INTRODUCING EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE INTO YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES, QUEENSLAND

Jennifer Blackshaw
Youth Justice
Department of Families, Queensland

Marly Ritchie-Wearn
Youth Justice
Department of Families, Queensland

Paper presented at
The Character, Impact and Prevention of Crime in Regional Australia Conference
convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology
and held in Townsville 2-3 August 2001
Introduction

In the arena of social work, we have for too long provided interventions based upon practice wisdom and intuition rather than proven research. Evidence-Based Practice is quickly emerging as a contemporary approach to human services work and allows us to articulate a proven basis for our interventions and assessments, encourage human service workers to continuously and consistently challenge their practice and support accountability aspects of such work.

The use of Evidence-Based Practice enables workers to employ practice interventions that have more informed outcomes, engage clients more effectively in the decision making process and develop greater professional and personal authority. The nature of human service work is often not conducive to reflecting upon practice and seeking ways to monitor, review and change practice. It thus, does not afford the luxury of being able to compare different styles of practice.

“Evidence-Based Practice is a response to concerns that professional practice is not always based on the ‘best evidence’ or is minimally informed by research knowledge (Carew, 1979; Osmond, 2000; Rosen, 1994). As such, it can assist practitioners to identify, call upon and utilise the ‘best’ research in their daily practice. It de-emphasises guess-work, intuition, unsystematic thinking, uncritical and unreflective practice and therefore heightens the likelihood of critically-aware, informed, independent and systematic practitioners who are continually up dating and expanding their knowledge bases. It is an approach that combines practitioners’ expertise and experience with the current ‘best’ evidence on practice topics and issues (Sackett, et al., 1997). Professional judgment is not devalued or substituted but is extended and empowered by external sources of evidence (MacDonald, 1998). This can lead to practices with clients that are helpful, effective and informed. (Osmond & Darlington 2000).

This paper outlines a change management project that aims to introduce the concept of Evidence-Based Practice into youth justice service delivery. The project involves the Department of Families Queensland and formulates part of the authors’ postgraduate research, which is multi-staged.

The project acknowledges that policy and practice guidelines developed at a program level within the organisation are based upon evidence. However, the project challenges the concept that workers in their interventions with clients understand this linkage.

Project Context

The Department of Families Queensland is the lead agency for the delivery of youth justice services. The majority of offices operate in a generic fashion, providing both child protection and youth justice services. In three locations, discreet youth justice services have been operational for approximately two years, trialing a uniquely tailored model for youth justice practice.

This project provides a starting point to achieve the introduction of the concept of Evidence-Based Practice. The project will target two regions and both models of service delivery.

Both of these regions have rural influences and significantly high Indigenous populations and Indigenous young people constitute the majority of the client group. Consequently, intervention needs to be culturally appropriate and demands specific responses from the organisation. Further, we hope that this research will identify Evidence-Based Practice responses in service delivery to Indigenous young people.
Regional Overview

Toowoomba and South West Region

The Region comprises 424,482 km², almost 25% of the State, with a population of 242,506 or 6.2% of the total States population. Geographically large, significant distances occur between the regional centre, Toowoomba and outlying communities. In some more sparsely populated shires moving west, services are concentrated in a small number of rural centres which endeavour to provide outreach services to isolated locations across vast distances.

Three area offices service the region, located in Toowoomba, Roma and Charleville. Toowoomba Area Office provides both child protection and youth justice services however, with a distinct youth justice team. Whilst, Roma and Charleville provide generic service delivery. Staffing models for each office include a Team Leader, Resource Officer and 3-5 caseworkers.

The total Indigenous population of the Region equates to the State average (2.7%) as a percentage of total population. However, the percentages are much higher in the Far West (11%), Mid West (7%), and Western Downs (5%). Indigenous over-representation is high, averaging 60% of young offenders on supervised orders across the region, with higher proportions evident in Charleville and Roma.

