Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

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Editorial

Chaos and Quiet

Jaspreet Bal

If the past few months have taught me anything it is that I still have a lot of learning to do. Our regular readers will know that I am still new to the role of editor. This issue is my first time solo-editing this journal. When I started this issue four months ago I was sitting in my office in Toronto. I had my life planned to the week. I had this issue planned to the day. As I write this editorial, I find myself quarantined in India in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic. I am grounded in Punjab, in my parent's farm house just outside our village of Butala. Flights have halted, buses and trains suspended and all non-essential business are closed. Punjab is under curfew and Ontario has declared a state of emergency; both my worlds have closed their doors to me. Occasionally the speaker on the village gurduara blares, reminding people to stay in their houses and not visit their relatives who are here from foreign countries. Other than that, an eerie silence gives the many birds a chance to show off their beautiful sounds. My dad's courtyard, which entertains village guests from sun up to sunset is empty save the two Punjab police officers stationed at the entrance.

Amongst these competing moments of chaos and quiet, I am still connected to my professional circle of CYC Practitioners. Through limited internet, I can see the work of those on the ground in Canada. Unsurprisingly, the community is resilient and productive. There has been concern for the young, for those in care, and those who have aged out of care. There has been acknowledgement that this time of crisis is gendered, differently experienced by those in poverty, and reflective of larger systems of violence and

oppression. I have seen a re-assertion of personal and professional values as a reminder of who we are and why we chose this profession. The response the world has demanded is congruent with Child and Youth Care Practice. The ask that we be empathetic, proactive, adaptable, creative, and ready to find a new rhythm in the most unexpected of circumstances, is all part of the CYC package.

In all this, I return to the pieces submitted to this issue; the profound pieces of writing I have had the honor of guiding through their process. I am humbled by the intimate relationship that CYC practice has with the unexpected, and the willingness of practitioners to find hope, change, and learning in the face of it. I am encouraged by how all the authors find balance in owning their narratives. To begin, this issue introduces a four-part series by Darlene Pevach. Darlene grew up in care and has found solace and purpose in creative writing. She shares her journey and her words with other practitioners to add her lived experience to their work. Elaine Hamilton shares her work on life story approaches within residential care with a deeply personal example that shows the ongoing nature of the process. Shane Theunissen brings to methods of a mosaic approach into CYC relational practice by using multiple methods and centering the voices and experiences of young people. Wolfgang Vachon brings a theoretical lens to the presence of "lived experience" in CYC literature. Looking at those who have been service recipients and are now service providers, the author considers implications for the field.

Matthew Halton identifies gaps in policy and practice with regards to the link between group home staff and schools. To better equip frontline professionals to work with folks who have a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder, Holly Tilden and Abigail Erasmus provide a literature review and connections to CYC practice. Patti Ranahan takes a deep dive into the concept of "Readiness' in practice and explores the tension with being prepared. This month's column on the teaching and learning of CYC practice, Tara-Rose Farrell and Monica Chander team up to reflect on race.

Wherever you are reading the journal from this quarter, I am positive you are linked to the global unfolding of this historic moment. It is my hope that you find in this issues articles that which I did, a restoration of hope through a CYC lens. I thank all the writers for their work and I am confident this time in our lives will result in many more CYC innovations from our resilient community

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Group Home Staff / School Relationships: Do They Really Matter? A Critical Link Toward Youth Resilience

Matthew Halton

Abstract

Effective communication between school and the home is critical to young people's success at school. Despite being professional caregivers, group home staff's roles and relationships with their clients' schools are ambiguous and ill-defined. This article examines the group home staff/school staff relationship from the theoretical perspective that effective group home/school communication has the capacity to increase youth resilience. The author uses personal reflections, discussions with colleagues and the literature to identify gaps in both practice and policy and makes specific recommendations to rectify this critical aspect of residential Child and Youth Care.

