EVALUATION THE UNITING CARE WEST TALKING REALITIES PROGRAM

Overview

The Uniting Care West Talking Realities young parenting program aims to provide both an early intervention and a prevention focus for young families. It aims to influence the health and wellbeing of young parents and their children. This is achieved by providing young parents support to increase their life skills, knowledge and capacity to parent effectively as well as by offering the opportunity to undertake TAFE accredited training to become Peer Educators and presenters of Talking Realities. The program trains and employs young parent peer educators to present the Talking Realities presentation to high school student groups with the aim of increasing their capacity to make informed choices regarding parenting and health. The program has a clearly structured curriculum and runs weekly during school terms over the course of a year. Once young mothers have successfully completed the course they are eligible to take on the role of a Talking Realities Peer Educator.

Target Group

Young girls aged 14-19 who are pregnant or parenting and living in Perth, Western Australia and surrounding suburbs.

Evaluation

The Talking Realities program was initially developed in South Australia for high school students to highlight some of the realities of young parenthood and to assist young people to make informed life choices. Independent program evaluation has been conducted by the South Australian Community Health Research Unit between 2000 and 2004[1]. Although the research largely assessed the effect the program had on students receiving the presentations given by the Talking Realities Peer Educators, it suggests that the program had a significant impact on the peer educators in terms of their increased confidence and personal development. Positive changes could also be observed by program stakeholders in the peer educators' ability to feel confident, assertive, in control of their lives and to contribute to society, and that it had increased further education and employment opportunities for many of the peer educators[2].

An evaluation pre-and post questionnaire is currently administered at the start and end of each annual Talking Realities course. The questionnaire collects the following basic information for each participant: cultural background, age, postcode, study/employment status. In addition, participants complete a series of questions related to their communication and people skills, sexual health, knowledge as a teenage parent and mental health. The questionnaire does not measure impacts and outcomes for participants associated with the Talking Realities program and it is mainly used as a reflection tool for participants at the end of the program.

Other data that is collected on a regular basis include an evaluation report submitted by schools following presentations, and girls completing an anonymous end of day evaluation sheet after most sessions. Emoticons are used for girls to express how they're feeling, what was the hardest thing about getting to the program on the particular day, e.g. 'my partner didn't want me to come'. This evaluation sheet assists in building a picture about participants' lives. The coordinator can then tailor the program to offer support in particular ways, e.g. initiating a discussion about dealing with abuse from partners, without the need to mention any names or focus on any specific individuals.

No formal methods were identified to be in place to measure the success/effectiveness of the program, whether its objectives are being achieved, how the program impacts on program participants, and what features of the program contribute to any impacts observed. One of the main indicators that are used to assess program effectiveness is the fact that the program has a 50% retention rate.

The need to start a simple evaluation one month after the presentations for teenagers who attend the sessions to see what they remembered about the Talking Realities presentation, and if it has changed their attitudes towards sexual health, relationships etc. was recognised by the program coordinator in discussions preceding the development of the My-Peer toolkit. Other evaluation priorities included the measurement of changes in problem solving skills, knowledge of services, reduced social isolation, development of social networks, peer support, acceptance and feeling valued, and positive self concept.

Methods

The aim of this study was to develop and trial a range of evaluation strategies within the Talking Realities program, in collaboration with the program facilitators, which could provide data on what impacts the program was having on young parents, whether program objectives were being realised and what features of the program were contributing to any impacts observed.

To evaluate what makes the program successful, strategies need to be implemented that address the specific areas of change on a continuous and frequent basis. The action research process focused on developing strategies to assess the impacts and outcomes on participants that could be integrated into the program's activities and standard processes.

Three evaluation questions were identified:
1) What changes for young people as a result of participating in the Talking Realities Program?
2) What program factors contribute to these changes?
3) Are online evaluation tools acceptable to the target group?

