways into early intervention programs, I would suggest that those working in the settlement phase, upstream of early intervention, be formally required to refer clients to identified government programs such as Strengthening Families. To strengthen these pathways, I would also suggest that an incentive be added in the form of a link between Centrelink training or other allowances and attendance at early intervention programs. In addition, early intervention messaging, such as health and child protection, needs to supported at departmental level in the same way that language acquisition is supported.

We are trying at the moment in Toowoomba to develop an incentivised pathway via the local courts. An ACAG member from Queensland Police has approached the local magistrate to see if attendance at the module on changing family roles could be made mandatory for people from a CALD background appearing in court for family violence. The magistrate is proposing this idea for statewide implementation, because of the potential benefits it offers.

I believe that getting these more systemic and structural interconnections in place is vital if early intervention is to succeed. Collaboration by agencies, such as the model we use in ACAG, needs to be supported by collaboration at the system level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we in ACAG have come to realise that working with African communities is part of an ongoing process in which we must acknowledge African parents' ways of thinking about child rearing and cultural background.

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We have seen from participants' feedback that they wish to be proactive in learning about Australian family culture.

We have developed a successful and popular model for collaboration and have maximised our resources. We have expanded our understanding of our clients, and our skills, through sharing our expertise. We have established strong collegial relationships that have had spin-offs in other ventures. We believe firmly that working in collaboration is the best way to tackle the issues we all face.

The biggest challenge is how to connect with a community that is not yet set up to work within Australian methods of community interaction. Lack of organised and skilled community leadership affects all aspects of early intervention delivery. I would urge us all to consider ways in which we can work together on this problem. I would also urge us to consider how we can develop systemic collaboration to support our work at the agency level and establish incentivised pathways to support program recruitment.

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