Youth development programs in Central Australian Aboriginal communities

A review of the literature

In Central Australia, youth programs have addressed volatile substance misuse and, more recently, issues associated with crime rates, health and emotional wellbeing, cultural renewal, educational outcomes and ‘socialising’. This paper outlines the current context of Aboriginal youth development programs in the Central Australian region and reviews the relevant local and national literature to identify the key elements of successful youth programs. The authors suggest there is a paucity of research that explores the effectiveness of youth development programs for Aboriginal peoples in Central Australia, especially in remote contexts. Much of the knowledge from successful work is dispersed and often unpublished.

Aboriginal1 young people are among the most disadvantaged groups in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2011). In 2006, children and youth aged 0–24 years represented 57% of the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006). Anecdotal evidence also indicates that in Central Australia 50% of Aboriginal peoples living in remote communities are less than 25 years of age. Fietz (2006) suggests that these young people are fundamental to the continued vitality of Aboriginal identity; however, they often experience poor health, boredom and inconsistent care from family members. Of particular concern in certain Aboriginal communities in Central Australia has been the high incidence of petrol sniffing among Aboriginal youth (Shaw 2009). In response, the Federal Government implemented the Eight Point Plan, which included the expansion of low-aromatic Opal fuel2 across affected areas and the provision of alternative or diversionary activities for young people (Community Affairs References Committee 2006; Urbis 2008).

The prevalence of petrol sniffing has decreased following the introduction of low-aromatic (Opal) fuel in specific communities in 2005 (Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLUS) 2008; Shaw 2009; Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs 2009); however, outbreaks continue to occur throughout the region. Opal fuel is only one part of the overall
solution and, to achieve long-term benefits to communities, concurrent and comprehensive strategies are required (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs 2009). It has now become common for regular ongoing sport and recreation or youth programs to be conducted in a number of remote Central Australian Aboriginal communities (Shaw & Payne 2009; Barkly Shire Council 2011; Central Desert Shire 2011; MacDonnell Shire Council 2011).

The focus of youth, sport and recreation programs over time has expanded beyond petrol sniffing and other VSM-related behaviours to youth development programs to address broader health and social outcomes for young Aboriginal people.

In Australia, youth programs have been shown to have a positive impact on crime prevention (Tatz 1994; Cameron & MacDougall 2000), juvenile criminal re-offences (Clough, Lee & Conigrave 2008), self-harm and other risky behaviours (Carinduff 2001). Programs are having positive health benefits, including reducing the risk of emotional difficulties (Zubrick et al. 2005). Anecdotal feedback also suggests that activities are promoting child and maternal health and child nutrition. Organised sport and recreation activities for young people have been shown to influence educational outcomes (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2010); for example, enhancing school attendance and performance, retaining young people in the educational system and improving employment opportunities. In addition, some programs have been designed to promote cultural renewal; foster self-esteem; enhance confidence; and develop teamwork, social interaction and skills (Mt Theo Program 2009; Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation (WYDAC) 2012).

Youth programs that have been evaluated internationally similarly report successful outcomes related to health, education, social and emotional wellbeing, and cultural development (Tucker & Herman 2002; Harvey & Hill 2004; Hawkins, Cummins & Marlatt 2004; Carter, Straits & Hall 2007; Hishinuma et al. 2009). This information is limited in relevance to the Central Australian context; however, it offers some helpful insight into general themes and emphasises the need and importance of further local evidence-based studies in the area.

Methods

This paper provides an outline of the current context of youth development programs for Aboriginal young people in remote communities of Central Australia. Some of the benefits and outcomes of youth development programs, with reference to examples, are provided to establish the context of this discussion. However, our focus then turns to the key elements of successful youth programs drawing on local and national literature. The review involved a comprehensive search through online databases (ATSIHealth, SCOPUS, CINAHL, Wiley and Google Scholar) and the collation of grey literature from government and non-government agencies. The search strategy involved key terms: youth, development, programs, Indigenous or Aborigin* (prefix), and evaluation. Some grey literature3 was also accessed opportunistically, such as through references lists and personal contacts. From this material we have constructed a narrative review.

