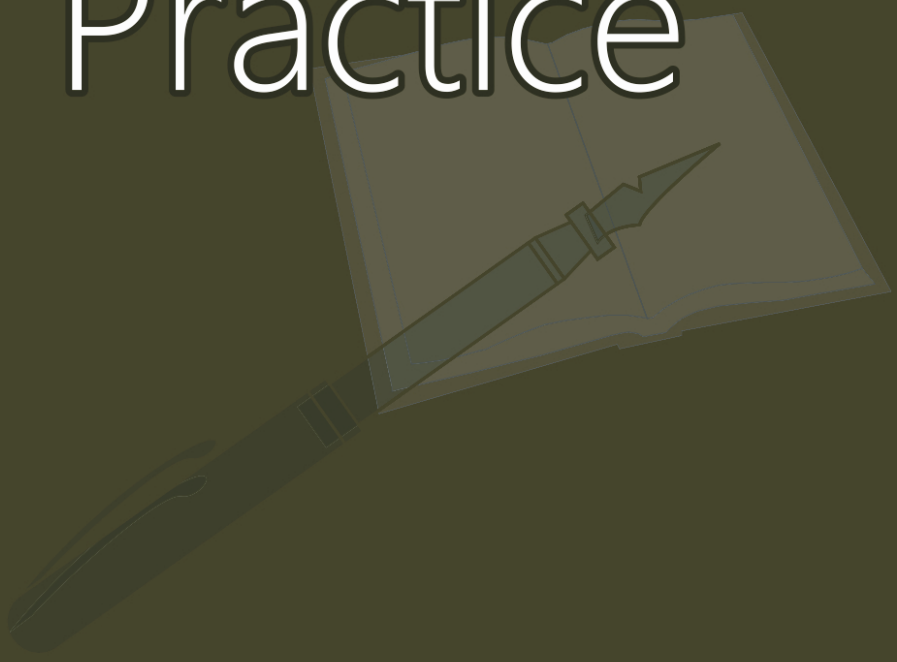
Writing Child and Youth Care Practice



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The CYC-Net PRESS

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Published August 2014

ISBN 978-1-928212-05-8

The CYC-Net Press
An imprint of Pretext Publishing
P.O. Box 23199, Claremont 7735 SOUTH AFRICA
http://cycnetpress.cyc-net.org • cycnetpress@pretext.co.za

Table of Contents

PRACTICE

THE PROFESSION

THE CONTEXTS

Preface

Writing Child and Youth Care Practice

The first thing I remember ever writing was a story (it was meant to be a book) about a Native American named Black Eagle and a white man named Old Trickman. They had become friends under the most adverse context of white people engaged in the genocide of Native Americans, and together they found themselves experiencing many kinds of adventures, all with a happy ending of course. I was twelve years old at the time, and my writing was strongly influenced (somewhat plagiarised really) by a series of novels written by a German writer, Karl May, in the early part of the twentieth century. Karl May wrote many stories about Native American heroes and good white people fighting on their side against the evils of the colonisers. He had never set foot in America, and he never actually met a Native American person when he wrote those stories.

Today, when I write about child and youth care practice, I cannot imagine doing so if I had never worked as a practitioner. All of my stories, both the funny ones and the sad ones, and also the angry ones and the light hearted ones, are at least loosely based on a real experience in the field; the characters are usually composite characters of young people I have worked with, and the adult characters often are slight caricatures of colleagues I have had the good fortune or the misfortune to be paired with. The policies and procedures that are often featured in my stories, especially in the context of residential care, are real ones; I have worked in places where such policies and procedures existed, and I know there are plenty of places left where even the most ludicrous stuff still happens every day.

These days my stories are influenced not only by my experiences in practice, but also by my more recent experiences observing the field as

an academic. I recognise my position as an academic to be one of enormous privilege; I get paid well to pursue my own interests, and no matter what I do, no one else's life is significantly impacted, at least not adversely. A crisis in my current context means that I may have to meet a deadline in a few weeks from now; it used to mean that a young person may take his or her life, or be rendered homeless, or engage in sexually risky behaviour, or perhaps suffer adverse physical reactions to a medication. But an academic position also provides ample opportunity to reflect on in-the-field experiences; many of my stories or writings really are expressions of these kinds of reflections.

I am always conscious that it is a lot easier to write stories than it is to do the 'right' thing in the moment. When I make light of specific practices in child and youth care, or when I seem overly critical of aspects of our field, I do recognise that I am able to make light of things, or offer critiques, largely because I have the space and the support to do so. Not every child and youth care practitioner has either the space or the support to consider different approaches to practice. In our field, as much as we talk of relationships and the importance of Self, much of what we do is influenced by policies and procedures, the pressures from our colleagues, from colleagues associated with our work but positioned differently within the organisation, and sometimes even by outside entities such as unions.

Still, I think stories and short opinion pieces have an important place in our field. We allow for many different voices in our field to talk about us, but we don't support each other enough to talk about ourselves or about the things we do. We don't have to agree on everything; quite to the contrary, I think we are stronger because we have so many different approaches, perspectives, points of reference and concepts that somehow become central to the way we are with young people, their families, neighbourhoods, and communities.

My stories and opinion pieces have particular themes that run through all of them. With respect to practice, I focus on the ways in which we engage young people and I advocate for authenticity, a greater focus on democracy, and the little things we can do to ensure

young people feel respected, cared for and even loved. I argue against the use of control, the abuse of power, and the temptation to 'fix' young people. And I suggest that buying a young person a T-shirt reflecting something we know about them is often a better and more powerful intervention than psycho-therapy. Many of my thoughts on child and youth care practice are influenced by people such as Janus Korczack, Henry Maier, Jack Phelan and Thom Garfat. In the context of the profession, I argue in favour of limiting ourselves to the things we know much about, rather than expanding our profession into areas in which we may have difficulty bringing our core concepts to work. Child and youth care is not an enterprise; it is an art form, informed by research and expertise, but preformed with love and soul. In this context I am especially influenced by Gerry Fewster, and I like his tendency to use strong language and sometimes sarcasm to describe our missteps. With respect to child and youth care practitioners, I like to focus on the enormous potential for a rewarding and meaningful, and also profitable, career as practitioner or as someone in a supporting role of practitioners (such as an academic, for example). I am not much drawn to arguments about how little we are valued in larger service contexts, or how disempowered we are in an era of clinical cultures. Instead, I suggest that practitioners would do well to focus on developing their confidence, their assertiveness, and their belief in what they are doing.

I like to write about some of the foundations of our work, including the language we use, the political contexts in which we work, and the nature and quality of pre-service education and training we promote. In all of those areas, I believe we have much more to discuss, to reflect on, and to consider change in.

The story of child and youth care practice is still being written, by all of us collectively. Many different writing styles quickly become apparent as we peruse our literature. I don't think this is a problem, but it becomes a problem when we begin to harden the boundaries between such differences. In the end, child and youth care practice is a story that is as complex as the lives of the young people we engage

with. It is not a story with a beginning and an end, but rather a narrative that transcends geography, culture, generations and contexts. There is very little truth in our story; but there is a lot of value in the story nevertheless, because without it, we become characters in the stories of other professions, each equally committed to making a difference, but each with its forms of 'turfism', disciplinary arrogance, and narcissisms.

Our story has a very serious context; the adversities experienced by young people around the world are no laughing matter. Nevertheless, I think there is a healthy place for humour within our story. After all, our story is not one of sadness and despair, but instead, it is one of hope and friendship, love and change. Child and youth care practitioners are arguably one of the most optimistic professional groups on the planet; where others have despaired, we tend to relish the prospect of engaging the disengaged. Much of our practice takes place on the edge: the edge of young people falling through the cracks; the edge of evidence and scientific inquiry; the edge of Self and Other. Needless to say, our story, and the anecdotes that make up that story, rightfully ought to be edgy too.

How to Read this Book

The stories, anecdotes and opinion pieces that follow are grouped into broad themes. The first of these is practice. All of the pieces within this theme are directly related to how we do our work. Many of the core concepts of child and youth care are featured in these pieces, sometimes explicitly so, and other times one may have to read between the lines to recognise them. Some of the stories are funny, others not so much, and may even reflect a hint of anger. Each story can be read on its own, reflected upon, and hopefully is worthy of discussion with colleagues, friends or even young people themselves.

The second theme is the profession of child and youth care itself. Here I present opinion pieces that tackle various elements of our profession, such as supervision, professional development, personal growth, or the prospects and challenges of getting involved in

non-traditional sectors, such as developmental services or youth justice. I also focus on post-secondary education in child and youth care, an issue of great importance for the future of our field.

The final section explores themes that speak to the social, economic and political contexts of child and youth care practice. I tackle issues that include regulatory frameworks for residential care, aesthetics, political orientations and more.

None of the pieces presented in this book are research-based in the traditional sense of this term. I rarely cite other authors, I utilise minimal data, and I make no claim of providing truth, correctness or accuracy. Instead, my hope is to provoke conversations amongst child and youth care practitioners and those otherwise engaged with our field that allow us to celebrate what we have already accomplished, give permission to step back using critical perspectives, and role model the idea of dreaming a little. I believe things are pretty good in our world of child and youth care; and I believe they can get even better!

PRACTICE

Too complicated, too fast

Child and youth care practice, as Jack Phelan likes to say, is complex; but then he also reminds us that it is the simple things that shape the experience of a child or youth in relation to the practitioner. I think this is an important reminder, one that speaks to the very heart of what we do. I also think that in many of our employment contexts, we are pushed hard to forget about the simple things and adopt instead increasingly complex and challenging approaches, thoughts, assessments and activities. There is, of course, value to some of these more complex ideas. I would never want to suggest that child and youth care practitioners should dismiss the theories and research-based evidence coming out of academia and other think-tanks. But we cannot get so excited about the latest findings, the most recent concepts and the seemingly more professional approaches at the expense of doing the basics and being human.

By way of explanation, let me briefly outline the process for a Plan of Care for a child living out of home in Ontario. Recent revisions to this process have resulted in a new template, based on the Looking After Children framework developed in the UK, that essentially structures the short, medium and long-term "intervention" for the child or youth. Within this template, we pay attention to seven dimensions of a child's well-being. These include education, health, social functioning, emotional well-being, etc. On the surface, it is a reasonable approach that seeks to ensure all aspects of a child's life are taken into consideration when planning for his future. So far, so good. The problem is that all of this planning often doesn't leave room or time to actually do anything related to the child's experience of living out of home right now. The days pass, the child lives and struggles,

and the plan takes shape, incorporating ever more detail, becoming ever more sophisticated and evolving into a branded model of intervention in which the brand clearly takes precedent over the quality of experience. Child and youth care practitioners along with their colleagues from other discipline use this Plan of Care as a way of evaluating their work with the child. Weekly team meetings involve a comparison of what the plan prescribes with what is actually happening, followed by a renewed effort to get the child to comply with his plan, follow through on his end of things, and lend his voice to the symphonic orchestra of confirmation that the Plan itself is the future to be desired and pursued. Our new found enthusiasm for child and youth participation in the development of their Plan takes on a rather macabre display of Newtonian physics; the Plan will keep moving unless something comes in the way, in which case we blame the youth.

I have always wondered why physicists are so interested in the nature of light, developing wave theories and then particle theories, and eventually getting hung up on quantum physics, but they have no interest at all in what light actually illuminates. Similarly, I worry that our interest in the nature of planning tools (as well as assessment tools, intervention tools, and the like) has overtaken our interest in the experiences all of these tools encapsulate. In my experience, very few young people sum up their experiences in relation to a neatly carved out set of dimensions said to capture their life essence; and very few seem all that interested in the relationship between the Plan and the outcomes. More commonly, I think, young people reflect on their experiences in terms of a feeling, an intuitive response to their interactions with others, a deeply held affinity or rejection of specific people, places and activities. To this end, I would suggest that child and youth care practitioners working with children or youth living out of home ought to develop their own template of care; I emphasise that what is needed is not another Plan but rather a way of ensuring that in being with children and youth, we don't forget the simple things that will figure much larger in the child's later reflection on

their experience of being and living out of home. So here are some of the things that ought to appear in such a template of care:

- The child/youth was given at least one hug today.
- The child/youth was given at least one popsicle (in summer) or one hot chocolate (in winter) today (without having to ask for it).
- Someone said 'Good Morning' to the child/youth today.
- Someone asked about his day at school today.
- The child's lunch included at least one item that the child actually really likes.
- Someone read with the child (or asked about what the youth is reading) today.
- Someone offered to do homework with the child/youth today.
- Someone asked about the child/youth's family today.
- At least on one day this week, no one asked the child/youth to follow his Plan.
- At least once this week the child/youth was able to break a rule or misbehave without consequence.
- The child/youth had a friend over at least once this week.
- Someone unexpectedly bought the child a new T-shirt this month, just because it seemed to suit the child.
- The child/youth went to bed at three different times this week.
- The child/youth is currently under no contractual obligations to anyone.
- When the child/youth completed his chore, someone said 'thank you'.
- When the child/youth returned from being missing, someone said 'welcome back'.
- Someone did the child's/youth's laundry this week because it was piling up.
- The child or youth had access to three-ply, super soft toilet paper every day.

- Shampoo, soap and other hygiene products were not purchased at the dollar store.
- At least once this week, the child/youth got to smell the aroma of fresh baking in the house.
- Someone made coffee/tea for the older youth before he got out of bed.
- At least once this week, someone affirmed the legitimacy of same-sex relationships.
- At least once this week, someone affirmed the legitimacy of spirituality even if the service is entirely secular.
- At least once today, someone ensured that the child's/youth's ethnic, racial or spiritual identity is reflected in something in his life space (food, pictures, TV program or movie, etc.).
- At least once per month, someone tests out the comfort of the mattress and replaces it if necessary.
- The child has access to basic leisure equipment every day (balls, bats, bikes, skateboard, skates, etc.).
- Someone did something to nurture the child's/youth's interest in art, music or sports today.

These 27 things, plus any number of additions child and youth care practitioners can think of, will go a long way to ensuring that we don't get ahead of ourselves. Sadly, I have experienced far too many child and youth care practitioners and other 'helping' professionals who would be hard pressed to even account for half of the simple things listed above. Most are caring and well-meaning professionals, but their focus on the Plan seems to have sidelined their ability to do what child and youth care practitioners do best; being with the child or youth in the moment and in their life space. A Plan does not produce outcomes. Our humanity, when acted on with care, does.

