

Embedding research in practice

Research within Family Relationship Centres in Australia

Catherine Caruana and Robyn Parker

Reforms to the family law system in Australia in 2006 have added legislative impetus to the view that for most separating parents, courts are not the best place to settle disputes over children following family breakdown. Complementing the reforms is a national network of Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) established to resource families in general, and parents in particular, through difficult life transitions such as separation.

The action research undertaken by FRCs fosters the development of evidence-informed practice and quality control. This paper surveys a sample of research projects undertaken by FRCs established in funding rounds 1 and 2, and provides some insight into the issues of greatest concern to centres in the first few years of operation, the usefulness of reflective practice in service development, and the experience of the research process where external research partners are involved.

The opening of the Broome Family Relationship Centre in October 2008, the 65th centre to be established, saw the Australian Government realise its ambitious program of putting a “new face” on family law and family relationship services nationwide. Pivotal to the “cultural change” sought by the 2006 reforms, Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) are mandated to operate in accordance with government objectives of “promoting healthy relationships, preventing conflict and separation, encouraging agreement rather than litigation, and promoting the right of children to have meaningful relationships with both parents” (Australian Government, 2007, p. 1).

The effectiveness of these new services in meeting that mandate will be evaluated at a number of levels, both externally by the relevant funding bodies* and internally at an individual centre level (by either the FRC or the organisation running the FRC). In addition, as part of a continuous

* The Australian Institute of Family Studies is currently undertaking an evaluation of the family law reforms on behalf of the Australian Government. A component of that study, the Service Provision Project, is examining the extent to which the new service provision system, including FRCs and the Family Relationships Advice Line, as well as other services funded under the Family Relationship Services Program, is meeting the objectives of the family law reforms. For a link to the evaluation framework, go to: <[www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/rwpattach.nsf/VAP/4341200FE1255EFC59DB7A1770C1D0A5~AFIS-framework.pdf/\\$file/AFIS-framework.pdf](http://www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/rwpattach.nsf/VAP/4341200FE1255EFC59DB7A1770C1D0A5~AFIS-framework.pdf/$file/AFIS-framework.pdf)>



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The authors

Catherine Caruana is a Senior Research Officer, Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse.

Robyn Parker is a Senior Research Officer, Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse.

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AFRC Manager: *Elly Robinson*

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839
Email: afrc@aifs.gov.au
Internet: www.aifs.gov.au

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improvement approach, FRCs are required to undertake action research on a set of national and localised questions and are encouraged to participate in additional research using other methodologies, with or without research partners (Australian Government, 2007).

This paper draws upon a survey of the research projects undertaken by FRCs[†] established in the first and second round (in 2006 and 2007) to provide insight into the issues facing these centres in the first two years of operation and the ways in which these issues have been examined through research projects. This has the potential to benefit all FRCs, in particular the 25 centres established in the final round (Round 3, 2008), with the provision of services and the formulation of individual FRC research plans, perhaps preventing duplication of research in the future.

Background

Family Relationship Centres support families experiencing difficulties with familial relationships and parenting issues by the provision of information, support and referral to appropriate services. In doing so, they perform both an early intervention or preventative role for intact families as well as providing in-house dispute resolution services for parents needing assistance in making arrangements for children once separation has become inevitable. The government has been careful to stress the broader role of FRCs, describing them as being more than a one-stop divorce shop. FRCs were envisaged as a community resource, like a local library (Australian Government, 2005), open to all family members, including children and grandparents.

With a key function of the centres being the provision of family dispute resolution services for separating parents, and with dispute resolution now an essential pre-condition to litigation (with exceptions), it is clear that FRCs are located firmly in the family law system. They emerged from over a decade of debate and inquiry into the effectiveness of family law processes. The most significant of those inquiries, the report of the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group in 2001 (Australian Government, 2001) and the 2003 Parliamentary Commission report, *Every Picture Tells a Story* (Australian Government, 2003), found widespread dissatisfaction with a jurisdiction seen as difficult to navigate,

[†] For a more detailed summary of FRC research projects, including some from centres established in round three, see the research profiles at www.aifs.gov/afrc/.

unnecessarily adversarial (and therefore costly both in a financial and an emotional sense), and insufficiently focused on the interests of children.

However it was the observations of the latter report, building on the findings of the pathways group, which led to more far-reaching reforms to both the system of service provision and to the substantive law, introduced in 2006. In recognition of the importance of children having a meaningful relationship with both parents, these reforms implemented a much more directive approach to the judicial allocation of parental responsibility and parental time spent with children. They contain a strong message encouraging a range of family law professionals to promote the idea of shared parental responsibility and, where appropriate, shared care.‡

FRCs are central to the changes outlined in the 2006 family law reforms by acting as a “highly visible entry point or gateway to a whole service system” (Australian Government, 2005). Among other things, they offer family dispute resolution (FDR) services§ (the first three hours provided free of charge), along with assessment, screening and individual interviews for clients, as well as some group work.

The role of research and evaluation in the FRCs

While they are part of a nationally badged network, subject to the same operational framework and funding conditions, FRCs come in a variety of forms within rural, remote and urban communities. They are run by a diverse range of community-based organisations, including some with an established history in the provision of government-funded family relationship services, as well as a number of new organisations, either as a sole venture or joined with other agencies as a consortium. Some share premises with existing services such as counselling and family support services.

As such, the issues that FRCs face, and the means at their disposal to deal with these issues, may vary greatly. The fact that FRCs are required to engage in action research (Australian Government, 2007) suggests an attempt to instil a culture of research-informed practice and is part of the growing movement towards evidence-based policy making and service provision. A survey of these research projects offers the opportunity to systematically examine the diversity of service delivery and clientele needs within FRCs established in 2006 and 2007, and while research is not the core business of FRCs, these projects have great potential to assist in the development and delivery of FRC services.