Townsville & Hinterland Region

The Region comprises 121,151.4 km², or 7% of the state. The total population is 184,166, or 5.3% of the state. Whilst not as large as the Toowoomba, South West Region, there are also significant distances between service points, and a number or remote communities.

Staff travel to service surrounding areas which extend north to Ingham, south to the Burdekin and west to Hughenden. Palm Island, population 3,500, is 70 kilometres north east of Townsville. It is only accessible by air or sea. The Palm Island Council is responsible for the provision of municipal services. This is an Indigenous community. All areas have large indigenous populations and contribute significantly to the 60% of indigenous young people on supervised orders in the region.

The Department of Families, Queensland, has three area offices spread throughout this region. Townsville and Thuringowa Area Offices provide child protection services to the region. The Townsville/Thuringowa Youth Justice Service provides youth justice services to the region. Townsville also is home to the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre.

The Youth Justice Service has a comprehensive staffing model. The service comprises of a Manager, two Team Leaders, eight Caseworkers, a Resource Officer, Program Development Officer, two Group Workers and a pool of casual Youth Workers. The service also has an Employment Officer based at the office, employed by Townsville Employment Training Incorporated.

Practice and Organisational Issues

Ken Buttrum, former Director-General of Juvenile Justice in New South Wales stated, “Current policy is flawed by political expediency and ‘knee-jerk responses to perceived problems of antisocial and delinquent youth behaviour. Juvenile justice should follow a systematic approach which demands that policy makers, juvenile justice administrators and politicians pay particular heed to research finding rather than gut-level populist opinion” (1998).
Policy by its nature is broad and influences the development of procedures for practice. Whilst policy within the Youth Justice arena is influenced by legislation and research, there exists a gap between the policy formulation and its translation into worker interventions with clients. Workers rarely understand or acknowledge the evidentiary links and often undertake practice within a cloistered environment following prescriptive procedures.

In the organisation's quest for uniformity and practice excellence, adherence to the prescriptive formula's designed to keep worker's on track has resulted in static practice. Staff are required to use prescriptive forms to acquire information and make assessments. Staff will often believe that they are using knowledge, derived from tertiary study and ‘on the job’ experience. “Despite this link, however, the translation of research findings to practice has frequently been erratic and unsystematic” (Reynolds, 2000,p19).

While there is merit in the use of formula's that have been designed based upon research and proven interventions, worker’s need to understand the linkages to facilitate reflective and innovative practice and practice that encourages worker's to ‘think outside the box’. Without this understanding creativity, innovation and skill levels are compromised.

For new workers prescriptive practice provides comforting guidelines but for experienced workers they serve to disillusion because of the failure to identify linkages between evidence, policy and its application to practice. This leads experienced workers to ask the question, Why do we do things the way we do? Both situations potentially undermine workers’ professional authority.

This is further exacerbated by youth justice specific training, which focuses upon policy and procedures that are broad and prescriptive. There is limited articulation to Evidence-Based Practice and assessment of the causal factors that influence offending. Inadequate training in engagement and assessment further compounds this.

The development of professional authority is an ongoing process and demands that workers continue to challenge their own and the organisations’ way of working. The understanding of Evidence-Based Practice will strengthen this questioning, not eliminate it.

In addition to the identified practice issues, organisational tensions such as high staff turnover, huge geographic distances, culturally diverse communities, high indigenous representation, rural and remote access issues and varied community infrastructure also inhibit optimal practice.

Consequence of Issues

The consequence of practice and organisational issues raises ethical considerations for staff and client service delivery. When staff do not have an adequate knowledge base from which to make decisions/assessments, they rely upon their legal mandate and become further reliant upon prescriptive service provision.

Due to these prescriptive and static practices and organisational issues, outcomes for clients are compromised. Case planning is often cursory, many workers lacking the understanding of assessment of risk and the linkage of criminogenic factors to recidivism and the importance of developing interventions based upon researched outcomes. This can lead to both clients and workers feeling powerless and ultimately, organisational credibility is undermined.