The My-Peer project team worked with the program coordinator and a peer research assistant, who is also a trained peer educator, to design and develop six evaluation strategies which could be used to answer the evaluation questions for the Talking Realities Program. Using more than one evaluation strategy helps to increase the reliability of the data collected and allows different questions to be answered.

The table below shows the evaluation strategies that were developed in response to the evaluation questions that were identified:

Evaluation questions	1) What changes for young people as a result of participating in the Talking Realities program?	2) What program factors contribute to these changes?	3) Are online evaluation tools acceptable to the target group?
Evaluation strategies			
Weekly Monitoring Tool	Y		
Short Term Impacts	Y		Y
Long Term Outcomes	Y		Y
Journal Writing	Y	Y	Y
Peer-Led Group Discussion	Y	Y	
Digital Story	Y	Y	

Each of the evaluation strategies which were trialled are described below:

1) **Weekly Monitoring Tool**

The impacts of the Talking Realities program on young parents were identified through discussions, brainstorming and interviews with the program coordinator and peer research assistant, facilitated by a researcher. The results of these discussions were used to create the *Weekly Monitoring Tool,* an observation tool for the program coordinator and facilitators to monitor the status of each participant. Areas monitored are communication and problem solving skills, confidence, self esteem, peer support, healthy relationships, knowledge, self efficacy, positive thinking and positive self concept. The tool contains one page per participant which, if completed weekly over a semester, tracks impacts over time visually. The intention is to compare responses for a single individual and discuss any inconsistencies observed by the program coordinator and facilitators. The tool is also intended to identify any actions for young mothers who have particular needs/issues.

2) **Short Term Impacts**

The *Short Term Impacts* tool is an online survey for program participants to complete at the start of each term, and periodically, so that changes over time can be analysed and compared. The survey includes a series of validated scales to measure dimensions of change in the following areas: relationships, knowledge of help services, support, mental health, problem solving skills, and optimism/future thinking.

3) **Long Term Outcomes (Peer Educators)**

The *Long Term Outcomes* tool is an online survey designed with the help of a peer educator who was also a peer research assistant on the My-Peer project. The survey is an online questionnaire for peer educators who graduated from the Talking Realities program. The survey is intended to be completed 3-6 months after graduation. It explores attitudes, employment/study, knowledge, support, mental health, problem solving skills, and optimism/future and tries to detect which factors of the program stand in association to these dimensions.

4) **Journal Writing**

The girls attending the Talking Realities program kept a paper-based journal during their training program. The use of an online blog was also trialled for two semesters of the program. The online blog was a diary or journal that was to be completed online each week during peer educator training. The blog was aimed at gathering qualitative data that would help to monitor how the program impacted on the participants' lives over time. Questions or prompts were given to the girls to help structure the writing process, e.g. '*Write about something good that happened to you this week*' or '*What did you learn in today's session?*'

5) **Peer-Led Group Discussion**

A peer educator was trained to facilitate a group discussion with other trained peer educators about their Talking Realities journey. The peer-led group discussion focused on how previous participants' experience of the program contributed to generate important changes in their lives including attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, knowledge and skills, both short and long term changes, and what features of the program they believed contributed to any impacts observed.

The *Peer-Led Group Discussion* was trialled as a strategy that may be integrated relatively effortlessly into a program's curriculum and that can be facilitated by a young person. The aim of the group discussion was to collect qualitative information from current or previous program participants. The information obtained may be used to compare the data collected with the *Weekly Monitoring Tool,* the *Short Term Impacts* tool and the *Long Term Outcomes* tool to assist in strengthening the obtained results.

6) **Digital Story**

The *Digital Story* is a creative evaluation strategy which was used to obtain qualitative data from a previous Talking Realities program participant to capture explicit information about how the young person perceives that participation in the program has influenced her directly in relation to what she has learned and how she has developed. The *Digital Storytelling* guide*,* available through the **My-Peer Toolkit,** was used to create a two minute 'video' with still images, music and voice using Moviemaker software. The digital story could be used as promotional material for the Talking Realities program and to engage other young mothers.

