

Reflections of a psycho-educational intern at a child protection unit: The processes and impact of engagement

Andrew Lewis*

School of Education, University of South Africa.
e-mail: lewisam@unisa.ac.za

Rona Newmark

Faculty of Education, University of Stellenbosch.
e-mail: rnew@sun.ac.za

Psycho-educational training programmes in South Africa currently aim to ensure that both the individual and community are benefited by trainees who graduate from these programmes. In addition, educational psychologists serving internships require training in community-oriented forms of practice. To achieve this aim, the University of Stellenbosch's Unit for Educational Psychology (UEP) follows an ecosystemic approach whereby interns perform community service at several centres in the Western Cape as part of their training programme. This article draws on the experiences of an intern at a Child Protection Unit (CPU) and the assistance given to the latter from the initial introduction to clients to the termination of therapy by the supervising psychologist. The article explores the functioning of a community-based unit such as a CPU and describes what is required of a psycho-educational intern by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) when working within a community context. The challenges which the intern confronted at the CPU are also indicated. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are drawn from these findings, which may prove useful to other emerging professionals working in similar community contexts.

*To whom correspondence should be addressed

Current thinking and practice in psycho-educational training programmes benefits not only the individual in traditional areas of psychotherapy and psychological assessment, but also the broader community of which the individual is a functioning part. The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) defines an educational psychologist as someone who '...assess[es], diagnose[s] and intervene[s] in order to facilitate the psychological adjustment and development of children and adolescents within the context of family, school, social and peer groups, and communities' (HPCSA 2002:1). This function of fulfilling both individual and community needs falls within the scope of practice of educational psychologists. Although writing about clinical psychologist training programmes in South Africa, Gibson, Sandenbergh and Swartz (2001:29) note a similar trend in psychology training and

practice, and indicate the challenges facing this current line of thinking and practice.

The rationale behind an approach of community and individual integration is that of systemic wholeness. Psychological support within an ecosystemic framework refers to the individual's 'adaptation' to environmental demands as well as to the influence of the individual on his or her surroundings to better meet his or her needs. To facilitate adaptation from an ecosystemic framework, existing therapeutic techniques are not discarded, but are considered for their appropriateness in each clinical context. Therefore, traditional ways of diagnosis, treatment, and aetiology are challenged and conventional thought processes need to be redefined (Auerswald 1973:699-700; Combrinck-Graham 1987:504-506; Keeney 1979:118,119; O'Connor 1977:16; Wilkinson & O'Connor 1982:986).

'Respect' for ecosystems assumes that the psychologist and client are artifacts of an interactional pattern or 'dance' that constitutes the whole of an ever-changing and evolving relationship context. From the viewpoint of an ecosystemic epistemology, neither the psychologist nor the client manipulate or steer the interactional dance. 'It may sometimes appear that one dancer "leads" and another "follows"; however upon closer examination this is shown to be questionable, since the follower may lead the leader to lead' (Keeney & Sprenkle 1982:15). Holt (cited by Bateson 1972:249) aptly expresses this process as follows: 'In my eyes the rock sculpts the sculptor, as much as the sculptor sculpts the rock.'

In this regard Pillay (2003:261) supports the notion that the practice of psychology should go beyond individual sessions; thus emphasising a broader focus on the community. However, he questions the level of preparation trainee psychologists receive for practice in the community. Pillay (2003:262) argues that community psychology adopts an ecosystemic approach where the emphasis is placed on the individual and context. He describes community psychology as focusing on prevention as opposed to treating dysfunction and maintains that educational psychologists in South Africa need to be trained and prepared according to an ecosystemic approach. This also includes the development of theory and research within the context of previously disadvantaged communities.

The Unit for Educational Psychology (UEP) at the University of Stellenbosch is a training institution for educational psychologists, which advocates this approach by requiring its student psychologists and interns to perform community service at several centres in the Western Cape, in addition to individual assessment and therapy (EOS 2002:2-3). Consequently, trainees are equipped with an array of skills drawn from the field of community psychology, which enable them to intervene in different ways and levels with larger groups of people, organisations and communities, as well as with families and individuals.

