

ABSTRACT

Can agencies promote bushfire resilience using art-based community engagement?

Dr Richard Phillips, RMIT University, Angela Cook and Holly Schauble, Country Fire Authority, and Dr Matthew Walker, RMIT University, describe an arts-based initiative to promote resilience in communities.

Emergency management agencies are confronted with problems when communicating preparedness information to communities. Levels of community preparedness remain low despite the availability of education materials and bushfire safety programs. To address these challenges innovative approaches to engage communities are needed. This paper presents evidence from an arts-based community engagement initiative that promoted disaster resilience in a regional Victorian town. This approach allowed staff of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) to initiate conversations with local community members about bushfire safety. Some challenges identified with this approach related to CFA staff skill levels, appropriate organisational support, and response capacities of the local volunteer brigade. The question this paper raises is whether agencies can engage communities effectively using innovative activities.

Introduction

Emergency management policy has shifted from an emphasis on bushfire response to community preparedness, but the latter still requires attention despite extensive public information initiatives (Rhodes *et al.* 2011, McLennan, Paton & Wright 2015). This problem is significant as both the threat of bushfires and the number of people exposed to bushfire risk continue to increase (Jolly *et al.* 2015, Foster *et al.* 2013).

Positive influences on community disaster preparedness include community cohesion and attachment (Anton & Lawrence 2016, Prior & Eriksen 2013), perceived trustworthiness of emergency management agencies and personnel (Christianson, McGee & Jardine 2011), interactive rather than passive delivery of information (McCaffrey 2004, Foster 2013), and informal social interactions and networks (Akama, Chaplin & Fairbrother 2014, McGee & Russell 2003, Brenkert-Smith 2010).

In Victoria, the CFA encourages preparedness using education and engagement programs. These programs include activities categorised as:

- warnings
- public information provision
- localised information provision
- localised community engagement
- community consultation, collaboration and development (Elsworth *et al.* 2009, p. 19).

Informing these approaches are concepts such as resilience and engagement (Coles & Buckle 2004, Stark & Taylor 2014).

Resilience in disaster preparedness refers to relationships and social structures that enable communities to prepare for or adapt to adverse conditions (Brown & Williams 2015). Johnson (2010) provides four types of community engagement approaches that have been used to increase bushfire resilience. These are:

- community information (e.g. agency websites, mobile applications communicating fire warning)
- community consultation (e.g. Victoria's 2016 Fire Operation Planning consultations)

- community participation (e.g. the 'community fireguard' educational program delivered to groups of households in a neighbourhood)
- ongoing relations engagement (e.g. Emergency Management Victoria's 2016 community-based emergency management planning initiative).

In 2014, the CFA received funding to explore new approaches to promote community resilience to bushfires and chose to investigate an arts-based approach. Huss and colleagues (2015) indicate that arts can enhance resilience by addressing trauma, 'building people's capacity for and interest in shared enterprise' (Matarasso 2007 p. 457) and fosters senses of community (Mulligan & Smith 2011). This study explored key stakeholder perspectives on the effectiveness of an arts-based initiative to enhance community bushfire resilience.

Methods

Design and setting

A qualitative interview study explored stakeholder perspectives on an arts-based youth community program delivered by the CFA in a small rural community in Victoria exposed to bushfire risk. The program involved 15 young people (5-16 years old) taking part in two two-hour workshops each week for three weeks during the summer holidays. Parents enrolled their children in the program after receiving information via the local newspaper, school newsletter, a direct mail-out to all households and word of mouth through local social networks.

During the workshops the young people used drawings and paintings to depict their knowledge of bushfires. Program facilitators also used body percussion, voice, and percussion instruments made from everyday objects (tin cans, sticks, plastic bottles filled with sand) to explore rhythm and sound. Ideas were used to compose short music pieces and a play was developed about bushfire preparedness that was performed at an Australia Day event that was co-hosted by the local community centre, State Emergency Services and the CFA.

