

Conducting Peer Research: Learning From the Evaluation of a Parenting Support Intervention

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Abstract

Peer research has the potential to increase community engagement in research and improve understanding of the data co-produced. However, there is a dearth of research on how to effectively conduct peer research with parents. The current study aimed to collect the views and experiences of parents who were peer researchers in the evaluation of a parenting support intervention. Four parents participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed via thematic analysis. Results indicated that peer research tasks were perceived as becoming easier with practice. Benefits of peer research included increased awareness of the organisation's work, enjoyment of the process, exposure to learning new things, and continued networks among peer researchers. Facilitating factors for peer research included availability and accessibility of the organisation's support, and opportunities for knowledge and information sharing among peer researchers. Main challenges experienced related to the training provided, previous experience in qualitative research, coding difficulties, and procedures regarding the organisation of the peer research process. Parents also shared ways of improving the peer research process in the future regarding structures to support the coordinating researcher and continued involvement of the same pool of peer researchers, given the acquired experience. Studying the peer research process has the potential to increase the understanding of peer researchers' needs, preferences, and resources, and to inform research aimed at supporting families.

Keywords

community based research, methods in qualitative inquiry, qualitative evaluation, social justice, case study

Introduction

Parenting support can promote positive outcomes for children and families (e.g., Barlow et al., 2002; Hohlfeld et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2014). A wide range of parenting support interventions have been implemented globally. Still, further research with parents on how to foster engagement in these interventions and positive outcomes for families has been recognised as needed (Britto et al., 2022; Cadima et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2022). Participatory research involving communities in developing or conducting research can contribute to evaluation or monitoring studies that are relevant for those involved, and the applicability of research findings, supporting sustainable and locally driven change (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Kaya & Benevento, 2022; Moore de Peralta et al., 2022; Salimi et al., 2012).

Participatory research includes various approaches geared towards planning and conducting research with (not on) people whose world or experience is being studied (e.g., Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Heron & Reason, 2001; Ospina et al., 2021). Participatory approaches can contribute to shifting the power and knowledge production from trained or academic researchers, as in traditional approaches, to broader groups, stakeholders, or communities (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Liebenberg, 2022),

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and to fostering conditions for social change (Ospina et al., 2021).

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) emphasises the participation of community members in various research aspects (e.g., Higgins et al., 2007; Israel et al., 1998). CBPR includes a focus on the participation of community members in the co-production of knowledge, in line with constructivist and critical theory paradigms' emphasis on the socially produced nature of scientific knowledge (Israel et al., 1998; Johnson, 2017).

Members of the community being researched who participate in the development and/or conducting of studies have been referred to as peer researchers (the term used in this article, following the definition of Lushey & Munro, 2015), co-researchers, community researchers, or peer-interviewers, among other possibilities. Peer researchers' lived experience and contextual understanding of a community can contribute to building rapport with study participants, improve understanding of the data collected, reduce power imbalances between researchers and participants, and minimise bias in research (Burke et al., 2019; Lushey, 2017; Roche et al., 2010; Yang & Dibb, 2020). Parents as peer researchers can encourage the participation of other parents in research, and also see their involvement as personally rewarding (Shen et al., 2017; Walmsley & Mannan, 2009).

Enablers of peer research have been recognised to include: opportunities for an active and participatory role in all aspects of the research process, such as planning, design, data collection, analysis and dissemination; integration into the research team; adequate resources, such as reimbursement and childcare; effective research management; and quality research guidelines for peer researchers (Dixon et al., 2015; Greene et al., 2009; Lushey, 2017; Shen et al., 2017). Identified challenges in peer research have encompassed: resource usage, including underpayment and lack of opportunities for advancement; wide-ranging experiences among peer researchers; lack of role clarity; and power differentials between peer researchers and researchers (Boyd, 2008; Damon et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2017).

Participatory research approaches involving communities in defining the research questions, supporting the implementation of studies, and analysing findings seem to be growing in popularity (Hill et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2020). Co-production of knowledge involving parents and families in diverse contexts can contribute to developing research and parenting supports that fit their needs, resources, and preferences (Gillies, 2007; Hackett, 2017). However, few published studies have been identified addressing parents' experiences as peer researchers and how to engage them in research effectively (Damon et al., 2017; Hackett, 2017; Hall et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2017). Exploring the experiences of parents as peer researchers can contribute to informing how to facilitate their engagement in research, which was the aim of the current study.

