

The Seer's Eyes: Re-storyng the Umlazi community

By Dr. Frida Rundell

The invitation is to cross a frontier into a territory, like entering a cave, where restorative practices become your daily bread.

Van Rensburg, a community psychologist states that “ with the growing trend to move toward globalisation of health, health policy, and health care, a set of processes are in place where unprecedented interconnectedness is blurring a variety of boundaries and transforming the nature of human interaction across a wide range of spheres. This in turn, increases economic, political and social interdependence. (Van Rensburg, 2004).

The Umlazi project addresses the opportunity for blurring some of those professional boundaries. It was an opportunity for a tertiary institution, Durban Institute of Technology and a non-profit organisation called Mzamo Guidance Clinic in the Umlazi area to work together in establishing a partially restorative practice. The insight was to promote interconnectedness across health care systems at an early intervention level that did not exist before.

In working with restorative justice, we concentrate at working with young people entering the statutory system where the state intervenes. Absorbing ourselves in problems has the ability to blind us to opportunities at other levels. My concern is that we fail to see opportunities of working at a prevention and early intervention levels in restorative ways. Professionals have, by definition of their profession, worked in their own separate “silos”. These “silos” have been prescribed by our professional disciplines and have an arrogance about them.

The key elements that allow the blurring of boundaries, require innovative awareness to synergy, transparency and reciprocity. Something Foucault (cited by Llyod & Thacker, 1997) calls “transgression” . Foucault’s idea of “transgression” is one way he is able to cross the boundaries and expectations of established disciplines and explore without experiencing limitations. His questioning is about “how” and not “why” allows Foucault the ability to “transgress” in order that new or different discourses can emerge. “Transgression” is the crossing of boundaries within or outside of a discipline or both.. “transgression” is about being on the frontier of those limits. It refuses to be reified into a reified principle. For Foucault, not every “transgression may be praised. Foucault speaks of the possibility of “transgression”. It must be noted that any action or discourse that is endlessly repeated loses its “transgression “ force. Modern paintings demonstrates this. Foucault cautions those who wish to use the option to “transgress” to proceed with caution and a degree of contemporary reality to “ grasp where change is possible and desirable and to determine the precise change this can take” (cited by Lloyd & Thacker, 1997,p.4).

An attitude of respect, intentionality, optimism and building trust allow acknowledgement, trial and error learning, and use of existing resources to take place in a reflexive manner. Sustainability must evolve and be a crucial component within this process. Trusting some of the processes while working within a community that has no choices cannot redistribute power at the wave of a wand. To begin the journey, the principles of being restorative will only evolve with time. However it is important

for practitioners to be ever mindful of the restorative principles and aim towards being fully restorative.

Hence the seer's eyes calls for someone who is integrative of all their senses as Gary Zukov calls it. The majority of us have a preference in our sensory system which allows us insight and the ability to facilitate process. One who is able to integrate all the senses instantly and intuitively makes decisions many times before they even know why. The seer as the prophet or predictor. who is able to see beyond the flesh, bone and sinew of our present reality into a future that is unknown.

I am reminded of a poem a friend of mine once wrote:

What if you stick your thumb?
Under the microscope
And find out it isn't there?
That you can take something
So for granted, that
It takes its reality from that,
And not from its skin and bone and sinew.
Like Kirlian photography.
When the picture's developed,
There's the outline of the thumb,
Amputated.
Like Mrs Ambrose getting frustrated
With Tony in my class and yelling,
What's the matter with you, boy?
Haven't you got any thumb?
And he looks up at her and says,
No I haven't.
And he holds up his two four-fingered hands.
By Charl Fregona

A shared assumptions about others and their reality may not be the truth. The "seers" in human service are many. They work on the edge of their professional discipline. Their ability to seize an opportunity or "transgress" is done with caution examines the "how" in the following ways:

- the role of discourses constitute and maintain social relations and subjects;
- where relations of power are implicit in the construction of specific forms of knowledge and truth: and
- the intensification of power relations are felt in any disciplinary gate-keeping practice for example in teaching, research and community.
(Lloyd & Thacker, 1997, p.5)

I have been privileged to catch glimpses of intense and existential processes of discovery in my work with Child & Youth Development training over the past fifteen

years. The rich cultural diversity of my South African inheritance has provided me with experiences that celebrate student's individual and creative ways of working within communities that do not have the privileges we have been afforded. The frontier is on the cutting edge and requires opportune "transgression". In turn, it has deepened my self-knowledge and my love for my fellowman. I am an African.

I have an intense love for African soil and its people. It provided me with the cornerstone that is an integral part of me today. There is nothing like an African sunrise or sunset; or an African smile and greeting. These were the eyes I developed unknowingly during my childhood on the farm.

Working and training various health practitioners over the years has taught me to listen to what is brought to one's attention through contacts or incidents. Flexibility, fluidity and judgement of whether this is an opportune "transgression" or not. Asking yourself "why now?" Could this transform the way we, as professional health care practitioners interact across a wide range of spheres.