Youth development programs in Central Australia

The Central Australian region is comprised of the Alice Springs Town Council and three shire councils: MacDonnell, Central Desert and Barkly. In the past, each community council was responsible for the delivery of a youth program in their community (Shaw & Payne 2009). As such, the provision of these programs and other youth services in Aboriginal communities has generally been irregular, ad hoc and subject to the difficulties of recruiting and retaining quality youth workers and the insecurity of ongoing funding arrangements (Fietz 2006). In 2002, there were only five communities with youth services, and two of these five were only delivered occasionally (Shaw 2009). Most programs received funding from sport and
recreation grants, but generally it was difficult to recruit and supervise youth workers given the low wages that were provided. There were also some communities that received specific funding, although these programs normally lasted for a short period of time and then collapsed (Shaw 2009).

The MacDonnell Shire is the only council that has conducted a formal evaluation of youth programs operating in their region (Shaw & Payne 2009). Youth programs also operate in the other two shires in the Central Australian region (Barkly Shire Council 2011; Central Desert Shire 2011) and, although no information is publicly available, anecdotal feedback suggests that they are having positive outcomes for Aboriginal young people in these communities, where adequate infrastructure and funding exist.

The Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS) commenced in 2002 and has become recognised as a leading organisation in the reduction of substance abuse in Central Australia (Batley 2009). CAYLUS has been working with the local shires and government agencies to extend youth development programs across Central Australian communities, with the philosophy that a preventative approach to substance misuse will be the most effective (CAYLUS 2008; Shaw 2009). Other examples of local organisations involved in the delivery and support of youth programs in Central Australian remote communities include Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council (NPYWC), Waljiya, Bushmob and Mt Theo (Cultural & Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) 2010). There are also various youth diversion and youth development programs operating in the region; however, many are not regular ongoing programs or are limited to town-based activities. In addition, few of these programs have been evaluated or published in the literature.

**Important elements of youth development programs**

With the increasing number of youth development programs that have been created and delivered in Central Australian remote Aboriginal communities over the last decade, it is vital that programs are assessed and important lessons are shared. Since there is limited formal literature available locally, the key elements that contribute to functional and successful youth programs have been identified predominantly from practice and grey literature. These elements have been substantiated by evidence-based studies, where possible, and national literature incorporated, where relevant. The key elements are discussed in turn below.

**The youth development program**

**Variety**

The evaluation of the youth development programs in the MacDonnell Shire (Shaw 2009) found that there was considerable age variability among participants, where in some communities certain age cohorts were overrepresented and in other communities they were underrepresented. In general, activities are needed to cater for a full range of young people, especially those in the 18 to 24 years age group. Some of the core activities include: bush trips, cultural activities, sports, arts and crafts, cooking, discos, movies, music programs, multimedia activities and computer programs (Shaw 2009; MacDonnell Shire Council 2011).

In relation to VSM-related youth programs, the Select Committee on Volatile Substance Fumes (1985) identified that youth programs should be available at different times: after school, evenings, weekends and during school holidays and should incorporate a range of activities to cater for the diverse characteristics of participants, including gender- and age-status-appropriate activities. Similarly, the Mt Theo program adopted a multi-faceted approach to petrol sniffing in recognition that a number of concurrent strategies are required to effectively address petrol sniffing (Preuss & Brown 2006). Youth and recreation programs should not be the primary or sole component of a VSM program.
and other support; it is those who have recently started or occasionally engage in sniffing who normally attend (D’Abbs & Maclean 2008).

With the success of Mt Theo, other outstations like Ilpurla have been created to host youth-specific intensive residential rehabilitation facilities (Maclean & D’Abbs 2002). However, because of their remote locations, outstations are not appropriate for those young people who are violent or seriously disabled. They can provide a meaningful program, but town-based support is also needed to help with the referral and placement of young people. Importantly, while outstation programs often provide a restorative break, most sniffers will resume the practice if conducive changes have not been made in the home community to encourage other activities when they return. It is vital therefore that these programs do not place all the focus on young people that sniff and disregard the importance of the community and other distal factors (Maclean & d’Abbs 2002).