This paper draws together data from participating FRCs to assist in the dissemination of information on research development and outcomes throughout the service system. The paper is complemented by a series of research profiles of the projects undertaken by FRCs who responded to the survey (see <www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/frc>). In the sample of FRCs surveyed here,

‡ Family dispute resolution practitioners in FRCs, along with other key players in the family law system, are required under s. 63DA of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cwth) to inform parents, that where it is reasonably practicable and in the best interests of the child to spend either equal time, or substantial and significant time with each parent, they “could consider the option of an arrangement of that kind.”

§ A plethora of pre-existing government-subsidised community organisations, legal aid agencies and private practitioners also provide FDR services.

What is action research?

The term action research covers a range of methodologies in which research (or understanding gained from observation and reflection) occurs at the same time as action (or implementation of change). It is often described as a cyclical process which alternates between action and review, with a continuous refinement of methods and insight.

Action research can assist organisations to develop reflective processes with the aim of both improving procedures and practice, and gaining a clear understanding of the environment within which they practice.

Further resources

Websites

Southern Cross University <www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html>

The Center for Collaborative Action Research <<http://cadres.pepperdine.edu/ccar/index.html>>

Books

Handbook of Action Research. Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2001). London: Sage.

Systemic Action Research: A strategy for whole system change. Burns, D. (2007). Bristol: Policy Press.

Online journals

Action Research <www.uk.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?prodId=Journal201642>

Action Research International <www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/arihome.html>

it is evident that some centres embraced the research process, reporting on multiple projects on a wide range of relatively small, procedural matters. Others were conducting research with the assistance of specialist units within their parent organisation (e.g., the policy unit of Anglicare), with external researchers or through partnerships with local universities on a single, larger project. Some projects such as the Ballarat FRC study looking at the impact of shared care on children, are quite ambitious in scope and are possible because of the active involvement of a researcher (in this instance a post-graduate student at Ballarat University) dedicated to the project.

Methodology for paper

The CEOs of the auspicing or parent bodies for all first and second round FRCs were advised in November 2008, in a letter from joint funding bodies,[¶] that they would be invited to participate in a survey regarding their research activities, conducted by the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC). They were then contacted by the manager of the AFRC by phone and those organisations interested in providing data were invited to submit a completed proforma outlining any research projects undertaken, including but not limited to any action research conducted as part of contractual obligations.^{**} Information from the proformas was recorded in a spreadsheet and managers were contacted to clarify any unclear aspects. Those centres working with external research partners were subsequently asked for feedback on their experience of the research partnership.

Results

Of the 40 centres established in funding rounds one and two, 21 submitted a written response, reporting on a total of 58 research projects.^{††} This sample included an FRC from each state and territory except the ACT, and included urban, regional and rural centres (with a large number of regional or rural centres).^{‡‡} This paper outlines the methodology used in the projects surveyed, any findings and, where relevant, changes made to practice as a result. The case studies highlight projects that are either of particular interest or representative of the research theme and are paraphrased from the description of the project supplied by the FRC.

For ease of analysis, the authors have grouped responses according to themes. Four major themes emerged in the foci of the projects, with several projects straddling more than one category. Unsurprisingly, given the newness of the services, the largest category included (mostly action) research on internal procedures relevant to the running of FRCs, including issues such as the management of waiting lists, ensuring the safety of clients and staff, and maintaining client confidentiality in a small town.

The next most significant category was research that sought to evaluate the effectiveness of child-focused or child-inclusive practice in the work of the FRCs, and the extent of access to FRC services by children and young people. Another group of projects looked at the effectiveness of FRCs in accessing or servicing particular socio-demographic groups within the catchment area. A final category explored the degree to which FRC services generally, and FDR processes in particular, met the needs of the community they serviced.

Theme 1: Internal FRC procedures

The internal operations of FRCs received a great deal of research attention, with 25 projects across 10 FRCs targeting one of three aspects of FRC operation: day-to-day centre management, issues related to clients and those related to FRC staff.

¶ Australian Government Departments of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Attorney General's Department (AGD).

** A copy of the proforma is attached as Appendix A.

†† The paper is based on information provided by centres in late 2008 and early 2009. As such, given the inevitable time lag in publication, this paper may not accurately reflect the current status of projects that were ongoing at time of writing. Readers interested in finding out more about the outcome of projects should either view the research profile posted on the AFRC website at <www.afs.gov.au/afrc/frc> or contact the centre concerned directly.

‡‡ See Appendix B for a list of the participating FRCs, contact details and a summary of each research project included in this survey.

Action research methods were typically used to investigate aspects of FRC operation, following the cycle of observation, planning, action and reflection. In some cases these were supplemented by data collection through standardised interviews (follow up of clients where a Certificate A has been issued),^{§§} the development of a specific tool (measuring readiness for FDR), or a brief phone interview (tracking the uptake of referrals). Other sources of information from outside the organisation were incorporated where necessary.

Day-to-day centre management

Projects focusing on day-to-day centre management ranged from an examination of ways to enhance service provision, to data and information management (including maintaining client confidentiality at Nowra FRC) and the transformation of physical space within the centre. The close examination of procedures arising out of the action research approach identified flaws in some FRC systems. A number of flaws were easily rectified, for example, by reducing the frequency of meetings, improving the management of meetings, or changing the physical layout of a centre to address privacy concerns. Workers at Geraldton FRC found that procedures around the delivery of client information sessions were overly complicated, with no shared understanding among staff of their purpose and an over-abundance of information provided to clients. In response, a standard presentation was designed, along with a step-by-step guide for session facilitators, with one staff member given responsibility for overseeing the sessions.

