ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Caring involvement”: a core concept in youth counselling in school health services

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Abstract
This article aims at providing theory for use in school health services. By exploring the accounts of young people on helpful interaction during difficult life periods, the study intended to capture the characteristics of helpful support viewed from the young persons’ perspectives. Forty-six students aged 16–22 years were interviewed with a semi-structured interview that focused on how the young persons describe and perceive difficult periods and life events. The study evolved from a larger action research project designed to develop counselling in school health services. The grounded theory method provided the analytical guidelines. When asked to reflect retrospectively on what had been helpful during difficult periods or stressful situations, somebody who cared about them was highlighted by the respondents. Caring covered personal interactions that varied from direct and active intervention to providing a space for reflection and learning. We found that the concept caring involvement captured essential dimensions and properties of what the young persons judged as vital in adult support. We suggest that counselling in school health services should be informed by a theory of caring involvement characterized by: a personal approach, the practitioner’s readiness for being active, attention to the young person’s agency, and balancing active involvement and attending to agency.

Key words: Youth, social support, caring, school health services, grounded theory

Introduction
Recently the mental health status of young people in western countries is given much concern. Several studies show that both girls and boys report psycho-social problems that severely affect their daily life (Roza, van der Hofstra & Verhulst, 2003; Costello, Egger & Angold, 2005; Costello, Foley & Angold, 2006). Simultaneously, other studies reveal that youth in need professional support often forego mental health care (Hales et al., 2003; Elliott & Larson, 2004; Samargia, Saewyc & Elliott, 2006; Stephan, Weist, Kataoka, Adelsheim & Mills, 2007). In this situation school-based interventions have been seen as offering promising results in terms of outreach to young people in general (Costello-Wells, McFarland, Reed & Walton, 2003; Hootman, Houck & King, 2003; Brener, Weist, Adelman, Taylor & Vernon-Smiley, 2007) and those being hard to reach in particular (Juszczak & Cooper, 2002; Morberg, Delve, Karlsson & Lagerström, 2006).

Incorporating the criterion of easy access, school health services have been identified for development in Norway (The Norwegian Government’s Strategic Plan, 2003). However, mental health support in school health services is a new arena of investigation, and there is little research to guide the development of the counselling (Lightfoot & Bines, 2000; Wainwright, Thomas & Jones, 2000; Borup, 2002). Only a few studies have addressed the perspectives of helpful interaction from young persons’ points of view. One focus group study in Sweden showed that when asked about the prerequisites and characteristics of a positive dialogue with school nurses, young people emphasize trustworthiness, attentiveness, respectfulness, authenticity and accessibility (Johansson & Ehnfors, 2006). In Norway, a focus group study including school nurses, school counsellors and young people, revealed four distinct dimensions of helpful interaction: caring, neutrality, confidentiality and agency (Langaard, 2006).
Aim of the research

The present study evolves from a larger participatory action research project (PAR) conducted at two upper secondary schools in Oslo. The aim of the PAR project was to provide a framework for counselling that adapted to the context of school health services by expanding and further develop the findings from the focus group study mentioned above. To make professional counselling easily accessible places particular demands on providing support in a way that strengthens the young person’s own coping resources (Jacobsson, 2005; Edwards, Mumford & Serra-Roldan, 2007). By exploring young persons’ views on environmental support in difficult life situations, we intended to integrate their perspectives of helpful interaction in the development of theory for use in school health services.

Methodology

Since the purpose of the study was to develop theory based on the young persons’ perspectives, the grounded theory method was assumed to be appropriate. Moreover, because grounded theory promotes focus on persons in real life situations and local social contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2005; Charmaz & Henwood, 2008), it is particularly well suited to develop theory that has a good fit with practical situations.