Participants and recruitment

Parents of young people participating in the arts-based program, community leaders, CFA staff and program facilitators were purposively recruited (Kuper, Reeves & Levinson 2008). Parents of the young people taking part in the program were interviewed because the focus of the research was not experience of the program itself but community stakeholder perceptions of program delivery process and outcomes.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to explore participant views and experiences. In total, nine

semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted. The nine participants comprised three parents of children attending the workshops, one community leader (who provided support for the program), one external program facilitator, and four CFA staff. Telephone interviews were conducted as participants were geographically dispersed across the region. Comparisons between telephone interviews and other techniques show no significant differences in outcomes (Sturges 2004). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed based on methodology by Braun & Clarke (2006) by repeated reading of the interview transcripts. Participants were asked about their experiences of and perspectives on the arts-based program. Interviews took place between February to June 2015 and, on average, lasted 30 minutes.

Results

Participant accounts indicated the potential for arts-based youth programs to positively impact on community bushfire resilience (perceived benefits), and barriers or challenges to their doing so (perceived limitations).

Perceived benefits

Enhancing community-agency relationships

CFA staff said that the arts-based program had promoted a positive view of the CFA in the locality and had attracted new interest in the CFA by enabling conversations about bushfire safety and the role of the CFA.

We wanted to have conversations with parents in a casual environment. We would talk about the opportunity for the kids to do this [arts-based program] and did they think it was worthwhile. Then it would come around to the messaging, 'do you guys get that information about the Community Fireguard?' (CFA 03)

I've been working with the brigade in the area for six months and having that [arts-based program] was an icebreaker for talking to people [that] I wouldn't have probably met. So it was handy in that way and to get their views on what they thought the [local volunteer] brigade was doing. (CFA 02)

Facilitating community networks

The program was perceived to have a positive impact on community networks. Parents valued the arts-based youth program because it gave their children opportunities for social interaction in a locality where opportunities are limited.

Facilitator - What was the reason - *why did you want to send them to it?*

Respondent - *Just to interact, get some social interaction... [and] when it's in town rather than travelling out of town, it's great.*

The arts-based program brought young people together at a time of year when opportunities for social interaction were limited. According to Resident 02 this was because parents in the locality would be engaged in seasonal employment. Furthermore, in the process of facilitating their children's participation in the program, adults could potentially reinforce their networks by meeting other parents. Encouraging such informal social interaction has been shown to support bushfire preparedness (Brenkert-Smith 2010).

Perceived limitations

Existing bushfire awareness

According to parents, their children's knowledge about bushfire had not increased by taking part in the youth arts-based program. Parents confirmed that their children already had some awareness about bushfires through other sources such as school and family (who worked or volunteered for other agencies). The general awareness about bushfires was also noted by a CFA member of staff.

When we starting talking to the kids and people, they had a fairly high degree of awareness of various fire messages. It wasn't totally new to them. (CFA 02)

Parents, too, had not learnt anything new via their children's involvement in the program. For some participants bushfire is a feature of living in their rural town.

You're just aware of [bushfires] and everybody is so close-knit, everybody keeps an eye on everybody. (Resident 04)

However, the extent to which bushfire awareness translated into preparedness was questioned by Resident 01 who stated that 'everyone is a bit blasé... you don't really think about [bushfires] until it happens'.

Local tensions

Participant accounts indicated some negative perceptions of the local volunteer fire brigade. While one parent was supportive and positive about their work, another expressed scepticism regarding their functionality and capabilities. In addition, community perceptions had also influenced the extent to which the local brigade participated in dissemination of arts-based program outcomes at the Australia Day event.

We didn't get [the local brigade] involved in the event because of the pushback in the community. But [they were] involved around the periphery of it. So they brought the truck down, the kids were able to squirt the hose. (CFA 03)

CFA support for sustained community engagement initiatives

Accounts indicated that community engagement approaches required a shift in the CFA's more traditional way of working:

It's easy for the guys to jump on a truck, spray some water, the fire's out. You can actually see what you've delivered. When you move to community safety you don't see that result straight away...and that's the hardest thing you try and sell. (CFA 14)

It's a certain narrow-mindedness. Not everybody, like [CFA 02], he didn't understand the engagement activity to begin with but he was very positive about it and just did his job... He just did it and learnt new things but that hasn't been typical from what I can see. (CFA 06)

Further to this, one participant expressed some concerns about ongoing resourcing and support for the arts-based program.

Word is that they're going to close our CFA down. If they do that now after having us happy with having the CFA people around doing this music stuff, it will be a smack in the face. We're not some crash test dummy in that respect. (Community Leader 01)

However, CFA participants (CFA 14, CFA 06 and Facilitator 01) confirmed that the approach was being tried in other localities in eastern Victoria to promote disaster resilience.

