

The Collaborative Community Practice Group: Reflecting Team Processes for Youth Services Delivery

The Program Evaluation Grant awarded to Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa (YSB) was focused on the evaluation of an innovative program involving the application of reflecting teams for direct clinical services for youth. The reflecting processes are used by members of the Collaborative Community Practice Group (CCPG), a collective of counselling practitioners organized into a community of practice and supported by YSB.

The primary goal of the project was to develop a comprehensive view of the reflecting team process as it impacts on both clients and practitioner communities. The data gathering procedures consisted of semi-structured qualitative research interviews with each of the thirteen CCPG members and with a number of clients--identified by the same members—who have experienced reflecting processes as part of the clinical work they have done with YSB and at other sites where CCPG members work. A questionnaire was developed for the counselors to acquire some additional nominal data.

A central feature of the reflecting team model utilized by the CCPG is that it serves as an effective vehicle for community building and knowledge transfer amongst front line counsellors. This inevitably has the potential to bring secondary gain to clients and the evaluation is equally focused on the impact of the reflecting practices and knowledge exchange processes on the counsellors themselves.

The rigorous requirements of the Tri-Council on Ethics at the University of Ottawa have slowed the research process somewhat; the committee typically takes about four weeks to approve submissions. At this point, two separate proposals have been approved--one focused on counsellor interviews and a second (which took longer to prepare and missed the first tight deadline immediately following the CHEO PEG announcement) included the client interviews. Most of the counsellor interviews have been completed at this time and several have been transcribed. This brief report will include a look at some preliminary data from these interviews, although data analysis is far from complete at this point. The client interviews are just getting underway, having been delayed by both ethics approval and the intervention of the Working Together conference (see conference package included with this report). The conference will be described more fully here because it speaks directly to knowledge transfer issues, is central to the activities of the CCPG, and has been referred to many times in interviews with counsellors. In addition, this report includes an excerpt from a working draft of the first article (Appendix A.) of four which will be written out of this research.

Counsellor Data

The counsellor interviews are just being finished up and as noted, several have been transcribed and are now being analyzed using NVivo qualitative research software. The interview sought to establish the impact on counsellors of both 1. participating in reflecting processes and 2. participating as members of a community of practice.

Appendix A. is an excerpt of an article in development that provides a quick snapshot of both reflecting processes and the community of practice which has come to call itself the Collaborative Community Practice Group.

As mentioned, interview transcripts were coded thematically. What follows is a very preliminary look at some of the themes that emerged, divided between impact of reflecting teams and impact of community or practice. Under each heading a short narrative account describes the overall tenor of comments received and includes an illustrative quote. In the notes that follow, the research participants will be referred to as “the counsellors”.

Participating in Reflecting Processes

Impact on Personal Skill Development

Reflecting team work involves a specific set of skills clearly documented in the research literature and reviewed both within the CCPG and also previously by those who participated in the YSB externship. The counsellors generally reported that ongoing reflecting team work hones their skills—particularly for adopting a more collaborative stance and being open to a wider range of possible directions. The following counsellor spoke of how she has learned to be flexible and pragmatic and is able to use reflecting processes at times even when a full team is not available:

...One is an evolution in creativity: you have one other person you can pull into your session, [whereas] before you had to follow the certain rule. It's like do it however you can get it done and just do it.”

Impact on Work with Clients Specifically

Counsellors had much to say on this topic. Reflecting teams tend to be sites of generativity and many counsellors spoke about how they and their clients go away from reflecting team sessions with a wide range of new ideas that they bring into subsequent sessions. For the following counsellor, who works in a setting of acute mental illness, having a range of counsellors speak about the situation from different perspectives and without judgment or technical language “normalized” talk about the illness:

“...It put the issue out on the table more, and it allowed for it to be more normalized and that's how I pulled them in...they liked the openness about talking about things and then it was just all out on the table. So now there's no hiding behind anything, there's no hiding behind a diagnosis.”

Impact on Practitioner in General

Many counsellors spoke of a growing confidence in their work. The paradoxical aspect of this is that the same counsellors also spoke of having made “mistakes” with their peers as witnesses. It seems that by rendering their work public, they also broke the private tyranny of inflated expectations—the sense that one should practice smoothly and seamlessly like the experts at workshops seem to do in role-play situations.

“It definitely gives me breathing space and just allows me to learn from my mistakes which before I wouldn't have because you know me and my personality which is very much control and it has to be right

and be done properly. But you know what? Not anymore... I think reflecting teams had a big piece in it because you can't do this and expect to be perfect and not make any mistakes."

Impact on Organization

The impact of reflecting processes on the organization was a specific focus of the interviews, but some noteworthy responses arose nevertheless. The optimistic and constructive energy associated with reflecting practices rubs off on others within the organization.