Three profoundly stupid ideas

Over the course of my career, I have always had a paradoxical disposition toward group homes. On the one hand, I loved working in them and I believed firmly that it is in fact possible to provide for meaningful experiences for young people within the context of residential group care. On the other hand, except for very short periods of time, my experiences of working in group homes have consistently confirmed that this is no way to care for kids. More than once I came to the conclusion that residential group care is really a nuanced way of practicing institutional child abuse. This summer I have been making a special effort to reflect on this paradoxical disposition. What, I asked myself, is it about group care that I find so objectionable? I am getting closer to answer this question, in part because I have made a major structural shift in my thinking. For the longest time I followed what the literature prescribes: try and figure out how to do it right. Now I have come to the conclusion that it is not really a matter of doing it right; it is instead a matter to getting rid of some of the most stupid ideas that have become entrenched in residential group care and that consistently serve to bastardise what otherwise could be a good service. So this month I thought I would write about three such stupid ideas, in the hopes that you will provide suggestions for additional ideas that qualify for the 'Dominion of Absolute Stupidity'.

The behaviour contract

At some point, I figure, a child and youth worker somewhere in the world went out to buy a new car. That process required him to sign a contract in which he obliged himself to make the appropriate monthly payments or risk losing the car. Right afterwards, he went to

his group home and was greeted by a young person with a profane expression. So he thought to himself that if he had to oblige himself to make regular payments or else suffer the consequence, this young person ought to do the same. Thus we now have the behaviour contract used as a standard tool in group homes across the world. The logic seems impeccable: you did something wrong, so you need to oblige yourself to not do that again. And just to make sure you understand your obligation, you will sign a document that says that you have obliged yourself, and as part of this document I will tell you what happens if you break your obligation. This way, there will be no complaining if and when you do screw up and receive your consequence.

While this may have been the thinking when the behaviour contract was first introduced, it has now morphed into something like this: you screwed up, and until you sign this contract, you are off program. Once I have exhausted your resistance and rendered you compliant, and you do in fact sign this contract, I will wave it in your face every time you even remotely get out of hand. The second I can nail you with a violation of your contract, I will impose the consequence the contract threatened, and even if this does not make any sense whatsoever, I have no choice but to do so since that's what the contract stipulates. Sure, such a contract has no legal standing and is really just a piece of paper that no one outside of this group home cares about, and sure, the context of your behaviour this time is completely different from last time, and yes, it is true that it would make much more sense for us to talk about what's going on rather than for me to retreat to the office so that I can write on the board that you are now subject to the consequence as stipulated in the contract, but a contract is a contract, and therefore we will proceed in this way instead. At any rate, breaching your contract results in me getting into my new car more quickly than sitting with you to discuss the issues.

Early bed times

Early bed times, or EBTs, are a favourite consequence used to punish kids when they are uncooperative in the evenings. EBTs are often seen as natural or logical consequences; the thinking is that if you are doing bad things in the evening, you ought to go to bed earlier the next day so that you….??? What exactly is the thinking behind EBTs? Kids who get out of hand as bed time approaches are no more likely to be calm and cooperative if they go to bed half an hour earlier the next day. In most cases, bedtime struggles are related either to an anxiety about sleeping, darkness, being alone, nightmares or the like, or such struggles relate to over-stimulation when the whole group of kids is asked to settle down for bed at the same time. In either case, sending the kid to bed earlier the next day doesn't quite seem to address the problem. In fact, in the first case, it exacerbates the problem because it adds half an hour to the nightmares, anxiety, being alone, etc. And if it really is about over-stimulation, why are we sending kids to bed earlier? Why not send them to bed later so that they don't have to deal with the whole group trying to settle down at the same time?

In my experience, the most productive time with any young person is late at night when the house has settled down, clean up is in progress, and all is quiet. Kids who struggle at bedtime ought to stay up later, spend some calm time with staff, maybe help with the clean up (which most kids gratefully do in exchange for avoiding the anxieties associated with group bedtimes) and prepare for the next day. EBTs serve no other purpose than to prevent this invaluable opportunity for relational engagement to occur.

Grounding after returning from AWOL

Leaving the group home without permission is not good; that much I can agree with (although in extremely bad group homes, escaping the oppression of the program might be good). Coming back to the safety of the group home after having been missing for a while

is very good. Surely few people would argue with that. Why, then, do we impose blanket consequences on kids for doing something very good, even if doing so necessitates doing something bad first? It seems to me that the best way to encourage kids not to come back is to tell them that if you do come back you will face consequences. Most kids do eventually come back, but I suspect that they stay away longer because they want to delay their consequence; I certainly would. Somehow we have become stuck in our belief that we must nail kids for running away, because if we don't, all the kids are going to run away all the time. This logic is ridiculous. If kids really wanted to run away, why wouldn't they do so, come back when they felt like it, refuse their consequence and run away again? The logic that we must 'consequence' kids for running away is based on the insecurity of residential staff and group home programs generally. It presumes that kids really don't want to be there in the first place, and the only way to keep them there is to threaten them with consequences if they leave. If things are really that bad, my advice is to close the group home. Alternatively, think about why kids don't want to be there, and then work with them to make being at the group home a better experience than being on the streets.

Well, there you have it. Three residential group care ideas that belong in the Dominion of Stupidity; there surely are many others. I think it would be fun to create a discussion thread on CYC-Net that exposes some of our dumbest practices from across the world. We all know that we participate in this stupidity from time to time, and sometimes regularly. Perhaps if we give voice to what needs to be eliminated from residential group care, we will begin to understand the potential of this way of caring for kids to actually be useful.

De-programming kids

I need to vent. As an academic, I no longer have a team to vent to and with; I don't get supervision where I could unload my latest frustrations, and it might be deemed 'unprofessional' if I start venting to my students. Thankfully I have you, the CYC-Net reader and participant, and I trust that we are now close enough in our connection(s) for me to be able to vent, and for you to provide me with the ears (or eyes) to place my venting somewhere meaningful. If I am overestimating our connection, please feel free to click to another article; Mark Smith always has some interesting news from the UK.

So here it goes. Let's start with a question: why do we make kids live in programs? I can understand why kids may have to move into a group home, or live with some other kids, or be cared for by child and youth workers. But that's not what we tell them when we 'admit a child to a program'. We tell them that they will be living in a program, and that the program has a structure, some routines, and a whole bunch of rules and expectations. Sometimes the program is based on points and level systems (don't get me started on that one…), and other times it might be based on a particular approach to using the therapeutic milieu; but ultimately, we 'admit the child to the program', whatever form that might take.

How would you like to live in a program? Judging from the Matrix trilogy, living in a program has its down sides. For one thing, programs don't understand you; they manage you. You are not part of the program code, the input into day to day experiences and happenings. The program is established independently of you, and so, to be blunt, you don't really matter. In fact, I have never come across a program that asks the question: 'given this child, what should I be

like'? But I have seen lots of programs that state indignantly: 'this child does not fit me [the program]'!

It is not entirely clear to me how we ended up using the term 'program' so easily and so uncritically. If we think about some other associations of the term, we might think of computers, of the military, of raising pets, of television programs or of the program guide. In the context of computers, programs are developed to function exactly the same way every time they are used. I know that when I hit 'Control B' the text I write will be bolded, every time without exception. When the computer starts acting up, or doing things that are outside of its program, I know it is time to run the virus program, which will hunt down and then kill any deviation from what is expected. If the virus program can't fix the problem, I will throw out this computer and buy another one. Hmm, surely this is not what we are thinking when we associate kids with programs.

In the military, there are all kinds of programs as well. In fact, we sometimes think of soldiers as requiring good programming in order to be able to deal with the enormous stress that might face them in battle. Best not to think too much when facing the barrel of someone else's gun; just follow the program, pull the trigger and save yourself. Nope, that doesn't sound much like child and youth care either.

The family pet, our beloved friend. Training programs for pets seem to be rather popular these days. In fact, at a very early age (three months or so), we can take our pets to the training program where, with simple monosyllabic commands they learn to sit, stay, roll over and bark for our grotesque enjoyment. While this might well describe point and level systems in residential care programs (complete with treat for rolling over particularly well), it certainly doesn't describe child and youth care practice. Seems just a little inhumane, doesn't it? Good thing pets aren't humans; we don't yet have a term for 'in-petane' (unless you count 'cruel').

Perhaps when we admit children to programs, we associate the term with TV programming; this is sounding better. TV programming involves a menu of choices, new episodes every week, and a wide

range of characters and story lines. Hey, that's just like the kids we work with; of course, there is the matter of TV programs being fictional (except, of course, Reality TV, which is not fictional but other-worldly), and the kids we work with are real. But on the positive side, when it comes to TV programming, if we don't like the program we can just switch the channel. Perhaps this explains the sad and ridiculous patterns of placement break downs for children and youth in care. Somebody clearly is hogging the remote.

Well, it seems to me that none of the typical associations we make for the term 'program' really work all that well for a context where children's lives are at stake. So why do we use this term? I have some theories about that:

> The term 'program' really refers to the operating logic of staff, who are imprisoned by the program's insatiable appetite for junk food such as 'consistency', 'structure', 'safety' and the like;
>
> Programs provide us with an object of blame when things don't go well, as in 'the child just couldn't handle the program';
>
> Programs allow us to pick and choose kids as in 'this one fits the program' but 'that one doesn't';
>
> Since we use terms such as structure and routine, we need to use the term 'program' in order to be able to define the other terms. Just try to define any one of these three terms without using the other two in the definition;
>
> It is much too difficult to care for kids; it is much easier to care for a program (hence the discussions about consistency, safety, accountability, structure, etc.).

Am I sounding a little critical, perhaps even cynical about it all? You are probably right, I should be toning this down a little.

Thankfully you are allowing me this safe space to vent, and so I don't feel the need to be 'nice' about it. But it has occurred to me that a little challenge might be fun. So here is something for you to consider. If you work in a residential program or a school program or some other kind of program where the rules, expectations, goals, routines, structure and basically everyone's way of being alive are predetermined, do this: next week, go to work and for just one week, shut down the program; make no references to pre-existing rules or expectations, have no plan for activities for the entire week, and don't follow any of the commands of program logic. Just be with kids. Structure and routine are great, but they are even greater when they come from kids rather than from the program. Rules are great too, but they 'rule' (excuse the pun) when they are formulated with the specific humanity of each child in mind, rather than the needs or desires of the program as their foundation. And predictability, stability and calmness certainly promote safety, emotional and physical, but I wonder whether all of this can be achieved without determining the children's lives ahead of time, without sculpting their experiences moment to moment with the precision of externally informed program logarithms. Consequences, rewards, discipline and hey, even punishment, have their rightful place in caring for children and youth, but I suspect these will be much more meaningful when they are derived from the relational context of human beings rather than from pages 4 to 12 of the program manual.

Of course, as a child and youth care practitioner, you know all of this. Relational work is what you do, every day. You know that each child is unique and special and wonderful and amazing. And you know that you couldn't possibly treat every child the same, or have the same expectations of every child all the time because the program says so. Right? Well that's great, than this challenge will be easy for you.

All is ask is that you spend one week being with children while the program is shut down. Let me know how it goes…

And thanks for letting me vent.

Making sequels

Recently my nine-year- old son got into a bit of a shouting match with one of my neighbours. My son loves to use his bike to jump the curbs of driveways, and on this particular day he was using my neighbour's curb to do just that. The neighbour was apparently quite upset about this and started yelling at my son, who was left a little traumatised by this experience (quite similar to how my neighbour felt once I was through with him). While not the most pleasant affair, this little incident reminded me about something that happened many years ago when I was working in a group home for adolescent boys. And I haven't stopped laughing, so I thought I would share that story in my column this month.

One of the boys in our home was a 14-year-old originally from Oman. He had a very long name that to this day I can't really spell or reproduce with any sense of doing it justice. It was something like Efrahimbenabdul…; in order to avoid mispronouncing his name, we just called him Ef, and he was very fond of being called this. His best buddy in the home was another 14-year-old boy originally from Hong Kong, and his name was much shorter: Yu. There is an obvious linguistic coincidence associated with this pairing of boys, and we were all very aware of this but worked hard to not acknowledge it in overt ways.

Ef and Yu were enthusiastic musicians, however, perhaps due to a lack of opportunity they never really had had the chance to practice their talents. In an effort to promote their interests, one of my colleagues at the time, himself a musician, had brought in an old drum set as well as a trumpet for the boys to use. As one might imagine, drums and trumpets are an odd pairing of instruments. With the exception of some pretty sophisticated jazz, there are few music genres where these two instruments go well together, particularly if

the players of the instruments are, to be polite, terrible. As a team, however, we really believed that what makes the boys happy is therapeutically useful, and therefore we withstood the horrendous noise and unpleasant sounds, and even resolved to ensure the other youth were taken on outings while Ef and Yu practiced their music. And practice they did; before long, they had a band name, and unlike us, they didn't hesitate to utilise the obvious linguistic coincidence of their names.

Over time, we had all grown rather fond of this band in our midst, and we shielded and protected them from any negative feedback (of which there was no shortage). The band even gave performances to the other youth in the house, and their enthusiasm blinded them sufficiently not to notice that everyone in the audience was wearing a hat (under which cotton was stuffed in the ears). It was, therefore, a glorious morning when the band announced that they were ready to record their first single, which was to be called 'Hot Knife Brothers' (a reference to a popular method for the consumption of hashish at the time; sadly, the development of flat top stoves has rendered this method impractical). The song itself might reasonably be characterised as 'early hip hop', although it was neither very hip nor did it lend itself to hopping. Nevertheless, we applauded wildly and enthusiastically when we first heard it, although our enthusiasm did wane somewhat as the boys practiced it over and over again in preparation for the recording.

Eventually the song was indeed recorded and it quickly became the most played song on the house stereo. I am not entirely sure what it was, but the song did have its charm, given the extensive drum solos followed by the nuanced trumpet notes significantly tempered by the acoustics of blowing air without quite generating very much sound.

As it turns out, not everyone loved the song, especially when played at full volume ten to fifteen times per day. Our neighbour, a rather profane man who was already very unhappy with our presence in the neighbourhood, frequently complained about the excessive noise coming from our house. We tried in vain to explain to him that

this was hardly just noise, but rather an expression of the artistic talents of disadvantaged children (admittedly, we had to hold back the grins as we gave this explanation). One day, as the neighbour once again was at our door complaining loudly, the band members happened to overhear his rant and made their way to the door to respond in kind. Just as they were about to comment, the neighbour squinted his eyes and hissed a rather aggressive and entirely uncalled for 'Fuck You' at the band, whereupon he abruptly turned and walked away.