Broader organisational impacts are witnessed through high turnover of staff and de skilling and stagnation for staff who do remain, resulting in disillusionment and the potential for performance issues to arise.
These issues undermine the potential for staff to fully develop their professional knowledge and expertise and compromises client involvement in decision making. By exploring the introduction of Evidence-Based Practice into youth justice, the project, acknowledges organisational responsibilities and constraints, client and worker rights and the organisations commitment to being a ‘learning organisation’.

Over time, a value system regarding how we work with young people develops which is effected by limited resources and sees measures of successful intervention as ‘order compliance’. In generic offices, this is further compounded by competing demands of youth justice versus child protection crisis work. The introduction of the specific youth justice services is a political acknowledgment of these tensions and recognition of best methods of service delivery.

We need to make staff aware of the evidence and research behind policy and procedures and their ability to challenge and question why certain policies are in use.

**Project Aims and Process**

The ultimate aim of the project is to introduce the concept of Evidence-Based Practice to staff working with young offenders.

In summary, the aims of the project are:
- To introduce the concept of Evidence based practice in to youth justice service provision
- To develop an understanding of existing policy and its linkage to a research base
- Develop greater professional authority
- Facilitate new ways of thinking
- Facilitate reflective practice
- To challenge accountability aspects of our work.

It is envisaged that the introduction of Evidence-Based Practice will be a new concept for many workers within both models. While it is acknowledged that the Youth Justice Service was developed as a best practice model, staff working within the service don’t always comprehend the evidentiary links related to the development of the service or rationale for intervention. It is anticipated that each will carry its on potential barriers, as well as launch pads for implementation of the research.

We hope that the project ultimately results in challenging the culture and current prescriptive casework. In doing this, worker’s goals and motivation will be stimulated and subsequently, client outcomes will improve. Positive client outcomes are more likely to be achieved when referring to best evidence to inform practice to pose the question “should you be doing something different or something more?” (Butler,1996,vii). Ultimately, reflective practice will become a part of workers’ daily schedule.

Because it is envisaged that different perceptions and intervention will be challenged due to the two models of service delivery, we propose a multi-staged introduction of Evidence-Based Practice targeting particular positions within each service model. It is envisaged that workers will volunteer to participate by identifying a case or program where links to ‘what works’ literature will assist in the development of an Evidence-Based Practice intervention.
Additionally, this will introduce the concept of a ‘Learning Organisation’, which can assist workers to challenge existing processes and enable them to consider new ways of thinking and working. The project provides a starting point to achieve this, by targeting two models of service delivery. “The core challenge faced by the aspiring learning organisation is to develop tools and processes for conceptualising the big picture and testing ideas in practice. All in the organisation must master the cycle of thinking, doing, evaluation, and reflecting. Without, there is no valid learning”. (Senge 1992 :351)

Significance for Organisation

The introduction of Evidence-Based Practice in to frontline practice with young offenders is not only timely but also crucial to our ongoing integrity. The potential benefits of this project may include:

• Prescriptive processes will be challenged
• By questioning this (above) we are valuing client outcomes and organisational integrity
• Challenging existing policy
• Creating new innovations
• Creating a climate of inquiry
• Increased professionalism and expertise
• Increased staff retention
• Increased appropriate responses to working with indigenous clients

We believe that the introduction of Evidence Based Practice will lead to increased professionalism for staff and has the potential to address a number of these organisational and ethical issues over time.

Conclusion

This project hopes to provide workers with different ways of thinking, working and intervening with youth justice clients. Through the introduction of the concept of Evidence-Based Practice in youth justice, workers will develop a framework to facilitate questioning their work or the organisations’ current prescriptive policy.

Senge (1992) further identifies that, we may learn best from experience, but people often never experience the consequences of many of their most important decisions. Within organisations we don’t take time to reflect upon outcomes to truly learn from experiences. Self-analysis of this fashion takes vulnerability and this is often frowned upon by the organisation and different levels of authority. Pro-active managers are encouraged and admired when they tackle problems fast. Being truly pro-active means seeing how we contribute to our own problems and solving this first.
References


