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What is known about the topic:	What this paper adds:
• Developing a research culture requires commitment and leadership	• The development of an interdisciplinary research framework within a community early parenting context
• International recognition that inter-professional education and practice for families with vulnerabilities, is the way forward rather than mono-discipline approaches	• A case study example of a partnership between researchers and practitioners

The development of an interdisciplinary research agenda at Ngala: a case study about innovation

ABSTRACT

Background: Ngala is an early parenting, not-for-profit organisation in Western Australia. Research academics from three universities in Perth had been involved in separate research activities over recent years at Ngala. During 2007, a strategic decision was made to forge formal links and articulate an interdisciplinary research framework to promote a research culture amongst Ngala practitioners.

Aim: to describe an organisational case study of the development of an interdisciplinary research agenda within Ngala.

Methods: Collaborative methods were used to achieve this. An action learning project was undertaken over a two year period with involvement of researchers, managers and practitioners across the five disciplines of nursing, midwifery, early childhood, psychology and social work. This project focused on the development of a research framework to guide future planning within the organisation.

Findings: The development process enabled practitioners, managers and researchers to have conversations about the nominated theories and approaches that inform their work in early childhood and parenting settings, thereby improving the communications between the various disciplines represented. As a part of this process, a small action research project was undertaken with practitioners which focused on understanding the barriers staff experienced to approaching research activities and to arrive at potential solutions for these barriers.

Conclusion: It was anticipated that with leadership evolving at all levels of the organisation, the resultant research framework would be sustainable into the future, and grow the evidence-base necessary for a strong platform for practice and research.

3

INTRODUCTION

Ngala is an early parenting organisation in Western Australia[1] (WA) with 200 employees, and for over a century has advocated for and supported families to create nurturing, safe and caring environments for their children. The name Ngala has two meanings in the Aboriginal Bibbulmun dialect - 'mother and child' and 'we two' [1]. This name honours the land on which the premises are located, and also acknowledges Aboriginal holistic ways of working with children, families and communities. Ngala's services are available to all parents of children aged up to six years in Western Australia.

The work of Ngala in WA contributes to the population outcomes of sustaining families in challenging times and enabling parenting with confidence. Parents often contact Ngala because they need assistance in some way to parent with confidence. This will vary from receiving information and education, meeting other parents in a group context, through to more specialised support such as the enhancement of a parent/child relationship with small group work or individual counselling. Many parents contact Ngala for issues to do with their children's sleep, nutrition, behaviour or parental adjustment and/or distress in the early years of life, particularly the first year.

Towards the end of 2007, dialogue on developing a research framework for Ngala commenced. It involved senior staff at Ngala as well as researchers from key universities already involved in some way with the work of Ngala. The research group involved practitioners and researchers from five key disciplines: nursing, midwifery, social work, psychology and early childhood education.

Purpose

The purpose of the research framework was to develop an interdisciplinary research agenda for the work in early parenting and early childhood, and build relationships with key

universities and agencies interested in research in the early years. The building of the collaborative relationships using an action research and action learning framework, within a case study of one organisation – Ngala – is described.

BACKGROUND

To develop a research agenda dialogue was necessary to articulate the research framework and to have a common understanding of how interdisciplinary members of the research group were going to work together. This would enable the development of priorities and a future plan for identifying funding opportunities and undertaking activities.

Interdisciplinary team practice is described as a partnership between a team of professionals and a client in a participatory, collaborative and coordinated approach to shared decision-making around health and wellbeing issues[2]. There is international recognition of the benefits of collaborative practice to address the complex interplay between the many factors which affect health and wellbeing[3]. The intent of developing an interdisciplinary research agenda was to guide how research, education and practice is undertaken at Ngala, and will be conducted into the future. Collaboration around research activities enables a common understanding of what each discipline brings to the table as well as:

- consideration of power and organisational culture;

- shared knowledge of theories and concepts across disciplines;

- linkages between different forms of knowledge;

- understanding of ethical issues and processes; and

- provision of a setting whereby there is collaboration between researchers and practitioners[4].

In the broadest sense of the word, the definition of research includes "any gathering of data, information and facts for the advancement of knowledge"[5] (p1). VanDeusen Lukas et al.[6]

suggest that strengthening organisations to implement research and evidence-based practice (EBP) can be enhanced through the presence of three interacting components which are: active leadership and commitment to quality; robust clinical process redesign incorporating EBPs into routine operations; and use of management structures and processes to support and align redesign[6]. Developing a research framework was one strategy that would enable Ngala to advance the knowledge base underpinning its early childhood and parenting work.

