An Experience of Reflective Practice - Finding a Reflective Space

By Siobhán Bruen, Social Worker, Ireland

I have been working as a Social Worker with children and their families for the last eighteen years. In 2006 I attended an Infant Mental Health Master Class facilitated by Deborah Weatherston of the Michigan Association of Infant Mental Health and Catherine Maguire and Rochelle Matakz of the Cork Health Health Services. I, along with other members of my team, have been involved in an Infant Mental Health Network Group since then. A central feature of the infant mental health model is reflective supervision. Most IMH specialists learn to use the supervisory relationship to reflect on the complex emotional realities of overburdened families and infants at risk. … The IMH specialist may be affected deeply by individual infants and families … she needs to have time to discuss what is seen and heard” (Weatherston, 2000, p.9).

In 2009 I completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Fieldwork Practice and Supervision in University College Cork, Ireland. As a participant of this course I was expected to keep a learning journal, and to engage in a process of reflective learning. I was also a member of a peer group which met regularly to provide members with opportunities to engage in reflection. This reflective model of learning is set out in an article by Dempsey et al, 2001. They make reference to the use of Kolb’s learning cycle, and Steve Seidel’s framework «which involves the learner in looking backward, looking inward, looking outward and looking forward.”

The importance of reflective practice and supervision has been a recurring theme for me in my studies and in my work experiences and also in recent reports on the complex emotional realities of overburdened families and infants at risk. … The IMH specialist may be affected deeply by individual infants and families … she needs to have time to discuss what is seen and heard” (Weatherston, 2000, p.9).

In the current climate of limited resources, reduced access to training, and increasing pressure on managers we have to be creative in finding the space for reflection. As a social worker I receive regular supervision. However due to the demands of the service this mostly focuses on case management, with little opportunity for reflective space. This challenged me to look at my experiences of supervision and find a space for critical reflection, for on-going learning, and growth. This then led me to have discussions within my team about how we might look to providing each other with support and, as a result, improve the quality of service to the children and families we work with. It has been creative and collaborative effort.

What follows is an example of how members and I from my team drew on our own resources to create a reflective space. As a team we acknowledged the inherent complexity and uncertainty in the work we do and the emotional impact of it. We identified a need for a reflective space to help us gain a better understanding of our own experiences in practice, further developing our conscious awareness of the impact of our work, including the impact we have on service users. With support from University College Cork (UCC), members of the Department of Applied Social Studies Carmel Halton, Marion Murphy and Applied Psychology, Maria Dempsey we began negotiating
The challenges:

- The process is not always easy – bringing together a group of people, negotiating ground rules, developing trust, being supportive rather than judgmental, giving and receiving authentic feedback.

- Continuing to find time within an increasingly pressured work environment to use the journal, and attend the meetings

Being part of such a group has been important to sustaining me in my work. It has enriched my engagement with service users and I believe has led to better decision making in the best interest of children.

The support we received initially from UCC was important in helping us establish and sustain the groups and to overcome the challenges in the first year. Now we manage the groups ourselves. We don’t always come up with the answers but generally are clearer about what the questions are. I believe this is a creative development in our team which has enhanced our practice and is a model which could be replicated to provide reflective space for practitioners working in social work teams.

References


Permission to reprint materials from Perspectives in Infant Mental Health is granted, provided appropriate citation for source is noted. Suggested format: Perspectives in Infant Mental Health, Volume n, Issue n, pp. xx-xx.