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 date 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

As mentioned, the reflecting team work described here happens in the context of a community of practice that has emerged over the year and is hosted by YSB. As the CCPG has evolved, it has come to recognize the importance of constantly re-inventing itself as it were, to maintain a freshness and energy. This has been accomplished by inviting new members in. At this point the CCPG is at capacity, but there are hopes of establishing other similar communities of practice at YSB, around Ottawa, and at other locations in the province. The community gathering on April 21, 2006, was conceived, developed, hosted and presented by the CCPG. Entitled Working Together: Exploring Collaborative Practice, it was a deliberate exercise in knowledge transfer and community building. The gathering of about 50 was attended by practitioners (both supervisors and frontline workers) from approximately 13 community agencies, including child and youth agencies, community resource centres, university and college counselling centres, and hospitals. Attendees came from Ottawa, Brockville, Smith Falls, and Halliburton.

Appendix B. is a copy of the invitation and includes the day’s program. The gathering generated a great deal of energy; many current initiatives are underway while several future possibilities now present themselves. Among these include:

1. Plans to establish further communities of practice with mentorship provided by existing CCPG members
2. Research projects focused on a range of related topics including:
   a. evaluations of reflecting practices at a variety of sites across the province
   b. The development of reflecting team mentors
   c. The use of “registries” of potential reflecting team members for clinical sessions (eight recent M.Ed. graduates have already indicated a keen interest in participating in this way.
   d. The development of a website to facilitate communication between communities of practice, and to include resources such as streaming video of counselling sessions. This work is well underway now under the supervision of David Paré at the University of Ottawa.
   e. Several articles are now in development, to be authored by David Paré, Nick Gazzola, and James Galipeau, in conjunction with CCPG members. An excerpt of the first attached to this report.
f. We have already contacted the CHEO Centre of Excellence and Children’s Mental Health Ontario to propose newsletter and website submissions summarizing the *Working Together* conference activities and the various initiatives now unfolding from it.

g. Discussion has begun about the possibility of the CCPG presenting its activities to a symposium on Counselling Supervision being organized by the Educational Counselling Concentration at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa for Fall, 2006.

As we have indicated elsewhere, there is much work yet to be done on the program evaluation supported by the CHEO Centre of Excellence. That work is ongoing and we will be happy to provide you with additional updates as the data are further inputted and analyzed. We hope this brief summary has given you some picture of the many activities now underway.

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