Outcomes

The benefits and any limitations associated with each of the evaluation strategies that were tested are discussed below.

Weekly Monitoring Tool
Benefits:
- Most useful as a reflection tool and record of changes over time.
- Helpful to pick up slight changes that occur in participants.
- Assisted the facilitator to look at things that are happening from a different angle.
- Recording dates helped to link changes in behaviour to specific events.
- Provided a structure for reflection and forced facilitator to think about a person on a range of dimensions.
- Having different dimensions to consider helps tease apart individual dimensions - e.g. increased confidence may be needed before problem solving skills are seen, therefore a lack of problem solving skills may be because confidence is low, too.
- May suddenly see a whole range of areas increase followed by a sudden decrease in skills.

This may be aligned to the young person becoming 'consciously skilled' and fearful of the consequences of taking action, e.g. ending an abusive relationship.

- Helped identify different contexts in which behaviours may be seen, e.g. confidence may only be expressed when the coordinator is present, the young person may not be confident in all areas of life.
- Useful tool to enable facilitator to be more proactive, identify trends and pass on important information about participants to other staff.
- Detailed information does not stay in facilitators' heads, forces facilitator to articulate and record important details. Useful record when coordinator is absent or on leave.
- Continued use of tool by coordinator.
- Components are good - would not add others. The detailed description of each component in the user guide works well rather than being on the tool itself.

Limitations
- Not feasible to find time to compare responses of facilitators each week or even monthly.

Suggested improvements:
- Provide Notes space on a weekly basis - difficult to separate comments for weeks otherwise.
- Notes can be made on a weekly basis but not by component since not all components will have a comment each week.
- Consider having more weeks on the tool.

Short Term Impacts
Benefits:
- Easy to use as in an online format that can be sent out as a link to participants via email.
- Survey implemented in Term 2 and Term 4 proved to be more realistic than administering it every semester.
- Perhaps could be combined with or replace the pre- and post- questionnaires currently implemented.
- Really important to collect some data for evidence of program effects - online survey facilitates reporting etc.
- Particularly effective for girls to see how they have changed and to realise change is possible and for girls to have a self awareness that they are capable of change.

Limitations:
- Survey was perceived as a bit too long by some participants and very long scales were omitted by some participants. May need to reduce the number of scales included in the survey or ask fewer questions

Suggested improvements:
- There was some duplication with existing pre- and post- questionnaires. It may not be feasible to implement both types of survey. For future purposes these two surveys may be combined into one single survey encompassing the most important questions.
- Administering any survey will be difficult as it requires participants to examine themselves which can be perceived as confronting. An online survey that is anonymous may achieve more honest answers; however, in any case it is important to be clear about what the information is intended to be used for.
- Aim of the administration of the paper-based pre- and post questionnaires was mainly for participants to compare their answers before and after their participation in the program. For future purposes, an online survey which collates group data and provides summary

reports of the results may be a more useful strategy to gather evidence that the program works.

- Fitting the survey into the structure of the program curriculum, having a fixed time when it is to be completed, and following up those who are absent until they have completed it, will help ensure the survey is implemented regularly in the future.

Long Term Outcomes
This tool was not implemented due to time constraints of the program.

Journal Writing
Benefits:

- The online blog was tested over two semesters. Participants were not greatly engaged in the strategy. This may have been due to them having to complete an additional paper-based journal as part of the Talking Realities program.

Limitations:

- Participants appeared to see the online blog as a chore.
- Participants commented that they already spent too much time on the computer.
- Lack of familiarity for some, e.g. do not have computers at home.