In my experience, kids don't respond very well to being sworn at by neighbours, and often will up the ante and engage in major conflict. While we were prepared for this, we were quite amazed by the response of the band. Far from wanting to up the ante, they were devastated that the neighbour lacked appreciation for their masterpiece. What could he possibly not like about this wondrous song, this ballad about the vulnerability and resilience of youth, this forerunner of what was to become by far the most popular and commercially successful music genre in the history of mankind? In the face of this all-encompassing criticism on the part of the neighbour, they resolved to do the only thing that made sense: they went to work to make a sequel.

And they worked hard. Countless combinations of drum solos and trumpet intrusions were experimented with; vocals were inserted before, over and immediately after the crescendo of instrumental volume, and the poetry of lyrics was refined to relate the utmost of emotion as the song climaxed with a description of the abandonment of hot knives in favour of the pipe. The song was recorded swiftly, and we were all getting our hats on ready for the world premier, when to our surprise, the band appeared with the cassette neatly wrapped in blue toilet paper (nowadays we understand why toilet paper is best left un-coloured). The band wasn't interested in our feedback. They understood that the route to commercial success required them to convince their fiercest critic. They were going to present our

neighbour with the sequel so that he too could understand their depth of talent.

We were so proud of the band. Two kids from far away places, embarking on the difficult and winding road to rock 'n roll stardom. Two kids with a dream, and they were not going to be deterred by an early experience of negative feedback. Clearly we had under-estimated them. These kids were going to make it. Attached to the wrapped cassette was a card; this is what it said:

Dear Neighbour: This is for You! Ef Yu 2

Fat, ugly bastard

It's back to school, and for me that means facing a large number of students and 'teaching' them about boundaries, an early lesson in the Professional Issues course I teach at Ryerson University in Toronto. I have been teaching this lesson for quite a while, and so it would be easy to enter my classroom next week and teach this subject matter through the usual routine, the usual lenses, and the usual perspectives. After all, we have benefited a great deal from both the wonderfully simple and enormously complex material offered by the likes of Fewster, Krueger, Garfat, Fulcher and so many others.

But something is different this year, and I find myself more reflective and pensive about this particular topic. I just don't feel like reviewing the debates about touch versus no touch, self disclosure versus stringent 'professionalism', and all the ins and outs of policies and procedures. Maybe it's because I have been reading about Garfat's ideas about 'relational' work; maybe it's because I have been reading Harry Potter with my seven year old son, and it turns out that the Harry Potter series is very much about the issues confronting child and youth workers every day; or maybe it's because some of the child and youth workers I admire most have always violated any and all preconceived notions of what might constitute 'good boundaries' that I am just not sure any more what it is we are talking about.

Regardless of the cause, my recent wave of reflection resulted in some memories coming back to life, and in particular, the memory about how I first learned about 'boundaries' in a child and youth care setting.

I entered this field like many did twenty, thirty or more years ago – with absolutely no understanding of what I was about to encounter. My first job was in a group home, and amongst the ten boys and girls living there was one who had been labeled 'difficult to engage'. He didn't say much, usually avoided contact with the staff wherever

possible, and frequently set off on his own, without permission, getting into a whole bunch of trouble in the community. Early into the job, I asked my supervisor what I should do. Specifically, I wanted to know how I could guide him to a healthier lifestyle, something I knew very little about back then myself. Her advice was that I should approach him and give him some pointers based on my personal experiences. 'Remember', she said, 'kids respond best when they think you can relate to them, when they know who they are dealing with, and when you are being honest and sincere with them'.

Equipped with this guidance, I went in search of my lost boy. This was going to be easy, I thought to myself. After all, I knew a thing or two about getting into trouble, and if all I had to do was to let him know how to get out of trouble…, well, not a problem.

I figured that the biggest challenge was going to be to get him to listen long enough to hear my sure-fire advice. So I offered him not one cigarette but a whole pack (they were very cheap back then and only rumoured to be bad for you). And then, relying on my personal experiences (which really is not that different from evidence-based practice), I rattled off what he needed to know:

> If you are going to shoplift, don't linger. Go in and get out;
>
> Sustain at least one injury in every fight. This will lessen the consequences later on;
>
> Don't tell lies. Embellish the truth instead – same effect but more dignity;
>
> If you are buying drugs at an arcade, tell the seller you are being followed, and then pretend to be $5 short. This almost always results in a $5 discount quickly;
>
> Be nice to your mother. You'll need her one day, and at any rate, she deserves it;

> And finally, when talking with a police officer, do not call him a fat, ugly bastard, even if you think it's true. This almost always makes things worse!

I knew I had made an impact based on the stunned expression on his face. He muttered something which I took to be his way of saying thank you, and, with full confidence that I had figured out the intricacies of child and youth work rather early into my career, I walked off, in search of the next youth I could set straight. I was somewhat surprised that this was deemed good practice; for some reason I had assumed that the messages we were to give to kids were to be somewhat more wholesome and laundered through the value system of productive adults. On the other hand, I was very pleased that in fact, the job was to help the youngsters stay out of trouble, and certainly my advice would do just that. Why should this poor boy suffer through the same tough lessons I had learned? No wonder none of the other staff could engage this guy. They were busy lecturing him on the 'right way to be', and they always talked to him like he was some sort of disease; they kept their distance (safe space, they called it, measured by the length of one arm); they never talked about themselves, as if they had perfect decision-making skills from birth to adulthood (beware of self-disclosure, they said); and when they didn't know what to say or do, they made vague references to policies and rules and program expectations.

I remember asking one of the senior staff on my very first shift why she spent so much time in the office, away from the kids. 'Well', she said, 'it is very important to have good boundaries when working with these kids; we are not their friends or their parents'. Now, this might have answered my question if it wasn't for my deeply entrenched German logic process, which quickly formulated the question in my head: 'what does sitting in the office have to do with boundaries??' Sadly I was not yet advanced enough in my English language skills to think of the more commonly used word describing bovine excrement, otherwise I would certainly have thrown it at her.

Over the years I have learned that child and youth workers are often very good at coming up with concepts that in theory make a lot of sense, but in practice provide the cover for inaction and complacency. I worry that 'boundaries' is one of those concepts. I have heard child and youth workers use this concept as the rationale for allowing kids to self-destruct, avoiding engagement with kids, lying to kids about their own experiences in life, and having 'relationships' with kids that are 'relational' only inasmuch as the imposition of 'staff power' connects with the exploitation of 'child vulnerability'.

This brings me back to 'teaching' the topic of boundaries to child and youth care students. What exactly should I be teaching them? Whose boundaries should form the basis of my lesson? Is there anything at all that can be said about boundaries that holds true beyond the specificity of each and every relationship or relational engagement between two persons?

Of course, some of these questions can be at least partially resolved by teaching boundaries as one organic element of the exploration of Self – I think that's what Fewster might advise me to do. But even the Self is highly differentiated and difficult to capture. I don't know why I have some friends who I have known for only a short time, and I feel safe and comfortable greeting them with a hug; and I have other friends, who I have known for a long time, and all I can comfortably muster is a distant 'hi'. In fact, I can say with conviction that I apply a different set of boundaries, physical and emotional, to virtually every relationship I have. I do recognise that the socio-cultural context in which my relationships exist might have a role to play here, but I also know that it is not the dominant role.

I am currently contemplating Thom Garfat's (a very huggable guy) latest offering on the meaning of 'relational'. I think I like the idea that relationships are constituted through the relational dynamics within that space in which the presence of two people overlaps, not physically but metaphorically. In this way, relational engagement becomes a process in which every relationship is constituted from

within that space to the outside, rather than from the outside (meaning through the medium of pre-determined rules about things like boundaries) to the core. But I am not done reflecting on this; after all, there is a very fine line between complex reflection and the production of bovine excrement.

Not long after I had given my advice to my now favourite kid in the group home, he got busted for shoplifting and was given a rather harsh treatment in court. Apparently he had run into a store at full speed, toppled over a display by accident, grabbed some gum, and tried to run out. When he was caught, he fought back and sustained a black eye, even though the security guy who caught him was a tiny man. It turned out that he had a rather large stash of drugs on him, which he had purchased at the nearby arcade at an incredible discount. And when the cop arrived to arrest him, he called him a fat ugly idiot.

'Why did you do that'? I asked, somewhat horrified.
'Because you told me not to call him a fat, ugly BASTARD!'

This story, by the way, unfolded ALMOST like I have told it, and I feel very good about that!

The relationship trap

"Hey Joe, where are you going with that gun in your hand?"
– Jimmy Hendrix

I am partial to problems much more so than solutions. That's probably not a good thing to admit to at a time when solution-focused approaches to therapy are all the rage. But solutions are all about endings: to problems, to reflections, to contemplations, to feelings. When we find solutions, we celebrate and move on. And herein lies my concern: why do we feel that we need to move on all the time? Many great minds have argued that the need to move forward is destructive. Karl Marx argued this in the context of economics. Many environmentalists argue this in the context of global warming. Plato warned against democracy in part because it would empower the masses to pursue progress, and he saw little more than oppression in many disguises coming from such progress. And so I too think there is something to be said for avoiding solutions; there is something to be said for accepting our problems long term, living with them, getting to know them, and reflecting on them. We tend to learn best when we are challenged, and problems certainly do just that. At any rate, it seems to me that most solutions yield additional problems in no time, which renders the whole enterprise of problem-solving little more than a perpetual 'kick at the can', a meaningless promenade through the barren forest of illusions.

Oops, sorry, this rant is supposed to be about child and youth care. So let me get to that now. I started thinking about my preference for problems when it occurred to me that in our field, we sometimes talk as if we have found a solution. That solution is the 'relationship'. Sure, there are still lots of uncertainties about how to manage relationships, what the appropriate boundaries are, some of the ethical concerns

entailed in this and so on. But fundamentally, it is very difficult to find anyone these days who will openly argue that relationships may not be the way to go. It is interesting to note, however, that at least some of the more engaged writers in our discipline appear to be sidelining the concept of relationship in favour of the concept of 'relational'; this is, in my view, a major development in our field, and I think a very good one. More about that in a moment.

My opening quote this month is a line from a Jimmy Hendrix song. If you were born before 1960, or if you attended Woodstock 1, you probably know how the song continues. If not, let's just say that it's not a "good news" song. Something about 'my old lady' and her 'messing around'. Joe is planning to use his gun. Nice relationship!

Let's face it; the concept of 'relationship' in and of itself provides very little comfort if viewed from the perspective of its role in popular culture. Most relationships don't work all that well. Most of the kids we engage with are there precisely because of the failure of relationships within their families and their communities. Adult relationships appear to have less than a 50% chance of lasting if we consider the divorce rate these days. Judging from the rise in the rates of bullying in schoolyards across the country, kids don't do much better in their relationships either. Some might argue that the entire history of gender has been the history of failed relationships between the sexes. The relationship between the rich and poor is solid, as long as we ignore the ever widening gulf between the two. It seems like the best relationships are the ones that involve the least engagement!

But it's not just a matter of popular culture. In fact, relationships are just as likely to be oppressive as they can be nurturing. Power and control issues are ever-present, and I think it is a little naïve to exempt child and youth workers from this dynamic. I read a great article recently in a new book edited by Bellefuille and Ricks. It's called *Standing on the Precipice*, and Hoskins and Ricks contributed a chapter about dealing with difference in our relationships. It is a wonderful chapter, and I found myself agreeing with virtually every point. And then it occurred to me that I know not one child and

youth worker whose relationships with kids are contextualised by the complexity required to mitigate the oppressive features of relationships. That doesn't mean that all relationships between child and youth worker are oppressive only; but I suspect that most, if not all, such relationships entail both virtuous and oppressive features.

The oppressive features of child and youth worker relationships are promoted by three factors: first, we don't choose the child with whom we have a relationship. We have that relationship with an 'assigned' child and for a particular purpose. When a woman is compelled to accept an arranged marriage to someone she doesn't know, our Western interpretation screams oppression, even if the man is a really nice guy. When a youth is forced to live with strangers we recognise at least the potential for misery, even if the strangers mean well. But when a child is assigned to a child and youth worker, we develop relationships and call it good work.

Secondly, we have that relationship in the context of an organisational culture, policies and procedures, rules about confidentiality and boundaries, and so on. So this is hardly a free and unmitigated relationship. It is one that is contained, pre-defined by context at least to some degree, and based on performance expectations of the child (either our own or those of the outcome-expecting employer). Within this relationship, we don't offer ourselves; we offer our professional package. But we still have expectations about reciprocity. So if the child rejects us even though we are really nice, the child clearly has a problem. These days, we like to diagnose every child with an attachment disorder, which fits amazingly well for any circumstances where our 'relationships' don't work. I am pretty sure that even the mildest understandings of oppression would include the unilateral ability to label the other as a symptom of oppression.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, our relationships come with time-frames that we (or our employer) control entirely. If I think about what the worst thing is that could possible happen to me, short of my unexpected death, it would probably have something to do with

losing valuable relationships. And yet we offer relationships to children and youth we already know are vulnerable to such loss, with the full knowledge that we will withdraw whatever relationship evolves at the time of service termination. Imagine the message: 'trust me, rely on me, I am here with you and for you, and by the way, as of tomorrow you will be discharged and we are done; NEXT!'

As I am writing this I can feel the reader's wrath; I sense the upset, the hurt feelings, and the move toward dismissing what I am saying. Relationship is the solution, isn't it? How dare I create a problem that has already been solved? At any rate, for most readers this characterisation of relationship will appear as foreign, perhaps even as amateurish. If that applies to you, I urge you to read and then contemplate the new language of 'relational'.

When I first encountered that language, I thought to myself 'how brilliant, with a minor linguistic adjustment, someone can add to their publication record without actually saying anything new'! But then I read this language again, and again, and it happens to be used by people who I hold in high esteem. So what's that about?