Similarly, examinations of problems with waiting lists and diaries identified the need for these to be actively managed and contingencies put in place to allow urgent matters to be expedited. One solution involved offering an interim service to clients. Another, at Noarlunga FRC, involved procedures whereby clients were contacted by phone four weeks after being placed on the waiting list, to enquire whether the service was still required. However the number of attempts required to contact clients by telephone led to the introduction of letter contacts, with clients approaching the top of the waiting list receiving a letter asking them to contact the FRC by a specific date in order to indicate the continued need for the service.

Management of clients

There were a number of projects that sought to ensure smoother client progression through FRC procedures. Issues relevant to the management of clients included effective practices for information provision, efficient intake systems and referral procedures, the management of waiting lists (as described above), preparation of clients for FDR and post-intervention follow up.

Lismore FRC, working with researchers at the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, explored how to improve referrals of clients presenting with domestic violence issues to other services. Joondalup FRC reviewed referral processes to external agencies more generally by first identifying the components of effective referrals (having a key contact person at both the FRC and the other agency; a good understanding of the role of the FRC and the other agency; and regular communication with staff) and the associated challenges for clients (service merry-go-round and confusion about the different roles of the agencies and changes to family law). The cyclical nature of action research was evident in the centre's exploration of this issue. It was hoped that an external referral form developed by the centre's Reference Group, which contained information provided by the client at the initial contact, for use by the FRC and participating agencies, would prevent clients having to continually repeat their story. However at the observation phase of the process it was evident that some agencies were not using the form. It was recognised that the system required ongoing review and that maintenance of inter-agency communication was essential for it to work.

A review of intake procedures, information provision to clients and preparation for FDR indicated to a number of FRCs the need for careful mapping of relevant procedures. This mapping fed into the development of flyers that are more client-friendly as well as step-by-step guides or

^{§§} See s. 60I(8)(a) *Family Law Act, 1975* (Cwth), that is, "a certificate to the effect that the person did not attend family dispute resolution ... but that the person's failure to do so was due to the refusal, or the failure, of the other party or parties to the proceedings to attend."

action lists for clients, clarifying what is required of them at different stages of the process. The guides, developed at Hobart FRC in the form of an “action pad”, were found to be helpful to clients’ understanding of how to take up the referral but did not improve actual uptake of this referral. They intend to address this further in a subsequent action research cycle. Joondalup FRC developed a “Genuine Effort Practice Framework”, with the aim of providing clearer information for clients as well as for FDR practitioners about the circumstances in which a certificate (indicating that a party has made a “genuine effort” to resolve the dispute in FDR, but now requires the services of the court) will be issued.

One approach to preparing clients for FDR adopted by the Gold Coast FRC involved the development of a tool for practitioners to assess a set of factors that might impact on the outcome of the mediation, namely:

- parental acrimony;
- parental alliance;
- the ability of the parties to focus on the interests of the child;
- a history of domestic violence;
- the skill of the FDR practitioner; and
- the willingness of the client to take up referrals.

This knowledge now assists practitioners in preparing clients for the dispute resolution process and strategies for the FDR session(s) and also contributes to the ongoing review of practices. The Gold Coast FRC is also surveying clients who have completed FDR over the last 6–8 months to gain insight into how FDR assisted them and what aspects of the service were beneficial or could be improved.

Concern for the wellbeing of Upper Mount Gravatt FRC clients who have been prevented from engaging in FDR due to the other party’s refusal to attend, led to a review of cases where a Certificate A had been issued. In order to better understand the outcomes for these potential clients, some were approached and interviewed about their current situation. It was found that the level of conflict between themselves and their former partner after attempts to instigate FDR was worse for 20% of clients, better for 37% and the same for 43% of clients. Only 30% of clients had used the Certificate A to initiate court action, while 11% had subsequently re-attempted mediation with another service. As a result of these findings, the option of providing support for clients who have received a Certificate A, via group work, is being explored further.

Staff development

Research on issues affecting staff looked primarily at training and professional development needs. For Darwin FRC and their research consultant from the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, an investigation into how to support Indigenous advisors currently on staff to become FDR practitioners resulted in targeted professional development planning. When the “Genuine Effort Framework” was implemented at Joondalup and Mandurah FRCs (see case study 1), it gave FDR practitioners at those centres greater support through the implementation of the certificate process, and afforded opportunities to discuss their decisions with other FDR practitioners and managers. Staff at the Gold Coast FRC also benefited from the introduction of an instrument to measure client readiness for FDR.¹¹¹ The identification of practitioner expertise as one of the factors affecting the outcome of FDR highlighted where further staff training was required. The tool also offers their FDR practitioners a basis on which to plan their approach to a particular case, especially in relation to managing high conflict clients.

As is evident in earlier discussion, enhancements to client management procedures and service provision resulted in benefits for staff in some instances. For example, the examination of referral procedures at Joondalup FRC also identified the challenges faced by first point of contact staff resulting from the lack of consistency in the referral processes between key agencies and the FRC. These were addressed by staff attending inter-agency meetings and professional development activities with first point of contact staff at other agencies. Other projects focused

¹¹¹ Developed in conjunction with their research consultant, Gabrielle Tidey from Passlow, GTP Training and Consultancy

on staff management issues (e.g., the organisation of staff rosters to maximise time for direct client work). Two projects examined ways to ensure the safety of staff as well as clients, in dealing with cases involving violence. Another project explored ways to maintain full participation by members of the FRC Reference Group.