The Current Study

This study was framed within CBPR, in which four parents participated as peer researchers. The research question was: How did parents experience their engagement as peer researchers in the evaluation of a parenting support intervention? They were asked about expectations, satisfaction, supports and resources relating to the peer research role, strengths and weaknesses of the work conducted, and suggestions for future practice.

The Parenting Support Intervention and its Evaluation

The parenting support intervention under evaluation was Powerful Parenting, developed by the Childhood Development Initiative, an Irish organisation with charitable status (called host organisation throughout this article). It was implemented in eight Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services (with children up to six years old) in a suburb of Dublin that has been considered economically disadvantaged (Central Statistics Office, 2016, 2022; Haase & Pratschke, 2017). The intervention involved having one qualified Parent Carer Facilitator in each ECEC service offering support to all the parents of children attending the service regarding parenting issues. The intervention included tailoring supports based on the needs identified by or with the parents, from one-to-one to group work activities and occasional to regular activities or meetings.

The host organisation and an external coordinating researcher recruited within a funded research project (the first author of this article) planned the evaluation of the parenting support intervention. The evaluation included interviewing the services' managers, Parent Carer Facilitators, and parents/service users about the intervention's utilisation, quality, and perceived benefits. Peer researchers were recruited to participate in the interviews with parents/service users. The research occurred while there were COVID-19-related containment and mitigation strategies in place.

The Recruitment of Peer Researchers

The rationale to recruit peer researchers in the evaluation of this intervention was to: promote community participation and proximity between researchers and participants in terms of shared lived experiences (Lushey, 2017); and to enhance data analysis on the basis that peer researchers' involvement and feedback could contribute to better reflecting participants' views (Roche et al., 2010).

Recruited peer researchers were not service users and were not participating in the parenting support intervention, in contrast to many participatory studies that include service users. The eligibility criteria for the post included being a parent of child/(ren) aged between 6 and 16 years, while the parents accessing the parenting support intervention had

children aged under 6 years. The option of recruiting parents not attending the intervention was purposeful to ensure peer researchers did not have previous assumptions about the intervention, and to enable parents receiving the intervention to feel more at ease sharing their opinions. The recruited parents were considered peer researchers based on the possible shared experiences regarding parenthood and community of residence with the parents they would interview.

Recruiting parents with children below 6 years old needing or having experienced a similar parenting support intervention could have been considered. However, it would be difficult to detail the intervention in the recruitment advertisement in such a way that parents could identify whether they had already accessed the intervention (i.e., parents in the services with the intervention could still apply for the role). The activities implemented could vary across ECEC services, given the goal of tailoring supports. The role of Parent Carer Facilitator was integrated into the ECEC staff, and the term used to refer to this role differed across services.

The recruitment advertisement for four peer researchers was shared online. The peer researcher's role included completing training, collaborating in developing the interview protocol to explore parents' views, conducting interviews with parents online or via telephone (approximately 10 interviews each), and collaborating in data analysis (up to a total of 26 hours of work, during 1 month, with a flexible schedule). The post involved establishing a work contract, and the remuneration was above double the minimum wage in Ireland at the time.

Thirty parents completed the application form. Seven were interviewed by the coordinating researcher and a representative from the host organisation, and four were selected. The selection was based on the applicants' expressed interest, experience, and availability. The selected candidates had previous experience working with children and/or families and participating in interviews and research. Although this experience was not part of the eligibility criteria, it was considered that it could support the work within the peer research role, taking into account the time and resources available. Also, since setting the role as paid seemed fair, and a possible enabler of the peer research process (e.g., [Damon et al., 2017](#); [Shen et al., 2017](#)), it was not possible to recruit more applicants.

As a reflexive note, the selection process raises questions about who determines who is included or excluded as a peer researcher, and how. While previous experience working with children or families could support the role's tasks, not selecting applicants based on it could reinforce the exclusion of those who had previously had fewer work opportunities. Participatory approaches can also often only reach the most powerful and articulate in local communities ([Kasdan, 2021](#)). Assumptions about who can be involved or not in research and knowledge production call for reflection ([Burns et al., 2021](#); [Cornwall, 2001](#); [Guy & Arthur, 2021](#); [Maguire, 1996](#); [Reid & Frisby, 2008](#)). However, based on our search for literature,

there seems to be a scarcity of descriptions and debates on how peer researchers have been selected for paid roles.

