

BRIEF REPORT: Wisdom 2 Action Events as a Route for Dissemination and Network Building

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Abstract:

The Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts (CYCC) Network is a Canadian knowledge mobilization network focused on improving the mental and health and well being of the most vulnerable young people by sharing best and promising practices regarding services for young people in an interdisciplinary and cross sectoral context. A major initiative of the CYCC Network has been a series of knowledge sharing events called Wisdom2Action which were held between 2013 and 2015 across Canada. This article examines the rationale for these events as part of meeting the CYCC network mandate, experience to date and future challenges.

Keywords:

Children and youth, knowledge mobilization, knowledge translation.

Introduction

Children and youth growing up in challenging contexts, both in Canada and overseas, face common threats to their mental health. These range from individual problems like depression, to family-based experiences of domestic violence and child abuse, to social exclusion because of poverty or political violence, to discrimination resulting from social stigma (Masten, 2014). Children's experiences may appear to be very different but they share a remarkably common set of underlying challenges such as traumand violence.

The available statistics illustrate the nature and magnitude of the challenges. While between 14 and 25 per cent of Canadian young people experience mental health problems, including violence towards others and self-harming behaviours (our focus) (Ministry of Children and Youth Services Ontario, 2006; Waddell, McEwan, Shepherd, Offord, & Hua, 2005), only one in five receives the professional care they require (Kutcher, 2011).

When untreated, psychological, behavioural and social problems like suicide and gang violence will continue into adulthood, creating long-term need for services. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2011) reports that more than 70% of adults who have mental health issues developed symptoms during childhood or early adolescence. The return on investment, both financial and social, is enormous when we address children's complex psychological, emotional and behavioural challenges early (Farrington & Koegl, 2014). In Canada, for example, approximately 500 young people commit suicide every year (Kutcher & Szumilas, 2008). In the US, 70% of young people under 18 who are incarcerated have a diagnosed mental health condition; 55% have more than one diagnosed condition (Kutcher & McDougall, 2009). Though the rate of incarceration in Canada is lower, the rate of concurrent disorders, including violence, is likely just as high, with 3.2% of young people reporting both mental health and substance use problems (Cheung, Bennett, Bullock, Soberman, & Kozloff, 2010). Even more troubling, a study of 497 Canadian youth using multiple services and facing a number of social barriers reported the lowest rates of service utilization and the least satisfaction with services when they did access professional help (Ungar et al., 2013).

The Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts (CYCC) Network has worked to improve mental health and wellbeing for vulnerable young people in Canada since 2011 and around the world through the sharing of promising practices from research and practice across the sector. The Network has brought together a dynamic and integrated community of members that includes 78 academics from 34 universities and more than 124 community-based service organizations, policy makers and community groups. The CYCC Network has engaged young people with histories of service use as active participants in all activities, including organizational governance. Further, the CYCC Network has contributed to the development of young academics working on issues related to vulnerable young people by establishing a national forum for graduate students. The Network's overall goal is to improve services and outcomes for young people with complex needs by engaging community-based service providers in the knowledge-to-action cycle to move research into practice (knowledge mobilization-KMb).

In Canada, community-based organizations providing psychological and social services to our most vulnerable young people are, for the most part, not engaging in evidence-based practices (Barwick, Boydell, Stasiulis, Ferguson, Blase, & Fixsen, 2005; Hoagwood & Olin, 2002). There are no existing models of KMb designed specifically for the contexts in which these organizations operate (e.g., poorly resourced community service settings with less formal organizational structures). This has given rise to a divide between some service providers and researchers who develop evidence-based research and practices which is a serious problem given that research shows that marginalized youth are more likely to rely

on community-based services rather than formal mental health or social services (Ungar, Liebenberg, Armstrong, Dudding, & van de Vijver, 2012).

Many service providers report having limited capacity to dedicate to engaging with research-based knowledge, even when this knowledge deals with populations to whom they offer services. This is not a reflection of service provider interest in engaging with such evidence. In an internal mixed methods evaluation of the Network's impact conducted with 94 of its members, want credible evidence that supports the most promising programs for children and youth that they can adapt to local contexts. That finding is congruent with research on KMB in this sector (Barwick, Barac, Akrong, Johnson, & Chaban, 2014). The CYCC Network is working to overcome this divide by engaging community-based service providers in activities that help them to engage with best and promising practices as identified by both academics and other service providers, and to adapt these to their service settings.