STUDY DESIGN

A case study design was used, with the organisation, Ngala, developing the research framework as the unit of analysis (that is, the case). Yin[7] gives different types of scenarios whereby case studies are used for various situations particularly as a research method in social science disciplines. Yin[7] states that the case study method allows researchers to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events such as organisational and management processes, small group behaviour and community change. Yin[7] explains that when using a case study strategy an essential approach is to use multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion.

Within the case study design two research methods were used[8] – action learning and action research. Firstly, action learning is used to enhance both individual and organisational performance via structured workplace learning based on real projects that people regard as important in the work environment. Initially "action learning" was developed to encourage 'cross pollination' of managers (external) in similar businesses or organisations through a collaborative and reflective peer network. It has evolved somewhat in recent years and is now used as an effective internal learning model when work teams are effectively engaged to collaborate and work towards a change. Put simply it could be seen as a "share and compare"

6

approach to learning. A cyclical process follows with phases of planning, implementing, observing, reflecting and this cycle repeats many times[8].

Secondly, action research was used for the practitioner project and is best described as a methodology which supports the implementation of a "change" whilst also providing an understanding of learning through enquiry. It is often described as an emergent process which takes shape as understanding increases – it is considered to be a repetitious process that takes us forward in our understanding. Because of its participative/collaborative nature "change" is usually easier to achieve when those most affected by the change are involved in the process[9] (p201).

METHODS

As described above, the data strategies informing the research agenda were systematically employed by collaborative methods over a two year period, and included:

1. Action learning through inter-professional meetings of the research group to develop the framework, priorities for research and a plan for implementation;

2. An action research project with practitioners using focus groups and interviews to inform the above framework and plan.

Leadership from the top and secretariat support are crucial, as is a systematic approach to providing staff with information on the progress of activities. Regular meetings of the research group and the commitment of members enabled progress of the research framework through collaborative discussion and planning sessions. The intent was to develop the objectives, principles, theoretical perspectives and approaches, research themes, priorities and a plan. This occurred alongside a continuation of research activities to assist the group to grow and develop. The benefit of regular membership was a bonus for effective implementation.

As well, the development of the action research project with practitioners was a necessary component for a holistic organisational approach. This was undertaken over nine months by a practitioner involved in the research group and consisted of two phases with the resultant strategies to guide further direction for the research agenda.

Both the action learning with the research group activities as well as the action research project with practitioners were instrumental in developing the framework of the theoretical underpinnings, research themes, priorities and plan for the research agenda.

RESULTS

The Research Framework

FIGURE 1 about here

The framework is presented pictorially in Figure 1. The diagram considers the purpose, principles, theories and approaches, the research themes and activities which contribute to a three to five year research plan.

Key principles

The principles for the research framework were to connect and collaborate, develop and change, provide a context and integrate rather than work in isolation. These were consistent with the philosophy of how Ngala works within the organisation using 'C-Frame' (Connect, Collaborate and Change), which is a strengths-based, solution-focused approach to working with clients, staff and stakeholders[10].

'C-Frame' is underpinned by strength-based assumptions, specifically that most parents, given the opportunity, support, tools and knowledge:

- want to protect, nurture and socialise their children;

- have the ability to care for their children;

- can make positive changes, and

- are capable of learning more about their child's needs[10].

The principles for the research framework also informed the way researchers, managers and practitioners worked together and enabled the development of theories and approaches across the disciplines.

Collaborative leadership strategies, energy and commitment were needed by the research group (which represented all levels of the organisation as well as academic researchers) to engage with staff at a number of levels. The 'bottom up' approach with focus groups and practitioner champions also assisted engagement over time.

Theories and approaches

The process of development of the research framework involved discussion and teasing out of the theoretical frameworks that all five disciplines used in early childhood and parenting practice.

The theories and approaches that inform the work of early childhood and parenting practitioners at Ngala include:

- Attachment theory and infant mental health which describe the importance of early relationship forming between infant and caregivers and how it affects the emotional development of the child and their future mental health[11];

- Brain development of the child which investigates the experiences of nature and nurture and how positive experiences are crucial to healthy brain development[12];

- Child development theory which is a description of children in terms of their patterns and stages of development as well as how children respond to the context and culture in which they function[13];

- Family systems theory which explains how the family system is made up of interconnected and interdependent individuals each affecting each other[14];

- The ecological model which views a child as developing within a complex system of relationships, affected by multiple nested layers of the surrounding environment[15];

- Social learning theory which focuses on the learning that occurs with one another in social contexts, primarily gained through observation, imitation and modelling[16];

- Strengths-based practice which concentrates on the inherent strengths of groups and organisations and seeks to activate the personal strengths of individuals[17];

- Cognitive behavioural therapy which is based on the theory that changing unhelpful or unhealthy thoughts, beliefs and behaviours will bring about positive change for individuals[18];

- Community development approach which promotes collective ownership and action within communities to achieve change[19].

