Exploring action research as a method of creating evidence that is informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, doing and knowing

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Abstract
Over the past two decades there has been growing acknowledgement of the need to decolonise approaches to evaluation policy, programs and services impacting on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Action research methodologies have been identified as the most appropriate approach (Evans et al., 2014). This article outlines how a community controlled peak body is utilising an action research approach guided by First Nations wisdom and knowledge to drive evaluation. Examination of two action research projects undertaken by Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) demonstrate how action research embodies the principles of self-determination and Indigenous Data Sovereignty in evaluative processes. The article also highlights how evaluative evidence informs new approaches to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection. Project reflections suggest participants found the action research approach inclusive, participatory, and effective in assisting them to address critical practice and systemic issues. The importance of ensuring evaluative methodologies are meaningful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was also highlighted.

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What we already know

- Traditionally evaluation approaches focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been of limited use to them in creating healing and addressing social issues.
- Emerging evidence suggests Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and others have been adopting action research approaches to develop their evaluative practice.

The original contribution the article makes to theory and or practice

- The article shares insights on emerging evaluative practice by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation in the historically contested space of child protection.
- The article shares reflections on action research as a tool for both practice and systemic change.

Introduction

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the need for new approaches to the evaluation and development of programs intended to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Luke et al., 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). Historically, inappropriate research and evaluation practices have been exploitative and harmful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, contributing to negative stereotypes, and exacerbating stigma and discrimination (Laycock et al., 2011; Sharmil et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). Issues such as research findings not being translated into practice, a lack of participant agency and recognition, and a focus on often distressing and shameful topics contribute a mistrust of research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Katz et al., 2016). Program and evaluation designs which preference Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and worldviews, and provide benefits from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are crucial (Cochran et al., 2008; Martin & Miraboo, 2003). Given this context it is important to share and explore evidence on emerging evaluative practice in this area. Community-controlled organisations and peak bodies across Australia are currently in a phase of developing and testing approaches to ensuring Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing can be used to build, share and implement solutions to the challenges communities face.

Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) is the peak body representing, advocating and supporting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child protection and family support sector in Queensland. Conducting program evaluations which are embedded into program design is critical to this work. QATSICPP utilises evaluative approaches which are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led, aligned with the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, and are best suited to the cultural context of the work. To this end QATSICPP has been adopting Aboriginal participatory action research (Dudgeon et al., 2020) as an Indigenous research methodology to a diverse range of projects in recent years.

Why action research?

Action research is an umbrella term describing a range of approaches to research and inquiry which broadly seek to ‘create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p.1). Participatory action research is one branch of action research which focuses on the empowered participation of stakeholders through a collaborative process designed to create social action and change (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Participatory action research it is widely recognised as the most appropriate research approach in relation to First Nations communities due to its democratic and participatory nature (Evans et al., 2014; Johnston & Forrest, 2020). However, although participatory action research can accommodate Indigenous epistemologies, it is not itself an Indigenous research methodology (Evans et al., 2014), and it has been described as a Western approach which fails to elevate Indigenous knowledge systems (Dudgeon et al., 2020). Indigenous research methodologies serve the interests of Indigenous people, are carried out by Indigenous people, are grounded in cultural traditions, and are based on the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational, and is collectively, not individually owned (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Wilson, 2001).

Dudgeon et al. (2020) extend the participatory action research method, describing a distinct Aboriginal participatory action research method. They argue that Aboriginal participatory action research is more than just an Indigenised form of participatory action research, but rather, the theory and practice of participatory action research comes from Indigenous de-colonial community capacity building practices and principles. Aboriginal participatory action research is defined as:

A critical, reflexive, and transformative IRM [Indigenous Research Methodology] providing an Indigenous authoritative voice and knowledges, underpinned by Indigenous research principles and values and governance/sovereignty (Dudgeon et al., 2020, p. 18).
Critical components of Aboriginal participatory action research are that it is informed by Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, it affirms Indigenous ways of being through its foundation in the social and emotional wellbeing paradigm, and it embodies Indigenous way of doing through adhering to Indigenous values, ethics, protocols and guidelines (Dudgeon et al, 2020). Based on these core elements, projects that adopt an Aboriginal participatory action research approach will commonly have First Nations people as lead or co-researchers who support the First Nations communities to collectively identify, analyse and respond to issues. First Nations people are the key decision makers regarding the framing of the research, as well as the interpretation and actioning of findings (Dudgeon et al., 2020). Aboriginal participatory action research modalities have been successfully applied to increase self-determination, community wellbeing and legitimise Indigenous knowledges and practices (Dudgeon et al., 2017).