Joondalup and Mandurah FRCs

A court cannot hear an application for an order concerning a child unless the person applying to the court files a certificate from a registered family dispute resolution practitioner, or the matter falls within certain exceptions (including cases involving family violence, child abuse or urgency).

A family dispute resolution practitioner can issue one of five types of certificates. One of those certificates can be issued on the basis that the parties to the family dispute resolution made a “genuine effort” to resolve the issues in dispute.*

In preparation for the introduction of this requirement, staff at the Joondalup and Mandurah FRCs in Western Australia identified the need for staff training in applying the rule of “genuine effort” as well as the development of an effective means of relaying information about this concept to clients.

Research question

What would it take to develop effective practices to ensure clients understand the concept of “genuine effort”?

Method

Joondalup FRC entered into discussions with other agencies and stakeholders to determine the level of client knowledge of the certificate system and the notion of “genuine effort”, and how these would impact on the FRCs. It was decided to first ensure that staff had a clear understanding of how “genuine effort” may be interpreted, so a framework (“Draft Genuine Effort Framework”) could be developed for use by staff. Once the framework was in place it provided a resource that staff could use to relay the information to clients and other stakeholders. To further strengthen the expertise of staff in this area, the Joondalup FRC and Mandurah FRC staff held a joint workshop to examine case studies and decide what certificate would be issued in those cases. Feedback was also provided from meetings with the Family Court of WA and combined meetings with Legal Aid WA and other FDR practitioners in regards to the issuing of certificates.

Implementation

By the time the system of providing certificates was introduced in July 2007, the Genuine Effort Framework was in place. A form letter was drafted to provide clients at both the FRCs with the information on “genuine effort”, detailing the process of family dispute resolution at the centres and what was expected of clients. This letter accompanied the written confirmation of the initial appointment to see a family advisor. To ensure consistency in the issuing of certificates across the family advisors at both the Joondalup and Mandurah FRCs, each case is discussed at the weekly case meeting and agreement reached on the issuing of the certificate to the client. The opportunity to discuss individual cases was found to be of great value to the family advisors.

Monitoring and review of the framework occurs on an ongoing basis at regular Operation Days, to ensure a high level of staff skill and knowledge in regards to “genuine effort” and that the impact on practice at the FRC is understood. Staff will continue to participate in combined meetings with other FDR practitioners and the Family Court of Western Australia to ensure consistency of information is being provided to clients.

* See s. 60I(8)(b) *Family Law Act 1975* (Cwth) , that is, “a certificate to the effect that the person attended family dispute resolution ... and that all attendees made a genuine effort to resolve the issue or issues.”

Theme 2: Child focus

The objective of ensuring a place and a voice for children in the work of Family Relationship Centres is of course central to the philosophical underpinnings of the 2006 reforms and to the work of the FRCs themselves. A significant number of FRC research projects (14 in total) explored, in a variety of forms, the most effective way of maintaining a strong child focus at particular points in the delivery of FRC services. For the majority (8), this involved the challenging task of evaluating the effectiveness of the pre-FDR co-operative parenting seminars^{***} as well as the FDR process itself in assisting parents to focus on the interests of their children, rather than their own interests or the dynamics of the dispute. Others reviewed the degree of child focus in the delivery of FRC services more generally, starting from the first point of contact. For Ringwood FRC this was as simple as exploring ways to make the physical environment of the centre more appealing to children.

Evaluating child-inclusive practice and the child focus of FRCs

In evaluating the effectiveness of child-inclusive practice, most centres and their research partners employed the more traditional evaluation tools of analysis of feedback forms, entry and exit surveys, interviews and focus groups and analysis of service data.

In one ongoing project, researchers from the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, working with Newcastle and Sutherland FRCs, are focusing on the effectiveness of FRC services in engendering greater child focus in fathers. The study will track the progression of fathers and mothers through the dispute resolution process via de-identified service data. The project will include the development of a questionnaire to help measure parental alliance including items on the degree of parental investment in the child or children; the value placed on the other parent's involvement with the child; the level of respect shown for each other's judgment; and the degree to which each parent wishes to communicate with the other. In addition, fathers who have registered with a FRC will be interviewed to ascertain the source and nature of emotional, material or factual support received prior to contacting the centre.

The analysis of 164 feedback forms from clients participating in the Nowra FRC Kids in Focus seminar in the first 6 months of delivery provided insight into the demographic profile of participants, their reasons for attending and experience of the seminar. The feedback received in the early stages has helped in further development of the program. Facilitators became aware that they needed more time with participants to explore what they hoped to gain from the sessions, so as to help manage client expectations. Requests for more discussion time on a wider range of topics have led Nowra FRC to explore the possibility of providing an additional group session aimed specifically at preparing clients for mediation.

In relation to the reasons for attending the Kids in Focus seminar, 24% of seminar participants attended so as to better support their children, 19% because it was part of the mediation process and 12% because they were compelled to do so. It is interesting to note that even though 31% of attendees felt that they had little choice but to attend, their experience of the seminar was largely positive. The usefulness of this particular research exercise in helping the organisation to improve service delivery is likely to lead to the instigation of regular reporting on client feedback on the Kids in Focus seminar to staff. Nowra FRC is also currently analysing entry and exit surveys of clients participating in FDR to detect, on a case-by-case basis, any changes in the clients' ability to consider their children's needs.