Engaging
In order for a youth program to be engaging it needs to be exciting and include opportunities for risk-taking (d’Abbs & Maclean 2008). Also, activities should be relatively informal and unstructured (Stojanovski 1999). An evaluation of school holiday programs in Central Australian remote communities (Batley 2009) found that the most effective activities for community engagement included those that catered for a variety of age groups, for example bush trips and discos. Those activities that taught new and practical skills were also beneficial.

For those programs aimed at addressing issues of substance abuse it is recommended that activities avoid giving youth who sniff preferential treatment but include measures to avoid stigmatising drug users (Maclean & d’Abbs 2002). It is also essential that youth programs are delivered regularly, particularly when schools are closed and during school holidays when risky behaviors like petrol sniffing are often observed (Fietz 2006).

Context specific
Fietz (2005) notes that community youth program models are often underpinned by the assumption that Aboriginal youth and the wider Australian youth population have the same aspirations, needs and interests. The broad application of mainstream youth programs does not take into account the differences that exist not only between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, but also between Aboriginal communities and groups. As d’Abbs and Maclean (2008) argue, interventions are context specific, with no single solution applicable for all communities. Programs that are locally developed, context specific and culturally relevant may be more effective and appropriate for young minority and Aboriginal peoples (Shaw 2009).

Fietz (2005) proposes equipping skilled youth workers with the ability to understand the complexities of Aboriginal family life and develop activities with consideration of the specific context of implementation. It is also crucial that young people and their families are involved in the planning and development of youth programs to ensure that activities are locally driven and not externally imposed (Fietz 2005).

Program staffing
Capacity building
Skill and capacity building is vital to the success of youth programs (Fietz 2006; CIRCA 2010). Youth programs should incorporate educational and employment opportunities and utilise local resources, including involvement of role models, promotion of strong intergenerational relationships, and community development and participation. Participation and support of older family members is important since they can provide advice on the cultural content of programs and influence wider community support (Fietz 2006; Preuss & Brown 2006; Lee et al. 2008).

The Mt Theo Program is a well-recognised example of a community initiated, supported and operated program (Stojanovski 1999; Preuss & Brown 2006; Mt Theo Program 2010). Warlpiri elders whose own children were sniffing petrol initiated and continue to run the program. Although Mt Theo now has

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outside support, the decisions are still made by the Aboriginal management committee and are considered crucial to the ongoing success of this program. The MacDonnell Shire youth development program has also shifted from a sole focus on youth engagement to an emphasis on “sustainability and community ownership and nurturing strong local youth workers” (MacDonnell Shire Council 2011, p.1). Activities are only delivered when local youth workers are available, in order to achieve a culturally and contextually relevant service that is run by young community role models (MacDonnell Shire Council 2011).

Youth worker workforce
Skilled and committed youth workers are a fundamental part of a successful youth program (Fietz 2006). Select Committee on Volatile Substance Fumes (as cited in d’Abbs & Maclean 2008, p.65) comments on the importance of employing staff who have some previous understanding of the problems of petrol sniffing, who would provide activities that were “purposeful, interesting, exciting and educational” and who are sensitive to the needs of the community. In addition, both male and female youth workers may be required and activities or even separate programs need to be provided specifically for females.

It has been argued that youth workers rather than recreation workers should be employed in remote communities since they are more likely to have a broader skill base and are therefore capable of working with young people with complex needs (McFarland 1999 & Shaw 2002, as cited in d’Abbs & Maclean 2008; Northern Territory Youth Affairs Network (NTYAN) 2010). Youth workers who operate within a community development framework might also aim to enhance the community’s capacity to run programs, rather than just provide activities. In contrast to other shires in the Central Australian region, the MacDonnell Shire employ staff who fit within the definition of a youth worker, as opposed to a sport and recreational worker (MacDonnell Shire 2011).

The study of the Mt Theo program (Preuss & Brown 2006) also suggested that perhaps one of the important factors in the success of this initiative is the strong cross-cultural partnership between co-workers (local Warlpiri people and non-Warlpiri community members). Non-Aboriginal members are acknowledged as an essential part of the establishment and ongoing maintenance of the program. They gain and manage resources, and negotiate between government agencies and communities in ways that most Aboriginal people are unable or unwilling to employ. Since non-Aboriginal people do not have strong Aboriginal kinship obligations, it is also beneficial that non-Aboriginal people are able to deal with sniffing action promptly, without complications of family affiliations (Preuss & Brown 2006).