CYCC Network Knowledge Mobilization

While not mandated to do primary research, the CYCC Network has developed innovative ways to synthesize knowledge in order to meet the needs of community level service providers. CYCC Network programming has helped organizations become both knowledge users and knowledge producers through strategic partnerships between academics and service providers and providing opportunities for sharing lessons learned through community workshops called Wisdom2Action.

When the Network began operations, Network team members learned that –despite whatever technology was available to share promising practices - Network members who were community-based service providers wanted to connect in person with local, credible connections. This realization led to the development of Wisdom2Action (W2A) events which have grown to become a pillar of the CYCC Network's approach to Knowledge Mobilization. Since the W2A event in Toronto, there have been six subsequent one or two-day regionally-focused unilingual and bilingual workshops (in Ottawa, Montreal, Halifax, Surrey, Iqaluit and Calgary).¹

The goals of each W2A event have been to share case studies of local practices shown to have a positive influence on children's wellbeing, and to engage participants in conversations about how to use academically-produced evidence to inform their work. Community organizations have presented on their own programs and practices and researchers have presented on the work they have done, for instance on gang prevention in British Columbia. The workshops have the additional benefit of strengthening regional networks of community-based service providers and engaging them in all three phases of the knowledge-to-action cycle. For some W2A participants it has been their first encounter with knowledge mobilization theory or practice. In this regard, W2A reflects the principles of implementation science (Raghavan, Bright & Shadoin, 2008) applied to a cross-section of service systems that have not been active in KMB activities.

1 <http://www.cyccnetwork.org/en/kmb/wisdom-to-action>

W2A events fit within the strategic framework that the CYCC Network has adopted to guide its activities. The Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services (PARIHS) framework has been adopted to structure these activities. PARIHS is a three-phase approach to KMB that places equal value on each phase of the knowledge-to-action cycle. The phases of this framework are: (1) gather the evidence for effective practice, wherever it can be found (academic sources, grey literature, case studies); (2) understand the differences between the contexts in which evidence is gathered and where it will be used in order to make it easier for service providers to adopt and adapt new practices; and (3) facilitate uptake of best and promising practices in new settings tailored to the particular needs of under-resourced service providers in community settings (Kitson, Harvey, & McCormack, 1998).

Wisdom2Action – Mobilizing knowledge across Canada

In developing W2A, the CYCC Network took steps to ensure that events would be relevant to Network members' needs. A survey of all Network members was undertaken and interested members were engaged to help plan events in their local communities. A national steering committee was established, comprised of Network Board members and key Network partners. This National committee met in October 2013 and agreed on a guiding purpose of "Sharing stories, promising practices and questions so that we can support young people better". The name "Wisdom 2 Action" was chosen for the events, reflecting the Network's convictions that 1) all participants have locally-rooted wisdom to share and that 2) the goal of each event was to move towards action which would improve the services offered to support vulnerable youth.

This national committee identified key principles to guide each W2A event. These principles included 1) engaging with the local context and 2) engaging young people in KMB activities where possible. In pursuing these goals Network staff planned each W2A event in collaboration with a local team organized by Network Partners. This had the outcomes of creating local ambassadors for the CYCC Network and ensuring that each event was reflexive in terms of approach, participants, location, language and other cultural considerations. Efforts to engage young people were based upon the promising practices identified in the knowledge synthesis report *Working with Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts to Promote Youth Engagement* (Zinck, E., Ungar, M., Whitman, S., Exenberger, S., LeVert-Chaisson, I., Liebenberg, L., Ung, J., & Forshner, A.) which was produced by the CYCC Network in 2013.

The Art of Hosting² approach was used at this founding meeting and all subsequent W2A events. This approach to facilitating events is highly participatory and is premised upon the belief that all participants have knowledge to share and that collaborative, interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral discussion and action is required to address complex issues. This approach avoids traditional presentations or panel discussions and instead puts participants in the roles of leading discussions, participating in and recording discussions.

2 <http://www.artofhosting.org>

The W2A model developed by the Network has been transferred effectively across diverse social and economic contexts. It has been employed in the urban settings of Toronto and Ottawa, in small cities such as Surrey, BC and Halifax, Nova Scotia and in Montreal, Nunavut, Calgary. Each of these cities faces distinct regional challenges. W2A Montreal, for example, sought to bring together French and English language serving sectors in a fully bilingual event. W2A Calgary consisted of a national meeting on the rise of violent extremist movements amongst youth. This event was grounded in research underway at the Resilience Research Centre.