The intent behind the method is closely aligned with that of the Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles proposed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Sovereignty Collective. These principles outline the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to control data that pertains to them with respect to what, how and for whom such data is collected. The importance of accountability, and the need for data that empowers self-determination and promotes the interests of First Nations people is also stressed (Miaiam nayri Wingara, 2018). In a field where program evaluations are often under resourced (or not resourced at all) or undertaken by external bodies led by non-Indigenous people, adopting an Aboriginal participatory action research methodology is also about community-controlled organisations realising the ideal of self-determination by setting the terms of evaluation, and becoming active participants in the process (Williams, 2018).

Child protection and out-of-home have traditionally been areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had their rights and voices largely ignored at a systemic and individual level (Healey, 2018), further supporting the utility of the Aboriginal participatory action research approach in this context. To change this dynamic, QATSICPP is working to establish a new paradigm, whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers elevate Indigenous voice and self-determination through knowledge generated by and for Indigenous people, families and communities. Aboriginal participatory action research most closely aligns with the methodology adopted for the two QATSICPP research projects outlined in this article. The following two practice examples explore ways in which Aboriginal participatory action research is being utilised to uphold First Nations people’s right to self-determination and data sovereignty, with learnings contributing to the development of evaluative theory and methodology.

Example 1 – new ways for our families

In 2021 QATSICPP commenced a project with Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety, and the Australian Catholic University’s Institute for Child Protection Studies exploring the experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence who come to the attention of child protection systems in regional and remote contexts in Queensland. Through engagement with community-controlled Family Wellbeing Services in regional and remote Queensland project aimed to:

- Identify the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people exposed to domestic and family violence who come in contact with child protection systems.
- Build knowledge about experiences of domestic and family violence amongst children and young people.
- Develop a best practice framework for Family Wellbeing Services to respond to the impacts of domestic and family violence on children and young people.

QATSICPP identified a critical need for the research to be developed with a strong place-based focus, recognising different ways of working in communities across Queensland. Equally important were the perspectives of multiple stakeholders on the complex issues of domestic and family violence and child protection. Critical knowledge holders including practitioners, children, young people families and Elders were identified. Central to the project approach was the utilisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, drawing on the strength and lived experience of practitioners and community members, to identify and design effective and culturally appropriate responses to domestic and family violence.

**Methods and processes**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander chief investigators from QATSICPP worked in partnership with community researchers based in regional and remote contexts across eight sites in Queensland. The community researchers were key participants and facilitators of the knowledge creation process. The community researchers were recruited from Family Wellbeing Services around the state with eight domestic and family violence specialists in eight different regional and remote services participating. These frontline workers were seen as not only knowledge holders, but also active agents in the action research, with research outcomes guiding their ongoing work. Community researchers were provided training in the protocols and research guide for the project, which were informed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies’ ethical guidelines (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2020). This ensured safe processes for meaningful engagement of participants.

Project partners from the Institute for Child Protection Studies and Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety provided technical support where necessary in terms of research skills and methodology.

The action research took place in a series of cycles, with each cycle focused on exploring a topic different stakeholder group. Figure 1 outlines the five cycles of action research carried out. A semi-structured interview method was used in both individual
and group contexts, informed by strength-focussed appreciative inquiry (Leeson et al., 2016) and yarning methods. Yarning is an important cultural practice used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples for connecting, sharing knowledge and exploring issues (Shay, 2019), and is increasingly being adopted as a culturally appropriate method in research contexts for data collection and relationship building (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Lin et al., 2016). Yarning was used to explore key themes identified by the research team, with a flexible approach to discussing each theme, allowing for participants to define key issues and steer the conversations. Questions centred around barriers, enablers and solutions to helping First Nations children overcome their experiences of domestic violence. Consistent with Aboriginal participatory action research’s focus on First Nations Peoples shaping research inquiry, community researchers drove the creation and refinement of yarning questions to ensure they were in language relevant for their local community.
The yarning sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with transcripts checked by participants prior to analysis. Verification of transcripts and findings with participants provided a secondary process to ensure participant safety and wellbeing following initial discussions as well as opportunity for further input and clarification of meaning. After each research cycle transcripts were coded and analysed by the QATSICPP research team using NVivo software. Throughout the project the research leads held regular Communities of Practice meetings, where the researchers reflected on the process, and collectively reviewed and interpreted the data, as well as utilising the knowledge gained in the previous cycle to guide the line of enquiry for the next research cycle.

The findings of the project are reported in two reports, *New ways for our families* (Morgan et al., 2022), and *You can’t pour from an empty cup* (Morgan et al., 2023b), and have been translated into a practice framework designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to decolonise practice and to address the impacts of domestic and family violence (Morgan et al., 2023a). Consistent with both Aboriginal participatory action research and the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, the development of this practice framework is about First Nations people not only driving the creation of knowledge but also ensuring its application serves their interests.

