

The Collaborative Community Practice Group

CHEO Centre of Excellence E-Newsletter

May 7, 2006

The Youth Services Bureau (YSB) of Ottawa has come up with some creative ideas for helping its counsellors to stay connected while providing innovative services to the young people who consult the agency. The YSB was recently awarded a Program Evaluation Award from the CHEO Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health to research the work being done by the Collaborative Community Practice Group (CCPG), a community-based team of counsellors sponsored by YSB who come together to form “reflecting teams” for expanding the conversations with young people and families facing difficulties.

The CCPG includes a number of YSB staff and counsellors from several Ottawa agencies and from private practice. David Paré, an Ottawa psychologist and counselling professor at the University of Ottawa serves as the group’s facilitator. The 12-member group meets every couple of weeks to review articles, share their work, and engage in skill development. But it’s the reflecting team practices that were the focus of the action research project centred on the CCPG and coordinated by Dr. Paré along with his colleagues Dr. Nick Gazzola and James Galipeau from the University of Ottawa.

The reflecting team was developed by Norwegian physician and family therapist Tom Andersen as a way to include the perspectives of a number of practitioners in a counselling conversation. A team of about four counsellors observes a session and then reflecting team members share their observations with each other while the primary counsellor and the people consulting the counsellor witness the exchange. Instead of honing in, detective-like, on one particular “answer”, reflecting team members strive to be respectful and compassionate witnesses to the challenges that people face. Their open-ended reflections typically generate a range of creative ideas that feed later counselling conversations. Members of the CCPG regularly invite each other to counselling sessions as a way to practice collaboratively while providing “added value” to certain therapeutic conversations.

Reflecting teams are a relatively new innovation and the early research on them indicates they’re a helpful addition to more traditional counselling work. The YSB program evaluation data from interviews with clients of these services is not yet all in; however preliminary data analysis from the counsellor interviews shows that reflecting processes also have significant benefits for the counsellors themselves. Reflecting teams are a venue for practitioners to actually *work* side by side. Unlike case conferences--talking *about* the work—reflecting on a team with clients present is a form of live, collaborative service delivery. It provides the opportunity for practitioners to witness each others’ styles and to try out innovative ideas side by side so that they can debrief and refine their practice as time goes on.

The counsellors interviewed for the YSB study consistently referred to the sense of support that comes with working in a community of practice. Based on the interviews analyzed so far, it seems that by “going public” with their practices, the counsellors actually become more confident, rather than less. They spoke of how the work gets demystified through the mutual collaboration. Counsellors said the team’s extra pairs of eyes and ears are like a safety net—they come to feel more comfortable sharing both their clumsy and their brilliant moments.

In late April, the CCPG widened the conversation and reached out to other community based practitioners by hosting an all-day gathering in Ottawa. The conference was entitled *Working Together: Sharing Collaborative Practice*, and included about fifty practitioners from more than ten sites in Ottawa, Haliburton, Smith Falls, and Brockville. The gathering, which included youth counsellors, mental health workers, nurses, and social workers, featured a range of exercises devoted to collaborative counselling ideas and practices, a demonstration of reflecting team work, and a play written and performed by members of the CCPG.

The Collaborative Community Practice Group is now busy planning further initiatives to sustain their innovative practices and to share their work with other practitioners. Among the projects underway: a teleconference link-up between counsellors in Ottawa and Haliburton in preparation for live sessions with reflecting teams. There are also plans for more knowledge-sharing between academia and the community. The Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa is developing a website which will feature streaming video of counselling sessions and roleplays for professional development purposes. It’s hoped the site will provide a venue for the many skilled practitioners in the community to share their work with graduate students who are developing their counselling practices.

For more information on the Collaborative Community Practice Group, contact Don Baker at dbaker@ysb.on.ca or follow the links at www.glebeinstitute.com.