The Peer Researchers' Involvement in the Study

Recruited peer researchers completed training over four days (2 hr per day) on the organisation's work, ethics in research, recruitment of participants, data collection, and thematic data analysis. They also completed an online 1.5 hr' training on children's protection and welfare.

After the training, peer researchers were collectively involved in the co-production of questions to be included in the interview protocol aimed at parents/service users. Peer researchers worked individually to contact parents and conduct the interviews, and in teams of two to code interview transcripts and develop first-level codes. Due to resources/time constraints, it was not possible to continue to work with the peer researchers to develop higher-order codes or themes.

During the period of the peer researchers' work, there were check-in meetings, where the peer researchers met collectively online, with the coordinating researcher, to share queries and insights and address potential biases that could arise (e.g., how the information on the study was being shared with the service users). Opportunities for peer researchers to reflect on their role and work can provide insights into their experiences and well-being and contribute to quality engagement and capacity building ([Burke et al., 2019](#)).

Despite the relevance of community members' participation in research at various stages within CBPR (e.g., [Higgins et al., 2007](#)), the recruited peer researchers did not participate in planning, complete data analysis, and dissemination. Despite this limited participation, exploring the experiences of peer researchers involved in diverse ways in research, including in economically disadvantaged areas, can contribute to informing how to best support them and facilitate their engagement in the future ([Damon et al., 2017](#)).

Methodology

The current study aimed to explore the experiences of parents engaged as peer researchers in the evaluation of a parenting support intervention. The coordinating researcher solely planned this study.

Sample

The participants of the current study were four parents recruited as peer researchers. They were parents of children aged over 6 years old. Three were mothers, and one was a father. They resided in the same area where the evaluated parenting support intervention was implemented.

The names of the peer researchers were pseudonymised and assigned a number to enable a link between their

background and the quotes shown. Peer Researcher 1 had experience in one-to-one consultations, had training in diversity, inclusion and equality issues, and had previously been involved in conducting research. Peer Researcher 2 had experience working with children and promoting personal and community development, and had previously been involved in conducting research. Peer Researcher 3 had experience providing support to parents in the community, and had previously been a research participant. Peer Researcher 4 had experience working with children and providing support to children and their families, and had previously been involved in conducting research. Information on whether they had participated as parents in previous research was not collected.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the coordinating researcher, with open-ended questions on expectations, satisfaction, supports and resources, strengths and weaknesses of the work conducted, and suggestions for future practice. Exploring peer researchers' views on the potential added value of engaging parents in planning, conducting, and/or disseminating research would also have been relevant.

Data Collection

The four parents were individually invited to be interviewed online by the coordinating researcher within two weeks of the completion of the peer researchers' work. Video and audio were used during the interview, but only the audio was stored in three interviews. Written notes were taken during the interview that was not audio-recorded (in accordance with Peer Researcher 2's preference). Each interview lasted approximately 30 min.

Since the coordinating researcher was responsible for recruiting the peer researchers into this paid role, this might have posed challenges for them to share their critical views openly, even if informed that the goal was to enhance future research endeavours. On the other hand, the coordinating researcher perspective could be beneficial in terms of building on prior working relationships and familiarity with the topic (Berkovic et al., 2020; Israel et al., 1998).

In this study, the coordinating researcher could be considered as having an insider perspective regarding the participation of parents as peer researchers and an outsider perspective concerning the community where the parenting support intervention was evaluated. Peer researchers could have been considered as having an insider perspective concerning their community. An insider-outsider dialogue can encompass conversations about power (Ospina et al., 2004) and can be framed in a continuum. By reflecting on positionality using an intersectional approach (coined by Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), power relations and bias in the research process can potentially be acknowledged and worked upon (Howard & Burns, 2021).

Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the coordinating researcher, who found it challenging to understand some expressions (due to a different first language). The third author of this article supported this task by verifying the written transcripts.

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All transcripts were read multiple times independently by the first two authors of the current paper. This allowed the researchers to be immersed in the data, highlight ideas from each transcript, and recognise and address any assumptions about the data.