Well, I have no idea what it is about for them. But I figured out what it means to me, and why I like the relational language. I like it because it is the language of problems, not of solutions. Relational work claims no victories, no progress, no outcome (it actually does claim an outcome, but not in the traditional way – perhaps someone else can speak to that). It is a philosophy of being, of being with someone, and of being in spite of someone. It says 'there is much going on around us, some good, some not good, and here we are, you and I, so how will we be together'? It's a problem in the best possible sense. Why move on from this problem? It is about being comfortable with this state of affairs, about relishing the opportunity to explore, and about accepting the moments of misery and collapse. But it is not about relationships. It is as close as we can ever get to being neutral, to putting aside agendas and interests, and expectations, and to just be, for better or for worse.

At the National Child and Youth Care Conference in PEI just a few weeks ago, I attended a few minutes of Jack Phelan's presentation. It was called *CYC Work is Complex!* Jack's message resonated with me: 'what we do is simple, but the rationale is complex'. Relationships are not simple. We shouldn't 'do' relationships. Relational work does keep things simple, but thinking about relational work is pretty tough. I'm just getting started, but I think it's a road worth travelling.

Neighbourhoods in Residential Care

Recently I was visiting a residential program in Toronto, and found myself in conversation with the Program Manager on the sidewalk in front of the house. As we were talking, a woman walked passed us, then turned around and approached us. She seemed hesitant at first, but she asked us if we were involved with the group home here, and the Program Manager confirmed that indeed we were. The woman then asked if it was really necessary that the young women living in the group home had to smoke on the sidewalk all the time; this, she argued, is of concern amongst neighbours, and on several occasions people have been accosted by the girls as they walk through the cloud of smoke. Why, she asked, could we not designate a smoking area in the back of the building, where both the smoke and the often colourful language of the girls would not be a bother to anyone.

I should point out that this woman's tone and approach to interacting with us was entirely appropriate, very friendly, and not steeped in judgment or rejection as one might often experience in this context. In fact, as she was talking, she specifically and repeatedly assured us that she was aware that the girls residing in the program had much bigger issues in life than smoking, and that she was not intending to judge or criticise. She simply wanted to know why they had to smoke on the sidewalk in front of the house all the time. The Program Manager listened attentively to the woman, and then gave what is in fact an accurate response. The government ministry that regulates residential care in Ontario prohibits young people from smoking on the property, thus forcing them to step off the property in order for the program to be in compliance with the regulations. "There is nothing we can do about that", the Program Manager

explained, and she added that even her staff were not pleased about this regulation. The woman then asked if there was anything she could do, such as writing to someone to register her concern. Since the Program Manager had no response, I decided to involve myself in the conversation (hesitantly, since I was merely a guest at the program myself) and suggested that indeed, this woman's voice was important; she could write to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services about this, and I directed her to the website which has a Comment section for just this kind of scenario. We chatted for a little longer, and the woman indicated that she was a physician, lived three doors down and also gave us her name.

As we re-entered the residence, the Program Manager thanked me for helping out in this conversation with the neighbour; she hadn't thought of referring her to the Ministry's website. At any rate, she explained, relations with neighbours have had their ups and downs over the years, but currently, things seemed to be quite calm.

In reflecting on this experience, it occurs to me that this interaction confirms what has long been an oversight in how residential programs construct themselves and their roles in communities and neighbourhoods. Notwithstanding the physical location of such programs in neighbourhoods, the everyday experience of life, for both the youth and the staff, continues to be one of separation, isolation and otherness. Of course, issues of privacy and confidentiality always play a part in this, but these issues are often used as rationales for ongoing disengagement and accepting the status quo. What I found most unsettling about this particular experience was not what was said or done, but instead what incredible opportunity was left unrecognised.

By way of providing further context, I should point out that the Program Manager involved here is an incredibly competent one, steeped in child and youth care principles, and knowledgeable about residential care in every imaginable way. Her team of child and youth workers is also an excellent one, able to articulate their practices and working very much within a relational framework for their everyday

activities. The house itself is quite beautiful and fits very well into this very affluent neighbourhood of Toronto, populated almost entirely by high-end professionals and well to do residents. It may well be the case that Ministry regulations prevent the program from having a designated smoking area on its property, but this encounter really wasn't about regulations. Instead, it was an opportunity to bring a valuable resource into the program, in this case a physician who is empathetic, well spoken and sensitive to the situation of the young people living there. An alternative response to "there is nothing that can be done", therefore, might have been (and could still be by way of follow up) something like this:

> "We are really challenged by this very issue as well, and of course are sensitive to how neighbours are experiencing our program. I can suggest some ways in which you and I might be able to work together to at least engage the Ministry on the implications of its policy, but in the meantime, I wonder if you might be interested in talking with us and the youth about smoking and options for quitting. You are a physician after all, and also our neighbour. Even if none of the youth quit smoking, just getting to know you will very likely result in greater mutual respect and better interactions when there are encounters on the sidewalk."

It seems to me that this encounter should trigger the recognition of capacity building for this program. Having a doctor in the neighbourhood can't possibly be a bad thing, and introducing that doctor to the staff and youth surely will have benefits. Given the affluent nature of the neighbourhood, there is a very good chance that the doctor knows some of the other neighbours, who might be accountants, business types, construction company owners, or tradespeople with small businesses. The accountants in the neighbourhood can help the young women in the program (serving ages 15 to 19) understand their taxes and possibly financial

management strategies; the business people can provide assistance with career planning and employment; the tradespeople and construction company owners also can help with employment, access to apprenticeships, and so on. Indeed, any one of the neighbours might be interested in becoming a mentor to one or more girls, supporting the program in its fundraising efforts, or assisting with special events or summer camp trips.

The point here is simply this: neighbourhoods are spaces of great opportunity for building connections, relationships and potentially accessing resources. Contrary to frequently cited hesitations, fears, and misgivings, most neighbours can be persuaded to engage young people facing adversity; in most neighbourhoods, the overarching culture is one of civic participation and doing good. This potential can either be engaged and accessed, or it can be diminished and buried by continuing to shield the residential program from its neighbours. In the absence of engagement, neighbours will of course turn to judgment, concern and safety issues as their primary response to having a group home in their midst. And young people living in residential care will always feel like strangers in their own neighbourhood, because their interactions with neighbours will almost always be faceless, nameless and impersonal. They will feel judged and labelled, and as a result, they will respond with the worst of what they have to offer. This is a shame, because almost always young people living in residential care are able to engage in positive, pro-social and altogether meaningful ways with others under the right set of circumstances.

It does not, of course, require an affluent neighbourhood for residential programs to engage with their neighbours. In fact, I apologise if this part of the story sounds a little elitist. The affluence of the neighbourhood simply points to the possibilities that come with engaged neighbourhoods in rather obvious ways. All neighbourhoods have much to offer, and engagement of neighbours is important no matter what the socio-economic context of the neighbourhood.

As I continue to reflect on this particular experience, my thoughts turn to this question: why don't more residential programs engage and become engaged in their neighbourhoods? I suspect there are many reasons, but certainly one additional observation I would offer is that doing so is not covered in much of the literature on residential care. Recent book publications on residential care in many different jurisdictions stay largely silent on this issue, and focus instead inward. Research on community engagement in residential care is limited to non-existent. And from a practice perspective, the training and orientation of program managers, supervisors and staff in residential care almost never include an orientation to the neighbourhood. None of the recording or report instruments used in residential care have anything to do with community or neighbourhood engagement, and the regulations governing residential care limit community engagement to the original intention of opening a group home in a neighbourhood (which in Ontario requires that a service provider hold at least one public meeting, although such meeting is not usually attended by staff or supervisors but instead by Directors and Administrators).

There are some good starting points for re-thinking this and for ensuring that opportunities for capacity building within neighbourhoods are not left unrecognised. Ken Barter, for example, has written extensively about community capacity building (see, for example, his article in *Relational Child & Youth Care Practice*, 16 (2), 2003), and I included a chapter on the Community Context of CYC Practice in my book *Professional Issues in Child and Youth Care Practice* (Routledge, 2008). The Isibindi project in South Africa is based almost entirely on building community capacity (although it is not a residential program-focused project). Indeed, it is not that our field has left the community context of practice out entirely, but it is somewhat problematic, I think, that we have not brought it to the forefront of residential care practice. Simply locating a group home in a neighbourhood does not make a 'community-based program'.

A Quiet Cancer: reflections on the office space in residential care

It can't be easy for kids to live in a group home. At a time when life isn't going all that well for whatever reason, we ask kids to live in a place with a bunch of other kids and allow non-familial adults to take care of them. We tell them what the rules are, what is expected of them, what they can and cannot do, and how to resolve any issues that they might be encountering along the way. We expect them to continue to function in 'normal' routines, such as attending and performing in school, joining others at the dinner table, and going to bed at a certain time. We determine when they eat, what they eat, and where they eat. We provide them with a bedroom so that they have some private space, but we enter their bedroom at will, and very often we are not able to mask the fact that their bedroom was someone else's only a few days ago.

We also try hard to make their experience as comfortable as possible. We tell them that for the time being, this is where they live, and so in a sense at least it is their home. Please respect your home, don't damage things, and be respectful of others living here. We assure kids that our rules and expectations mirror what might (or ought to) be in place in a family home, or in an independent place of living in the community. We offer our support to kids for those moments when they just can't cope, and we try, as best as we can, to remain empathetic towards their family situations, their personal and psycho-social struggles, and their many failures. We emphasise their successes, however small they might be at times, and we focus on their

strengths and competencies whenever we can.

Recognising that the scenario is imperfect, we engage kids in relational ways, offering our presence, our guidance, and our nurture as a way of mitigating the perils of the physical and social milieu. Of course, even in this context we create many contradictions for kids; we ask for their trust, but we maintain vigilance in our monitoring and supervision of their activities. We express our commitment to their well-being, but we ensure that we maintain professional boundaries that pre-empt friendship, reflect professional goals and objectives, and rule out unconditional love.

I suppose somewhere in the strange and unusual world of residential care it all makes sense; sort of, and even then, the evidence is hardly compelling. Still, I am prepared to accept all of the contradictions, the dialectics, and the absurdities of residential care with the exception of one: the staff office. We have come to unconditionally accept the need for a staff office in the group home, and yet this is by far the most institutional feature of the place. But it's not just institutionalism that I object to. Staff offices contradict the very essence of child and youth work, and their presence undermines the very ethos of the profession. Why, you ask? Well, let me point out the obvious.

One would expect to find an 'office' when visiting the doctor. Perhaps the dentist. Maybe the psychologist. Certainly at the counselling centre, the school and the probation office. In fact, one would expect to find an office at just about any place we go to for the purpose of receiving a specific service. This also includes banks, lawyers, child care centres, government facilities, hospitals, and many places of business. But what is an office? It's a place that is designated for a specific purpose, one that is outside of the happenings in its immediate vicinity. Offices serve to separate, to distinguish, to remove, to divide, to create barriers, to prevent, to protect, and to withhold. They are visibly designated for this purpose. Everyone knows when we step from a common space into an office. The rules are different, and specific to whoever occupies that office. We lower

our voices, we take on a more formal posture, we recognise and are conscious that we are in someone else's space. We have stepped out of space we feel entitled to and stepped into space we feel conspicuous in.

Offices are by definition places of work. In offices, work is administered, organised, evaluated, designated, allocated and monitored. In these spaces, records of the work that has already taken place are often kept, more records are generated, plans are made for more work to be done and how it will be done, and records are kept of those plans as well. As a result of their role, offices are the spatial equivalent of private property in the most reactionary articulations of capitalism. In this sense, they are spaces and places of enormous power, and they make no secret of this. In fact, 'being sent to the office' in schools is another way of being stripped naked of one's autonomy and subjected to the 'invisible hand' of intimidation, demonstration of authority, and exploitation of personal vulnerability.

Offices are the opposite of life spaces. We leave our life spaces to go to the office. Before we leave home, we dress according to office standards, we take with us material that is useful only in the context of the office, and we say goodbye to those we leave behind at home. Going to the office means exiting our life space and entering a zone in which all that we are, all that we know, and all that we feel becomes marginalised by a temporary identity that is entirely tied to its spatial context. An office is not really complete until it has not only a desk, but someone behind that desk as well. Nowhere does the commodification of the human spirit and identity unfold more surgically than in the office. We are, along with that desk, part of the furniture.

Why do group homes have offices? Because we need somewhere to store files? Because we need somewhere safe to lock up medication and sharp objects? Because we need to be able to protect the privacy of clients by having a space to have private phone calls or private conversations? These are logistical issues that do in fact require safe

and practical responses. It is ever so easy to find the answer for these issues in the office. But at what cost?

From a child's perspective, the office is a mysterious place. It's where the adults are, where they talk about me, where they make plans for me, where they decide on consequences for me, where they make fun of me, where they 'vent' about me. It's where I need to be, as often as possible, so that I am in on the secret no matter how painful. It's where I need to be as often as possible, so that I can be seen as connected to the invisible hand of the power-space. It's where I need to be to quell my fear of what I don't know, can't access, and am excluded from.

Children and youth have vivid imaginations, and almost always an intuitive capacity to know the difference between words and actions. All the talk about caring, about normalising, about relationships, and about home fade into the abyss of hypocrisy in the presence of the office. It does not matter whether we are in the office or on the proverbial floor. It does matter, however, that this dichotomy exists – the office versus the floor. The barrier between the two is explicit and ever present. You have an exit, I do not. You have a space, I do not. You have power, I do not. Like a benevolent dictator, you may grace me with an audience in your hall of power, your temple of authority, your cavern of secrecy. But it is yours, not mine, and much like the welfare state did in the face of the rampant inequities of capitalism, it serves to keep me complacent but never invested. I can't own a share of this space. I can only drool or tremble in the face of its commanding presence.

For the child and youth worker, the office is much like the demon Mara chasing after the young Siddhartha. It promises knowledge, solutions to logistical challenges, and legitimacy for the profession itself, and lures us into believing that this is real. For the more conscientious child and youth workers, avoiding the office and spending as much time as possible on the floor mirrors the young Siddharta's resistance to the temptations of Mara. This is virtuous but

ineffective. With our resistance we accentuate its presence; it becomes omnipresent.

Child and youth work, and especially residential child and youth work, is about being with, joining, traveling with, exploring with, and experiencing with children and youth. It is about togetherness, about learning about each other and ourselves, and about managing the consequences of what we find out. Offices are about hierarchy, separation, exclusivity, secrecy, and the demonstration of power. In a group home, we eliminate mould when we find it. We bleach the counters to keep away germs. We wash every piece of clothing, bedding, and fabric to kill those lice and their offspring. Why are we not tearing down the walls to eradicate this source of wretchedness in the places we make kids live?