Sampling and participants

Initial sampling (Charmaz, 2006) aimed at capturing variety was undertaken. The schools selected classes considered as “ordinary” classes at that point of time which in Norway today comprise students with different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Heterogeneity was also related to the characteristics of the two schools, of which one was a vocational school and the other academically oriented. Respondents’ characteristics thus varied by age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Ages ranged from 16–22 years with most informants aged 17 years. The sample divided equally between boys and girls. The students had diverse ethnic backgrounds with parents coming from Norway, Pakistan, Iran, Morocco, Turkey, Spain, The Philippines, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Bulgaria, Lebanon, and Nigeria. The parents’ professional and educational backgrounds varied from university, high school or vocational education; some were unskilled workers or were unemployed. All lived with parent(s) with two exceptions (living with friends or with friends of parents). Differences between the schools reflected the students’ backgrounds, practices and cultures.

Procedure

The first author arranged a meeting with each of the classes and asked the students if they consented to be interviewed about how they managed difficult life situations. It was emphasized that the intention of their participation was to improve counselling for young people in school health services. With few exceptions, the students agreed to participate. Some explained their participation by saying that they considered the aim of the study to be of great importance. A total of 46 students consented and were interviewed by the first author. To ensure participation it was seen as both important and necessary to carry out the interviews as soon as possible after the initial meeting.

The interviews

A semi-structured interview called The Private Theories interview (PTI) 1 was used. “Private theories” denotes respondents’ subjective views on living through difficult periods or episodes, and how they make meaning of their own experiences in this respect. Charmaz (2006) suggests the use of open ended but directed interviews in grounded theory. PTI is structured around some few and open themes that provide a frame within which the respondents are encouraged to express their experiences. The interview focuses on real life situations viewed as challenging by the participants, how they manage to get through, and how these experiences influence their outlook on future coping. The respondents were encouraged to share episodes or periods that they experienced as especially demanding, although not necessarily “traumatic”.

All the interviews took place in school, and lasted from 45 min to about one hour. Prior to the interview, the first author read a short introduction. The introduction emphasised that the purpose of the interview was to capture their personal experiences: none of the responses would be considered as being “right” or “wrong”. A typed copy of the introduction was also given to the student.

Ethical considerations

The proposed study was evaluated by the Regional Committee for Medical Research and approved by the Norwegian Data Inspectorate. It also received approval by the head teachers of the schools. Before the interviews commenced, the students were informed that the interviews were to be audio-taped, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. However, recognizing the unequal power positions, it was necessary that the interviewer
took a particular responsibility to ensure that the interview did no harm to the students. In one case, ethical considerations resulted in the interview being terminated.

Data analysis

A key characteristic of theory development using grounded theory is that collection and analysis of data is a simultaneous process (Hallberg, 2006). After each interview the first author wrote a short memo containing her immediate impressions and thoughts before proceeding to the next interview. At this stage the emerging categories guided further data-gathering, and therefore enriched the theoretical sampling to a certain extent. The theoretical sampling was, however, mainly conducted by reanalysing the interviews with conceptually driven questions (Charmaz, 2006; Morberg et al., 2006). The first author conducted the initial analysis, and the focused codes and concepts were continuously discussed with the second author. The sample including two different schools was assumed to provide data that was rich enough to assure concept saturation.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. As a starting point, initial coding of the personal accounts of strain and coping was applied. According to Charmaz (2006), initial coding should be conducted by remaining open and staying close to the data. After this first coding procedure, the data were coded into NVivo software for qualitative data analysis. The transcripts were reviewed several times using the constant comparative strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The young persons’ accounts were compared with the aim of identifying similarities as well as varieties between cases. Initial coding was followed by selected coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes that seemed most significant and/or frequent were chosen (Charmaz, 2006). Microanalysis as described by Strauss and Corbin was also used. Words and sentences that seemed to be of special significance were analysed more closely. The analysis at this stage was guided by the issues which emerged as being of particular importance to the participants, and also the interest of research. Against this background, the analysis focused upon situations that reflected the variety and complexity of involvement that the young persons perceived as supportive. Theoretical sampling was used to determine the central concept and bringing together codes and concepts to provide a coherent theory. To adapt for the purpose of theoretical sampling, the transcripts were reviewed to select cases that particularly visualized connections between categories that related to the core concept. Finally, to envisage contextualization of concepts (Strauss & Corbin 1998, Charmaz & Henwood, 2008), excerpts that linked different dimensions and properties of the core concepts to concrete situations, were chosen.

