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Music therapy with Indigenous families: Cultural learning put into practice

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Introduction

This paper will describe the process of learning and development that occurred when the Sing & Grow prevention and early intervention project began to provide services to Indigenous families, a relatively new area of music therapy, particularly in Brisbane. The first attempt at establishing a weekly group music therapy program for Indigenous families was not as successful as anticipated; however through analysis of the contributing factors, guidelines were developed and implemented in the following program, which resulted in a positive learning experience for the families and therapists involved.

Background

Australia's Indigenous people are the keepers of the oldest cultural history in the world. This culture is rich in music and art, with the values of family and community held in high esteem. This culture and its ideals should be treasured, embraced and learnt from by non-Indigenous Australia. Indeed, there are many good news stories to be had; however Australians must also acknowledge the current alarming statistics in relation to the health and well being of Indigenous Australians.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disadvantaged across a range of socio-economic factors. They experience lower incomes than the non-Indigenous population, higher rates of unemployment, poorer educational outcomes and lower rates of home ownership - all of which can impact upon a person's health and wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2003)

The current life expectancy of Indigenous Australians is 66 years for males and 63 years for females. These are the equivalent to the life expectancies experienced by non-Indigenous Australians in the year 1901. Suicides account for 2.3 times more deaths than expected for Indigenous males and twice as many deaths as expected for Indigenous females (Australian Institute of health & Welfare, 2003).

Babies of Indigenous mothers are twice as likely to die at birth and during the early post-natal phase, and nearly twice as likely as babies of non-Indigenous mothers to be of low birth weight (Australian Institute of health & Welfare, 2003)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be the subject of a child abuse or neglect substantiation than other Australian children in all states and territories of Australia. For example, in Victoria in 2002 -2003 the rate of Indigenous children who were the subject of a substantiation was nearly ten times higher than the rate for other children (Australian Institute of health & Welfare, 2004). 35% of all calls to Kids Helpline are about current and ongoing abuse or neglect of Indigenous children (Westerman, 2004)

Despite current efforts to improve the health and well-being of Indigenous families throughout Australia, it is reasonable to conclude that further intervention is warranted.

The Sing & Grow project

Sing & Grow is a federally funded early intervention project presented in partnership with Playgroup Queensland and the University of Queensland. Originally funded for 2-years, the project has been extended to six years. The project provides opportunities for Queensland families who may be at-risk of, or are experiencing marginalisation, to access a regular series of music therapy sessions over a ten-week period within a community setting. Families living within identified geographic locations were initially targeted, particularly families who experience low socio-economic status, live with a disability, or identify as Indigenous or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD). Over the past three years a total of 63 programs have been conducted. Two of these have been with Indigenous families. The conducting of these two programs represented a period of significant learning for the project in the area of first practice work with Indigenous families. The following section describes how the first program was prepared and implemented, and the issues that arose, which were subsequently addressed in the running of the second program.

The First Indigenous Program

Sing & Grow programs are usually established in collaboration with organisations in the community that support families with identified needs. In 2002, the Director of Sing & Grow consulted with the Indigenous Officer of Playgroup Queensland and jointly approached an organisation in inner-Brisbane that supported Indigenous youth, and that Playgroup Queensland had contact with. There was limited time to prepare for the group as the funding body hoped that an Indigenous group could be conducted before the end of the first financial year (2002), placing time pressures on the already hectic first year. In-servicing was made available to all staff, but only the original contact person attended. No access to the families was possible for in-servicing or prior meetings. A date that

was suitable to the venue was set and flyers provided to the organisation and the women's health clinic located next door for distribution. The program was also promoted over an Indigenous radio station. A nine week program was planned as requested by the organisation.

Literature consulted prior to commencement reinforced that group strategies were often more beneficial and preferred to one-on-one interventions, as this would better compliment the customs and traditions of Indigenous Australians and cater for the value placed on social relationships (Nelson & Allison, 2000). Yeo stated that "aboriginal culture inculcates social and emotional closeness to multiple caregivers and the community at large" (Yeo, 2003, p.298) "Generally, Aboriginal children grow up in a close relationship with their community" (p.297). "The security of an Aboriginal child would be derived from a network of regular caregivers and acceptance in their community. In a multiple caregiver context, the opportunity of forming an enduring affective relationship with more than one specific person in the community allows the support and maintenance of the child's emotional health throughout their lifespan" (p.). To embrace these cultural values, the standard parent-child dyad focus of Sing & Grow, was broadened.