Insights from practitioners

Hobart FRC drew on the insights of FRC practitioners to inform the development of a 2-day practitioner forum on child-inclusive practice. Attendees were invited to complete a pre-attendance survey and findings from that survey clarified gaps in expertise that the forum, and

^{***} These are group seminars or workshops that parents are generally required to attend prior to embarking on FDR. They have a range of titles, for example, Kids in Focus seminar (Nowra), When Parents Separate sessions (Ringwood), Journeys of Separation program (Sunshine), Parental Alliance sessions (Joondalup). Action research undertaken by Upper Mount Gravatt FRC found that seminars of this kind were among the preferred topics voted for by FRC clients.

subsequent staff training, hoped to address. The Gold Coast FRC also sought the views of its FDR practitioners to assess a number of variables, including the level of child focus in clients participating in mediation, and the impact of this on both the level of client preparedness for FDR and the outcomes flowing from that process.

The voices of children

A number of research projects sought to capture the views of children involved to some degree in family law processes. Researchers at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia will instigate pre- and post-testing surveys for child clients of Joondalup and Mandurah FRCs as part of their wider evaluation of the effectiveness of those services. In-depth qualitative interviews will be conducted with 40 children to gather their “perspectives about the differences in their family now and before their parents attended the FRC”. The literature review conducted as part of this project has already proved useful in formulating written material for FRC clients on children’s developmental needs within different care arrangements.

The Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, in conjunction with Lismore FRC, will also be conducting interviews and focus groups with children relating to their views and experiences of involvement in parental decision-making. This is part of a wider study that involves interviews with parents, FRC staff and executives from the parent organisation, Interrelate, as well as a review of the policies and procedures relating to children of both Interrelate and the funding bodies. The study will examine how child-focused practice is “understood, facilitated and evaluated in Interrelate FRCs, both at an organisational level and at an individual level”.

Interviewing children involved in family law processes always poses significant ethical and methodological challenges. The Midland FRC, also working with researchers at Edith Cowan University, aims to circumvent such concerns by analysing data from children collected as part of the initial child interview and therefore already on file. In spite of the methodological shortcomings of this approach, including potential sample bias^{†††} and the absence of a (pre-FRC attendance) comparison group, it is one that this particular FRC sees as the least intrusive methodology and one that provides a starting point to consider the experiences of children. Midland FRC anticipates that insights gained could perhaps contribute to the development of further research on issues of relevance to children.

Investigating child-inclusive practice and child focus through action research

Internal reflection and debate on child-inclusive practice^{†††} was used in the development of, or to fine-tune existing, seminar programs of the four projects in this category using an action research methodology (Ringwood, Sunshine, and two Joondalup projects). At Sunshine FRC it resulted in the production of a kit bag containing a number of written resources for seminar participants. Ringwood FRC is currently developing a DVD version of the When Parents Separate seminar for clients unable to attend the centre. At Mandurah and Joondalup FRCs in Western Australia, the topic of child-inclusive practice has been a standing item on Operations Day meetings, and through that process, staff have contributed to the drafting of letters inviting the children of clients to attend the centre as well as developing a client feedback process for children who have seen the Children’s Counsellor.

Whatever the methodology employed, all projects aimed to contribute to program development, with findings from the eight projects completed at the time of writing resulting in modifications to procedures and practice.

†††The researchers acknowledged that there may be a fundamental difference between children whose parents agree to a child interview and those who do not.

†††For a discussion on child-inclusive practice, see McIntosh, J. (2007). *Child Inclusion as a Principle and as Evidence-Based Practice: Applications to Family Law Services and Related Sectors* (AFRC Issues Paper No. 1).

Frankston FRC

With Professor Thea Brown from Monash University as their research partner, Frankston FRC sought to “track the impact of introducing the FRC into the local area and identify what model of FDR would be appropriate for the clientele presenting in the catchment to enable them to focus on the best interest of their children”.

Research question

Was the FDR model adopted by the Frankston FRC effective in the Frankston/Peninsula locality? Was there any sign of a culture change in parents' thinking?

Methodology

One hundred clients out of 280 who participated in FDR from December 2006 to August 2008 were surveyed via a mailout of a questionnaire and by a subsequent telephone interview. FDR practitioners were also interviewed about the presenting issues being addressed in the mediations.

Findings

The research identifies considerable success in both assisting parents to reach agreement in mediation and the durability of agreements made. Sixty percent of parents surveyed indicated they had achieved some agreement, and of those, 78% indicated that the agreement had endured for periods of 3 to 21 months. Some 33% of total respondents indicated that they had proceeded to court after mediation or had concrete plans to do so. That left another 7% saying they had no agreement on any issues but they had no plans to pursue the matter further. Work is continuing on exploring what propelled some of those with no agreement towards court as opposed to those who did not proceed to court.

Seventy-six percent of respondents reported they had gained new ways of looking at the post-separation parenting issues and 47% of participants indicated they had gained a stronger focus on their children, with a similar proportion reporting improved communication with their children. Forty percent of respondents felt that communication with their former partner had improved.

The researchers concluded that: “FDR was effective for Frankston, noting the high proportion reaching agreements, the lasting nature of the agreements & the high satisfaction (outcome and process) ratings. There were signs of parents achieving a culture change in regard to their separation and divorce, noting the proportion of lasting agreements, and their views that they had learned and gained.”

Implementation of findings

The study has resulted in ongoing review of practice, the establishment of researcher/practitioner forums, the provision of training on the model of service, the kinds of clients presenting to the service and staff needs.