A 'Three Thirds Approach' to Residential Care

Residential care, in all of its many guises, is hard to get right. Once in a while it is good to celebrate those who keep trying – the many child and youth care practitioners around the world who come to work every day, prepared for another eight or twelve hour shift, ready to be with children and youth, to engage and be engaged, to work at relationships, good, bad or just challenging. Their challenges, and perhaps their shortcomings, are almost never due to a lack of effort, or a lack of dedication and commitment. In fact, as we approach the holiday season in many parts of the world, I wish them warmth, love and peace, and ultimately the courage to keep trying.

One reason why it is getting more difficult rather than less difficult to 'do' residential care well is the ever-expanding rhetoric that accompanies this way of being with young people. In many parts of the world, the really fundamental concepts of residential care provision, such as caring, engagement and relationship, are being sidelined in favour of frankly peripheral ideas that nevertheless are getting much airtime and are leading to often questionable everyday practices. I am thinking here about the theoretical frameworks, the words and phrases in vogue right now, and the compulsive need of program administrators and often also funders to impose evidence-based practices in contexts where simple moments, such as a young person contemplating running away, call for simple but heartfelt and well thought-out responses. My recent experience with residential care discussions in Canada has been that no one knows anymore what the point of it is, what to focus on, or even where to start the

conversation about quality of care. Instead, most conversations have deteriorated into a competitive and grandstanding discursive hyperbole about attachment theory, resilience, trauma-informed care and outcomes.

With this column, I want to suggest an alternative approach to thinking about residential care. In this approach, we can forget about all of the language games we play to make what we do sound good. And we can forget about blaming each other when things don't turn out as we might have hoped (not that we all hope for the same things…). Instead, I want to focus on bringing to life the kinds of ideas and concepts often discussed by Gerry Fewster (in the context of caring), Thom Garfat (in the context of relational practice) and Leon Fulcher, Mark Krueger, and many others (in the context of team work). These are ideas that have also been at the forefront of thinking of many practitioners and supervisors I know, but who are constantly facing barriers in exploring these largely because their concerns don't mesh with the priorities of their employers. It is a simple approach, and I will lay this out in this and the next three columns (January, February & March). I call it the Three Thirds approach to residential care, and this month I want to just provide the rationale and basic idea behind this approach.

The Three Thirds approach entails nothing particularly new; it is simply a way of ensuring that all that we do is geared toward ensuring the best possible experience for young people based on who they are individually, as a group, and the kinds of things that very likely impact their experience far more so than our rhetoric. This approach is named very literally; it is focused on the three thirds of each day, corresponding, by and large, to the typical shift schedule in residential care: 7am to 3pm (from morning routines to after school), 3pm to 11pm (from shortly after arriving back from school to falling asleep), and 11pm to 7am (from having fallen asleep to waking up). In January, I will explore the first third (overnights), in February the second third (day time) and in March the third third (afternoons and evenings).

Within the Three Thirds approach, we ask these four questions about each of the thirds:

> What are the environmental conditions that will make a young person's experience during this time as good as it can be?
>
> How can we be relationally engaged during this time?
>
> How can we influence how this time might impact on the other two thirds of the day?
>
> How can each of us contribute to the strength and well-being of the team during this time?

None of these questions, or the answers I will provide, will solve any of the everyday problems we might encounter in residential care. And I am very confident that nothing within the Three Thirds approach will satisfy the rhetorically-focused 'experts' in our field(s). But absolutely everything in the Three Thirds approach will be geared toward creating contexts and everyday experiences for young people that are meaningful, pleasant, and precursors of hopeful futures.

All of us seek sanctuary; whether it is stress at work that makes us crave the evenings where we can relax on the couch and enjoy a glass of wine or a cup of tea. Or maybe it is the chaos of raising our own children that results in us looking forward to being able to go back to work. Perhaps it is financial pressure, relationship problems, health concerns, or something altogether different that results in our craving of the pillow and the heavy cover to pull over our heads; sometimes sleep is the only place left where we find time for tending the wounds to our Self. Fundamentally, knowing one's sanctuary and being able to rely on it gives us strength (not always enough strength) to re-enter whatever chaos or stress might be waiting.

This is not different in residential care. Young people are placed there with little control over where they might find sanctuary. All

parts of the day are potentially challenging, stressful and anxiety-provoking. And the same is true for the child and youth care practitioners entrusted with caring for the young people. They never know ahead of time what fires will flare up, when these might flare up, and how these might impact everything else and everyone else. As a result, residential care has moved toward containment practices designed to limit or extinguish those fires. Routines, rules, consequences and rewards/activities are all designed to get ourselves, the young people and the program through the day.

Behaviour management, psycho-social treatment, and pharmacological interventions are entirely reasonable from a containment perspective, but these do very little to guide the everyday experience of young people and child and youth care practitioners in residential care. In pretty much all existing approaches to residential care we have focused our energies on managing one of two things and sometimes both of these: place and process. In the Three Thirds approach, we manage neither of these two things as our primary focus, and instead manage time as the foundation of excellent practice.

All of this may sound a little difficult to visualise. But for this month, I want to end by simply asking you to imagine a team of child and youth workers, sitting with a group of young people, and discussing in depth and at length, what could be done to make going to sleep something everyone looks forward to; a sanctuary with relatively few demands, and an experience from which flows strength and optimism. This is what I will explore next month, so stay tuned.

In the meantime, the holidays are indeed approaching, and so wherever you are and whatever you might celebrate, I wish you Peace.

The First Third: Overnights

Overnight shifts in residential care are often underrated in terms of their substantive contribution to caring for young people. In fact, the hiring criteria for overnight workers typically are much more flexible than those for other positions. In many cases, the core requirement

for this position is the willingness to work during overnights; all other qualifications are seen as a bonus. In many programs, the overnight worker position has its own job description, one that typically features an emphasis on administrative tasks such as checking the client files for completeness, custodial tasks, such as cleaning behind the fridge and the stove and doing the laundry, as well as safety tasks, such as ensuring that the fire alarms are functional and checking on the kids during regular intervals.

The three thirds approach to residential care promotes a very different perspective on overnights, and sees this third of the three thirds as a very important opportunity for enriching the connections throughout the program. Although there is still plenty of time to ensure the house is clean, the files are complete and the fire alarms are functioning properly, the physical environment components of the position are much more focused on the individual and group needs of the young people. To this end, the specific cleaning and household tasks of the overnight worker are focused on mitigating the inconveniences of group living. For example, instead of cleaning behind the stove in the middle of the night, a chore that can be effectively done during the day with the young people assisting, the overnight workers will focus on the bathrooms of the young people, and ensure that any of the dried up toothpaste in the sink is removed so that the young people are not reminded of the less pleasant aspects of group living as soon as they get up. Toilet paper will be available and personal hygiene products are prepared for the morning. Young people who have special requests with respect to shampoo or other products can make those requests to the overnight worker, who will ensure that the requested product is available in the morning (sometimes young people may have to leave a note for the overnight worker since this worker may come to work after the young people are already asleep).

The overnight worker can also go through any photographs taken recently as part of program activities and frame the particularly good ones either to give to a young person specifically or to mount on the

wall if it is relevant to the whole group. Knowing that a particular young person has a job interview the following morning, the overnight worker may ensure that the young person's shirt is washed and ironed so that it is ready to be worn the next morning and the young person can feel confident at least about their attire. Knowing that another of the young people has a math test the following day, the overnight worker may prepare some new pencils, freshly sharpened for the young person to take to school that day. And knowing that it is one of the young people's siblings birthday the following week, the overnight worker may prepare a birthday card to be signed and mailed by the young person the following day. In homes that serve older youth, the overnight worker may prepare some coffee for the young person who needs to get up extra early to go to work the next morning.

All of these examples have in common the attention to what is going on in the lives of the young people at any given time, and taking actions that support the young people in engaging or responding to whatever challenges, opportunities or activities may affect them tomorrow or shortly thereafter. In addition to these person-focused activities, the overnight worker also prepares the home for a feel-good atmosphere in the morning, by for example preparing some fresh-baked goods as the morning approaches. This will ensure that the young people wake to a pleasant scent in the house and also can look forward to a tasty breakfast after they have completed whatever morning routines are required in the program. In order to further support the group of young people, the overnight worker might review the newspapers to make a list of things happening in the community the coming weekend, and then leaving that list for the young people to use in determining their weekend plans.

With respect to the safety of the home, the overnight worker will contemplate not only the physical safety of the home but also the emotional safety of individual young people or the group as a whole as new dynamics are introduced. For example, if the residence admits a young person of a particular culture or ethnicity, ensuring that

pictures or other items in the home provide familiarity and a sense of welcoming to this new resident is an important task. Making some recommendations about culturally appropriate food and other customs to his or her colleague, based on spending a little time researching online, can also contribute to the emotional safety of everyone. And finally, perhaps less focused on the young people and more on the team, the overnight worker might also print out particularly relevant articles (from CYC-Net, for example) that speak to current issues or challenges experienced by the team during the other two thirds of the day. If the team is feeling the effects of burnout, there are some wonderful articles on self-care right here on CYC-Net; the team needs a different way of thinking about physical restraints? Laura Steckley has written extensively about this on CYC-Net as well. Had a particularly intense debate about love in residential care at the last team meeting? Why not print out the always interesting observations of Mark Smith, who has written extensively on the role of love in CYC practice generally and in residential care in particular.

These kinds of activities are uniquely suited to the overnight position in residential care, because this position usually has more thinking room and can therefore act more strategically than the day or evening positions. This position is also one of very few professional contexts in which one can gain a perspective on young people that is not tainted by the moment-to-moment stressors of program-imposed interactions, behavioural interventions and 'crowd control' measures.

In addition to thoughtfulness about the environment, the overnight worker can also maintain excellent connections with the young people even if he or she rarely comes into face-to-face contact with them. For example, knowing once again about the young person who has a math test tomorrow, the overnight worker can leave a note saying "good luck on your test". Aware that a young person had a particularly difficult family therapy session the day before, a note saying "I know you had a difficult family session yesterday; hope you are feeling better today" might be helpful. If a young person is new to

the program, putting some icing that spells "welcome" on a muffin that can be served for breakfast can go a long way to creating comfort for the new resident. Alternatively, leaving a note for the young person with the new job to go to in the morning that asks "what do you take in your coffee? It will be waiting for you when you wake up" may build confidence and something to look forward to for the young person. These kinds of relatively simple acts are all representative of building connections that don't require much conversation or face-to-face interaction, but that nevertheless speak to the relative isolation experienced by young people in residential group care. Fundamentally, the message to the young people is that no matter what might be happening during the other two thirds of the day, during the overnight third of the day someone is connected to them, is thinking about them, and is looking after their needs that easily are overlooked during the chaotic circumstances of the other two thirds of the day.

A similar connector role can be established in relation to the team. Here the overnight worker can maintain oversight over what is happening for individual team members and remind the rest of the team of opportunities for collegial nurture and caring. For example, the overnight worker can ensure an updated list of significant dates for each team member, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and perhaps even anniversaries of major personal losses. This way, a culture of caring for another can be maintained that transforms the whole environment into one where the specific circumstances of individuals, staff and young people are respected and acknowledged.

None of the suggestions made here are particularly revolutionary or creative; I am quite certain that many overnight workers throughout the world have done some or all of these things from time to time. The point, however, is not only to do these things, but to acknowledge the role of the overnight shift differently than it currently is. This represents fully one-third of the experience of young people living in residential group care, and it happens to be the third where young people have the least control over what happens

(because they are asleep), and where for many young people, anxieties and worries are at their most acute. It is therefore crucial to recognise that what is required for the overnight shift is nothing less than excellence in child and youth care practice. This position requires not less but more engagement with the principles of child and youth care practice, and their translation into everyday moments; and in fact, the first third of the three thirds approach to residential care is fundamentally about becoming present, even when some of the obvious ways of being present are less available.

The Second Third: The Day Shift

The day shift starts when we leave our homes to make our way to the group home. In fact, the journey to work is arguably the most important time of the day shift, because this is the time when we must unburden ourselves of all of the baggage we carry going into the day shift on site. Whatever nonsense the young people might have been up to the previous day, whatever anticipation we might carry given the recent behaviours of one or more of the young people, by the time we get to the group home, our objective ought to be one thing, and one thing only: we want to start the day ourselves with the conviction and give the message to the young people that THIS DAY comes with boundless opportunity, unlimited joy and the possibility of great things. This is not an easy message to convey to others, and often it is just as difficult to really believe this message ourselves. Group home life rarely reflects the optimism of this message. Still, it is an essential message, because the impact of negativity is always cumulative, and negative anticipation almost invariably becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. No matter what the reality on the ground, every day must start with the conviction that it can be better than the previous one, for if it does not, it won't be.

Last month, I wrote about the first third of residential care, the overnight shift. Much like I framed the overnight worker as someone who fulfils a caring function for the rest of the team, the day shift worker also must focus on caring for his or her colleagues. When

arriving at the group home, therefore, the day shift worker first turns his or her attention to the overnight worker, and ensures that that person's experience overnight finds a place for debriefing. Listening to the experiences of overnight workers is what connects that important shift with the other two, often more glamorous, shifts. Rather than complaining about things left undone by the overnight worker, the day shift worker offers assistance to complete them now, so that the day can start with a feeling of readiness for everyone. In addition, the shift change in the morning must reflect a two-way process; it is sadly common for day shift workers to receive information from the overnight staff, but not to provide information to the overnight staff. As we discussed last month, it is in fact imperative that the overnight staff is well informed about the specific issues facing each of the young people and the thinking that might inform the team's approach to working with each of them.

As Henry Maier often wrote about, the very first contact with the young people each day is arguably one of the most important moments in residential care. This first contact sets the tone for the day, prepares young people for whatever they might be facing that day, and also allows the day shift worker to settle into being with young people for another eight hours or so. It is the level of consciousness that is important here, for surely one of the first errors committed by day shift residential staff is the assumption that their being with young people will flow naturally and represent a smooth transition from whatever state of mind they may have had coming from home. In fact, there is nothing natural about this process of transition; as workers we have to shift our Self into gear to account for all of the complexities entailed in caring, relationships and engagement. It is essential, therefore, that the first contact with the young people, often unfolding in the context of waking them from their sleep, be gentle and inviting. This is not the time to list all of the tasks, challenges and obligations for young people for the coming day. Instead, it is a time for young people to gain confidence that this day will be a good day, and that they can indeed exert some influence on

how this day will unfold. Particularly disruptive in this process of gaining confidence are reminders of ongoing consequences earned the previous day, or of any sort of restrictions on the possibilities that this new day presents. These kinds of discussions must wait until the young person concerned is ready for them and able to absorb some of the less positive messages. That moment will vary from one young person to the next, and day shifts can therefore not be structured in such a way that all young people are confronted with challenges at the same time.