Discussion

This study examined stakeholder perspectives on an arts-based approach to promote community bushfire resilience. The study found both perceived benefits to the initiative (enhancing agency-community relationships, facilitating community networks) and a number of factors mitigating its sustained effectiveness (existing bushfire awareness, local tensions, perceived agency support). Findings from this study indicate that community engagement initiatives reveal complex social relations within a community and aspects of agency delivery that may hinder engagement activities.

This study corroborates previous research by Crow and colleagues (2015) showing that the relationship between emergency management agencies and communities is an important factor in promoting bushfire preparedness. Findings indicated the arts-based program offered opportunities for the CFA to initiate conversations with community members about the agency's role and about bushfire safety. This enhanced the local CFA's reputation with the community. This should be encouraged as two-way, face-to-face interaction with trusted sources is an effective communication method (McCaffrey 2004, Christianson, McGee & Jardine 2011, p. 48) and community trust in agencies is critical in disaster preparedness (Crow *et al.* 2015, Sharp *et al.* 2013). Similar engagement programs could be used in other

communities to help build bridges between agencies and residents. This study also showed that participants felt that their children's social and community networks were enhanced by taking part in the workshops, and improved social networks have been shown to be an important feature of disaster preparedness (Akama, Chaplin & Fairbrother 2014).

The study found that awareness about bushfires did not appear to be significantly enhanced by using an arts-based program as a vehicle for enhancing community resilience. This is underpinned by previous research indicating that residents in rural areas have relatively high levels of bushfire awareness and regard fires as a natural part of living in a rural environment (McGee & Russell 2003). Despite using interactive rather than passive forms of information provision (Foster 2013), the benefits of this initiative lie in strengthening community networks rather than explicit educational outcomes. This study indicates that issues of poor reputation and lack of trust hinder engagement between communities, the CFA, and the local volunteer brigade. These findings confirm existing research regarding the importance of public trust in agencies (Sharp *et al.* 2013).

This study used a qualitative design with a small sample size. While the findings cannot be statistically generalised, they offer insights into the particular exercise conducted and have the potential for theoretical transferability. Given the possibility of future implementation of similar programs, this study shows the importance of emergency management agencies responsiveness to local needs and the use of such programs to leverage opportunities for community-agency collaboration and communication. This approach highlights challenges both at the local level and within the organisation of the CFA and the importance of training and skills development for staff and volunteers involved in engagement activities. Findings illustrate the importance of agency awareness and management of local expectations when the program ends. While the program helped the CFA to address some of the localised challenges relating to perceptions of the agency, this sort of engagement requires skilled practitioners and time to develop effective relationships among agency staff, volunteers and residents.

The study design did not attempt to quantify levels of community engagement or resilience pre- and post-implementation of the arts-based youth program. Instead, the design allowed exploration and understanding of the contexts of implementation and the perceived benefits and challenges from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders. Further research could use quantitative or mixed-methods designs to evaluate the impact of program implementation using population-representative surveys. Given the arts-based program explored in this study was a short-term activity, it is possible that evaluation of longer-term and more sustained engagement practices between the CFA and community members would enable a more comprehensive assessment of effects on bushfire resilience.

Conclusion

Fire agencies need innovative and effective methods to engage communities and to promote community resilience. This small study investigated the feasibility of arts-based initiatives as a method of community engagement. The study indicated that such approaches have the potential to improve agency-community relationships and strengthen community networks. Arts-based approaches offer another option for agencies to consider as part of a range of engagement activities to help promote bushfire resilience and preparedness. Further research is recommended to quantify the effects of such programs on community resilience to bushfire risk.

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Project Bounce Forward

After the big floods of April 2015, Dungog Shire Community Centre provided emergency accommodation, food, clothing and other support to people in need. But, it was soon clear that recovery would be a longer journey.

For Dungog to truly recover, people needed to be connected and nurtured.

Project Bounce Forward was formed to help with information, links, resources, decision-making and emotional support to locals to 'Bounce Forward'. The Bounce Forward philosophy is that we don't go back to how things were before, but use the event to grow and taking a new, empowered approach to life. Project Bounce Forward is an 'outreach' model – if you can't come to us, we go to you.

See what Dungog is doing to bounce back: www.dsccl.net.au/project-bounce.