"...the service planning in the past has been very much about medication and everybody writes 'Bob will take his medication in order to maintain his mental health'. But there are more things to mental health than medication, right? And that's what bothers me. In some ways I'm in the system trying to make changes and my supervisor has seen that. She has seen the positives and the strength based component of the collaborative approach and is asking me to help out with service planning and teach the new people coming in to do it from a more positive approach as oppose to a mental approach. So, that is neat. That's different."

Participating in a Community of Practice

Impact of Participating in a Community of Practice on Counsellor's Identities and Overall Professional Repertoire

Counsellors were very vocal on the topic of the importance of a community of practice to their identities, their professional lives—even their mental health. The answers focused on things like community, shared values/language, and mutual support. For the following counsellor, it was the ongoing exploration and learning that came to the foreground in response to this question:

"...I'm definitely someone who needs to have fun doing what I'm doing, but I don't need it to be jumping for joy kind of fun, but always be challenged, that's what I'm talking about. It constantly challenges me, constantly makes me think about what about this or is there another alternative? And it's always done that for me and that's what I like. So that's what it's all about and I don't have a desire to go back to school, but that's what school did for me too. That's what was there and when it left I was like 'where do I find that?' Well I find it here."

Pros and Cons of Working with a Community of Practitioners from Diverse Work Settings

A unique feature of the Collaborative Community Practice group is that it is made up of counsellors from a variety of settings—not all of them exclusively devoted to working with youth. This was uniformly seen as an advantage by the counsellors we interviewed—as something that added richness. It should be noted that this heterogeneity of setting is in the context of relative theoretical homogeneity—a topic to be explored more fully as the research unfolds.

"...again it comes back to having so many different backgrounds, life experiences, education, we're just such different people. Although, some of us haven't done the job of the other, I think it adds to the colourfulness, I don't know how else to say this. It adds to the richness of the reflections that are coming back because my experiences in life are so much different than yours and so you're coming in with all these different ideas. And what's really cool about reflecting teams is that I may never have thought about a certain path to go down, whereas someone else who is maybe labeled a "youth worker" or something else comes up with this really cool way into something else that I would never have thought of that maybe the

person we're working with completely hooks onto. And then it gives you another opening, another door to go down to. So, I think it's only good. I can't see any disadvantages to it."

Importance of the Community of Practice in the Counsellors' Professional Lives

While counsellors spoke of the impact of being in a community of practice in their practices specifically, they also spoke of the impact on their professional lives. Again here, themes of community, mutuality, connection and support came up.

"It helps me maintain my mental health because it's a change in pace, it's a change in the collaborative approach vs. I'm the expert, medical model approach. It allows me a lot of time for humour, we laugh a lot and I love it...it's given me energy."

Knowledge Transfer

We have already contacted the CHEO Centre of Excellence and the Children's mental health Ontario to propose newsletter submissions summarizing the Working together conference activities and the various initiatives now unfolding from it. Developing reflecting team registry.

who have interview Despite repeated indications through informal feedback from clients and practitioners that the process is helpful, we have yet to systematically evaluate the specific impact of these practices. From current and past client recipients of reflecting team services, we will seek to determine what makes the group process different from individual sessions, how they respond to the multiplicity of perspectives offered, what advantages/disadvantages they see in this mode of service delivery, how they might suggest modifying the practices in accordance with these observations. From the practitioners, we will want to find out how the reflecting teams contribute to their ongoing clinical practice, whether they help to dislodge "stuck" impasses, whether counsellors can identify thematic material generated by the teams that is carried forward in their ongoing work, whether the participation of their peers contributes to a sense of collegiality and morale, how they respond to having their practice witnessed by colleagues. In addition to amassing this rich qualitative data, we will develop interview protocols and survey questions that will provide a foundation for further evaluation of communities of practice. As for the data themselves, more than merely confirm/disconfirm efficacy, we seek to distill a more nuanced view which will generate ideas for modifying the practices. We will publish an article in a national or international periodical on the use of reflecting teams with youth and their families in an inter-agency setting. We will offer distilled summaries to CHEO's Knowledge Exchange Centre for its website, and submit to the Children's Mental Health Ontario newsletter. We will present preliminary findings at a local conference for mental health practitioners and administrators who work with children and youth (see invitation, Appendix B), scheduled for April 21, 2006 and hosted by the CCPG. Our hope is that this project will help to kick-start broader knowledge transfer initiatives and support applications to other funding sources such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Fall 2006 deadline).

A summary of the program evaluation activities that took place over the award term including the results of any data analysis that has taken place.

· Deliverables and outcomes achieved (e.g., copy of manuals produced, # of staff trained, copy of evaluation plan developed).

· Knowledge exchange activities that have taken place or that have been scheduled to take place in the future.

We will require both a hard (paper) and soft (electronic) version of your report.

Please send the electronic version to vpleasance@cheo.on.ca