Theme 3: Target groups

The Operational Framework for Family Relationship Centres includes guidelines for FRCs on client service delivery (Australian Government, 2007, p. 8) that provide specific directives on involving children in FRC services and ensuring accessibility by all families in the catchment area, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, age or level of ability. All centres are required to provide a culturally sensitive service for local Indigenous people. The framework provides for weightings to be attached to Key Performance Indicators to recognise success in achieving outcomes for particular client groups.

Eleven of the projects surveyed involved research on how to better access and service particular groups within their locale. Among these projects there was a spread of focus on the following target groups: grandparents (Nowra and Berwick); young people and children (Lismore and Midland);^{§§§} fathers (Newcastle, Sutherland and Joondalup) and families from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background (Ringwood and Sunshine). Darwin FRC engaged in action research on how best to engage with Indigenous people from outside the Darwin area. Seven of the eleven projects used action research methods, with the rest either conducting surveys of clients and professionals or analysing service data. Just over half of the research projects were complete and had resulted in implementation of findings.

CALD and Indigenous clients

The Operational Framework guidelines referred to above clearly indicate that FRCs need to demonstrate that their client base reflects the ethnic mix of the local area. Research projects that explored ways to target different cultural groups, however, did not appear to have a baseline understanding of their success or otherwise in attracting such groups to the service. For one regional centre, it was data on the demographic profile of clients participating in the pre-FDR seminar collected via feedback forms that alerted staff to the gaps in their client base and resulted in a more targeted approach to CALD clients and Indigenous communities. At the Sunshine FRC, located in an area in Melbourne with significant African and Vietnamese communities (see case study 3), these groups were a focus in the development of the service from day one, having already been identified at the service tender stage. Comparison of demographic data with a profile of the client base in projects such as these would be useful, not only in directing promotional activities but also in providing benchmark data against which to measure change as a result of those activities.

Centres seeking to achieve greater engagement with particular ethnic groups within their area used a number of methods to explore how this could be achieved, including working closely with the local migrant resource centre, or ethnic resource and support groups, by employing community liaison officers or ensuring that the reference group reflects the cultural mix of the area.

Darwin FRC used a participatory action research model to obtain input from Indigenous Advisers about ways to engage more effectively with Indigenous people living outside the Darwin area. Through this process a number of Aboriginal communities were selected for regular visits from FRC staff and involvement in FRC activities. In addition, a reporting form was designed for these visits which would be useful both in generating statistics and collating information about clients and their community.

Including fathers

The emphasis in the reforms on equal parental involvement in children's lives following separation has led three centres to look specifically at ways to more actively engage fathers in family dispute resolution. As discussed earlier, Newcastle FRC, in conjunction with the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, is tracking the movement of fathers through FDR processes. Some preliminary findings from this study suggest that a roughly equal number of fathers and mothers are accessing FRC services in these two catchment areas, and are presenting with similar needs. However, the fact that only 38% of fathers and 50% of mothers actually had an FDR appointment within 12 months of registering with the centre raises further questions about the effectiveness of those services (Fletcher, 2008).

Sutherland FRC, a sister organisation to Newcastle and also assisted by the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, will be conducting qualitative research with staff from a number of FRCs. The research will attempt to define father-inclusive practice and to explore how

^{§§§} See previous discussion on child focus. When combined with the projects evaluating the effectiveness and impact of child-inclusive practice in the delivery of family dispute resolution, it is evident that children and young people are a group of particular importance in the design and delivery of services at FRCs, both directly as clients and indirectly as the focus of their parents' negotiations in mediation—hardly surprising given the fact that child-focused or child-centred practice underpins the policies and procedures of FRCs nationally.

Sunshine FRC

The Sunshine FRC is located in the western suburbs of Melbourne, a very culturally diverse population with 40.9% of residents born overseas (as opposed to 22.2% in Australia as a whole). Vietnamese and sub-Saharan Africans constitute two significant sub groups (ABS, 2006). One aspect of the funding application is that the centre will engage effectively with the Vietnamese and African ethnic groups in particular.

Research question

What would it take to improve or enhance the CALD community access to our service?

Methodology

Using action research processes of critical reflection alternating with action, centre staff met to explore some of the barriers to use of FRC services, and ways to ameliorate these barriers. Initially the Community Liaison Officer (CLO) at the FRC compiled a demographic profile of the area so staff members were aware of the different cultural groups in the catchment. A planning/strategy document was developed to determine how best to engage these CALD communities (the African and Vietnamese communities in particular) with strategies such as:

- the building of relationships within the African and Vietnamese communities and with service providers who work with these communities;
- liaison with community groups such as women's and men's groups, church groups, playgroups and parents groups, and presentation of information sessions about the FRC to these groups. Information was to be culturally appropriate and presented in easily understandable language;
- inviting community representatives and workers to be on the Reference Group (to inform FRC how best to engage their communities) and encourage them to be involved in other FRC activities;
- ensuring that staff members are culturally aware and sensitive; and
- having information translated into appropriate languages.

Implementation of findings

As a result of this groundwork:

- networks were developed;
- African community workers addressed staff on a number of occasions;
- two part-time CLOs (one Vietnamese and one African) were employed to further develop the strategy;
- forums were held with African and Vietnamese communities;
- the Afro-Australian Resource Group, cross cultural Women's Action Group, and Vietnamese Advisory Group have been established and meet regularly;
- staff training in cultural awareness has been provided;
- all events are evaluated via feedback forms, with feedback being very positive to date;
- culturally specific information sessions for separating parents have been held; and
- FRC brochures and flyers have been translated into a range of different languages.

Outcomes

Anecdotally, there has been an increase in the number of African and Vietnamese clients and community workers approaching the centre.

