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.

Background
In June 2023 QATSICPP published an article in the Evaluation Journal of Australasia outlining an Action Research approach used in the development of two child protection initiatives in Queensland (Moore & French, 2023). There is a long history of research and evaluation processes which have exploited First Nations communities and contributed to negative stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination. To counter this QATSICPP utilises evaluative approaches which are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
led, and aligned with the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and self-determination. To this end QATSICPP has adopted Aboriginal Participatory Action research (APAR; Dudgeon et al., 2020) methods to a diverse range of projects in recent years. Aboriginal participatory action research 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.

The article explores the experiences of participants involved on two APAR projects in Queensland. The first relates to community-controlled Family Wellbeing Services in regional and remote Queensland, and the second involves the implementation of delegated authority (DA) in pilot sites in the Sunshine Coast and Central Queensland regions. Delegated authority relates to legislative changes allowing for the delegation of certain functions and powers in relation to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children to shift from the government to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander entity.

The findings of the Family Wellbeing Services 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., 2023a), 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., 2023b). The DA action research project is reported in *Implementing delegated authority – Capturing our story* (QATSICPP, 2021).

**Key Findings**

Participant Reflections on the benefits of the APAR process:

- Capacity building opportunity for community researchers.
- Participants found the APAR process empowering, healing and reciprocal.
- The process was inclusive, participatory and effective in assisting participants to address critical practice and systemic issues.
- APAR was described as a good fit with usual practice, and aligned with practitioners’ usual work practices (e.g., act, observe, reflect, plan).
- Provided a useful opportunity to reflect on work practices, partnerships and power dynamics.
- Enhanced peer networks which assisting participants to maintain social and emotional wellbeing.
- Place-based approach allowed for local knowledge to be drawn from people with critical insight into the issues being explored.
- The participatory approach created a sense of ownership and a high level of confidence among participants in findings and recommendations.
- Participants felt that results reflected their voices and perspectives.
- The process was an important tool for ongoing partnerships and programme development.

**Messages for Practice**

- 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.
- Action Research approaches which preference Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing provide a way 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.
• Centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as leaders, decision makers and participants in the process of ‘doing’ research and evaluation is critical to meaningful and useful knowledge creation, grounded in the experiences and perspectives of those Peoples.