One such community centre where educational psychology students and interns perform community service is the Child

Protection Unit (CPU) in the Western Cape. The CPU, a unit within the South African Police Service (SAPS), handles crimes against children and renders a service that is sensitive to the needs of traumatised children (Pienaar 2000:19). A reciprocal relationship exists between this CPU and the Unit for Educational Psychology whereby the CPU benefits from the free psycho-educational service provided by the students and interns, and the latter's psycho-educational skills are honed by assisting traumatised CPU clients. This situation requires skills to be learnt and applied with proficiency and empathy. Educational psychology students and interns carry out this work under difficult and demanding circumstances with no formally researched community-based model from which to work and no on-site form of supervision while assessment, diagnosis and therapy are in progress. However, this is part of the reality of working in community-based projects in South Africa. Part of a student intern's challenge is to cope with the harsh realities of community work in an ethical and responsible manner that is based on sound psycho-educational knowledge and practice.

This article draws on the reflections and experiences of a psycho-educational intern at the CPU and of his supervisor from the Unit for Educational Psychology. The aims are to highlight the ethical and professional demands made on a psycho-educational intern and to suggest how the latter can be assisted in working at a community-based project, such as the CPU. These reflections and experiences may assist other students and interns when dealing with individuals within a specific community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research design commences when a person has a problem requiring a solution (Johnson & Christensen 2000:36). This provides any research with a focus and direction, and therefore requires a method of research. The research method in this study is qualitative and based on two specific case studies. The CPU was the site of the inquiry and the cases comprised two clients who were seen individually once a week: an 11-year-old boy who had been sodomised and a five-year-old girl who was a victim of rape.

Several research questions formed the focus and subsequently needed investigation in the research:

- What ethical and practising conditions are required of a practising psycho-educational intern in South Africa?
- What is the CPU and, more relevant, what functions do CPU's perform in South Africa?
- What challenges face a psycho-educational intern at a CPU?
- What conclusions can be drawn from these findings so that recommendations can be made for interns practising at community centres?

ETHICAL/STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

In order to become a practising professional educational psychologist in South Africa, the formal academic requirements stipulated for professional training in educational psychology must have been completed, as well as an appropriate internship. Intern educational psychologists are legally required to register with the Professional Board for Psychology prior to commencing the internship (HPCSA 1999[a]:1-2; HPCSA 1999[b]:2).

The following documents must accompany an intern's application: (a) A written undertaking from an appropriately registered supervising psychologist to act as supervisor for the duration of the internship, (b) a letter from the training institution consenting to accommodate the candidate as intern for the duration of the internship, (c) a letter from the supervising Department of Educational Psychology of the university agreeing to act as such for the duration of the period of the internship, and (d) a detailed internship programme (HPCSA 1999[a]:1-2). The internship programme of the Unit for Educational Psychology at the University of Stellenbosch is accredited by the Professional Board for Psychology for the training of educational psychologists. This accreditation includes the requirement that interns have to spend at least three hours per week in community-based settings. Before commencing at the Unit, all these requirements are stipulated by the supervising psychologist and accepted by the intern.

A further integral part of an internship programme entails the training and supervision of interns. The supervising psychologist must be registered in the applicable relevant category with the HPCSA (in this case educational psychology) and should be in possession of a doctorate or a minimum of three years' appropriate practical experience and appropriate training in supervision. Intern supervision requires that the supervising psychologist be accessible and available for personal contact, on a daily basis (HPCSA[b] 1999:5). A legal obligation of the intern-supervisor relationship is that an intern must, if instructed by a supervisor, always comply with the supervisor's instructions (Allan 2001:187-188).

During the author's internship period there were five interns in total at the Unit for Educational Psychology. During their community service at various centres in the Western Cape, the five interns were spread over a wide regional area that made it difficult for the supervising psychologists to be on site. However, supervisors were available telephonically which, according to the HPCSA (1999[b]:5) is acceptable in exceptional circumstances. Generally, however, telephonic supervisory sessions are seldom needed as interns receive adequate guidance prior to their scheduled weekly supervision sessions. The author served his internship at the CPU. During this period, it was not necessary to contact the supervisor telephonically. However, the supervisor's availability, if needed, ensured that the service could be performed with the necessary confidence.