Findings

A grounded theory of caring involvement

When the students were asked about the characteristics of involvement that they perceived as supportive, a distinctive feature emerged across the sources of support. The involved person had to be perceived as a person who cares. The descriptions of what caring meant to them revealed a variety of features. However, some key features were identified: the supporting person should approach the young person in personal and active ways. Moreover, attention to their agency was revealed as one of the key features of caring involvement. The manner in which the supporting person achieved a balance between these two approaches, however, appeared to be crucial (see Table I).

The situations described by the participants varied from daily hassles to major negative life events. Many of the situations may be termed as developmental strains. These were situations that implied the usual difficulties embedded in contextual conditions shared by all students such as difficulties related to making oneself visible among peers and in the class, handling the transition to a more advanced school level, presenting oneself in a working society, establishing or ending peer relationships, and uncertainty about a professional career. Some situations involved episodes of being caught shoplifting, physical abuse, being bullied or exposed to racism by adults. Other situations implied life stressors such as arranged marriage, parent’s divorce or substance or alcohol abuse, life-threatening illness or accidents, or the death of a parent.

Depending on the situation, peers, older siblings, parents and non-parent adults were involved in the supporting processes. Although most informants had access to both parental and peer support, some of them also portrayed situations characterized by loneliness, with no available source of support.

The young persons’ emphasized the importance of having somebody to talk to in difficult circumstances, and overall they expressed a preference for talking with peers because of mutual understanding. Susanne echoes many of the participants when she said that she preferred to talk to friends when encountering strain. She did not like to talk to strangers about personal things. Nevertheless, she also pictured the complexity of this issue by saying that she would prefer to talk to a person that “both knows her and does not know her”. “Not knowing”
involvement in this context could mean to relate to the students in ways that exceeded just being judged according to school performance. Some respondents told about situations they did not manage well on their own, such as stress about school achievement entailing distress and ill-being, feeling uncomfortable in class or playing truant. Many of these accounts were related to the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school. Hence, those respondents who for some reason found themselves in vulnerable situations seemed to be in particular need of adult support and attention during this transition. However, those who managed well emphasized the transition to upper secondary school as a possibility for development which implied increased responsibility for their own lives and decisions.

The practitioner’s readiness for being active

The meaning of involvement characterized as supportive, varied from the persistent and pushing follow-up as Omar described, to providing a space for reflection and learning. Active involvement by others was particularly important in situations characterized by feelings of having lost control or the energy needed to participate in daily activities. Many of these accounts were related to the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school. Hence, those respondents who for some reason found themselves in vulnerable situations seemed to be in particular need of adult support and attention during this transition. However, those who managed well emphasized the transition to upper secondary school as a possibility for development which implied increased responsibility for their own lives and decisions.

A personal approach

To be involved in a personal way was first and foremost connected to family and friends. In contrast, some students suggested that professionals did not know them and, therefore, could not engage in a personal way. A more complex picture was revealed, however, when actual interactions experienced as supportive were described. To be “personal” did not necessarily mean to know the young individual personally, but to express an interest in him or her as a person. Omar represented those of the respondents who told about gaining support from professionals. He recalled his contact with the school counsellor.

I: What is it that’s good about her?
Omar: She knows a lot—most things, kind of… doesn’t give up on rowdy students, to put it that way.
I: So that’s also important.
Omar: [nods]. There are many teachers and counsellors who kind of give up on students after a while, whereas she hangs on there and presses forward all the way.

The counsellor’s persistent attitude was experienced as caring and this seemed to relate to her skills in looking behind the young person’s negative behaviour. Omar also emphasized the counsellor’s knowledge as an important feature of adult involvement.