FRCs can assess professional capacity to engage fathers. It is hoped that it will inform both the development of a screening tool to assist in evaluating the capacity of practitioners to be father inclusive, as well as staff training in father engagement.

Other groups

In order to gain insight into the needs of grandparents, staff members at Berwick FRC are recording the experiences of older clients via a pro-forma feedback form, to report back to the rest of staff on a regular basis. This data will be complemented by information collated in face-to-face interviews with grandparents. An initial outcome of this reflective process has been the modification of the intake form to make it less directed to separating parents, and therefore easier for grandparents and other non-parent clients to complete.

Through internal observation and discussion, staff at Upper Mount Gravatt FRC explored ways to be more effective in getting party B (the non-instigating party) to accept the invitation to use FRC services and commit to the FDR process. As a result, Upper Mount Gravatt, Strathpine and Cairns FRCs made changes to their invitation letter, emphasising the services on offer rather than the consequences of non-participation, and added the step of phone contact with the second party in attempt to personalise the interaction. An increase of between 6–13% in the number of Party Bs engaging in FDR services across the three sites indicated that the measures adopted were effective.

Theme 4: Evaluation of FRC services generally

Seven of the 58 projects focused on evaluating client engagement with FRC services more broadly. Within this category there was a disparate range of projects, some looking more specifically at client experience of FDR and whether there was effective preparation of clients for FDR (Nowra, Midland and Gold Coast), some at the effectiveness of the service model used in that locality (Frankston, Mandurah and Joondalup), one looking at awareness of family relationship services in the local area (Rockhampton), and a survey of the community education workshop topics preferred by clients (Upper Mount Gravatt, see case study 4).

The Nowra FRC project involved the analysis of feedback forms from clients who had participated in FDR over a 6-month period. Clients were invited to complete one form if the mediation had not resulted in an agreed parenting plan, and another, which contained additional questions, if they had agreed to a parenting plan.

The centre was reluctant to extrapolate from the findings given the small sample size, with only 31% of clients having completed a survey. Notwithstanding this and a degree of polarisation evident in the responses, staff and management were heartened by the generally high rating of client satisfaction with FDR services. On further analysis, the negative responses were found to be largely linked to dissatisfaction with outcome. This insight resulted in staff being more sensitive to client expectations and the need to provide sufficient information at the intake stage, in preparation for FDR.

Another project currently underway and conducted by researchers at Edith Cowan University is focused on the efficacy of FRC services at Mandurah and Joondalup, and the experience of clients in their engagement with these centres. Much time has been invested in the development of a number of research tools including intake booklets, and post-survey follow-up booklets, as well as pre- and post-intervention surveys for parents and children. Semi-structured interviews with parents and staff will also be undertaken.

Discussion

Rather than a definitive account of FRC-based research, this paper provides a snapshot of the types of enquiries that may assist Family Relationship Centres in providing services. Just over half of the in-scope FRCs provided feedback. In our discussions with centre managers it became evident that there was a range of reasons for centres not responding, including differing

Upper Mount Gravatt FRC

One of the stated aims of FRCs is to implement community education strategies to help strengthen family relationships. In the first 12 months of operation, the Upper Mount Gravatt FRC focused its energies on establishing the FDR services, and when an attempt was made to run an additional workshop on the development of healthy relationships, there was little interest from clients. This provoked an internal discussion which led to a decision to conduct a survey to assess registered FDR client interests and preferences about workshop topics, workshop times and workshop formats.

Research question

What would it take to ensure that our community education workshops meet the needs of our clients?

Methodology

A team meeting was held to assist in the development and approval of a survey tool. Data were then collected from clients following intake, the pre-mediation group work and mediation sessions.

Findings

Clients of the centre expressed strong interest in workshop topics that related to parenting skills, methods to support their children through the separation, and communication and conflict resolution skills. In general, clients were less interested in topics related to intimate relationships such as dealing with grief and loss and developing healthy future relationships.

Clients preferred workshops to be held during the week and in the evening and were more interested in attending single event information workshops and knowledge/skill focused short courses (i.e., 4 weeks) rather than intensive therapeutic courses (i.e., 8–12 weeks).

Implementation of findings

As a result of this project, staff members at the centre now have a clearer idea of client preferences about group work topics and formats. During 2009 the FRC aims to further assess potential community education and group work priorities and develop a range of regularly offered group work packages.

The analysis and writing up of the findings helped to define program priorities and intervention development.

workloads and problems with staffing, changes at the management level and the fact that the information was sought over a period spanning the Christmas break. Some indicated they had no projects of substance to report for similar reasons. A number of FRCs established in the second round in particular indicated they were too concerned with establishment issues to conduct research. One manager advised that the only research undertaken at the centre was action research in the development of forms and procedures and in establishing community engagement, described as “survival stuff”.

In addition, the material provided by individual centres, their parent organisations or research partners contained varying degrees of detail and analysis. While every attempt was made to clarify information received and fill any perceived gaps, our analysis will inevitably reflect these differing sources. Notwithstanding these limitations, a number of key messages have emerged from this survey which may be of interest. These include insight into issues such as the factors driving and shaping centre research, the topics FRCs chose to research, the methodologies used, and the experience of working with external research partners.

Factors driving and shaping FRC research projects

The nature of the research activities that FRCs embark on can be influenced by a number of factors. With the requirement to participate in action research being tied to funding arrangements, some of the individual centres may seek to avoid “risky” or controversial projects, to disclose findings that are perceived to reflect badly on performance, or to report on projects or research partnerships that have gone wrong. Similarly, the quality of the research agenda of a particular centre will depend to a large degree on the amount of time and energy that client loads and staffing levels allow for involvement in research activity. A common lament among participants was that while research was seen to be extremely useful in informing their practice, there was little time to dedicate to it. The degree of commitment to research by the parent body and/or the FRC manager, and the access to support and direction in conducting research, either through an external research partner, an internal advisory unit or some other source, also impacted on the ability of FRCs to meet their research obligations.