It is imperative that interns maintain ethical standards set by the profession. Because interns remain the responsibility of the supervising psychologist, and as the profession is bound by the ethical guidelines set by the HPCSA, aspects such as professional competence and relations, privacy, confidentiality, maintaining, disseminating and keeping records, assessment and therapeutic activities are required. While working at the CPU, these ethical aspects were rigorously adhered to by the intern and ensured by the supervising psychologist. Prior to the intern's involvement in community service, several workshops were presented by the supervising psychologist pertaining to ethical issues.

THE CHILD PROTECTION UNIT (CPU)

The South African Police Service (SAPS) identified a need to prevent and combat crimes against children during the 1980s and appointed specialised individuals to investigate these crimes. CPUs function in the main centres of South Africa with several specialised individuals policing crimes against children in the smaller centres. The training of these specialists working at the CPU encompasses educational psychological aspects, such as knowledge of child development which is presented by trained educational psychologists (Pienaar 2000:19; SAPS: 1-2).

The primary task of the CPU is to render a service that is sensitive to the needs of the child against whom a crime has been committed. The CPU's mission is to protect the interests of children against criminal, physical and psychological harm by means of unbiased professional deterrence and the investigation of the crime. Crimes against children *inter alia* include rape, sodomy, incest, indecent assault, murder, assault, assault with the intent to do bodily harm, abduction and kidnapping (Pienaar 2000:19-20).

CHALLENGES

The rationale for students and interns practising at community centres is to ensure that they acquire a broad experience of professional psycho-educational service delivery in the heterogeneous South African society. This practice also ensures that students and interns are exposed to a teamwork approach and alternative ways of practice (EOS 2002:2).

In general, students of psychology, and in this case educational psychology, face several challenges in their training. Gibson et al. (2001:29) refer to several generic challenges experienced by students and interns during training which include:

- Having to deal with and adapt to heavy workloads;
- the need to develop a complex set of psychological skills;
- being trained under close supervision which implies critical appraisal of their experience and the things they have been learnt; and
- dealing with personal issues which can be triggered by and exposed during training.

In addition to the above, every community faces its own unique challenges and difficulties. The authors experienced the following specific challenges which may prove useful to other students and interns working under similar conditions at a CPU, or any like context, in future.

Sensitivity to corporate culture

Each organisation has its own particular corporate culture; the Unit for Educational Psychology and the CPU are no different. According to Vaida (2004:1), "company culture is made up of the values and principles that guide the company in everything it does, from its business dealings to how it treats its employees." The CPU has its own particular rules, values and conventions that govern its functioning. This introduces the first demand which is a sensitivity to the new values.

Thus, part of the orientation process of the Unit for Educational Psychology includes a visit by all students and interns, together with the supervising educational psychologist, to the CPU to meet the members of the CPU as well as to sensitise both parties to each other. This includes meeting key parties with whom specific students and interns will work and interact and an introduction to the particular rules and norms of the CPU. Key personnel are identified to whom interns and students can turn in times of possible difficulty.

Approach to intervention

The Unit's intervention model involves the compilation of a client file based upon the information received from the CPU. The client's caregivers are contacted telephonically in order to make an appointment and to obtain information regarding the child's functioning at school and home.

Thereafter, a supervisory discussion was set up with the supervisor at the Unit for Educational Psychology. Based on the information obtained from the CPU and the discussion with the client's caregivers, the supervisor provided the intern with input based on available knowledge of the specific case. The discussion also included the other four interns at the Unit in order to exchange ideas. The aim of these sessions was to give the intern

guidance concerning the selection of a possible therapeutic method of intervention for each case, as well as to stimulate thinking and engender other possible approaches.

On meeting the clients and their caregivers for the first time, several administrative formalities had to be clarified, these included: limits of confidentiality, the giving of authority, and the setting of fixed appointments for assessment and therapy. This initial contact also established rapport among the intern, the client, and the client's caregivers. The Unit's official letter of authority consists of permission to make recordings of the sessions, using the sessions for research and training purposes, and the name of the person to whom reports of the assessment and therapy must be directed. Caregivers have the option of receiving the report solely or allowing the client's school and other related professionals (e.g., occupational therapists) who are assisting the child to receive the report as well. All these aspects are bound by ethical considerations of the psychology profession as governed by the HPCSA.