Keywords

Residential CYC, teacher relationships, resilience, policy, training, education

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Occasionally, perhaps at a party or networking event I am asked "What do you do?" In these situations, the same top two identities crowd into my mind: I am a dad and a Child and Youth Care (CYC) worker. These two identity pieces constantly intersect. In the same day I might find myself texting my daughter's teacher about the science project she is stressing about, while providing supervision to my team regarding connecting our clients to school. I am navigating, supporting and advocating as a parent and much of the same when at work. This got me thinking – what should be the role of group home staff in their clients' schools?

Parental involvement in education is well understood to have positive outcomes for young people: from higher attendance and high school completion, (Berzin, 2010; Finlay, 2007; Gallhagher, Brannan, Jones & Westwood, 2004; Peña, 2000) to a greater sense of wellbeing at school (Epstein, 1995) and higher post-secondary enrolment (Courtney, Roderick, Smithgall, Gladden & Nagaoka, 2004; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Gallhagher, et al., 2004). While the nature of parental involvement in schooling may have changed over the years, it can be understood to include providing a culture of learning at home (Ross, 2008), creating a supportive and love-filled home environment (Jeynes, 2010; Epstein, 2011) to actively engaging school staff (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Are group home staff so different than parents? Yes and no. While acting *in loco parentis*, or "in the place of a parent" (Oxford Dictionary, 2017), group home staff exhibit significant differences from parents when it comes to their engagement with schooling: parents seek natural, organic connections in hallways and playgrounds while group home staff seek collaboration at service team meetings and purposeful behaviour management. All of these activities create the basis for a relationship between the teacher and caregiver but it is the *quality* and *nature* of this relationship that amounts to a protective factor for the student. In my experience, group home and school staff want kids to succeed, however there are numerous barriers to building mutually thriving relationships between the staff cohorts. In this article, I'll explore these barriers and provide a number of recommendations for group home agencies and schools.

I would like to be clear: I am not comparing group home staff with parents. Group home staff do not 'replace' or 'do the same job' as parents. Residential CYC practitioners are working under the pressures of high caseloads, limited budgets, an incredibly complex web of professional networks, low pay and high expectations, all while attempting to construct resilience-enhancing service plans for children and youth that they barely know. Additionally, I am examining and critiquing their guiding policies and

training, neither of which parents have; this highlights the key distinction between the two types of caregivers – professional and non-professional. It is not my intent to expose flaws in the care provided by group home staff; rather, it is to better understand how engaged parents are able to build protective factors into their children's lives and transfer that knowledge as resilience-informed praxis to the field of residential CYC.

Relationships as a Resource

The core purpose of group homes seems to be, beyond housing youth in care, maintaining or improving the health and wellness of vulnerable children and youth. Group home agencies often use value statements such as "*we strive to make children healthy and whole"*; aiming for "*successful transition to independent living";* or "*acting with compassion to bring hope to those in need"*. Every child and youth in the care of Child and Family Services has experienced a grievous trauma and is in need of a purposeful, evidence-based intervention; the residential care agencies and their staff have undertaken to fill this need. The existence of trauma, and the mandate of the group home staff to facilitate the youth's journey toward wellness – to bounce back – is reminiscent of the definition of resilience.

Like all astute CYC workers I have integrated the purposeful construct of resilience into my practice. Everything that I am writing here comes from an understanding that ethical CYC practice incorporates resilience theory as a foundation; therefore I will examine the relationships between group home staff and teachers from a resilience theory perspective (DiFulvio, 2011; Ginsburg, 2011; Rutter, 1985, 2012; Ungar, 2010). While resilience is commonly thought of simply as the ability to *bounce back* from trauma (Henderson & Milstein, 2003), the theoretical model has become increasingly sophisticated. Recent resilience theorists consider resilience theory to have significantly farther reach – it provides a tangible framework by which to understand an individual's capacity to *thrive* (Ginsburg, 2011; Donnon & Hammond, 2007, 2011; Ungar, 2004). Resilience is defined by Ungar , Brown, Liebenberg, Othman, Kwong, Armstrong & Gilgun (2007) as "both a characteristic of the individual child and the quality of that child's environment which provides the resources necessary for positive development despite adverse circumstances" (p. 288). A specific theoretical model can be found in the research of Tyrone Donnan and Wayne Hammond (2007, 2011) who posit that individual resilience is actively constructed, is ecological and is made up of specific, measurable developmental strengths. Examples of developmental strengths are achievement, school