Sessions began in May 2002 but only five of the nine planned sessions were conducted due to clashes with the organisation's training days. Consistency in approach, which is documented in the literature as vital in allowing the development of trust and relationships (Vicary & Andrews, 2001), was not possible. Unfortunately such inconsistency seemed to undermine attendance as only one family attended each week (a different family each week) and did not return the following week. Of the seven families and one pregnant teenager referred to the service, five carried through and attended once. Attending each of these sessions were the music therapist, an Indigenous Officer, an Indigenous worker and an Indigenous volunteer who was completing community service. This meant that helpers always outnumbered participants which further seemed to overwhelm families. Furthermore the weekly attendance of only one family meant an individualised approach was necessary each session, despite prior planning to minimise this situation.

The standard session plan for Sing & Grow (Abad & Edwards, 2004) was used with minor modifications including the use of Indigenous instruments supplied by the organisation. Again, the literature was consulted for guidance on how to implement the session plan in a culturally acceptable way, but there was very limited access to literature pertaining to music therapy groups conducted with Indigenous Australians. While there is some excellent work being conducted, (Charles Darwin University Newsroom, 2004), accessing this work can be difficult.

Other factors that seemed to directly influence attendance were the physical location and layout of the facility. The location was chosen as it was central and

known to families, however the building was not suitable for groups, and sessions were conducted on a stage in the middle of a large rectangular room. This meant families had to walk through a large empty room and then climb five stairs. There was often a feeling of being vulnerable and unprotected. There was also no transport available to assist families in getting to the sessions.

Cultural issues that impacted on the accessibility of this program were also noted. In particular, the sessions were seen as 'women's business' which resulted in one father not returning, despite explanation that the program was focused on family relationships rather than mother-child.

On conclusion of this program it was decided that greater access could be achieved through a more successful implementation, greater community consultation and greater support from an Indigenous organisation. Despite consulting the literature and working with an Indigenous Officer, the program did not run smoothly, however, conducting the group allowed for many valuable and significant hands-on learning experiences.

Upon reflection and analysis of the program outcomes, four key elements for adaptation and development were identified. It was hoped that improvements in these areas would increase accessibility and strengthen outcomes in future programs with Indigenous families. The four elements were: Trust and rapport; Physical space; Staff support; Cultural issues. Several concerns and possible solutions were identified under each area:

Trust and rapport

Families referred to the program were unfamiliar with the Indigenous Officer from Playgroup Queensland and with the staff of Sing & Grow. No time was spent with families prior to the program commencing. Vicary & Andrews (2001) stated that relationship development is a key factor in the success of intervention in the Indigenous community. Furthermore, a relationship with the Aboriginal community, family or client must be built first, before intervention. Once possible intervention or treatment options have been explained to Indigenous participants they should be given a choice as to how to proceed (Vicary & Andrews, 2001).

In future programs, a 'cultural consultant' would need to be included who was familiar to and trusted by the families who could introduce the staff, and also suggest appropriate avenues for treatment. Meeting families in a social context would allow potential participants the opportunity to get to know the music therapist, ask questions and have active input into how the sessions should be implemented before the program began. The cultural consultant would then take an active role in the intervention (Vicary & Andrews, 2001).

Physical space

As previously noted the space for the first group was not conducive to therapeutic work. It was large, empty and acoustically was intimidating and did not promote feelings of security and safety despite being local to families. Families also experienced difficulty accessing transport.

For future programs, access to a user-friendly space that was light and airy would be needed. This space would be made more culturally appropriate by including Aboriginal posters and reading matter, and access to an Aboriginal person to liaise with, as informed by the literature (Wilson & Andrews, 2001). Participating families would also need to be provided with transport options to and from sessions.

Staff support

During the first program agency staff were not adequately informed about the program and their role in supporting it. This may have contributed to staff cancelling two groups, leading to inconsistency in the program delivery which undermined trust.

In future programs, more time would be needed to provide adequate in-servicing to staff and to build rapport with Indigenous workers, so that they could comfortably advocate the program to families. Session times would need to accommodate the organization's regular routine to minimise cancellations and disruptions to the weekly sessions.

Cultural issues

Several cultural issues were identified including a sense of being singled out as there was only one family present each week; the lack of Indigenous music; and the perception that the groups were 'women's business'. It was not seen as culturally appropriate for the music therapists to use Indigenous music without proper consent from Elders. However, due to inconsistent attendance trust was not built enough to allow for such permission to be granted.