**Participant reflections on aboriginal participatory action research**

At the completion of the action research cycles participants and facilitators were asked to reflect on the Aboriginal participatory action research process. There was broad consensus amongst the research team, that Aboriginal participatory action research was an effective approach in terms of both process and outcome, and a number of benefits were highlighted. The Aboriginal participatory action research process was seen as good fit with usual practice, and aligns with practitioners’ usual work (act, observe, reflect, plan). Therefore, while some community researchers lacked prior experience with formal research, they connected well with the theory and practice of action research. Having support from project partners at the Institute of Child Protection Studies with strong background in action research helped to assist participants to make meaning of the methodology and have ownership over the process. Community researchers viewed the experience as a developmental opportunity, stating that the process affirmed and strengthened their research skills, and provided a welcome opportunity for practitioners to conduct the business of research themselves. They also found the methodology to be empowering, healing and reciprocal, with one community researcher stating:

> There was this safe united feeling, as well as warmth and compassion for each other... this overwhelming sense of peace and safety in the room, also the presence of relief, and letting go and healing (Anonymous, personal communication, January 2022).
Community researchers also highly valued the peer network, which enabled mutual support, joint reflection and the sharing of practice knowledge, assisting them to maintain social and emotional wellbeing amidst the incredibly challenging work of responding to domestic and family violence. Another strength of the process was that community members who participated in the project reported that it provided a safe, inclusive process which enable them to explore challenging topics in a way that made them feel their experiences and perspectives had value.

Further to the strengths of the process, participants also identified positive outcomes arising from the research. The project supported and acknowledged frontline practitioner reflections on their complex work to address domestic and family violence based on Indigenous ways of knowing and being within the constructs of a westernised child protection system. The networks, connections and trust the community researchers had in their communities meant the project was able to benefit from the engagement of a variety of people with critical insight into the issues being explored. It is highly unlikely it would have been possible for the project to achieve such engagement about a difficult issue such as domestic and family violence without the existing relationships of the community researchers. As one QATSICPP chief investigator for the project put it – ‘people are only going to open up to you about a topic like this if they know you’. (R. French, personal communication, March 2022.). Participants reported a high level of confidence in the reports and recommendations due to the high level of involvement of community researchers not in the yarning, but in the analysis and development of findings.

A number of challenges and limitations were identified including access problems in some remote areas, and obstacles to engaging with young people under 18 years of age. Given the critical focus in the project on this group, the omission of their direct perspectives was seen as a significant gap. A final challenge related to difficulties juggling frontline work commitments with a desire to participate fully and meaningfully in the research for some lone community researcher practitioners.

**Example 2 – implementing delegated authority – capturing our story**

The second project relates to systems reform and collaboration between community-controlled organisations and the statutory child protection body to evaluate and inform the ground-breaking implementation of delegated authority reforms in Queensland. In 2018 the Child Protection Act 1999 (the Act) was amended to enable the Chief Executive of Queensland’s then Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women to delegate functions and powers to the Chief Executive Officer of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander entity in relation to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child. This was a significant reform, giving practical effect to the principle of determination in the Act through establishing legal authority to accompany the cultural authority First Nations communities have over decisions about the safety, wellbeing and care of their children. Despite the promise of a new, decolonised child protection system, all stakeholders acknowledged this transformational change would need a planned and executed
transition process, requiring capacity building both within government and the community-controlled sector. To capture this change and inform implementation QATSICPP was commissioned to undertake action research throughout the project. As well as collecting evidence to understand the nature of implementation and support refinements to the approach, the action research would also support Aboriginal and Torres Strait community-controlled organisations and the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs in ensuring they have the right processes, policies and methodologies for the ongoing expansion of delegated authority across Queensland.

**Methods and processes**

To guide the action research, QATSICPP formulated an overarching question that sought to frame the project: ‘*What does implementation of delegated authority look like and how can we improve it to be the best practice and design?*’ Critically, whilst the project involved significant collaboration with Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs, it was led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout, in line with Aboriginal participatory action research methodology. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at QATSICPP decided on the framing of the original overarching project question and the refinement of subsequent discussion questions, as well as choosing a semi-structured yarning methodology for the action research. First Nations staff at QATSICPP facilitated the semi-structured sessions and led discussions on how findings were to be interpreted and relevant recommendations formulated.

The delegated authority reforms are occurring against a historical backdrop of, mistrust and generational experiences of negative statutory child protection agencies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In recognition of this, the action research process undertaken needed to reflect and foster the kinds of strong partnership that all stakeholders had recognised as critical to the delegated authority reform. To this end, a staged approach was undertaken to support equitable participation and to ensure that differing viewpoints and understandings were captured (see Figure 2). Initially the semi-structured yarning sessions would be held separately for community controlled and Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs staff, before a third session with both stakeholder groups present; this was to enable participants to have honest and frank conversations safely in the first instance, enabling a more accurate picture of the realities faced and more open joint reflection.