Some participants perceived the school environment as not providing sufficient support when they needed someone to turn to. They compared this with the situation in secondary school where they remembered the teachers as being more personal. Personal involvement in this context could mean to relate to the students in ways that exceeded just being judged according to school performance. Some respondents told about situations they did not manage well on their own, such as stress about school achievement entailing distress and ill-being, feeling uncomfortable in class or playing truant. Many of these accounts were related to the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school. Hence, those respondents who for some reason found themselves in vulnerable situations seemed to be in particular need of adult support and attention during this transition. However, those who managed well emphasized the transition to upper secondary school as a possibility for development which implied increased responsibility for their own lives and decisions.

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Martin: I’ve gotten my act together much more since last year with less absenteeism and stuff like that.
I: And what’s been happening then?
Martin: No, I’ve just decided to be better.
I: Was that something you came up with totally on your own?
Martin: Yes, it was actually that. Or my teacher said that I was absent a lot and stuff like that.
I: That was the first year?
Both the young person's withdrawal and arousal of environmental anxiety might influence supporting actions. One of the respondents, Emily, visualized how parents and others who are close to the young person naturally react under such circumstances. Emily had cut her arms during a difficult period of time. She remembered that her relationships with some of her close friends were difficult at that time, and also that her mother was absent for some time because of illness. When her parents tried to help her, she perceived their involvement as “nagging”.

She said: “Mom and dad tried to find out, but I would not talk to them. And they checked my arms every night, and took away all sharp things from my room and stuff like that.”

At the time of the interview she did not hurt herself anymore, her explanation being that she wanted to avoid her parents’ nagging. However, she still experienced relational problems and expressed that she missed someone to talk to who might help her cope with her feelings of insecurity that strongly influenced her life.

The importance of involvement in situations where the young person refuses or rejects contact is demonstrated through Emily’s and Julia’s accounts. They also revealed the significance of having somebody to turn to who is not too close to the young person.

Attention to the young person’s agency

The importance of providing opportunity to feel one’s way ahead in difficult situations appeared to be a key feature of a caring involvement. This approach was sometimes combined with advice and an attitude of assurance from the supporting person(s).

Situations that included difficult choices in particular highlighted the importance of a reflective space. Nora echoed several participants when she talked about her doubts concerning taking a year off from school or changing her education plans. She was unhappy with her situation and asked her friends for advice, but they were just as uncertain as she was. She had also talked with her parents who advised her to continue school. She described her parents’ involvement in this way:

I really don’t know how that would have been. I don’t know. If I had been left alone, I probably would have felt even more isolated and alone. If people did not care, that would not have been right. I felt like… ‘Stop nagging me! Let me be!’ At that very moment, I did not recognize that they really worried about me.

There’s kind of like pressure at home to submit my application and be quick about it. I hear that all the time. And I don’t really know if I want that.

I: No. So, what do you want?

Nora: That’s what I haven’t decided on. It’s tempting in a way to take a year out… with one
That’s priority.’ Then I thought: ‘Yeah, screw prejudice, be their buddy’ [laughs].

By advising her and carefully pushing her not to give in, her parents gave her self-confidence that helped her to face this difficult situation. The parents provided both a reflective space and also a space for learning. At the same time they expressed their care for her—the most important of all, viewed from Rubeena’s perspective.

Discussion
The most striking finding from this study was the young persons’ emphasis on being able to perceive the supporting person as caring. Caring was envisaged as the manner in which he or she was approached personally and actively. This approach seemed to mobilize engagement and activity by the young person. Many of the features of a personal approach such as seeing the whole person, understanding, trusting, imparting hope and encouragement, and worrying, are also described in the nursing literature as characteristics of a caring practice (Bassett, 2002; van Manen, 2002; Wilkin & Slevin, 2004).

