

Josie Gould Memorial Scholarship 2019 Essay:

“What are specific challenges youth workers face, and what can be done to overcome these challenges?”

Alexis M. Ruettnauer

June 26, 2019

I am a second year Master's student studying counselling psychology, with a specialization in school and youth counselling. I recently completed an 8 month counselling practicum with Health and Social Services, as well as counselling at St. Patrick's High School in Yellowknife, NT. As a youth mental health counsellor, I feel that my experience provides me with a unique perspective to address the topic of specific challenges youth workers face.

Challenges of a Youth Mental Health Worker

Lack of youth engagement and "buy in" in services being provided to youth presents a primary challenge for youth mental health workers (T. Mueller, personal communication, 2019; Gulliver, Griffiths, Christensen, 2010). "Buy in", defined as "acceptance of and willingness to actively support and participate" (Merriam Webster, 2011), refers to the need to feel in control of the decision to access services, and a sense of alignment and empowerment in participating. As a youth mental health worker, it is a challenge to provide effective counselling services to youth who do not feel in control of the decision to be in my office. Unfortunately, this is often positioned as the youth's problem to solve - responsibility rests on them to simply take the help being offered. This conceptualization of youth as a problem is inherently flawed, as lack of buy-in is rooted in a lack of flexibility and developmental considerations in the approach and delivery of services being made available.

The GNWT Child and Youth Mental Wellness Action Plan (2017) recommends that "listening to youth lets us know what types of services and information they need, and how they want to receive the information and services" (p.3), however, current implementation and practice of mental health services for youth does not reflect this statement. Tracey Mueller, Mental Health and Addictions Counsellor, explained "we should start by asking the youth "what do you need?"; empowering them to be a part of their own treatment plan". Unfortunately,

stigma and lack of education often results in caregivers dropping youth off to my office, yet being unwilling to discuss their role in the challenges the youth is facing. This often results in youth being scapegoated as “the problem to be fixed” in their families, schools, or communities, and can result in resentment towards mental health services in general. I have quickly learned that when working with youth, my work also includes their caregivers, and community.

Another significant challenge facing mental health counsellors is the need to “find flexibility within the system” when working with youth (T. Mueller, personal communication, 2019). For example, the nature of counselling that I am able to provide in a clinic-office setting is largely limited to individual counselling. Although I have undoubtedly become creative in incorporating activities into counselling sessions, not every youth feels comfortable to engage in individual counselling. Although research shows that psychotherapeutic interventions are more effective when tailored to activity-based or creative approaches when working with the diverse needs of youth (Bowen, Neill & Crisp, 2016), there are currently no group or activity-based counselling programs for youth or families being offered by Northwest Territories Health and Social Services. In considering the lack of trained mental health counsellors in schools that could provide such flexibility and diversity in counselling services, limiting government office settings are used as the only option for youth to access mental health counselling.

Overcoming Challenges of a Youth Mental Health Worker

Youth cannot be expected to “buy-in” to counselling services if they are resistant to the services being offered, whether that is due to parental pressure to attend, or lack of education and uncertainty. A shift in the perspective of youth mental health workers is needed, from tirelessly trying to “get youth to attend” counselling sessions (often at the insistence of adults), to reconsidering the manner in which services are provided (T. Mueller, personal communication,

2019). I believe the key to helping youth to feel empowered in seeking mental health services is to integrate and normalize group and activity-based mental health programming into schools from an early age. In engaging all students in strengths-based mental health programs in non-threatening, experiential social settings as part of school curriculum, stigma and fear of seeking additional mental health support if needed would be reduced.

Furthermore, the addition of empirically supported activity and group-based counselling in schools such as drama therapy, adventure/nature therapy, or art therapy, could provide non-stigmatizing, engaging, and empowering opportunities for youth to become in touch with their own mental experiences, and help-seeking, from an early age (Bowen, Neill & Crisp, 2016). In addition, parental/caregiver support programs are needed in order to educate caregivers regarding their role in their youth's challenges, and empower them to feel capable of enacting change without scapegoating/ blaming the youth, or expecting counsellors to "fix" them. Such group programming at the school level would also significantly reduce wait lists and wasted resources in community programming. For example, in the NTHSSA Community Counselling Program in which I currently work as a summer student counsellor, there are often no-shows for youth counselling appointments due to unwillingness to attend, while the time and energy of counsellors could be better used elsewhere.

I believe that in order for these aforementioned goals to be realized, positions for adequately educated mental health counsellors, under supervision of clinical supervisors, must be implemented in schools across the north, an initiative which the GNWT announced in 2018 they will be enacting over the course of the next four years (CBC North, 2018). Most importantly, the guiding principle in these changes must be that youth empowerment and choice is the key to successful youth mental health work.

References

- Bowen, D. J., Neill, J. T., & Crisp, S. J. (2016). Wilderness adventure therapy effects on the mental health of youth participants. *Evaluation and program planning*, 58, 49-59. doi:10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2016.05.005
- CBC North. (2018). N.W.T. government aims to put mental health counsellors in schools. Retrieved June 12, 2019, from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/counsellors-in-nwt-schools>
- Government of the Northwest Territories. (2017). *Child and Youth Mental Wellness Action Plan 2017-2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.hss.gov.nt.ca/sites/hss/files/resources/child-youth-mental-wellness-action-plan-2017-2022.pdf>
- Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K. M., & Christensen, H. (2010). Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: A systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry*, 10(1). doi:10.1186/1471-244x-10-113
- Merriam-Webster. (2019). "Buy-In". Retrieved June 10, 2019, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>