The first two hours or so of the day shift are often very busy (and also very loud) times in residential care, as young people are getting ready, usually at different speeds, for another day. Showers must be taken, rooms tidied, breakfast eaten, and preparation for departing for school must be made. Predictably, young people move through these first two hours at different levels of efficiency, and day shift workers must therefore muster whatever resources they have to exercise great patience. It is never the case that putting pressure on young people to be more efficient actually results in more efficient approaches to preparing for the day; quite to the contrary, such pressure almost always results in delays, arguments and negativity, and likely will produce great barriers to the process of confidence-building for the young people. It may be helpful for day shift workers to remind themselves that even in perfectly functional family homes, where two or three children are getting ready for school, these first two hours of the morning are almost always characterised by a higher degree of chaos than any other time of the day. Morning laziness, slow commitment to getting ready, and a level of moderate compliance with instructions are developmentally 'normal' behaviours and dispositions, and the militaristic style of trying to make this process efficient in group homes is entirely misplaced.

Logistically, day shift workers must ensure that at least four things happen for young people during those first two hours:

They are physically prepared to face the day, which means being dressed in ways that reflect their personal styles, they have had breakfast, and they have taken care of basic hygiene routines;

They have had reminders that the group home is looking forward to their return in the afternoon, so that leaving for school doesn't feel like 'the staff can't wait to get rid of me for the day';

They packed a lunch that is worthy of being looked forward to;

They are aware of any meetings or other obligations that might be scheduled for that day.

Once the chaos of the first two hours subsides, day shift workers are able to take stock of what must be accomplished for the remainder of the shift. This includes planning attendance at Plan of Care meetings or case conferences, as well as thinking ahead to the evening shift and what contributions can be made to the planning for that shift. Inevitably, the day shift involves some administrative duties that can include everything from writing reports to making phone calls to update other workers and often parents of various happenings. Typically, day shift workers do so reactively; this means that phone calls are made in response or as a reaction to things that have already happened. An opportunity exists, however, to also make phone calls or have meetings that are pro-active and that contribute to the relationships between workers and the parents of young people or other professionals in the field. The day shift is often a very good time to connect with a young person's father or mother (or sibling) for the sake of connecting rather than to update on anything in particular.

One area of particular note is the way in which a residential group care program supports young people in their schooling. Aside from connecting with teachers and support workers at school, day shift workers also can spend time exploring materials or learning plans that

speak directly to that which young people are learning in school right now or will be learning in the near future. Ideally, the goal is to not only help young people catch up with school work, but to provide supports that allow young people to work ahead a little, so that the experience in school is one in which they feel competent and well prepared. All too often, residential care support for schooling is deficit-based, and merely seeks to ensure young people's attendance rather than their performance and academic success.

With respect to the physical environment, the day shift is a good time to ensure that this environment is safe, welcoming and clean. Day shift workers often neglect basic household tasks, relying instead on the overnight worker to look after these. This not only creates situations where young people return from school to less than cared-for environments, but it also sets a poor example to young people in terms of caring for one's environment as an ongoing activity rather than a scheduled task. Moreover, it reflects poor teamwork and an inevitably negatively-charged dynamic of delegating 'undesirable' work to someone else.

There are many additional scenarios that can unfold during the day shift; often, some young people do not attend school due to suspensions or because they are transitioning from one school program to another. Sometimes, young people stay back from school because they are ill. In all of these cases, the work of the day shift worker changes, because of course the priority now shifts from administrative tasks to being with those young people still in the home. It is problematic when day shifts unfold with young people in the home but limited interaction between them and staff. The boredom that comes with passing the time is often the breeding ground for further challenges in the evening shift.

At a more general level, one might think of the day shift in residential group care as a 'connector shift'. Aside from connecting the overnight to the evening, it is also the time when day shift workers can give life to the network of connections of young people, including their families, their schools, their professional services and their

recreational endeavors. Day shift workers have more opportunity than anyone else to ensure that the lives of young people in residential group care do not become isolated but instead are continuously connected and re-connected to the their lifespace and to the spaces where their relationships unfold or ought to unfold. In this way, the day shift becomes not an administrative shift, but instead one that provides for a much richer experience for young people, assisted by the pro-active and engaged work of the day shift worker.

The Third Third: The Evening Shift

The evening shift in residential care is, without a doubt, the most dynamic shift, where the only truly predictable component for the staff is that something will happen that they (the staff) did not expect to happen. This lack of predictability is also a source of anxiety, for staff and young people alike, and therefore much time and energy is expended to avoid things from happening or to put safety and limits around the things that do happen. In fact, it is quite amazing that in spite of there being many different theoretical approaches, program designs and policy and procedure frameworks for residential care programs, the evening shift everywhere features common routines most of the time: there is a snack period for when the young people return from school, followed by a little free time, eventually some quiet time (also referred to as homework hour, room time, personal time, etc.), dinner, a chore, some structured recreational and/or therapeutic activity, another snack time and then bedtime routines. Of course there are many variations in the degree of structure, and some residential care programs build in more free time than others. In addition, sometimes some young people can be exempted from particular elements of the program and instead plan their own routines or activities. Nevertheless, there is an overarching framework for the evening shift nearly everywhere within which staff move young people from one element of structure to the next, all well-intended, all usually well-executed, and most elements of the structure underwritten by a meaningful rationale (sometimes more

meaningful than other times).

As part of the Three Thirds Approach to Residential Care, it becomes necessary to re-think not so much the structure of the evening shift, but instead the way in which staff place emphasis on the different elements of this structure. For this shift, as for each of the others, it is important for staff members to start their work with a team intention of making the next eight hours as pleasant, meaningful and safe as possible for the young people. This does not mean working to avoid issues or crises, but instead, it means creating spaces for re-grouping, for finding comfort (for both staff and young people) and for experiencing one another without the pressure to conform, comply or perform. As with the other shifts, one of the core questions for the evening shift is how to care for the physical context in which staff and young people come together. This is often a neglected feature of evening shifts, not because no one cares, but simply because this shift is usually very busy, and there never seems to be enough time to look around, and to think about how to render the physical space a comforting one. Of course, this perception of busyness is just that, a perception. In fact, it is entirely possible to render the evening shift busy precisely because everyone is occupied with rendering the physical space one of comfort that exudes a sense of belonging for everyone. Instead of a "therapeutic activity", for example, staff and young people could come together and re-design the layout of furniture within the space; or the group could work on an art project specifically designed for display in the living room. Perhaps the most obvious place where the physical space can be impacted is not so much through physical interventions, but through the other senses, such as smell and sounds. A selection of mutually agreed upon music in one area, and a joined cooking effort using interesting spices in the kitchen can alter the experience of being within the physical space without actually requiring any extra time or effort on anyone's part. The point here is not to constantly find ways of altering the physical space, but instead to make the way the physical space is experienced a joined experience on the part of staff and young people, with a

collaborative, empowering approach to deciding on changes or even temporary enhancements.

Dinnertime in particular is arguably one of the most underrated opportunities in residential care. Usually, dinner is seen as having an instrumental role, and thus is structured as a routine of the program to be completed. Instead, dinnertime could easily be transformed into a core aspect of embedding connectivity and stress-free group living (work) within the residence. Instead of a twenty minutes affair, thoughtful residential care would at least often (if not always) strive to extend dinnertime to last for much longer, perhaps by having multiple courses and by encouraging "lounging" between courses and during and after dinner. This is an opportunity to utilise a safe, comfortable and enjoyable context for coming together as a vehicle for forming deeper connections, practising social graces and skills through daily life events, and even supporting the learning and education of the young people by steering the conversation toward school curriculum (without really talking about school).

Another question we ask for every third of the Three Thirds Approach is how each shift can contribute to the other two. During the evening shift, many (almost all) residential programs require the young people to do chores. This particular routine is an example of how sometimes program routines are enforced for the sake of getting them done, instead of in ways that render them meaningful for the young people, the staff, the other shifts, or the program as a whole. Instead of having a pre-set list of chores and assigning young people to rotate through these on a week-by-week basis, why not identify things that would actually be helpful based on the feedback from the other two shifts. This might include cleaning chores, household management chores or administrative chores, such as preparing particular kinds of forms, putting together admission or information packages, or preparing shopping lists or, in programs for older youth, actually doing the shopping, or taking out the trash, vacuuming, cleaning behind the fridge and so on. One might ask each night what sort of chore the young people are most up for; some nights, someone

might feel ambitious or feel the need to do something that might be appreciated by the overnight staff; others might just want to take out the trash and be done with it. The point is that chores present an opportunity to take action related to the connections of young people with overnight staff, the connections between shifts, and the motivation of young people to do things that they see as being useful.

Another question we ask ourselves for each of the thirds within the Three Thirds Approach is how we might use the third as a way of deepening connections and relationships. Here it is interesting to note that the core focus of relationships in residential care, and perhaps in child and youth care practice more generally, has been on relationships between individual young people and individual staff members. There is great value to this focus, but there is also an element of incompleteness associated with it. We must acknowledge that these interpersonal relationships are only one aspect of relationship and connectivity in residential group care. Other, equally important aspects include relationships amongst peers, between groups of peers, amongst staff members, and between several young people and several staff members. The evening shift lends itself to working on some of these 'other' relationships and connections. The common focus on one-on-one time as a precondition for working on relationship does not correspond to the child and youth care principle of working through daily life events and in the moment. Those DLEs and 'the moment' are almost always characterised by the involvement of multiple individuals, staff and young people, and in some cases peers and family members from outside of the residential program.

The third third of the Three Thirds Approach is therefore an opportunity to explore the connections in multiple constellations of individuals; this is where we can ensure that our relational work is centred within the lifespace of the young people, which usually is a complex space (rather than place) in which multiple relationships are colliding all the time. Engaging diverse small groups of young people in activities, play and conversation ensures that connectivity throughout the evening provides for shared experiences that do not

chronically leave any individual on the sidelines. It also ensures that neither staffing groups nor resident groups form in such a way that some individuals within the program experience their everyday life as less connected than others.

This same logic also applies in the context of maintaining a healthy team. It is virtually always the case that a range of connectivity characterises the relationships amongst team members, with 'cliques' often appearing as the worst possible outcome. The evening shift provides an opportunity, therefore, for each staff member to find their path to contributing to a team effort, and to work side by side with every other team member in rendering this path compatible with the paths of others. Each member of the team can contribute here by embracing being paired with a colleague who may not be immediately compatible with oneself. The challenge of working together in spite of different personalities, perspectives and approaches is an asset in residential group care when it is approached as an opportunity for innovation rather than an imposition.

The Benefits of the Three Thirds Approach

I have tried to articulate, in simple language, an approach to residential care that mitigates some of the chronic stressors for staff members while at the same time focusing considerable energy on rendering each third of the day as positive as possible in relation to some of the most central elements of residential care: the physical context, the relationships, the transitions from shift to shift and the health of the team. There are several immediate benefits associated with thinking about residential care in this way.

First, this approach eliminates any ideas about legitimising different value ascriptions for each of the shifts. It is a core element of this approach that all moments in time, including the middle of the night when most young people are asleep, are of equal significance and provide for great opportunities to contribute to the promotion of the core elements as defined above.

Secondly, this approach calls into question any ideas that legitimise

the hiring of less-qualified individuals for different shifts, and in particular for the overnight shift. Every person entrusted with caring for and about young people in residential care must understand and make a commitment to the everyday life experiences of young people, and therefore must find ways of utilising their time and opportunity to contribute positively and meaningfully to that experience.

A third benefit of this approach is that it places significant importance on the physical context of being with young people. This is an area that is often neglected for long periods of time, and then addressed through somewhat random efforts to 'clean the place up'. This kind of thinking really separates the physical context of care from its relational, activity- based, and therapeutic context. As Michael Burns made clear in his book about Healing Spaces, this kind of separation makes no sense and is to the detriment of young people's everyday experiences of care. Within the Three Thirds Approach, the physical context of residential care (framed as the response to all of the senses, including sounds and smells), caring for this context is a central component of each of the thirds.

And finally, the Three Thirds Approach is really about providing a framework for maintaining the highest possible commitment to caring for others in the moment. Fewster has written passionately about the importance of the word "care", both here on CYC-Net and in scholarly articles and books. Yet much of this compelling writing finds few opportunities for surfacing in the everyday chaos of working or living in residential care. For this reason, I think that focussing on eight hours at a time, and ensuring the complete integration of care into everything that happens, is smart and less stressful than trying to create program frameworks, theories, policies or any other overarching approach to building care into residential care. It also promotes simple ideas, such as lounging over dinner, giving greater importance to food (which is almost universally recognised as the foundation of care), and letting young people know that we are with them (present) even when that may not be obvious.

THE PROFESSION

Expansion to what end?

Over the past ten years or so, at least in Ontario, child and youth care practice has made substantial forays into areas of work that have not traditionally been within the purview of our profession. These days, we take pride in the fact that CYC professionals are working in areas such as autism, child protection and youth justice. On the one hand, I share with so many others (who may be a little reluctant to admit this) a secret pleasure related to expansionism for the sake of it; call it empire building, conquest, accumulation or whatever. But from time to time I do what I have been taught to do as a child and youth care practitioner and what I now get paid to do as an academic: I become reflective, even pensive, and since I have a natural inclination toward cynicism, sarcasm and the macabre, my reflections, I admit, sometimes are decidedly critical of our field. I have often thought that perhaps I should apologise in a preemptive way for the things I write about so as to spare others the annoyance of feeling compelled to respond to me. But since England has never apologised for appointing Kevin Keegan as head coach some years ago, and America never apologised for electing Bush not once but three times, and the whole world is still waiting for Australia to take back Crocodile Dundee (especially part 2), I think I will forgo such politeness and do what comes naturally.

So, here is my thought, framed as a question: is it really a good thing that we are expanding into all of these areas? Will it work out well for our profession and perhaps more importantly, for kids and their families? I am reminded of one of my own experiences branching out into a kind of work I knew nothing about. Here is my story.