It is worth noticing that based on young persons’ perspectives, caring also may include pushing and expressing expectations. Depending on the situation, actions that were perceived as caring ranged from direct intervention, such as pushing, offering advice and suggestions, to provide a space for reflection. The sensitive balance of the supporting person between active involvement and providing space for reflection seemed essential for the young person to transform interventions in a way that facilitated possibilities to make one’s own experiences and decisions. The study also demonstrated that in some situations adults might become involved without the young person’s approval. Adult involvement may be experienced as intrusion and nagging at that moment, but in retrospect viewed as vital and necessary. These findings agree with findings from a qualitative study that explored the interaction patterns of depressed youth and the important adults in their lives (Draucker, 2005). This study demonstrated that “breaking through” was essential. This meant to have an “open eye, open ear and open door”, and an attitude of “steadily pushing” (pp. 956–957).

The key characteristics of school health services are accessibility and availability. To be situated in the young people’s daily environment implies being there which might influence the relationship between the young person and the counsellor in a fundamental way. Commonly the establishment of a relationship with youth who need professional support is regarded as a challenging task because of young persons’ need
to exercise their autonomy (Amodeo & Collins, 2007; Binder, Holgersen & Höstmark Nielsen, 2008). One might assume that adult support provided in the young peoples' proximal environment where the young person just can drop in, facilitates a flexible practice that puts the young person in charge. Compared with research on parent and peer support, relatively few studies have evaluated the relationships between adolescents and their extended adult networks (Beam, Chen & Greenberger, 2002). Some studies however, show that non-parent adults exert a strong influence on psychosocial health and well-being among young people in general (Draucker, 2005; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005), and in the development of youth from high-risk settings in particular (Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006). Our findings support these suggestions. Despite parental support, students might require a space for reflection and learning beyond the intimate and emotionally laden relationships with family members and friends. Moreover, non-parents may be the best reflection-partner simply because they possess new perspectives and different knowledge.

Professional relationships may be viewed as "artificial", as was pointed out by several respondents. To practice personal and active involvement in a professional way might involve some challenges. Counsellors in school walk a tight rope when they have to balance their professional code and conduct with caring involvement. This touches on the issue of proximity and distance, a dimension where lay and professional relationships diverge in a vital way. On the other hand, distance gives the professional the space needed to reflect and analyze the situation (Ohnstad, 1998). However, maintaining a professional distance does not necessarily mean to be distant as a person. The features of caring involvement, such as encouragement, imparting hope, looking "behind" trouble and to have a view for possibilities, might very well be practiced in professional counselling. This is in line with the view on youth counselling that emphasizes the importance of approaching the young person in a positive and optimistic way. The professional must free him or herself from the focus on correcting "deficits", and instead apply an approach that focuses on assets and positive elements in the young person’s life (Amodeo & Collins, 2007).

Practicing caring involvement in school health services offers some challenges in terms of balancing proximity and distance, but it also provides the professional with opportunities to get to know the young person in a more general way, beyond troublesome periods, and for the young person to know them. Since adults in upper secondary schools are occasionally perceived as distant and aloof, opportunities for alternative relational experiences are crucial especially when it comes to meeting the needs of vulnerable youth.

**Conclusion**

The position of school health services being close to the young people's daily life provides unique possibilities to provide support during difficult periods. The results from this study support findings from other studies that emphasize the importance of developing counselling in a way that promotes the young persons’ capacity to master difficult life situations. During these processes access to adults who care about them is vital. Therefore, we suggest that a theoretical framework of caring involvement should inform school health counselling. The cornerstones, comprising a personal approach and a balance between active involvement and promotion of the young person’s agency, might be fruitful concepts for the further development of youth counselling within the context of school health services.

**Acknowledgements**

The study is funded by the institutions: Health and Rehabilitation and Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Eastern and Southern Norway.

**Declaration of interest:** The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the contents and writing of the paper.

**Notes**

1. The interview is developed by Andrzej Werbart and Sonja Levander at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Psychoterapy Section at Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden. In this study the YOUTH version was used. A coding manual for the PTI was devised by Ginner, Werbart, Levander & Sahlberg (2001). However, for the purpose of the present study, grounded theory guidelines as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and further developed by Charmaz (2006), were assumed to be more suitable.
2. All the names used in the article are pseudonyms.

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