After the introductory formalities were concluded, a discussion with the caregivers ensued during which a rich and detailed history of the events pertaining to the incidents of abuse was obtained by means of an interview, genogram and a timeline. History taking is helpful in deciding on the best form of treatment for an abused child (Lewis 1999:185). Interviewing is a common method of data collection especially with regard to clients who have or are experiencing stress and trauma (Lewis 2003:91-92,111) as it assists in gaining family background information, establishing the context in which the abuse occurred, ascertaining a child's current and emotional needs (Fitzgerald & McGregor 1995:179), and assessing parents' distress concerning the abuse. This method of data collection was especially helpful in assisting the intern to obtain a lucid case history of the two CPU clients and their context.

Selection of assessment and treatment options

Lewis (1999:185) notes that it is sometimes necessary to conduct a psychological assessment before deciding on a treatment plan for the abused child. This type of testing, which

includes both intellectual and emotional assessments, assists in determining if the child's difficulties stem from the experienced trauma only or from scholastic and family problems, as well. The two clients at the CPU were assessed both intellectually and emotionally, as is the protocol within the Unit for Educational Psychology.

Intellectual assessments were done using the Senior South African Individual Scale – Revised (SSAIS-R) (Van Eeden 1991) and the Junior South African Individual Scales (JSAIS) (Madge 1981). Emotional assessments were performed by making use of the Draw-A-Person (DAP), Kinetic-Family-Drawing (KFD) and Rotter Incomplete Sentences techniques. Feedback of the intellectual and emotional assessments was given to the caregivers. These assessments helped to provide guidelines to the caregivers when assisting the child and to develop a treatment plan.

Individual therapy involved play therapy which included drawings, sand tray, clay, toys and puppets and allowed the clients to express their thoughts and feelings within a safe environment. The CPU has a well-equipped playroom where clients could express their feelings and thoughts concerning their abuse. Play therapy sessions were videotaped and involved only the client and the intern. The sessions were aimed at helping the clients to restore a sense of control and an understanding of boundaries and provided adaptive ways of coping at home and at school. The sessions also provided the intern with an understanding of the child's experience of the trauma. For example, the five-year old girl expressed her experience of rape by placing a female doll in the sand tray with play money next to it. Included in the sand tray was a monster toy. This suggested the girl's molestation and payment made by the perpetrator (symbolised by the monster) for her silence.

Lewis (1999:193) notes the pivotal role played by adult caregivers in the therapeutic context of the child's recovery from trauma and it is therefore imperative that they form part of the child's recovery process. However, a challenge experienced was the inability of the clients' parents to accompany them to the CPU on a weekly basis during school/working hours, and they sometimes only accompanied the child

every alternative week and allowed another family member or friend to accompany the child. However, the authors did not judge it ethical to discuss the child's progress with anyone else except the legal caregiver. Therefore, feedback on the client's progress and subsequent parent counselling could only take place when the child's legal caregiver was present and with the client's permission. This approach is congruent with Allan (2001:146) who notes that "the therapist will, on a regular basis inform the [child's] parents about the therapeutic process and progress. The report will be brief, factual and in general terms. This feedback will be given in the presence of the child, or otherwise the content of such feedback will be discussed with the child beforehand."

Termination of therapy

Termination of therapy can have both a positive and negative effect on the client. In the first instance, therapeutic growth can lead to the client's ability to process the trauma positively. Conversely, termination can lead to a furthering of the trauma experienced by the client. Thompson and Rudolph (1992:51) argue, 'Termination may be difficult for children because they usually find the session to be a time when a caring adult gives them undivided attention'. To ease the break, the therapist facilitates the process by rehearsing what will happen after the separation. The child is then left with the feeling that the therapist still cares after therapy has been terminated which creates a sense of security for the client.

As the intern was concluding his internship at mid-year, it was necessary to provide pre-termination counselling and suggest alternative providers (HPCSA 2004:17) as therapy could not be concluded with one client (the five-year-old girl). The new intern was introduced gradually to the corporate structure of the CPU and to the client, after explaining to the client's caregiver and the client the reason for the change. Initially, the replacement intern observed the first intern doing therapy with the client and, over a period of weeks, the replacement intern progressed from partial intervention to full intervention with successful results.

CONCLUSION

South African psychology services have moved towards accommodating the community as well as individuals in their treatment programmes and this has necessitated that training programmes also reflect this shift in their curricula.