Some years ago, I was asked to work with a family that consisted of a hard working single mom and her three children. One of the three children, I was told, "was missing a chromosome" and Mom needed someone to help get him through his morning routines because she had to leave the home very early in the morning in order to attend to her cleaning job on the other side of the city. The job was very simple: go to the family's apartment each day, Monday to Friday, for about 6am. Mom would leave as soon as I arrived, and my job was to help the identified kid get dressed, have breakfast and then accompany him down the elevator to the front of the building where he would get picked up by his school program no later than 8am. Great, I thought to myself. I can do this job before going to my real job, which at the time was a manager's position in a children's mental health centre. As an experienced child and youth worker, I figured, this would be a fun and easy gig. After all, what's a missing chromosome when most days I am working with youth who have serious mental health issues, huge behavioural problems, moments of violence and other anti-social behaviours and so on.

I showed up on day 1 and no sooner had I walked through the door of the apartment that Mom stormed out to catch her bus. Since I had never been there before, I quietly opened all of the apartment doors to try and figure out where my kid actually was. Sure enough I found him behind door number three, but not before seriously freaking out the other two kids who apparently knew nothing of my presence in the home. Turns out the other two were extremely good at their morning routines and they were out of the house pretty much by 7am, leaving me with my kid. I must say that I did a very good job getting him dressed, even matching up at least some of the colours of his outfit. And he seemed very happy with me, smiling from ear to ear, even touching me and checking me out in what I thought was reasonable curiosity but a slightly misguided sense of boundaries. Not a problem, I figured; developing appropriate boundaries that are right for me and for him is something that I have been doing forever with lots of kids. So I started explaining to him what was ok and what

wasn't, and I attributed his non-responsiveness strictly to the fact that he was, of course, non-verbal. That went well, I thought to myself. Time for breakfast.

I had always been a believer in a good breakfast for kids; food, I knew, is very important to ensure that kids get a good start to their school day. So I went searching for some dishes and I found both a bowl and some cereal, which I promptly placed in front of him. I even made sure that I filled the bowl with milk right up to the very top so that he would know right from the start that I would not shortchange him on his breakfast. In fact, I can state with confidence that up to that point, I had successfully demonstrated (mostly to myself) that the use of child and youth care principles and skills clearly were easily a match for minor issues such as a missing chromosome. Basking in the glory of my professional brilliance, I just didn't see it coming. And I wasn't really sure that what I thought had happened actually did happen, because looking at my kid across the table, he seemed entirely content and perfectly calm. My surprise kept me calm too, even as the milk all over my T-shirt was soaking through to my chest and the sugary glue that held the cereal to my clothes was slowly dissolving and thereby contributing to transferring the whole mess from me to the floor.

As a child and youth care practitioner, I had lots of experience dealing with temper tantrums and aggressive behaviours, but the kid had neither suffered a tantrum nor did he appear aggressive in any way. I kept my calm and in a very soft voice explained to him the inappropriateness of his action; but I refused to get sucked into power struggles and a game of consequencing, and so I finished my very first day with him and went on to my real job, a little embarrassed about my now soiled outfit and resolved to come up with an excuse (ok, a lie) for how this had happened.

Day 2 was rather uneventful, and once again by the time I arrived at my real job, I had my cover story explaining the peanut butter and jam all over my shirt ready.

Day 3 went exceptionally well, in part because the yellow of the egg yolk sort of blended in with the sunset motif of the shirt.

Day 4 wasn't quite as good, because it turns out that although pancakes are relatively safe and clean projectiles, the only way to get maple syrup out of the hair is to get a haircut.

On day 5 I called in sick. I really was sick, not physically but emotionally. This kid was driving me nuts, and more importantly, people at my real job were looking at me with a rather discernible mistrust. If I didn't know any better, I might have thought that they didn't believe my story about the seriously alcoholic waitress at the breakfast diner. Fundamentally, I was concerned about two things: on a selfish note, I was tired about showing up to work looking a little dirty and smelling not all that well. But equally importantly, I was concerned that the kid wasn't getting what I have always prided myself as being one of the things I ensured kids were getting: he wasn't getting breakfast, and he was going to school hungry every day. Something had to change, and I had to accept the fact that it was time to call in some help. So I turned to the people I figured would know what to do: my child and youth care friends. Specifically, I decided to call a friend who not only was a child and youth worker, but who had considerable experience working with kids affected by autism. I explained my dilemma and asked for help specifically with respect to the two concerns cited above. His response was just a little disconcerting: "well, if he can't handle behaving during breakfast, don't give him breakfast. He needs to learn that you serving him breakfast is a privilege to be appreciated". I found this response frankly scary; quite aside from the fact that it is illegal in Ontario to withhold food as a consequence, it just seemed harsh and wrong, and it didn't really speak to one of my concerns at all.

So I called another child and youth worker who was, at that time, working with kids with developmental disabilities after having spent many years working in a group home for 'youth with behaviour issues'. Her advice was equally unsatisfying: "these kinds of kids don't understand your explanations; you have to use clear consequences

that they can feel; every time the kid goes to throw his food at you, take him by the arm and escort him to his bedroom. He needs to stay there for at least five minutes, and then try again. Just repeat this process and you will find things will change". This approach, I thought to myself, seems to suggest that I can train this kid to do things differently by exerting physical control over him. At any rate, this seems like a behavioural approach, and I am not convinced that from the kid's perspective, he is engaging in any sort of 'negative' behaviour.

The third child and youth worker I called didn't hear me out; instead he reminded me that I owed him fifty bucks for a recent 'night of bad decisions', so naturally I faked a bad connection and hung up.

Since I was rather unsatisfied with the responses so far, I thought I would try again. I called a guy who had over twenty years experience in the field, had worked in all kinds of different settings, and was at that time working with kids with serious neurological problems in a program that specialised in meeting the needs of these kinds of kids. His response, surely, would be helpful. In fact, I hoped that he might have had this experience himself at some point. Here is what he suggested: "when this kind of thing happens, we always make sure we give the kid involved food that can be picked up off the floor. So if you give him toast and he throws it, just pick it up and put it in front of him and keep doing that until he gets tired of throwing it at you."

I have to honestly admit that I gave up on quite a few friendships that day. Although I still had no idea what to do, surely these suggestions were not the way to go. I was conscious that I had received these suggestions from people who were actively working with kids at that time, and I was feeling rather low and depressed about the state of our profession. In fact, I was ready to abandon the profession and turn to an entirely different kind of professional for advice, hard as that was.

So I called this guy I knew and severely disliked. He was, by profession, a developmental services worker and had spent his entire career, spanning some thirty-five years, with kids and adults with

developmental challenges. This guy was Irish, and he was categorically unapologetic about his view that child and youth workers did not know the first thing about developmental disability (and now that I think of it, the Irish never did apologise for making the rest of the world drink green beer on St. Patty's Day). I had to swallow my pride but I knew I needed his wisdom right now. After I explained the situation and outlined my two concerns, he was very quiet initially, and then he burst out laughing for no less than an uninterrupted five minutes. Not to digress, but I never understood why the Irish feel the need to laugh at others, particularly given Sinead O'Connor and Joyce's incomprehensible Ulysses; South Africans know to laugh with you rather than at you, and when a Scottish guy laughs at you it lasts at the most 10 seconds, then he gives you slap on the back that will temporarily render you unconscious, but then he moves on with the night. The Welsh are far too polite for this kind of thing and the English – come to think of it, I haven't heard an English guy laugh since 1966.

Back to the story: the Irish guy did eventually stop laughing, and then he gave me the advice I really needed: "bring a second shirt, Idiot". Click, and he was gone.

So that's what I did. Every morning I put another shirt in my car, then I went to see my kid and spent a wonderful morning with him. And every morning I prepared two portions of food; the first he threw at me, following which I served him the other portion, which he happily ate with great delight. I walked him to his bus, went to my car, changed shirts and happily set off to work. Thankfully the alcoholic waitress finally got into treatment, so I didn't have to make stuff up for my colleagues any more.

Child and youth care is a wonderful profession with much to offer to children, youth, their families and communities. But I am not convinced that this means we should be getting into areas of work for which we are, all too often, neither qualified nor mentally and emotionally ready. What are the odds that the same theories, concepts and practice principles and strategies are meaningful in the context of

such profoundly different worlds; this is not to say that the same individual cannot work effectively with the more traditional client base of child and youth care as well as the client base of the developmental services sector. But the work is different, and I don't think it is useful to try and do one thing through the perspectives of another. Are we doing anyone any favours by celebrating our expansion into new areas of work?

Re-Thinking Child and Youth Care Education

Although there are currently many efforts underway to think about the nature of child and youth care education, including efforts to introduce accreditation standards for post-secondary CYC programs based on identified competencies, I wonder whether we, as a global CYC community, have created the right space, or enough space, to really re-think pre-service education in our field. I find myself increasingly concerned that what we currently provide through College and University programs (at least in Canada) is not a particularly good fit with our field. Somewhat simplified, one might describe the current path to completing a pre-service education in child and youth care like this: at age 17 or 18, following the successful completion of secondary school, a young person enters a three or four year College or University program. In either case, the program will require the young person to complete a series of discreet courses, typically about 30 in College and 40 in University, and demonstrate through a range of assessment methods, competence in the course material at least at 60% of that material. In addition, the young person will complete two or three field placements that on average will result in about 1000 hours of field experience (or exposure, as it is not always clear that simply being in a placement results in an experience *per se*).

A fairly large part of the course curriculum consists of elective courses that can include a wide range of subject areas, but that are very often quite specific in what they cover. For example, in my University-based program, students often take courses such as Human Sexuality, Homelessness in Canada, the Sociology of the Family or Introduction to Spanish. Almost never do they take elective

courses in the Sciences, in Math or in Business, as these are frequently thought to be more difficult or less related to child and youth care (a problem in and of itself).

Aside from such elective courses, students take typically about 20 courses that are labeled CYC courses. In terms of content, these courses cover anything from theories of change to therapeutic intervention, from interpersonal communications to professional issues, and from advocacy to children's rights. The courses are usually well structured and they are regularly updated to reflect new content or new areas of exploration. For example, in my program, my colleagues have incorporated into their courses themes such as trauma-informed care, cyber-counselling, anti-oppression, and various intervention models such as dialectical behaviour therapy, narrative approaches, resilience frameworks, and many others.

In addition to courses, students participate in field placements. This is a challenging area, at least in my geographic jurisdiction (the Greater Toronto Area), where the demand for placements (not only for CYCs, but also for Social Work students, Early Childhood Studies students, nursing students and others) far outpaces what is available. Largely for logistical reasons, therefore, many students end up in placements that at best provide exposure to children and youth, but that provide relatively few opportunities for substantive practice. Many of our students, for example, end up in elementary schools, usually supervised by a teacher, and often limited to administrative tasks and/or one on one support to students struggling with academics. Others end up in group homes, shelters or community agencies where the core principles of CYC are not always reflected, and where supervisors (of placement students) are somewhat arbitrarily assigned, with limited attention to their readiness for this task.[1]

1 Some students do end up in excellent placement and are supervised by highly competent child and youth workers.

As a faculty member in a University-based CYC program, I teach mostly 4th year courses. This provides me with an opportunity to experience what students may have learned during their education journey. Often, I am amazed by students' incredible transformation from naïve and under-educated individuals[2] to dynamic, critical, ethical and well-educated professionals. More often, however, I am left deeply concerned with the outcome of four years of education ostensibly in our field. Here are some of the gaps I would readily

2 Embedded here is a criticism of the secondary school system in Ontario, where students appear to graduate with a limited base for further studies.

identify[3]:

- A very large number of graduating students are very poor writers, regardless of whether English is their first language or a later language. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that for many graduating students, expressing ideas that include even a modicum of complexity in writing is an impossible task.
- Many students demonstrate limited skills in terms of becoming present. By this I mean that they lack confidence in their posture and their communication strategies, they struggle to speak persuasively, and they are challenged to adapt their language, their tone, their voice and their force to diverse contexts.
- In spite of having taken courses in theory, and presumably having performed to a passing level in assessments of their understanding of theory, the overwhelming majority of graduating students are unable to incorporate theory into their exploration of themes and issues related to CYC practice. This I find particularly concerning. It is extremely rare that a student in any of my 4th year classes will make reference to any of the core theoretical frameworks of our field (except for ecological perspectives, which happens to be a separate course in my School).
- Many students have very limited knowledge of the world. In one of my courses, I ask students to come together in smaller groups and to imagine what it might be like to be a CYC in a range of different countries. I use only large, well-known or currently in the news countries, such as, for example, South Africa, Israel, Germany, Brazil, and Russia. Amazingly, many of the students know virtually

3 I should point out that my program also has 'direct entry students', many of whom return to complete their degree after years of practice in the field. These students are quite different than students entering from high school, and much of what follows below is not really reflective of their experience.

nothing about any of these countries, and in surprisingly many cases, are unable to identify the location of these countries on a world map.

- In spite of having completed about 30 or 40 courses by the time they graduate, many students have read very little literature that is specific to our field. Perhaps one exception to this is this journal, which almost all students are familiar with and have used repeatedly in their course work. However, beyond short CYC-Net articles, columns and opinion pieces, students often are unfamiliar with scholarly literature in our field, even though they have referenced this literature in their many essays and assignments over the course of their education journey.
- Finally[4], very few students leave their post-secondary education with a plan for their ongoing professional development; most either have a specific professional career plan (such as becoming a teacher), or adopt a 'wait and see what happens in their employment' approach. Pro-active, targeted and self-initiated plans for professional development are very rare.

I want to be perfectly clear that I am in no way suggesting that students are not doing enough; quite to the contrary, they are doing everything we ask of them. The vast majority of students in my program are intelligent, well-intentioned, enthusiastic, ethical, and highly competent individuals. The gaps in their education are not the result of their negligence, but instead reflect what we, as educators, are not doing. Here is the fundamental reality I have observed amongst students, not just in my program, but across programs at other universities and colleges: students are taught that they must achieve good grades, and their efforts therefore are geared toward achieving those good grades, whether they learn (and retain) anything in the

4 I say 'finally' because I have to complete writing this article sometime soon, not because I am suggesting that this is an exhaustive list of gaps.

process or not. In fact, the experience of a post-secondary program in child and youth care is not at all different than the experience in any other academic program, in the arts, the social sciences or the natural sciences. Fundamentally, the experience is one of going to class, meeting the expectations of the course outline, completing assignments and moving on to the next class.