Research topics

The topics under investigation in FRC research have invariably been prompted by the seven questions posed by the National Action Research Working Group.^{¶¶¶} It was interesting to note that although one of the proposed national questions referred, albeit somewhat obliquely, to the issue of domestic violence,^{****} surprisingly few of the research projects surveyed dealt with this issue. Only four of all the projects featured could be said to have a direct focus on violence (projects looking at the safety of clients and staff, screening for violence at intake and referral processes where domestic violence is a presenting issue). Given that an attempt at mediation has, since July 2007, become a pre-condition to litigation,^{†††} it is unlikely that this apparent lack of attention is because violence is an issue rarely encountered at FRCs. Perhaps as centres become better established and less concerned with the “survival stuff” involved with service establishment, the research focus will shift more to an exploration of practice-related issues such as dealing with issues of violence.

Choice of methodology

The majority of projects surveyed here employed an action research methodology (unsurprising given the contractual requirement of FRCs to undertake action research), with most of those exploring internal FRC procedures. Perhaps action research—implemented as it so often is in a collaborative context and as a tool used in continually refining practice—is particularly suited to investigating the efficacy of internal processes. Given the way it has been used in a number of these projects, action research could be said to be another name for reflective practice. Whatever the label ascribed, as an emergent process, with action or change occurring at the same time as insight is gained, this methodology has the potential to be easily incorporated into the daily practices of busy centres, deliver immediate results and promote teamwork.

However the fact that most projects that evaluated services used the more traditional methods of analysis of service data, feedback forms, entry and exit surveys, and qualitative data perhaps suggests that action research may not be as useful a methodology in *evaluation* research. It may well be that by its very nature the task of evaluating the impact of a particular intervention demands an inquiry more wide-ranging and rigorous than a methodology of observation and reflection can provide.

¶¶¶ These questions may be addressed directly in the action research of centres or used to formulate questions specific to the local area. For a list of the National Questions as formulated by the National Action Research Working Group, go to <www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Families_FamilyRelationshipServicesOverviewofPrograms_ResearchandEvaluation_ResearchandEvaluation>

**** See research question 5: What would it take to ensure the safety of clients and staff? The list of suggested national research questions for FRCs to explore in action research projects can be found on the Attorney-General’s website: <www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Families_FamilyRelationshipServicesOverviewofPrograms_ResearchandEvaluation_ResearchandEvaluation#frc>

††† One of the four types of certificates which an FDR practitioner can issue exempting a client from having to attempt mediation is a certificate stating that it “would not be appropriate” to embark on FDR. Matters where there are allegations of domestic violence and child abuse, or a risk of violence or abuse, can be exempted under this provision. See s. 60I(8)(aa) *Family Law Act, 1975* (Cwth).

Research partners

It was also apparent that some of the projects undertaken would have benefited from input from someone with research expertise. Some centres could draw on the expertise of an in-house policy unit, such as the Anglicare (Diocese of Sydney) Policy Unit. Two FRCs (Darwin and Gold Coast) employed an action research consultant on an as-need basis to help facilitate action research processes, shape the methodology, and review the results. Managers from both centres spoke highly of the value of this service and the quality of the relationship with the consultant. Other centres raised the possibility of using an existing research agency, such as AIFS, to assist in the development of instruments and the analysis of findings.

For the nine centres working with external research partners on larger projects, rather than in-house action research, the experience was generally, though not universally a positive one. In our discussions with these centres, the following factors were identified as being important in establishing an effective working relationship with an external research partner:

- a manager (and a parent body) who understands and values research;
- a researcher with good knowledge of, and passion for the sector, and a good grasp of the family law reforms;
- a willingness on the part of the researcher to work collaboratively with staff, management and the auspicing agency (especially important when the researcher has limited knowledge of the sector);
- good communication between the researchers, FRC staff and management. FRC staff need to be constantly informed as to the progress of the research;
- a research topic that is of relevance and interest to staff; and
- a clear understanding of the financial arrangements relating to the partnership.

The interaction with an external researcher can help to develop a pro-research organisational culture and provide a resource to staff via the exchange of knowledge of current and established research. The only negatives identified were that these partnerships can be costly, both in relation to the time commitment to the process required by managers and in a financial sense. Other support needs identified by participants included the need for more regular and comprehensive training in action research to build on that provided initially by the funding bodies and an opportunity for FRCs to share learnings from the research they conduct.^{††††}

In conclusion, there is a sense that FRCs responding to this survey view research as a worthwhile activity, with the potential to achieve more than just the meeting of funding requirements. Where centres are supported to undertake research in a way that is relevant to and compatible with the demands of service delivery, this kind of “coal-face” research can impact positively by helping FRCs improve the quality of their professional services, the mechanisms by which they are delivered and their reach into the communities they service. In addition, the national system of Family Relationship Centres is uniquely placed to contribute relevant and rigorous research to a family services sector, and a wider family law system which is increasingly hungry for it.

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^{††††} It is anticipated that this paper and the posting of profiles of FRC research projects on the AFRC website <www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/frc> may go part of the way in meeting this need.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Summary of FRC research project proforma

Available at <www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/b14pdf/frc_proforma_appendix.doc>

Appendix B – List of participating FRCs

Available at <www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/b14pdf/frc_contact_appendix.xls>