Key questions were formulated to enable participants to reflect on the implementation of delegated authority at each point of the cycle. A key focus for these questions and subsequent analysis was exploring how the knowledge produced could help to ensure the new child protection system created through the delegated authority reforms could honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. New questions emerged at the end of each cycle of action research that were utilised in future reflections. The responses from each of the action research meetings
were then transcribed and in the interests of adhering to Indigenous Data Sovereignty, provided back to participants for verification. All qualitative responses were entered into NVivo software and coded via a thematic structure developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the research team. Data was then aggregated via both numbers of responses and qualitative quotes to enable key issues to be highlighted. QATSICPP produced regular summary reports for participants throughout the process, culminating in a final report summarising the action research cycles that occurred across the two early adopter sites during the project.

**Figure 2.** Cycles of action research undertaken in the Implementing Delegated Authority – Capturing Our Story project.

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**Participant reflections on aboriginal participatory action research**

The final action research report, *Implementing delegated authority – Capturing our story* (QATSICPP, 2021), highlighted a number of key reflections on the roll out of the
program to date, including the need for building strong foundations – in relationships, processes, and systems (locally, regionally and centrally), as the key enabler of success. To achieve this, it was seen as imperative to refine current processes not just accept them, streamline some and continuously reflect on how to improve them. Project reflections to date suggest participants found the action research approach inclusive, participatory and effective in assisting them to address critical practice and systemic issues.

Participants identified a range of strengths in the process. For example, they highly valued the opportunity to stop and reflect, not only on their own work, but on the work of their partners in the delegated authority reform and what ‘working in partnership’ meant in the emerging context enabled by the new legislation. The approach of running separate yarning circles for Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs and community-controlled staff originally was a critical step in allowing constructive collaborative discussions to occur. The process provided Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs the chance to reflect on their work from a cultural perspective and acknowledge the impact of existing power imbalances in the current family support and child protection systems. The focus in Aboriginal participatory action research on First Nations led conception and framing of critical research issues helped non-Indigenous staff at Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs to reflect and reconcile what a new system based on Indigenous ways of being and doing would mean and require. Having technical support from the Institute for Child Protection Studies in promoting the validity and potential benefits of action research helped to build stakeholder faith in the process. Both Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs and community-controlled organisations indicated they were likely to implement the recommendations from action research process as they felt that had a high level of involvement and could see their voice reflected in the reports produced.

Participants identified a number of strong outcomes from the project. For example, the collective nature of reflection enabled by the Aboriginal participatory action research methodology resulted in ways forward for the implementation of DA that were also collective in nature. The Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs and community-controlled organisations came up with solutions to the issues they faced collectively, or agreed to try new approaches. Participants at all levels reflected that the action research process itself became an important tool for continuing to develop positive working relationships as all opinions were valued through the process.

Some limitations were noted. Given the specific local factors in shaping the nature of the reflections in the research, there are limitations on the applicability of this knowledge to the roll out of delegated authority in other parts of Queensland. To a significant degree, the quality of research produced through an action research process is dependent on the state of existing relationships between stakeholders, and hence some degree of relationship building is foundational to any kind of action research process.
Conclusion

The importance of self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has long been a secondary focus of evaluation (Katz et al., 2016; Dudgeon et al., 2020). Many commissioners of evaluation including state and federal governments believe that unless evaluation is undertaken independently then it cannot be rigorous or its findings valid. Such arguments are founded in Western approaches to evaluation, which have placed a strong focus on independence of an ‘expert’ evaluator who observes and makes findings from a place far enough removed from where the work takes place (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). However, as noted by Lackey and colleagues (2017) Western research traditions themselves come from a place of bias, based as they are on the underlying theories and assumptions guiding the research, and the particular personal lens through which the researcher makes their observations. Moreover, as Patton (2008) argues, research on evaluation demonstrates that intended users are more likely to use evaluations if they understand and feel ownership of the evaluation process and findings.

The action research examples highlighted in this article represent ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are using evaluation methodologies such as Aboriginal participatory action research to combat the colonising discourse of mainstream research and uphold the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, in a way that can contribute to not only more effective service delivery, but healing and self-determination. A key insight gained from this work highlighted the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples being leaders, decision makers and participants in the process of ‘doing’ the research was the only way that meaningful, useful, unpublished and deeply sensitive knowledge could be created.

QATSICPP is working as an organisation to use and implement effective evaluation methods which honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing. Whilst much of this has been successful the need to continue to work within Western structures, including contracts that provide limited resourcing and time for research completion, has at times been a challenge to upholding the principles of Aboriginal participatory action research and Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Continuing to share ways in which such barriers can be overcome is part of a rich tradition in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, where communities have collectively evaluated and identified solutions, as well as sharing knowledge, across multiple domains creating strong knowledge systems for over 60,000 years. We hope this article contributes to this continuing cultural objective.

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