After reading the transcripts, initial codes were generated manually by the second author, who did not use any pre-existing codebook as the aim was to use an inductive approach, ensuring a data-driven analysis. The first and second authors reviewed the codes collaboratively through discussion and reached a consensus on how to combine and categorise them. Having the second author coding the data first added insights beyond the insider perspective of the coordinating researcher.

The two first authors organised the data into categories, pulling together similar codes. These categories were organised into emerging sub-themes. The two first authors discussed the emerging sub-themes and developed initial main themes. These were further reviewed by the first two authors, who agreed on the final main themes. One of the main themes (the first described) was named using the participants' own words.

Ethics

The study was conducted within a wider project, which received ethics approval from the Child and Family Agency's (Tusla) Research and Ethics Committee. The approval reference was the project's name: Parental Engagement and Relationships (PEAR) in Early Childhood (EC). Before data collection, verbal consent was obtained from peer researchers. During the transcription of the interviews, data were anonymised by removing potential personal identifiers (names were replaced with the term 'peer researcher'). The audio recordings of the interviews were erased after transcription. The results were shared with the participants for feedback and validation. Information on dissemination goals was also sent to participants.

Results

Five main themes and fourteen sub-themes emerged from the data analysis (Table 1). Each main theme is first introduced, and the sub-themes are subsequently discussed.

"It Would Get Easier and Easier"

Engaging in the evaluation of the parenting support intervention allowed peer researchers to develop their research experience, making the research process easier to grasp.

Table 1. Main Themes and Sub-themes Emerging From the Data.

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
1. "It would get easier and easier"	1.1. Peer researchers' expectations 1.2. Learning by doing
2. Reaping the benefits of peer research	2.1. Enjoyment of the peer research process 2.2. Exposure to learning new things 2.3. Value of a network among peer researchers 2.4. Awareness of the organisation's work
3. What makes peer research easier?	3.1. Support from the host organisation 3.2. Knowledge and information sharing
4. What makes peer research challenging?	4.1. Training adequacy 4.2. Previous experience in qualitative research 4.3. Coding difficulties 4.4. Organisation of the peer research process
5. Informing future peer research	5.1. Supporting the coordinating researcher 5.2. Involvement in future peer research

Peer Researchers' Expectations. Although the coordinating researcher initially shared the goal of interviewing 40 parents/service users, only 27 interviews were completed. Peer researchers reported feeling disappointed that the engagement was less than expected, which suggested interest in the interview process.

"I think it went well, but it was a little bit disappointing that we didn't get as many interviews as we thought we would." – Peer Researcher 4

Learning by Doing. Peer researchers reported challenges in initially conducting interviews and data analysis. However, these tasks became easier to accomplish the more they did them. An increased sense of confidence during the research process has been described as a possible benefit of peer research (Shen et al., 2017; Walmsley & Mannan, 2009).

"I think once you did the first interview, the rest were very easy to do. It was just a matter of repetition. So, they become much easier. If you have more interviews, it would get easier and easier." – Peer Researcher 3

"When we were starting doing the interviews, it was a little shaky at the start, trying to read the questions and stuff. But as you went on, you got more confident. So it was just a pity then when you kind of find your competence, and you are at your best, that there were no more interviews." – Peer Researcher 4

Reaping the Benefits of Peer Research

The identified benefits of peer research included the enjoyment of the process, exposure to learning new things, the value of networking among peer researchers, and increased awareness about the host organisation's work. Previous literature reported peer/co-researchers, including when they were children, perceiving their involvement in research as

personally rewarding, which could be related to increased confidence and research skills, and contribution to topics they considered important (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Kaya & Benevento, 2022; Shen et al., 2017; Walmsley & Mannan, 2009).

Enjoyment of the Peer Research Process. Enjoyment of the peer research process emerged as a common benefit for peer researchers. Peer researchers particularly enjoyed hearing the opinions of the parents they interviewed and learning about how the parents valued the support that the host organisation was providing.

"The work was enjoyable. After ending the recording of an interview with a parent, I chatted with the parent, and it was enjoyable, it was nice." – Peer Researcher 2

Previous experience in conducting research seemed to help one peer researcher to enjoy the research process. Despite data analysis emerging as one of the areas that peer researchers struggled with, for this peer researcher, it was an opportunity to "refresh" previous training and expertise.