One of my past student's put out an appeal to our organisation for assistance with Mzamo Guidance Clinic. It was a plea that no one else in the department saw fit to respond to, and I did because it allowed me to answer questions regarding the "how". This connection was made with Mzamo Guidance Clinic located at Prince Mshiyeni Hospital. My fourth year Bachelor of Technology students became seer's too.

The reality was that Mzamo Guidance Clinic was sitting with over 160 case referrals and only four social workers to deal with the load. The Education Department's Psychological Services for Education (PSES) were not visiting Mzamo Guidance Clinic at all. Consequently no psychological services were available to this community.

With this invitation, we visited Mzamo Guidance Clinic to see how Bachelor of Technology : Child & Youth Care students could make a difference. The potential for a partnership was good. A clear contract of understanding was established where students and academic lecturer would visit Mzamo Clinic one day in every week for a eight week trial period.

Two pilot studies were conducted. Each consisting of eight weeks (August/September 2005; February/March 2006). During this time a total of 15 students engaged at an early intervention level with children/youth and parents to do a developmental assessment. Meetings were held inviting psychologists from Education Department(PSES), social workers from Mzamo Guidance Clinic, child care interns from DIT, intern social workers from UNISA; and Occupational therapists from Education Department(PSES). Truly a multidisciplinary team.

Students engaged in fair process with families. The relationship building was intense and provided students with hands on experience to develop family maps and connections. Then our students were able to engage with the child/youth on a scholastic level and experience some of the individual needs of each young person.

Our students presented each individual case they had worked with to an audience of professionals. Discussion followed each case as to the possibilities for drawing up an Individual Developmental Plan (IDP) . This rich sharing of potential and possibilities

provided students with insights to complex human needs. This could never have been achieved if we did not have the professionals in the process. Thereafter, the students invited each family to a discussion of the possibilities that were available for their young person. Families left with a copy of the recommendations. Follow-up work was done by social workers at the Mzamo Clinic, psychologists and students where needed. Twenty families with their young person were assessed developmentally and Individual Developmental Plan (IDP) drawn up with the help of the multi-disciplinary team .

It is interesting to note how many of the young people were experiencing grieving processes that were going unnoticed. It was only when the young person displayed “acting out” behaviours, aggression or high levels of distractibility that they were noticed. It is here that I see the training of child & youth care workers in schools as a strong link in providing ongoing support group for grieving groups. This would require the Education Department’s in countries and states to recognise professional studies in child & youth development at universities as potential resource for relationship building.

Children and youth who were being detected with learning problems around the ages of 6/7 yrs were more able to receive help at a remedial level. However, remedial was not readily available in these areas. Small group tuition could be the answer. Using child & youth care workers again to support classroom teachers in providing this resource would be the ideal.

Delays in receiving a developmental assessment leaves children who are experiencing mild to moderate retardation at severe risk to themselves, their families and the community at large. If schools were to employ child & youth care workers, developmental assessments could be carried out within the school milieu with little cost to the parents. Remedial support could be made available to nurture the emotional and social skills while teachers could pay attention to the other learners. The stigma of school refusal would be avoided and a healthier attitude in the child could be fostered. Social workers visiting schools would then be able to follow through with the help of the educational psychologist recommendations. The tremendous backlog of cases would be addressed in a systematic manner.

These two pilot studies have shown the potential for the Education Department to take cognisance of the new emerging profession Child & Youth Care to assist and help teachers, psychologists, social workers in connecting together and blurring boundaries for the best interests of the child. Economically, it would provide teachers with a support base; schools with a systemic way of referrals; and families with a safety net where children are falling by the wayside and developing school phobias that are unnecessary. Care dependency grants and child support grants would be applied effectively to the appropriate families.

Here are some of the key issues that allowed this experience and process to be meaningful both for intern students and professionals.

Respect required us to speak as if the people are present all the time; keep appointments that we make; give a clear understanding of what we expected of the family; many times this would come in the form of writing a note for the family to

have evidence of their visit. Respecting their need to speak in their language e.g. Zulu; Introducing ourselves by first names; wearing name tags so as to be identified easily. Speaking to the family by being curious and facilitating a process of sharing.

Creating space for something to happen was important. This pilot would never have happened if we had waited for an appropriate space. Flexibility on the social workers at Mzamo Guidance Clinic and on the part of the student interns made it possible. They gave up their offices; students brought blankets and found a space on the grass. Nothing deterred us from the process of working. No one complained.

Recognising everyone's **basic human rights** and maintaining an awareness of how to fulfil them. Every family had the right to be interviewed in their own language. Where students were unable to speak Zulu, we paired them with a Zulu speaking student. The family were entitled to information, procedures, confidentiality and anonymity. Students would refer to the young person by their initials in their reports; parents were given a report with all the relevant information in it. Student interns were expected to keep the young person's file updated with information. These procedures allowed students accountability each time a young person was interviewed. Transparency at all times was necessary so that other professionals dealing with the case were informed and could follow up on the case.