Practising as an educational-psychology intern within a community service context which serves the individual, family and the community poses several challenges. The first challenge is to have knowledge of, to understand and respect the community programme where one is working with the realisation that organisations differ in their culture and functioning. This requires sensitivity to the community's culture. A mutual understanding of the context of each organisation and community contributes towards the understanding of professional and ethical considerations. A second challenge is to realise that existing intern training models have to be flexible and adaptable to the context in which the intern has to function while still maintaining professional and ethical standards. This flexibility is reflected in aspects such as contact with parents, psychological assessment, diagnosis and intervention when dealing with clients at a community centre.

Although supervision cannot always be on-site, it is important for interns and the supervising psychologists to liaise with each other and to discuss the different cases. Interns in South Africa are bound ethically and legally to the stipulations laid down by the HPCSA and it is imperative the supervisory institution and psychologist ensure that these regulations are judiciously upheld so that the individuals and community are both effectively served.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge the co-operation and guidance offered by the staff at the Goodwood Child Protection Unit. These views are those of the authors alone and in no way reflect those of the staff of the CPU.

REFERENCES

- Allan, A. 2001. *The law for psychotherapists and counsellors* (Second edition). Somerset West: Inter-Ed.
- Auerswald, E. 1973. Families, change, and the ecological perspective. In Ferber, A, Mendersohn, M & Napier, A. (Eds.). 1973. *The book of family therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Combrinck-Graham, L. 1987. Invitation to a kiss: Diagnosing ecosystemically. *Psychotherapy*, 24(3S):504-510.
- Eenheid vir Opvoedkundige Sielkunde (EOS). 2002. Jaarverslag [Annual report]. Universiteit van Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch.
- Fitzgerald, KM & McGregor, KJ. 1995. Specialist assessment services for child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse Review*, 4: 177-190.
- Gibson, K, Sandenbergh, R & Swartz, L. 2001. Becoming a community clinical psychologist: Integration of community and clinical practices in psychologists' training. *South African Journal of Psychology*, (31)1:29-35.
- HPCSA. 1999(a). Health Professions Council of South Africa. The Professional Board for Psychology. Application for Registration as an Intern Psychologist. Form 26. 2 September.
- HPCSA. 1999(b). Health Professions Council of South Africa. The Professional Board for Psychology. Policy regarding Intern Psychologists. Guidelines for Universities, Training Placements and Intern Psychologists. Form 160. 3 November.
- HPCSA. 2002. The Professional Board for Psychology. Scope and practice: Psychology. November.
- HPCSA. 2004. Professional Board for Psychology. Rules of conduct pertaining specially to Psychology. January.
- Johnson, B & Christensen, L. 2000. *Educational research: quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Keeney, BP. 1979. An ecosystemic model for diagnosis. *Family Process*, 18:117-129.
- Keeney, B.P & Sprenkle, DH. 1982. Ecosystemic epistemology: critical implications for the aesthetics and pragmatics of family therapy. *Family Process*, 21(1):1-18.
- Lewis, S. 1999. *An adult's guide to childhood trauma*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Madge, EM. 1981. *Junior South African Individual Scales (JSAIS)*. Pretoria: South African Human Sciences Research Council.
- O'Connor, WA. 1977. Ecosystem theory and clinical mental health. *Psychiatric Annals*, 7(7):63-77.
- Pienaar, A. 2000. South African Police Service: Child Protection Unit. *Child Abuse Research in South Africa*, (1)1:19-24.
- Pillay, J. 2003. "Community psychology is all theory and no practice": training educational psychologists in community practice within the South African context, *South African Journal of Psychology*, 33(4), 261-268.
- SAPS (1986). Establishment of a Child Protection Unit (CPU): 1986. [Http://www.saps.gov.za/_dynamicmodules/internet site/buildingblocks/text/txt23.htm](http://www.saps.gov.za/_dynamicmodules/internet site/buildingblocks/text/txt23.htm) Accessed 12 January 2004.
- Thompson, CL & Rudolph, LB. 1992. *Counseling children*. New York: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Vaida, G. 2005. Culture outweighs job skills. *Sunday Times Business Times Careers*, 6, February: 1.
- Van Eeden, R. 1991. *Senior South African Individual Scale-Revised (SSAIS-R)*. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Wilkinson, CB & O'Connor, WA. 1982. Human ecology and mental illness. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 139(8): 985-990.