"I really enjoyed doing the analysis because I had done that work before. For me, it was great to get back to that, the research, and do it again, just refresh my brain with analysis." – Peer Researcher 1

Although the peer researchers did not have the opportunity to read all transcripts, when they were able to check some of them during data analysis, they seemed to enjoy seeing the work that other peer researchers had completed. It may have helped peer researchers 'form a picture' and contextualise the possible findings from the data.

"I like to do the interviews. But, then, I liked when I saw other interviews and the transcriptions of, basically, the positivity that's in it." – Peer Researcher 3

“I had loved to see those other transcripts. I’d wonder, ‘Is that [possible theme] happening there?’ Because it was not a theme that I was expecting to see. I actually loved that because I found that when I was reading it, new things were coming through.” – Peer Researcher 1

Exposure to Learning New Things. The peer research process was noted as having created opportunities for exposure to learning new things. This echoes the transfer or acquisition of new skills by peer researchers that have been reported in previous literature (Kaya & Benevento, 2022; Shen et al., 2017; Young Women’s Trust, 2022).

“I loved learning new stuff, and it was really interesting. I made a spreadsheet [on the computer] when the other peer researcher was here, and I was so proud of myself because I had never made a spreadsheet before that worked properly. It was nice to learn all that stuff.” – Peer Researcher 4

Value of a Network Among Peer Researchers. The creation of a network among peer researchers was considered helpful in seeking advice on different issues, including beyond the scope of the research process. Social networks can foster knowledge about community resources, career advancement opportunities, and social inclusion. These might constitute key aspects when researching in contexts characterised by social exclusion and/or poverty, which are often focused on within CBPR (Marrone et al., 2022). Building social networks has been one of the benefits of peer research found in the literature (Minogue et al., 2005; Tait & Lester, 2005; Tanner, 2012), including among children (Cuevas-Parra, 2020).

“It’s nice that even if there is not a lot to say [in the check-in meetings], you are still chatting to the other researchers, and you are kind of bonding a little bit more. So, it is easier to reach out to the other peer researchers for advice on something. Even if it was not for the work part, it was good for the personal bit. I enjoyed that.” – Peer Researcher 4

Peer Researcher 4 also highlighted learning about the different organisations that other peer researchers worked for. Such connections could be helpful to the peer researcher and the community.

“Now I know about [other peer researcher’s organisation]. I work in [area of work], and we have a nice knock-on effect for the young parents coming in there. I can suggest it to them. You can never have enough friends or contacts, so I liked it.” – Peer Researcher 4

Awareness of the Organisation’s Work. The peer researchers indicated that before they were engaged in the peer research process, their knowledge of the host organisation’s work was limited. Involvement in research potentiated learning about the organisation’s parenting support intervention and service

users’ views, which seemed to have been experienced as rewarding by the peer researchers.

“It was formative for me, as a parent, to see the work being done. So I enjoyed it for that reason, to see all of the work that is actually done that I wouldn’t have been aware of beforehand.”

“It was also very positive for me to see the great work done and how people spoke about the facilitator [the Parent Carer Facilitator].” – Peer Researcher 1

The peer researchers’ learning about the host organisation’s work only after participating in the research could be expected, given that they were not service users. In terms of reflexivity, it can be asked how much this affected the interview process and their rapport with parents/service users. From the outset of the study, the coordinating researcher used the term peer researchers. However, it would have been relevant to explore peer researchers’ own identifications regarding their role in the evaluation of the parenting support intervention.

What Makes Peer Research Easier?

Perspectives shared by the peer researchers indicated that the availability of support from the organisation and coordinating researcher, as well as knowledge and information sharing among the peer researchers made the peer research process easier and enjoyable.

Support From the Host Organisation. The host organisation established a contract with the peer researchers, and the coordinating researcher set support mechanisms (training, guidelines, check-in meetings, and regular contact). The availability and accessibility of the coordinating researcher seemed to be a valued aspect of the supports received. The peer researchers reported perceiving that they could reach out to the coordinating researcher and have their queries addressed in a timely manner. Previous literature indicated that enablers of peer research can include integration into the research team, adequate resources, and research guidelines (Dixon et al., 2015; Greene et al., 2009; Lushey, 2017; Shen et al., 2017).