Resources and infrastructure
CAYLUS (2008) suggests that the basic infrastructure required for a youth development program includes a recreation hall or other suitable building with shelter and shade, accommodation for two youth workers (a male and a female), and two vehicles (one for young men and one for young women). For operational requirements CAYLUS suggests salaries for the youth workers, a team of local workers and an adequate budget for activities. The reality is that in some Aboriginal communities there is a severe lack of basic resources which prevents youth programs from functioning effectively (CIRCA 2010).

With the funding announcement of $55 million for the implementation of the Eight Point Plan there was hope that infrastructure needs in the region would be fully met. Instead, most funding has been allocated to short-term programs and there is concern that at the end of the federal funding allocation the situation in the region will not be much better (Standing Committee on Community Affairs 2009).

Ray & McFarland (2010, p.72) commented that “… the availability of youth services is inconsistent across the region; some communities have adequate funding, others almost none”. There have also been reports that a considerable amount of funding in Central Australia has been granted to larger

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non-government organisations instead of smaller community-run organisations (CIRCA 2010). This has been viewed as wasteful as well as a duplication and devaluation of existing service providers. The infrastructure and resources required to support programs such as recreational and youth activities cannot be provided by communities alone (Maclean & d’Abbs 2002). Governments must also be prepared to commit to supporting evidence-based interventions and to funding resources to create recreational, educational and employment opportunities. It is suggested that relationships between government and community organisations need to be enhanced and strengthened (CIRCA 2010).

Findings from the MacDonnell Shire evaluation (Shaw & Payne 2009) highlighted a lack of management and administrative resources and a concern that there is not enough capacity to address the broader strategic vision of the program. There have been difficulties trying to keep on top of the demands of a program that has 28 staff members and is spread over a large geographic area. There are also concerns about the wider strategic direction of the program and how to improve the scope and quality for the long term (Shaw & Payne 2009).

Conclusion

There have been a number of successful youth programs developed and conducted for Aboriginal youth to address a broad range of health and social issues. Given the importance and benefits of these programs, it is essential that lessons are shared among the broader community. Overall, findings from the review found that generally few studies have been conducted to explore the benefits and value of Aboriginal youth development programs in Central Australia, given their relatively new status within the research field, particularly in remote settings.

The key elements of a successful youth program were primarily identified within grey literature. The majority of the youth programs operating in remote contexts in the Central Australian region have not been evaluated and are not formally published. Since there are inherent differences among Aboriginal groups and communities, there are limitations to the application of programs across diverse settings.

This review identified a number of key elements of a successful youth program in Central Australia. A “one size fits all” approach is not effective for youth programs operating in remote Aboriginal communities. Youth programs should focus on the provision of meaningful, culturally relevant, gender- and age-status-appropriate activities. They should incorporate involvement, guidance and support from older family members and employ skilled youth workers who develop ideas and lead activities. It is also crucial that programs have appropriate funding and resources, including infrastructure. Collectively, the effectiveness and sustainability of a youth development program may be dependent on the successful functioning of the various key elements outlined.

Notes

1. In this paper the term “Aboriginal” is used in acknowledgement of the diversity of Aboriginal peoples in Australia and in recognition that this terminology is not universally accepted. Since this paper is focused on Central Australia and the term Aboriginal is most commonly used in this region, the term Aboriginal has been chosen for this discussion.

2. Opal fuel is a low-aromatic unleaded fuel that does not contain the properties associated with the creation of a “high”. It was designed to discourage people from petrol sniffing (British Petroleum (BP) 2011).

3. Grey literature is defined as “information produced on all levels of government, academia, business and industry in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing”. Anecdotally, this service is no longer operational.

5. Youth workers contribute to the development of young people aged 10–24 years by: providing services and meeting needs, building relationships, and building connection to and participation in communities (Martin 2006). A trained youth worker normally has a broad skill base that includes delivering sport and recreation
activities as well as being able to identify issues affecting young people and offering them help or referral to an external service (NTYAN 2010).

6. In general, a sport and recreation worker has a narrow and defined role that involves the facilitation of regular and specific diversionary activities to promote an active and healthy lifestyle for participants (NTYAN 2010).

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