

Personal reflection on Ian Murray's Paper 'Does the length of training determine the effectiveness of counselling practice?'

MARGARET O'BRIEN

I first met Ian Murray in 1991 when I became a member of the Australian Institute of Welfare & Community Workers (AIWCW now ACWA). Over the ensuing years Ian and I worked closely together on many occasions, on a variety of issues, papers, projects and assessments in relation to the education and training of Welfare Workers. We were, in the beginning, mainly concerned with the new Associate Diploma of Community Welfare Work that was being delivered through the TAFE sector. This progressed over the years to higher education and also the overseas skills migration requirements for this sector of the Human Services Field. Many of our discussions centred round 'What makes a really good, effective worker?'

It was always his viewpoint that academic qualifications alone did not make an effective worker, that is, a person who was able to build relationship with a client that allowed a positive outcome for the client to eventuate. It came as no surprise to me that the over-riding aspect of this his latest, and sadly, his last paper has been focussed on research to prove his theory.

So what does make a really effective and competent practitioner in today's world of Human Service provision? To begin with we need to look at what competency really means.

Competency - The knowledge and the skill to apply it. Just what does this mean? For Ian, it meant a focus totally on the client which allowed the practitioner/worker to actually see the person. This allowed their problem or issue to be seen as totally unique to them, even though the problem or issue, itself, was common to many. The ability to develop this level of empathy for the individual demonstrates a true understanding of the human condition. It allows the practitioner/worker to assist the client in achieving a good outcome.

I am of the opinion that the research seems to bear out his viewpoint. Perhaps the lesser trained person who truly has developed the ability to:

- a. give, and demonstrate through their empathy
- b. the unconditional positive regard

- c. that is needed to see the real world situation
- d. rather than relying upon a theory book example

is the reason for some of the success data of the studies researched in this paper.

From my own teaching experience, both within the TAFE system and Higher Education levels, I have found that:

- a. the students who demonstrated the ability to build relationships with their clients during their practicum, and
- b. also the ability to interact positively in lively discussion, with both fellow students and educators, during their academic study times, in an effort to fully understand the issues under discussion

were the students, in general, who were more likely to determine the probability of good outcomes for clients in various real life situations. These students usually went on to become very good human service workers regardless of the level of study being undertaken.

I am aware that many generalist human service workers have undertaken the responsibilities of the traditional professionals, and demonstrated their knowledge and competence in the only way that matters. That is, positive outcomes for clients. As Ian has indicated in his paper, the benefits to the Industry at large could be huge if only we allowed ourselves to acknowledge the implications of the research that although particular knowledge of the human condition is needed:

- a. it does not necessarily mean that a person has to undergo lengthy training/education to provide beneficial services to people in need,
- b. or, to have in-depth knowledge, such as that required for example in the medical profession.
- c. So, unless they wish to specialise in a particular area, and depending on the area, even then lengthy academic training may not be necessary, and
- d. perhaps working within the Industry with a mentor would perhaps be a better option.

I tend therefore to agree with Ian's observations that the length of training time has no real influence on their effectiveness. The one proviso that I have is that the training/education should be accredited by the students' Professional Association in order to ensure that it has the depth and quality required. Once this is accepted, many more highly effective workers will be recognised for their worth, resulting in greater employment at the 'grass roots level' and beyond.

I would like to conclude this comment on Ian's paper by drawing attention to a particularly important sentence 'that those with briefer training do just as well or better than those with many years of specific psychotherapy training' (p 17). It would behove the Human Services Industry to look closely at WHY this is the case, and give some credence to the notion that 'the ability to build relationship is critical to the successful outcome' of any client/worker relationship. I believe Ian's research clearly demonstrates this fact and I am of the opinion that this, his last paper, will prove beneficial to the many people throughout Australia who provide a service in this Industry as well as to those who receive them.

Margaret O'Brien (formerly MacMahon) holds a Masters in Social Welfare Administration and Planning (UQ), is a former national president of AIWCW/ACWA and a long time community welfare worker and educator, now retired.