Wisdom2Action Nunavut

The territory of Nunavut has a youth suicide level of 13 times the national average, high incidences of substance abuse and exposure to domestic violence and geographic and financial challenges to providing effective services to young people (Statistics Canada 2010; Kielland & Simeone 2014). Further, the organizations that support young people face enormous challenges because of the distance between communities, a lack of mental health infrastructure and difficulty accessing professional development (Kral 2012).

In 2014, the CYCC Network partnered with the Nunavut government's Department of Child and Family Services, Mental Health Services and Justice (Crime Prevention), along with community-based service providers, to host a two-day Wisdom2Action event that facilitated the exchange between people living in Nunavut of best and promising practices to address youth mental health challenges. Sixty service providers, nurses, psychologists, government officials and young people travelled from across the territory to Iqaluit to both share their work and hear from service leaders and academics about programs that could inform local solutions in remote communities.

Post event interviews with participants told us that for some participants W2A Nunavut was the first time they had shared program ideas in a structured way within the territory, either with academics or other service providers. The event helped forge new connections between service providers and academic supports. For example, the Isaksimagit Inuusirmi Katujjiqaatigiit Embrace Life Council, a suicide prevention coalition, connected with the Halifax-based Resilience Research Centre to conduct a self-evaluation of their program's impact; the territory's only paediatrician developed strategic partnerships with community services for parents and mental health professionals that has led to development of a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder assessment clinic; the Arctic Child and Youth Foundation met government officials who, after hearing about their work, joined the organization's Advisory Council and are working together to establish a child and youth advocacy centre to provide an evidence-based approach to the investigation and treatment of child sexual abuse. Perhaps most noteworthy is the community of practice that grew out of the event. Mental health workers working in remote communities such as Arviat and Rankin Inlet established a network that now bi-weekly teleconferences to share program ideas across the territory.

Implications on KMb in other sectors

Organizations working in different fields across the country have begun to show

interest in the methods that the CYCC Network has developed for sharing evidence-based and practice-based knowledge. For example, the National Centers of Excellence (NCE) Knowledge Mobilization 2015 conference brought together representatives of NCE-funded organizations from across the country. Representatives from fields as disparate as medicine, science and technology, health care, cyber security and operations management were in attendance. CYCC Network staff led participants in a session based upon the techniques developed through W2A events. This session provided lessons on how to organize an effective knowledge mobilization event and was attended by conference delegates from across the country. Informal feedback from participants suggests that there is interest in porting the W2A model of knowledge mobilization developed by the CYCC Network into new fields and new geographic locations.

Challenges

Several challenges have been encountered during the process of developing the W2A model employed by the Network. One of these challenges has been ensuring that the events are recorded effectively despite their non-traditional format. While participatory events can be productive for those involved, the possibilities of issuing conference proceedings that relate the details of the conference to both participants and non-participants are limited. In response to early experiences where participants' recollections of the day were insufficient to provide detailed reports, the CYCC network has ensured adequate staff and volunteer attention is given to documenting each event. This has led to the production of short videos and reports that document each event.

Perhaps the most significant challenge has sustaining the momentum following each event, an issue raised participants in our network-wide self-evaluation. The CYCC Network recognizes this need and in its second cycle, intends to both strengthen its regional presence through hubs and critical partnerships and in part through this model, support the creation of communities of practice, either subject or place based. Further, in June 2015 the CYCC Network hosted a National Wisdom2Action meeting that will bring together members of W2A planning teams from across the country for a meeting in Halifax. This meeting will provide an opportunity for participants to exchange experiences and develop region specific ways of carrying the momentum of W2A forward.

Conclusion

Engaging community service providers in knowledge mobilization activities such as Wisdom2Action events is one way of supporting an increased use of research in service provision and the exchange of promising practices amongst service providers.

Moving forward, the CYCC Network intends to deepen engagement with a small number of community based service organizations in Canada and support them as they change their organizational cultures and uptake of evidence-informed practices. The Network will build regional capacity and expertise in how to provide coaching to local organizations to help them share and adopt evidence-informed practices.

Within this structure W2A events are best thought of as the initiation of a longer term process rather than as discrete events. While W2A events provide direct benefits to participants, the building of sustainable networks through which participants can exchange innovative program ideas and research and practice-based evidence is more relevant to the long-term future of KM within the sector of community organizations that provides programs and services to vulnerable youth.

Finally, the CYCC Network's success in hosting W2A events in diverse contents and organized around diverse subject matter suggests that other organizations working in other fields may find success in transferring some aspects of the W2A model to their work. Particularly, organizations attempting to build KMB capacity in sectors that span across diverse economic, cultural and geographic contexts may find exploring the adaptation of some aspects of W2A to be productive.

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