Recommendations for future programs included working closely with a cultural consultant whose role it would be to encourage and assist families to attend regularly, ensuring a group, rather than individual setting. Yeo (2003) stated that "Aboriginal culture is collectivist, where they are more likely to think of themselves in terms of their affiliation with other people and their community" (p.297) and so group work is culturally appropriate. Group work would also reinforce cultural norms that "Child-rearing in the Aboriginal culture is literally a family and community concern and is not confined solely to the parents of the child" (Yeo, 2003, p.299). This focus of intervention on family rather than parent-child would potentially alleviate fathers feeling the space was not appropriate. The provision for getting to know families and working closely with the cultural consultant would assist in the development of trust and rapport with families to allow for the use of Indigenous music when, and if, an invitation was extended.

The Second Indigenous Program

A second attempt at providing Sing & Grow services to Indigenous families was initiated in 2003 in partnership with a major community service provider. The Playgroup Queensland Indigenous Officer was involved with the Indigenous Playgroup and approached the Indigenous Community Family Support Worker (herself an Indigenous woman) who was the Playgroup co-coordinator. In response to the learnings achieved during the first program, several strategies were implemented under the four key elements identified, to improve the chance of successful outcomes for families involved in this program.

Trust / rapport

Extra time was allowed for the building of trust and rapport and empowering families to decide on the future of the program. Three weeks of general music sessions followed by morning tea and informal chatting were scheduled. During this time families had the opportunity to participate in casual, non-threatening music groups, to talk to Sing & Grow staff, ask questions and gauge their interest in the program. The families then decided whether a full 10-week program would follow and how this would be implemented. They chose to continue with the program in the format used in the majority of Sing & Grow sessions. Westerman (2004) suggested that face to face trust and rapport building is essential, as some cultures within Indigenous Australia require that their people judge the spirit or good intentions of workers trying to engage them. To do this, the area around the solar plexus and abdomen needs to be viewed as this is where the person's spirit is held.

Physical space

Nelson & Allison (2000) stated that Aboriginal families need to feel safe and secure in the environment for interventions to be successful. The space chosen for the second program was one familiar to the participating families, as they had been attending Playgroup there for some time. It was designed as an early childhood space with an open and airy feel and many culturally diverse paintings and pictures on the wall. Over the course of a week this space was also used by Vietnamese and Samoan playgroups. All attending families were local and were provided with free transport to and from groups with a mini-bus pick up / drop off service. The Sing & Grow program was brought to the family's own environment, and the parents controlled how the program was to be implemented.

Staff support

The Indigenous Officer from playgroup Qld attended each session to support the playgroup coordinator, the session leader, and families, in making the most of what the program had to offer.

The playgroup coordinator acted as the cultural consultant and had many extended family members attending the program. She was instrumental in maintaining attendance and motivation for families throughout the program and

was an active participant in sessions, and modelling various interactive and play behaviours each week. Through in-service training, she was aware of the potential benefits of the program in enhancing parent-child and family relationships and building confidence in parenting skills. She became very directive with parents when she felt they weren't participating to their full extent. As she was an older Indigenous woman, and was known to the mothers in the group, this direction was accepted and used. This person also had between-session contact with families to ensure their future attendance and to check-in with them as to how they were using tools taught in the program at home.

Cultural issues

A family approach in an appropriate physical space allowed for the active inclusion of extended families in the program. This complimented the fact that many Indigenous parents place value on the role and responsibility of the sociocultural environment in shaping their children's development (Nelson & Allison, 2000). The group was attended by women and children each week. Session plan and song material used were the standard Sing & Grow collection, therefore predominately Western tunes. At the end of the program, families indicated that when future programs are conducted with this group, it would be appropriate for Sing and Grow staff to approach the local Elders for permission to use the local languages and some song material. In this group alone there were over ten different language groups represented.

Conclusion

The implementation of these changes led to the successful completion of an eight week Sing & Grow program with Indigenous families in the Western suburbs of Brisbane. A reflective and cyclic approach was taken to evaluating the group that allowed for weekly feedback from the two Indigenous workers to be acted upon and implemented immediately. Families also provided regular verbal and written feedback. Evaluation of this program showed that a total of 12 families including 19 children accessed Sing & Grow and five families attended at least 50% of the sessions offered. These results compare favourably with the attendance statistics of the first program conducted where only five families attended, with none of them returning for more than one session.

The Sing & Grow program is constantly evolving as a result of the action-research evaluation model adopted. Experiences such as these provide invaluable opportunities to learn, act and improve the services we provide for young children and their families. This model and strategies developed will now be implemented in other regions of Queensland with Indigenous families, where such opportunities will provide a time and space for further significant learnings as the program is taken out of urbanised areas. Like all families, learning for Indigenous parents needs to happen in a way which complements their identity and maintains their social relationships (Nelson & Allison, 2000). Programs such as Sing & Grow can invest in optimum early childhood, family, and community

outcomes while embracing and celebrating the rich cultural heritage of Indigenous Australians.

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