Comments:

- It is possible that the next group of girls will enjoy blogging and it will become increasingly the preferred option with more computers in homes and an increasingly 'online' youth culture.
- A paper-based diary feels like a more permanent record since any edits are more obvious than edits made to an online blog.
- An online blog may be more effective if it is the only 'journal' that needs to be completed and not in addition to a paper-based journal.
- Requires access to computers, PC literacy, and flexibility within program to allow girls to complete journals
- To increase future participation it is important to build the online journal into the program as something that needs to be done and is not optional.
- By contrast, the girls really enjoyed completing their paper-based journals with some becoming quite attached to theirs. Reasons may be because it was part of their homework and built into the curriculum, it represented their 'personal story' which may be important. Participants liked reading how they felt earlier in the year and how their thoughts had changed, The girls appeared to like the creative aspect of drawing pictures/doodles in their journals and decorating the cover of their exercise books with photos etc. as it turned the piece of work into a personal valuable possession.
- Other aspects that contributed to why the paper-based journal worked included:
    - Giving young people directions by asking precise questions which made them think about their own values and opinions, and that they actually do have a story to tell.
    - Using strategies to trigger the thought process can assist in the writing process e.g. using *Deep Speak* question cards or *Stones* cards (please see www.**innovativeresources**.org for more information)
    - Emphasising that literacy does not play a role and that young people can express themselves in any way they wish to. When monitoring the booklet it is essential that the facilitator only makes positive comments, remaining non-judgmental, and acknowledging the young person's efforts (no red pen or criticism).
    - Building the journal into the program as something that needs to be done and is not optional.

Peer-Led Group Discussion

Benefits:

- Facilitated by a peer research assistant who is also a Talking Realities peer educator possibly contributed to reduce barriers among girls to talk openly.
- Stimulated a reflection process for participants which is positive for them as it makes them realise how far they have actually come and how much the program contributed to a positive change in their lives.
- Peer research assistant was able to transcribe and analyse the obtained data easily.
- Useful strategy to obtain direct input from participants on their perception of the program's impacts.
- Group discussion can enable enhanced reflection process and contribute to obtaining a broader scope of views and opinions than when administering individual surveys.
- Provides a meaningful role for young people to get more involved in the program.

Limitations:

- This strategy may not be suitable for all groups, especially those who are new to a program and do not know other participants very well. In addition, some young people might not engage in the discussion as much which can be distressing for them.

Comments:

- In order to obtain in-depth information the peer facilitator needs to have good group discussion facilitation skills so that they know when to follow up on answers more rather than continuing straight on with the question guide.
- Debriefing the peer facilitator is important.

Digital Story

Benefits:

- Perceived as an enjoyable and fun activity.
- High level of youth engagement and participation.
- Provided a positive learning experience and a means of increasing skills and levels of confidence of the peer research assistant.
- By having the young person reflect on their outcomes and achievements the tool had a self affirming effect.
- Provides a promotional tool agencies can use to advertise the benefits of their program.

Limitations:

- Rather time consuming.
- Voice recording and synchronizing with the music needed some practising.

Comments:

- It is important to have a clear message that one wants to get across to the viewer and not to get side tracked from this.
- Reading the movie maker directions carefully before you start can save time and energy in later stages of the process.

Overall Findings:

1. **Confidentiality and consent.** All evaluation strategies need to take appropriate measures to manage issues of confidentiality and consent.
2. **Inclusivity.** Some strategies engage participants more than others. It is important to implement a range of strategies that engage all participants e.g. creative, low literacy, shy members of group.
3. **Multi-purpose.** Evaluation strategies can have a dual purpose not only providing evidence of effectiveness but also providing opportunities for youth participation, fun, self affirmation, program promotion, and/or maintaining a positive focus.
4. **Peer research assistant.** Meaningful role for trained peer educators. Important in developing and implementing evaluation strategies as it increases acceptance among the target group. Opportunity to build valuable skills and work experience for peer educator.
5. **Sustainability.** Important to develop strategies that can be adopted by the program in the long term with no support from a research project team.

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[1] Jolley G and Masters S 2004, Talking Realities Evaluation Report (2004), South Australian Community Health Research Unit: Flinders Medical Centre, Flinders, South Australia