The identification of common theories and approaches by the Research Group and the practitioner Action Research project occurred simultaneously over a number of months. These involved planning, acting, observing and reflecting which were cyclical during this period of time. Once documented, the focus then moved onto the key themes for developing research priorities which would inform the implementation plan.

Key themes for research priorities

A Delphi study in 2005 by Hauck *et al.*[20] provided feedback from staff on their priorities for research which enabled further research projects to follow. For this specific project the themes for research were identified through a combination of two sources, a process of workshops with the research group and discussions with staff through the action research project. The following were seven key themes identified to guide the implementation plan: perinatal anxiety and depression; early years development; parent/child relationship; parent skill development; families in community context; workforce development; and historical perspectives of Ngala's work.

Developing a research culture

During the two-year period of development, the Research Group undertook research activities which enabled the dialogue and common understanding of the framework to evolve. The Group acted as a monitor to all activities (research, evaluation and practice development) occurring within the organisation.

A grant was obtained from the Western Australian Nurses Memorial Charitable Trust to undertake an action research project with practitioners to inform the research agenda as well as promote a research culture at Ngala. The aims of the study were to:

- Identify the needs and expectations of practitioners around contributing towards and participating in research activity in order to ensure evidence-based practice (EBP);

- Identify the barriers perceived and experienced by staff that would inhibit the development of a research culture;

- Identify staff perceptions and attitudes towards participation and utilisation; and

- Develop strategies in collaboration with practitioners to address the identified clinical needs and expectations around EBP[21].

11

The method of fostering practitioner input involved focus groups and individual interviews over two phases. During the first phase 24 staff participated - 17 through focus groups and seven participated in individual interviews. (Due to small numbers of staff, to protect the confidentiality of participants, we cannot give a breakdown of each individual occupational group). The questions were centred on how staff perceived research and its relevance and use in practice; how they saw a research culture developing at Ngala and the barriers to attaining this. The data were collated through a process of thematic analysis and then was presented back to the next phase of focus groups and interviews to validate and find strategies that would assist in moving the research agenda forward. In the second phase 21 staff participated—13 contributed to focus groups and eight participated in individual interviews. A thematic analysis again revealed the major finding that the majority of staff involved in the study perceived 'research' as an academic activity which involved a high level of skill and 'scientific' approaches. They described research using words such as 'onerous' and 'arduous'. Practitioners also placed a high value on research and ensuring that practice is evidence-based, with many expressing that research is vital for retaining credibility as professionals and as an organisation[22].

The barriers identified by staff were consistent with other studies undertaken[23] [24]. The barriers ranged from perceptions of heavy workloads and having little time to invest in research, to a lack of support by the organisation in providing quiet spaces to study or reflect; as well as the need for training and opportunities to undertake activities.

The recommendations put forward by staff were to:

1. Provide project management support and guidance within the organisation to provide support, guidance and advice with research ideas and projects;

2. Develop opportunities for regular "research/practice evidence sessions" open to all staff to attend if interested, operating like a research club;

3. Offer meaningful incentive and reward for participation;

4. Provide access to research databases for all staff, including providing support on how to search and navigate;

5. Provide research skills training, including literature reviews or critically appraising research literature;

6. Develop processes within the organisation to ensure and support new practice knowledge being translated into practice;

7. Allocate time for staff to participate in research activities such as time to read, to share practice knowledge or to take part in projects.

DISCUSSION

Gray[25] highlights the importance of enhancing transdisciplinary research through collaborative leadership. This interest is not new, but can present a challenge when several disciplines attempt to transcend well established and familiar boundaries of disciplinary silos. Gray promotes a model of leadership that has three general categories: cognitive, structural and processional[25]. The development of the research framework included all three elements and has been a very positive experience. The inter-professional research group and the collaborative efforts have meant that a solid platform has evolved in which to launch a plan and work together in a sustainable way into the future. The benefits and opportunities of having cross discipline dialogue do increase understanding and tolerance of different perspectives and approaches, both in research and practice. The 'top down' and 'bottom up' approach needs to occur simultaneously to generate momentum at all levels. The document developed has allowed the articulation of a framework to guide discussion and a focus for research as well as a common language for all service levels, practitioners and researchers.