engagement, caring school climate, and family school involvement. Further, we understand that resilience is built largely through navigating to and successfully utilizing resources (Ungar, 2011).

To put the two together a) if the focus of our work is thus on connecting youth to resources as a means to create an environment that increases the probability that youth will thrive, and b) positive relationships between the significant adults in young people's lives can become one of these powerful resources for young people (Donnon & Hammond, 2007, 2011; Ginsburg, 2011; Ungar, 2004, 2011), then one response is clear. In the interest of best practices, agencies providing residential care to young people should have clear policies and training to support the creation of warm, collaborative relationships between CYC workers and school staff.

Why is it so hard to do?

Parents and teachers will agree that protective factors, in the form of *relationships as resources* can actively be built into youths' lives when significant adults have high expectations of them, provide a safe and caring school climate, and establish positive boundaries for them. My observations of group home staff, whether as a colleague, supervisor or collaborator confirms what I know to be true: they are for the most part competent, caring and professionally astute individuals. Group home staff accomplish much of what the leading resilience investigators recommend through relentless advocacy and a diligent pursuit of evidence-based practices. The effectiveness of residential group home staff is in no way limited by their own compassion or relational capacity; rather, the limitations seem to be systemic in nature.

While thinking through this article, I talked with many CYC colleagues about the group home-school relationship. There is certainly support for the value of positive parental-teacher relationships in the literature, but unfortunately what I have heard from my colleagues and from teachers is that, for many reasons group home staff just can't seem to do this consistently. The barriers are numerous and significant; from lacking training and support, to hierarchal and legal barriers, complex professional teams, transitions and ambiguous roles and responsibilities – CYC workers to a large extent are unable to help connect youth in group care to this valuable resource.

Information

Relational Child and Youth Care Practice (formerly *The Journal of Child & Youth Care*, established 1982) is committed to promoting and supporting the profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people.

This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, including personal growth and development, are essentially "relational".

Certain pieces in *RCYCP* have received peer review. However, we do not peer review all articles as we choose not to exclude those voices where peer review would be inappropriate or on request from writers.

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Relational Child & Youth Care Practice welcomes submissions on all aspects relating to young people, families and communities. This includes material that explores the intersectionality of Child and Youth Care practice and the lived experiences of all who are engaged in Child and Youth Care practice. Considerations will also be given to interpersonal dynamics of professional practice and all submissions that assume a relational perspective. This might include topics such as cultural values, ethics, social policy, program design, supervision, education, training etc. Welcomed are also submissions that address advocacy, social justice and reconciliation practices within the diverse spaces and places of Child and Youth Care. Each issue may include refereed articles that comply with acceptable 'academic' standards; submissions contributed by regular and guest columnists; short pieces that describe particular relational experiences and reflections; poetry; artwork and photographs.

Material should be submitted by email to rcycp@press.cyc-net.org in standard word processing format (eg. .doc, .rtf). Formal articles should not exceed 6000 words in length. Referencing should conform to either APA or Harvard format. Author-date citations should be used within the text and a double-spaced reference section should accompany each article. In all submissions, authorship details including an abstract of no more than 150 words should be included, as well as a short list of keywords at the beginning of the article, a headshot photo and a short author bio of about 100 words to publish with your article. Importantly, authors should also indicate whether a peer review is required (in addition to the standard editorial review).

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