Financial resources needed to be investigated. In the first two pilot studies, Mzamo Guidance Clinic gave the families transport money only after arrival. This ensured full appointment attendance. If this study is to continue, the department will need to assist in this process.

Intern student's skills are free as they learn under skilled supervision. Social workers, on the other hand are sitting with an overload of over one hundred and sixty cases not yet touched. **Recycling human resources** within institutions seems the most logical process to follow when addressing this type of overload. If institutions could realise the potential change that they could be initiated, if they allowed the "seer's eyes to bring students at an advanced level of study to the cutting edge within communities of need. The use the human resources as a change agent at tertiary institutions could be over powering. Ukuba Nesibindi, a drop- in- centre established between Life Line (Durban) and Child & Youth Care Department in 2002 is a prime example of crossing professional boundaries . Faculty play a pivotal role as seer's within their respective departments. This is time consuming.

We are the rainbow nation. **Celebrating diversity** by engaging with the people is the best way to prepare students for differences. Student interns voluntarily devoted time beyond the requirements. Their feedback on how they experienced working in this way speaks volumes for solution focused learning. Acknowledgement that all voices could be heard. provided student intern's with an opportunity and ability to show their true grit. We, in this country have a richness of experience that all our student interns and the families bring to the developmental assessment. I am constantly in awe of it.

One thread can be broken, but two threads intertwined is more difficult to break. The more departments and faculty **build partnerships**, the stronger our visibility and ability to make a difference. It is amazing what one achieves when one is not

concerned about who gets the credits for it. Choosing partners requires testing out the synergy and intention over time where commitment and communication are key. Our strongest partnership is with our students. They see the supervisor's passion and catch it. This is not taught but caught.

Providing everyone with an **overview**, allows you time to get a feel of the project. Sometimes we spend too much time on the details and lose sight of the bigger picture. Being involved in 'community' means you need contingencies. The best plans of mice and men are often laid by the wayside because working in the community is dynamic, real and complex. Sleeping on a problem often gains a different perspective on the issue. All of these things help us move to gaining insight into which is a priority and which is worth sweating over.

Sometimes there are no short cuts. **Hard work, consistency and predictability** are the cornerstones. Eventually with much practice, the artist in the work will come to you. Initially students sweat over their reports. There is editing and re-editing. Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small jobs. In the two pilots, we introduced students to one task at a time. As they reached completion, their insight deepened and the feeling of achievement was there.

Disappointments are inevitable when working in the community. **Caring for each other** is vital. This is where the professionals were extremely giving of their time. When the hang-ups and bang-ups happen, we all remember to be there for each other in different ways. Working together to ease the disappointments is part of our learning curve. Learn to say: It happened! What can I learn from this?

Leave time for **reflection**. If we are to nurture strong child & youth practitioners, reflection should become our daily tool. Harming children and youth because we have unresolved issues is not okay. Students are expected to do their daily reflections and seek counselling if they find it interfering in their professional work. Regular group de-briefing is an essential ingredient for student interns and professionals. Reflective practitioners will ask the question "How?".

Documenting your progress and even writing it up for a journal so that others can learn from your mistakes and understanding. We, as supervisors and students need to get involved more actively in promoting our profession by our actions and our writings.

Disengagement and **closure** are many times under-estimated. Time to take off and say "Goodbye". The rituals of telling someone how they contributed to your learning is important for the community member to hear as well as the students. These often are the most poignant moments where permission is given to say what someone has done for you.

Sustainability is the challenge to any pilot study. The seer eyes must have this in mind from the beginning. Within a partnership potential is sought and as one progresses sustainability options appear. Put something in place before you go. Transformation requires long and short term planning. It doesn't just happen.

When students work with theory alone, their expectations of the real world is distorted. My theory was a grid I laid on the world. And many times life defied those grids. Teaching my students how that grid and practice worked was far more important. Community projects like this Mzamo Guidance Clinic project purposely provided students with a reality and an understanding of themselves in relation to the community. Blurring the boundaries between theory and practice helped to transform professional interactions and create interdependences and relationships that created hope. I do not know of a better way of re-storying a community than with people from different communities.

I invite you to use your seer's eyes to re-story self and others within your community.

References

Foucault, M. (1980). Power.knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977. C.Gordon (Ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Freedman, J., Combs, G. (1996). Narrative Therapy The Social Construction of Preferred Realities. W.W. Norton & Company: New York.

Lloyd, M., Thacker, A. ed. (1997). The impact of Michel Foucault on the Social Sciences and Humanities. MacMillan: New York.

Van Rensburg, HCJ. Ed. (2004). Health and Health Care. Van Schaik Publishers: Pretoria.