“It was nice that you were constantly on the other end of the email or a text. You [coordinating researcher] are so relatable, and it was just nice to have someone like that at the end of the phone instead of thinking, ‘Oh, like she is higher to me, I can’t go ask, or I am so embarrassed around it’.” – Peer Researcher 4

Support and opportunities to conduct research can also be framed regarding empowerment, a key component of CBPR, which can be described as improving people’s lives (Weidenstedt, 2016). However, assumptions that this can always be fully attained through participatory approaches have been challenged (Miller, 2017; Weidenstedt, 2016).

Empowerment also involves attending to how the research process is implemented, with resources and capacity to support community engagement effectively (Liebenberg, 2018).

Knowledge and Information Sharing. Peer researchers working together and helping each other emerged as one of the strategies which supported the peer research process.

“Everybody was willing to help everybody if we had any questions. They were all very nice.” – Peer Researcher 3

Although the peer researchers acknowledged the accessibility of the coordinating researcher, they seemed to have found support among each other about their concern regarding the number of interviews completed. However, this concern could suggest the sense of power differentials, which have been reported as a challenging factor in peer research (Boyd, 2008; Damon et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2017).

“It was nice just to ask others ‘look, did you get any [interviews]?’. You do not feel as bad because you are getting that instantly from them saying ‘no, no I have not heard back from anyone’ or ‘I’ve had two interviews’. You constantly knew where you were in the group, kind of if you were behind or not.” – Peer Researcher 4

As the peer researchers had different experiences and exposure to the research process, they used this to help and share insights with each other, which seemed particularly helpful in undertaking data analysis. Group meetings can provide an opportunity for the co-production of knowledge (Barlow & Hurlock, 2013). In this regard, it is relevant to highlight that research might consider not only knowledge generation but also the exchange of knowledge (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019).

“I enjoyed the communication, sharing different themes or concepts when doing the analysis with the other peer researcher.” – Peer Researcher 2

“The other peer researcher was able to explain things that I would not have known and see it from a different perspective. I thought that was very valuable.” – Peer Researcher 1

Emerging themes highlighted the value of continued networks among peer researchers, opportunities for knowledge and information sharing, and the availability and accessibility of support. In this sense, the peer researchers seemed to value the core principles of the CBPR approach regarding equity, co-learning, shared power in decision-making, reciprocity, and mutual benefit (Shen et al., 2017). This highlights the importance of being mindful of power dynamics between parent peer researchers and academically trained researchers (Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2018), including in evaluation

studies, where much participatory work has been criticised for being tokenistic (Guijt, 2014).

What Makes Peer Research Challenging?

While the peer researchers reported enjoying the peer research process overall, they also identified factors that made the process challenging. These factors were related to training, previous experience with research, data analysis, and the organisation of the peer research process.

Training Adequacy. Although training can be experienced as rewarding by peer researchers (Walmsley & Mannan, 2009), training on thematic analysis, especially data coding, emerged as one of the areas that the peer researchers struggled with. Based on the experiences shared by the peer researchers, the 2 hr of data analysis training could have been enhanced through a more extensive time allocation.

“I just found it hard to get a handle on coding... maybe a two-day introduction, or two half days.” – Peer Researcher 3

Although the peer researchers acknowledged a better understanding of the training content as they engaged in the research process, they suggested that the training should have included tools and opportunities to practice thematic analysis to make it clearer.

“The way I learn, I would have preferred to have had all that printed, and while [the training facilitator] was going through it, I could have added my notes. Maybe if [the training facilitator] just got us to do that, to practise. For me, again, I just like to have a go, and then I’d be more confident with it.” – Peer Researcher 4

Peer researchers mentioned that it would have been relevant to receive more information on the data analysis, including the end goal, and going beyond the development of first-level codes. Involving peer researchers in more or all stages of research could have contributed to overcoming this challenge.

“When it comes to the training, I think the analysis and more explanation of the end goal. I’m not sure if we could use an example to pull out a bit of information, code it, and then see if we could develop a theme from that. So, going from start to finish.” – Peer Researcher 1

“It would be good to have more information on how to analyse, but it was great fun working with the other peer researchers. Maybe we could have done cross-coding, crossing our codes with codes from the other group.” – Peer Researcher 2

Increasing peer researchers’ experience emerged as an important aspect by building on their skills, particularly in data analysis, which might be new for parents without previous

training or experience. As a reflexive note, it is relevant to emphasise that the assumption here is that training can facilitate the engagement of peer researchers, not that training is needed to enable the co-production of knowledge within research.

