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Ray Southon

Mountain View Adventist College

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Introducing psychology interns to counselling in Christian schools

Ray Southon

School counsellor, Mountain View Adventist College, Doonside, NSW; registered psychotherapist and counsellor

An illuminating idea

As part of a compulsory aspect of professional counselling practice, I had established a supervisory relationship with practicing psychologist, Colleen. Colleen happened to also supervise interns who were studying a Masters degree in either Educational Psychology or Clinical Psychology at various universities around Sydney. When I found out that Colleen was looking for placements for her students to gain experience in various counselling settings, an exciting idea was born. I began negotiations with the principal and school council of Sydney Adventist College (SAC) regarding the placement of psychology interns in the school and later in Mountain View Adventist College (MVAC).

Assessing the potential value of intern placements

I discussed with the principal the needs of the school and the training and skill level of the interns in order to determine how the interns might best serve the needs of the College.

During the infancy stage of the project, the interns placed in the school played a significant supportive role in the effort to establish a needs-based assessment of perceived ways the school counselling team could best serve the school community. They assisted in surveying staff and student needs and began setting up structures to respond to them. During a parent information night, they helped conduct a parent-needs survey and utilised the results to develop pathways to address parents' needs.

“Benefits have mostly come through the expanded services the counselling departments can now offer at the schools”

Developing a job description

There was no existing protocol or pathway for the introduction of psychology interns into our school setting. We needed to carve a new pathway for integrating psychology interns into a major school system. The university required the formulation of a job description for the interns. We wanted to develop a job description that reflected the needs of the school and how the interns would be utilised in order to address those needs.

Drawing on the findings of the needs-based assessment we had done of students, staff and parents, I formulated a draft copy of a 'Needs-Based Assessment for the Integration of Psychology Students'. The draft included suggestions for possible services the interns could provide and needs they could fulfil. This proposal later developed into a model that would provide not only an adequate job description but also the prime function and accountability structures of our department.

Selection of interns

Selection of a suitable intern is critical. We liaise with the placement coordinator at the University of Western Sydney, School of Psychology in order to find those students interested in a placement in a Christian school setting. Potential interns submit a resume and indicate their willingness to operate within the school's value system.

Contributions made by the interns

The benefits of hosting and supporting psychology interns at Sydney Adventist College and Mountain View Adventist College have been extensive. These benefits have mostly come through the expanded services the counselling departments can now offer at the schools.

Interns were involved in the formulation of a major Anti-Bullying Project for SAC. They formed part of a brainstorming group and made it possible to visit sixteen other major private and public, co-ed and non-co-ed colleges around Sydney with a view to determine best practice in addressing bullying. These findings then formed an important resource during the development of school policy and practice.

With increased counselling staff, SAC has been able to establish two additional counselling rooms. School administration supported this growth and it wasn't long before the interns began supervised meetings with students. Counselling sessions help address issues such as cutting, suicide ideation, family break-up, sexuality, sex, identity issues, anger management, depression, relationships, grief, separation anxiety, integration adjustment, and bullying.

An educational psychology intern has been placed as a classroom supervisor with the learning support coordinator. This intern works with teachers to develop and implement behaviour support plans for individual students; manage small groups of students who require specialised support; work with students on an individual basis as required; carry out appropriate testing (including for integration) of students when required; and liaise with teachers regarding student progress.

By utilising the interns, we have been able to offer increased support to parents. The interns played an essential part in the development and delivery of a 'Relationship Recovery Workshop' aimed at empowering families of divorce, separation or bereavement in their healing and reinvention. The interns acted as facilitators of small groups, supporting parents and their children.

The interns were integral in the development and delivery of a parent night for middle school parents. The program included a panel discussion with several brief presentations on teenage developmental stages and parenting issues. The program gave us an opportunity to introduce ourselves as professionals, facilitate networking amongst parents, and provide feedback to parents. Following are further services offered by the interns:

- skills training
- support for teachers dealing with difficult behaviour
- assistance in supporting learning difficulties
- follow-up with students
- career guidance
- psychometric testing, including feedback to parents about the child's needs with respect to psychometric test results
- liaising with teaching staff and documenting cases to assist resolution of student-related issues
- delivery of anger management courses
- support for student mums.

The relationship between the interns and the school is truly of mutual benefit.

Welfare to wellbeing

After careful consideration of the services offered at the school, including those by the counselling department, we planned a change of name for 'Student Welfare'. Instead of being called 'Student Welfare', the inference of which is helping the needy, I suggested a new title 'Student Wellbeing Support Team'. This new title suggests a positive and holistic approach to caring for students. This proposal was met with favour and was passed by the School Council.

The interns' experience

During the first placement, entry, orientation and integration were poor due to teething issues. In spite of this, our intern enjoyed her early experience with us and was enthusiastic to get more involved in the school. Over time, her confidence grew and teachers started to show their appreciation of her input. (Experience and the development of a job description now enable us to facilitate a smooth entry process.)

The interns are with us in order to further develop their skills. They have an opportunity to observe behaviours, see professionals in action, ask questions, and explore ideas and concepts in a supervisory relationship. Over time, they learn to trust their intuition as they use the student story and their own life experience and training to respond to needs. They also learn to reflect on situations to determine what can be learnt about themselves, about others, about life or about God.

As the interns grow in confidence, experience and competence, they start to team-counsel students and parents under my supervision. When appropriate, they then branch out on their own, seeing their own list of students. During their university training, these interns have not had the chance to do one-on-one counselling so our school setting offers a tremendous learning opportunity.

In addition, interns have the opportunity to fulfil the requirements of their university internship program.

Conclusion

'Where there is no vision, the people perish'. For me, fulfilling one's dreams is an exciting adventure. This project has made an important contribution to Christian education in our schools. The process hasn't been without its challenges but we have seen effective multiplication of our labour, allowing us to care for even more needs within our community. This project is a worthy fulfilment of a wonderful dream, and the illumination has only just begun for those who see its potential. **TEACH**

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