Other authors also substantiate the need for leadership and creating a culture for interdisciplinary collaborative professional practice[3][6][26].

In developing a research culture it is necessary to demystify the concept of research. Through the practitioner forums it was clear that many staff felt research was outside their realm of everyday work. It was encouraging that a number of staff were committed to the development of research in practice and were keen to have education and support to develop their skills in this area. The strategies recommended by staff were about obtaining more support and education in research activities relevant to their work.

Leadership is required at all levels of the organisation to drive change in this area. The benefits of investing in champions to work alongside peers cannot be overstated. Partnerships with the universities created the rigour and education of research to service delivery, as well as providing opportunities to access a greater number of post graduate students and collaborative research grants.

An implementation plan has been developed and the recruitment of a research officer part-time has been organised to focus the organisation with progressing the strategies identified. A further submission is just being finalised to progress increased rigour within practice and incorporate client feedback in the study, and further funding is being sought to ensure its long term sustainability.

The challenges for working within a not-for-profit organisation, such as resource constraints and capacity ability, can be daunting. Nevertheless, this project has demonstrated that these barriers can be overcome if a small inter-professional group is committed to finding creative solutions to engaging staff in a service that continues to strive for excellence, rigour and relevance to practice. In this instance, leadership, provided by the Research Group, is required to stimulate and create energy and ensure the team is united and working in the same direction.

Rogers and Stevens[27] discuss the importance of developing an agenda for practice-based evidence in parenting and early childhood. They propose as key elements for the agenda: organisational and practitioner strategies; researcher-practitioner relationships; inter-organisational co-operation; and involvement of parents and carers.

The involvement of consumers in the development of the research framework has been a weakness to date, but it is acknowledged within the new Ngala strategic plan that the voices of families need to be stronger and inform the work we do at a research level. Ngala will be considering how best to incorporate the voices of parents and children through governance arrangements and research activities, including Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.

CONCLUSION

Ngala, a not-for-profit parenting organisation in WA, made a strategic decision to forge formal links and articulate an interdisciplinary research framework to promote a research culture amongst Ngala practitioners. This narrative paper has explained the development of an interdisciplinary research agenda using collaborative methods in an action learning project over a two-year period and involving an interdisciplinary team of researchers, managers and practitioners. The project focused on the development of a research framework to guide future planning within the organisation.

In the development process, practitioners and researchers discussed various theories and approaches that inform their work in early childhood and parenting settings, thereby improving the communications between the various disciplines. The project incorporated a small action research project with practitioners which focused on understanding the barriers staff experienced to approaching research activities and suggested solutions to those barriers. Research leadership evolved throughout Ngala, with a resulting research framework which

would be sustainable into the future, and which could develop evidence necessary for a strong platform for practice and research.

The implications of the research agenda for practice areas has enabled a process of change and has anecdotally enabled the progression of some strategies in the support of practitioners and the application of theory and knowledge for them in their work with clients. The Research Group continues to meet on a regular basis and the organisation has now employed a research officer on a part time basis to progress research activities. The development of the research framework has provided a solid foundation for further research activities.

The process of working with researchers, managers and practitioners continues to evolve and strong leadership continues to be paramount in developing a research culture. It is hoped that the research framework will continue to evolve and grow research and practice development activities into the future.

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Figure 1.

Interdisciplinary Research Framework at Ngala

Purpose:

- To develop an interdisciplinary research agenda for work in early parenting & early childhood.
- Relationship development with key Universities and Agencies related to research in the early years.

NGALA: a leading organisation for innovation and evidence-based practice in the early years

Connect &

Develop &

Context

Integrate

Disciplines

Early Childhood   Nursing & Midwifery   Psychology   Social

Theory & Approaches

*Attachment theory & infant mental health
*Brain development
*Child Development Theory
*Family Systems Theory
*The Ecological Model
*Social Learning Theory
*Strengths-based Practice
*Community Development

Research Themes

*Perinatal anxiety & depression
*Early years development
*Parent/child relationship
*Parent skill development
*Families in community context
*Workforce development
*Historical perspectives of Ngala's work

Activities

*Integrate practice with evidence

*Link with universities & agencies

*Build practice frameworks