Previous Experience in Qualitative Research. Peer researchers expressed challenges about the interviewing stage. They felt they had to ask questions as they were written in the interview protocol, and to provide feedback as included in the training material, with no flexibility to change them. One peer researcher addressed the challenge of remaining neutral, yet also informal, while ensuring they were actively listening. While previous experience in qualitative research could support the interviewing process, the training provided could also have included opportunities to practise these skills (e.g., role play).

“I would word the questions differently but didn’t know if I could change the questions too much. We could have received more input on the wording we could use during the interviews.” – Peer Researcher 2

“I know we’re not meant to give them any opinionated feedback, but it was just very difficult to be like, ‘I see, I see’. It kind of doesn’t feel like you’re listening. The answers or phrases you had to kind of give back, it was just very difficult to stay with them. I hope I was neutral enough, but it was just really hard to kind of just use those phrases when it was so informal.” – Peer Researcher 4

Coding Difficulties. A lack of previous experience and hands-on practice during the training seemed to be the main challenge in the qualitative data analysis stage. For three peer researchers, this was the first time they had come across this type of analysis in practice.

“I did not enjoy coding as much. That was harder. It’s not something I’ve ever done before. I met up with the other peer researcher, and we did it, and it was good fun. But I found that it took a lot longer than we thought it would. We were trying to figure out the way to do it.” – Peer Researcher 3

The relative inexperience of peer researchers can add complexity to the research process (Lushey & Munro, 2015), and this seemed particularly evident in coding using thematic analysis, highlighting the importance of adequate training. Differences in experience and expectations can imply adjustments to the study, and, therefore, should be considered when planning the research (Abma et al., 2019).

Organisation of the Peer Research Process. The involvement of the peer researchers in the evaluation of the parenting support intervention did not provide them with an opportunity to gain a comprehensive picture of the whole research approach. Peer researchers coded transcripts in teams and did not have the

opportunity to code or read the transcripts from all the interviews. This posed a challenge for the peer researchers as they could not align their work to the work conducted by the other team.

“We tried to sort of put little notes to explain the different themes we thought were coming through. We did not actually name a theme because the other researchers have their codes. It’s only when it all comes together that you will be able to do that. I think it would be great for everybody to see all the themes that have been formed from the codes, and that will help the learning process.” – Peer Researcher 1

Opportunities for involving all the peer researchers in exchanging insights and co-producing knowledge on the codes and emerging themes could have contributed to a better understanding of the data. Analysing data and co-producing knowledge can be considered a key aspect of participatory research (Israel et al., 1998; Ospina et al., 2021), with the potential to promote collective ownership and sustainability (Kasdan, 2021).

The coordinating researcher planned the tasks in which peer researchers were expected to participate when delineating the research project. However, the definition of tasks by the peer researchers could have contributed to promoting ‘meaningful’ participation and power balance among all involved (Ospina et al., 2004). Peer researchers having the opportunity to participate in more or all stages of research, as emphasised within CBPR, could have contributed to providing further context to the study.

Informing Future Peer Research

The peer researchers shared ways of improving the peer research process in the future, including establishing structures to support the coordinating researcher and continued involvement of the same pool of peer researchers.

Supporting the Coordinating Researcher. The peer researchers’ motivation to support the coordinating researcher highlighted the active role they can play in research. One peer researcher with previous involvement in qualitative research was familiar with tasks in the research process and empathised with the coordinating researcher’s responsibilities. This peer researcher proposed a supporting structure with a peer researcher as a “side person” who could assist the coordinating researcher by reading all the transcripts and addressing queries with the other peer researchers.

“Maybe if one of the peer researchers could get to read all the transcripts as well, like the side person, that could help you. I was conscious that if we’re not around for you to ask questions... I think it’s handy if you had somebody that is just there to assist you.” – Peer Researcher 1

The peer researchers expressed concern about the workload of the coordinating researcher, who transcribed the interviews conducted by the peer researchers. One peer researcher suggested having the people that conducted the interviews support the transcribing process.

“I would have thought the hardest part would have been you have to do all the transcriptions, to be honest. Would it be easier, if you were doing it again, to have the people who do the interviews also transcribe them?” – Peer Researcher 3

This solution-focused approach potentially indicates the peer researchers’ interest in participating in and enhancing future research approaches.

Involvement in Future Peer Research. The peer researchers suggested that the host organisation establish a pool of peer researchers to be accessed in future research, leveraging their experience. All peer researchers acknowledged that peer research had given them the opportunity to experience new ways of working and that they would, therefore, be better prepared to do similar work in the future. As highlighted before, “*it would get easier and easier*”. Given their acquired skills and understanding, recruiting the same peer researchers in future studies could reinforce their experience and career development.

“If you were using the same people again, they could see, now, the start and the finish, and what has come out of it.” – Peer Researcher 1

“I’d love to ... if there was anything else coming up again like this. I’d love to do it because you feel more prepared now.” – Peer Researcher 4

Discussion

The current study sought to address the question of how four parents experienced their engagement as peer researchers in the evaluation of a parenting support intervention. Benefits included increased awareness of the organisation’s work, enjoyment of the process, exposure to learning new things, and continued networks among peer researchers. Facilitating factors for peer research included availability and accessibility of the organisation’s support, and opportunities for knowledge and information sharing among peer researchers. The main challenges experienced were concerned with a lack of opportunities to practise during the training, which also related to difficulties during the interviewing and data analysis stages, and the organisation of the peer research process, which only involved peer researchers in some stages and hindered a comprehensive view of the whole study. Suggestions for improvement included having a peer researcher assisting the coordinating researcher, and the peer researchers’ continued involvement in future peer research.

Based on the findings, insights were generated regarding how the engagement of parents as peer researchers can be facilitated in qualitative research, which has been recognised as needed (Hackett, 2017; Hall et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2017). One insight relates to including peer researchers in most or all research stages, when feasible, potentiating their participation, including in decision-making, and the alignment of the views and goals of peer researchers and trained researchers/organisations. However, the involvement of peer researchers from the outset of a study can be challenging when researchers need to write funding applications before knowing if they will be able to conduct the study (Shen et al., 2017). Funders should take into account time and resources to include peer researchers (Collins et al., 2018). When managing limited resources, it is important to assess how to prioritise them and to identify those resources or tools that best support peer researchers and the stages in which they can or should be engaged.

Organisations and institutions conducting peer research should ensure adequate support is available and accessible to peer researchers (e.g., through check-in meetings, regular contact), building on their training and previous experience. Research teams and organisations which recognise the value of the contributions and resources from parent researchers, supported by working conditions that enable participation and the development of career paths, can build on the interest of parents who apply for this role (Hackett, 2017).

Appropriate support can also include guidelines on handling distressing situations and maintaining confidentiality. Involving parents as peer researchers can raise ethical and practical considerations. Parents may encounter sensitive topics when interviewing other parents, including subjects related to their own and the other parent’s children, which can elicit emotional responses. Besides considerations regarding sensitive topics and confidentiality, availability issues should also be taken into account.

Another insight refers to when the power remains with the academically trained researchers, which can lead to tokenistic parental involvement (Shen et al., 2017), and mainstreaming of a diminished version of participatory research (Burns et al., 2021). This highlights the need for academically trained researchers to reflect on their views and positionality (Howard & Burns, 2021) and to acquire skills to engage parents as equal partners, for instance, in facilitation and the capacity to operate within different power structures (Israel et al., 1998; Shen et al., 2017). Addressing power differentials can entail negotiating authority, clarifying tasks and roles, and setting boundaries among the group members (Ospina et al., 2004). The role of the researcher can be of co-learner.

Exploring peer researchers’ needs, preferences, and resources can inform research aimed at supporting families. Although research addressing social dynamics and focusing on local issues should consider an intersectional approach (Guijt, 2014), the implementation of participatory research practices can be extended to international contexts

(Wallerstein et al., 2021). Currently, the Sustainable Development Goals agenda is recognised as bringing more interest to evaluating interventions and policy decisions based on local perspectives (Apgar & Allen, 2021). Addressing ways in which community partnership can strengthen research efforts can be particularly relevant when the validity of findings from research adopting less traditional methods may be questioned and less considered in policy making (Lushey & Munro, 2015; Rossiter & Robertson, 2014).

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