When I think about the discipline of child and youth care in North America, I am conscious that much of this discipline has been organised, defined, promoted and advanced by a relatively small number of individuals, who for about 40 years or so have taken the ideas of an even smaller number of individuals (Redl and Wineman, Trieschman, Maier, Bettleheim, Bronfenbrenner, Freire, and a few others) and shaped these into a coherent framework for thinking about being with children and youth facing adversities, in any setting. The outcome of those 40 years of thinking and writing, of experimenting and arguing, is well captured in an article by Garfat and Fulcher in which they list about 25 characteristics of a child and youth care approach.[5] Aside from the substantive outcome, however, these relatively few individuals have also been responsible for creating the field as we know it, through their promotion of and participation in CYC conferences, scholarly journals, and teaching at various post-secondary institutions. In fact, CYC-Net itself is the contribution of this small number of individuals, either as creators of this medium or as ongoing and long standing contributors to it.

I raise this in this context because I am wondering about how the field will sustain itself and build on the accomplishments of the relatively few movers and shakers, most of whom are approaching potentially at least a more quiet period in their lives. Will it be sustained by graduates from Colleges and Universities who have completed an education experience focused on their externally

5 Garfat, T., & Fulcher, L. (2011). Characteristics of a child and youth care approach. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, 24 (1/2).

assessed performance in relation to artificial assignments and exams? Will graduates who are unable to continue writing about their ideas and concepts of child and youth care sustain it? Will graduates whose world is so local that they have scarce knowledge of the experiences of their practitioner colleagues in places like South Africa and Israel sustain it? Will it be sustained by graduates who look to their employers for direction and commands, and who are ill-equipped to be confident, assertive and articulate about their field of practice and the principles that underwrite it?

I am worried that all of this is unrealistic, and that as a field, we are not taking meaningful steps to address what undoubtedly is already happening: the slow but clearly observable disappearance of child and youth care *per se*, and its replacement by a generalist workforce equipped to do the work which the managerial class within the human services would rather not do. This workforce will be expendable (as evidence by recent dismissals of CYCs in many hospital settings), at the bottom of professional hierarchies (as evidenced by the ongoing struggles of CYCs in education settings), characterised by variable training and professional development (witness the completely unregulated human resource of residential care in Ontario and most other jurisdictions in North America), and professionally without identity and representation (as evidenced by the complete failure of professional associations across North America to establish themselves as legitimate even amongst their own constituents, let alone government or employers).

We have looked to various processes to intervene in this dynamic. The drive to impose accreditation standards on post-secondary programs is one initiative. Professional certification is another. Ironically, we have even contributed to the proliferation and dramatic expansion of college programs in child and youth care (in Ontario), which may seem like a good thing but ultimately results in even more graduates who identify themselves as CYCs and thus confirm the irrelevance of the field once other professionals realise the knowledge gaps of these graduates. I worry that all of these approaches are doing

exactly what we should not be doing. These are all approaches that try to organise child and youth care workers bureaucratically; some will be certified and others not, some will graduate from accredited programs and others not. Some will be members of irrelevant professional associations and others not. But none of these approaches speak to the experience of young people's education in the field. That experience has almost no resemblance to the field itself. It is not relational in any way (getting As in assignments is not a relational task), it does not promote the exploration of Self (course outlines don't ask who you are, they impose what you must do), and it does not build a capacity for presence (being herded into the gym to write a final exam along with two hundred other students explicitly negates presence).

I set out to propose an entirely different approach to organising the post-secondary education experience of CYC students, but this column is getting too long; therefore, I will end rather abruptly by just raising some possibilities, and ask that you, the reader, write to me, or post on the CYC-Net discussion forum, your ideas and thoughts on this topic, so that we can continue this discussion. But to end, here is some food for thought:

- What if CYC programs were organised not around courses, but instead around relationships? We start the program by enhancing our relational capacity amongst the students, then between students and faculty, then between the program and the community, and then between the community and the world.
- What if the assessment methods in CYC programs were not based on the regurgitation of facts, theory and performance, but instead on the growth of Self?
- What if 'field placements' were not separate course or program segments but actually integrated into all curriculum and program activity?
- What if getting to know our literature were more like a scavenger hunt and less like a performance expectation?

- What if CYC programs had international visitors built into their core curriculum?
- What if CYC programs exposed students to the worlds of culture, science, language and art instead of asking students to complete and pass 'electives'?
- What if we measured the success of CYC programs not in terms of graduation rates, attrition rates or subscription rates, but instead developed a measure of 'presence'?
- And finally, what if we gave ourselves permission to assume that we are not doing what we could be doing, and there might just be something else?

Career development for child and youth workers

As I answered the usual questions posed by the US Customs Officer prior to boarding my flight from Athens to New York, I started reflecting on the past few days of international travel I had undertaken all in the name of child and youth care. Between explaining that my name is of Azeri origin, and then patiently helping the officer figure out where Azerbaijan is on a world map, followed by a lengthy speech on how I ended up traveling with a German passport and finally, why I am a permanent resident in Canada, it occurred to me that notwithstanding my profound dislike of American custom procedures and its awkward interfacing with my tri-national political identity, I was loving my momentary predicament. The uncertainty of whether I would be allowed to board the flight was not really warranted given that in spite of what on paper looks like a perfect set up for international intrigue, I really am 'just' a child and youth worker trying to get home after a couple of very satisfying professional experiences.

Loving one's professional situation, it seems to me, is a gift that we can, if we try hard enough, give to ourselves. I know that for me, loving what I do requires much more than having good days at work; it requires more than knowing that I am good at what I do; and it requires much more than being acknowledged for what I do. In fact, although material issues are important, it also requires much more than a good salary and decent benefits. In order for me to love what I do, I have to feel tension, uncertainty, lack of predictability, sometimes even fear and self-doubt, all somehow mitigated by a belief that there is more I could do, other ways of approaching my profession, new and uncharted territories to explore and to be challenged by.

Child and youth care offers a career path that provides opportunities for all of the above. It is possible to make a decent living in this field, to balance family life and professional obligations, to enter uncharted waters, to discover new possibilities, and to experience a wide range of professional situations, environments and challenges. The path, however, is not marked clearly, involves many risky propositions, sometimes seems to double back, and may even from time to time require a guide. Unlike more established professions, ours hasn't quite developed to the point where there is clarity amongst ourselves about what we can do, much less amongst other professions that might be involved in advancing our career goals. I think that it is important for us to contemplate the possibilities, and the practicalities of career development and advancement. There are two reasons why I think it is important:

First, I have met far too many individuals working as child and youth workers directly with vulnerable children and youth, who have long given up on their career. These individuals have fallen victim to complacency and accepting themselves as second-rate employees in dead end jobs. Not surprisingly, I have always found that this kind of child and youth worker has very little to offer to kids, and sometimes even contributes to making life more difficult for them. When asked about their career aspirations, they almost never cite a child and youth workers job or career; instead, they dream of 'bigger and better things', like being a clinician, a psychologist or, delusional as this might sound, a social worker. And when asked about what is dissatisfying about child and youth care, they typically cite the schedules, the lack of power, the lack of acknowledgement, and the perceived incompetence of administrators, managers, and policy makers.

These child and youth care workers really are 'finished'; their negativity about themselves perpetuates their resistance to change, to adopting new ideas and new approaches, to engaging with children and youth and allowing them a voice in what happens. In other words, they reproduce their own perceived oppression in how they

work with the kids. For many of these child and youth workers, it is too late to change course; their best option, on behalf of themselves and certainly on behalf of kids, is to get out.

But the second reason why I think it is important to think about career development and advancement is that very few child and youth workers in the group above started off that way. I would like to think that the vast majority of individuals entering the field do so for good reasons; to make a difference, to be with youth, to do better for kids than was done for them. And in fact, I still know many, many child and youth workers who have maintained their positive outlook, who perform exceptionally well in their jobs, and who remain dedicated to kids and even humbled by the privilege to be part of their lives. But they too are increasingly wondering what to do with themselves in the coming years. And because they are so good at what they do, because they are positive, attentive, interested, and supremely competent, we, as a profession, are always at risk of losing them to other professions, other fields, and other sectors. In the absence of clearly identifiable paths to career advancement, these people are more likely to switch to somewhere where they can see the path and where they can channel their competence in seemingly more productive ways.

That is a real shame. We shouldn't lose these excellent child and youth workers, and in many ways, we can ill afford to lose them. And I don't think we have to lose them. Our profession offers them the opportunities needed to keep them loving what they do. Our job is to outline what these opportunities are more clearly, and at least to provide some inspiration by talking about the possibilities. After all, amongst us are child and youth care professionals who are CEOs or Executive Directors of large Children's Services organisations, successful owners of child and youth care businesses, child and youth care consultants with local, national and international assignments, academics at all levels of education, and child and youth workers who still spend each and every day with edgy youth, but in environments and contexts of their choice. And while it is still true that the majority of child and youth workers are at the lower end of the income

spectrum, many are not; peanuts may have to be accepted early in one's career, but pecans are realistic and pistachios are not out of reach.

To spread some optimism, consider these simple facts:

> Nearly half of the worlds 6.5 billion people fall into the age group typically engaged by child and youth workers (6 to 24); there will never be a shortage of children or youth who would benefit from knowing a child and youth worker;
>
> Even in the richest countries in the world, there has been a consistent and long-term trend toward an increase in all of the major root causes of problems for children and youth: child poverty, mental health concerns, family disintegration, child welfare referrals, school drop out rates, and in most cases, youth crime (although in Canada at least, there has actually been a decrease in serious youth crime as well as in youth convictions over the past five years);
>
> Virtually all evidence-based practices point to the importance of long-term and intensive engagement with children and youth experiencing challenges; this surely is a specialty of child and youth care professionals;
>
> Almost all major systems serving children and youth have turned to child and youth care professionals to strengthen their services; that's true for education, family-based care and interventions, the youth criminal justice system, foster care, hospitals, and specialised clinical interventions such as eating disorder clinics, services providing specialised treatment for children with autism, and services seeking to support older youth in their transition to independence;
>
> For some time now, the profession of child and youth care has

been producing its own research, evidence-base, and clinical knowledge about children, youth and families, and the production of this material is increasing rapidly; this means that the profession is increasingly succeeding in introducing child and youth care as not only a labour force, but also as a field of knowledge, a major step in disciplinary evolution.

Children and youth will remain a major concern for many years to come, perhaps forever. And with the challenges for children and youth, and also their families, becoming increasingly intense, child and youth workers will be needed. Where there are child and youth workers, there are supervisors, managers, directors, and there are organisations and institutions in need of management and consultation. Our discipline is uniquely situated to be at the centre of future developments in children's services worldwide. We are (or ought to be) adaptable, flexible, culturally competent, and we can work in institutions, organisations, communities and families. We can join, follow, lead, organise, be present, and engage. And whatever we do, we do so through the medium of relationships, which surely is one of the reasons our profession is so adaptable in the first place.

To carve out a career in our field, there are a few skills and activities that one might focus on. I would suggest the following ten skills and activities that may be helpful:

Read! In a rapidly developing field, new ideas, methods and practices are emerging quickly, and so is new language to describe all of these. The only way to keep up is to read. Journals, books, online material, government reports, research reports, etc. Read every day.

Again read!! In addition to field specific material, read things from other fields, because child and youth care almost always unfolds alongside other professions. It is imperative to know what those other professions are all about, much like we always

demand that other professions develop a better understanding of ours.

And once again read!!! In order to feed your imagination, and in order to set your goals not according to what is expected but what might be desirable, read literature. Nothing will get you imagining and contemplating like good literature.

Network! It is what you know that matters most, but who you know really, really helps!

Know what's going on in the broader field. Keep up with the news, check out related Ministry websites and the sites of related associations (for example, associations related to Child Welfare organisations, Children's Mental Health, etc.)

Write and present! Writing has two advantages: first, it gets your name out there and it helps with networking. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it forces you to really think about issues, concerns, concepts, etc. Presenting also has two advantages: it puts a face to your name for those who might be interested in what you wrote about somewhere; secondly, it helps you learn to take risks, to expose yourself to stress and high pressure situations, and to overcome any feelings of 'I can't do this'.

Take a stand on behalf of kids and youth. The best way to know that you are doing the right thing and moving in the right direction is never ever to forget that your ultimate professional loyalty lies with children and youth, not colleagues, teams, organisations, policies or whatever. Stand up for Children's Rights and for ethical conduct in our discipline.

Take risks! Nothing particularly interesting ever happens

without the willingness to take some risks. Not every decision you make about your career has to be researched and studied to death. Sometimes opportunities present themselves suddenly and unexpectedly, and you either take it or leave it. Don't take everything, but don't just dismiss opportunities because you didn't have enough time to study them fully either. One caveat though: I am for taking risks, but never at the expense of children and youth.

Broaden your experiential basis; lateral moves are enormously useful to gain a deeper appreciation for the nuances of different kinds of services. You may not gain materially, but moving from residential care to special education to family-based care will help you understand the service system as well as children and youth much better.

Be kind! Child and youth care is a complex profession, with many different elements that may require many different skills, including assertiveness, leadership, decision-making and so on. But none of this has any meaning at all if we forget about the foundation of meaningful human relationships – be kind, to children and youth, to colleagues from within and outside of the discipline, and to yourself.

Organising the profession

It is one of the less impressive aspects of our profession that we seem to have a rather difficult time organising ourselves by means of an Association. At least this is true in North America. In my home province of Ontario, I have the privilege of counting myself as a member of the largest child and youth care association on the continent; sadly, I am one of only about 2000 individuals who can make this claim, and about 1000 of those individuals are students. There are approximately 11,000 child and youth care practitioners in Ontario who are eligible for membership. Why has it been so difficult to get more members and to move the profession forward as an accredited, licensed, recognised and valued professional group within the broader social service system?

I think the first problem we have relates to language and its implications. When child and youth workers think about an association, they think about the concept of representation. In essence, the question for individual child and youth care practitioners is whether or not it is worthwhile to be represented by an association. I am not so sure that representation is what an association should do for the profession, at least not yet. Instead, I would encourage child and youth care associations to focus on the concept of presentation. We have not, in Ontario, had a coordinated, systematic and multi-focused approach to presenting the profession of child and youth care. By and large, the profession remains an unknown to the public, where professions such as early childhood education, educational assistants and social work invoke relatively clear and familiar images of professionals helping children, youth and families in various service contexts. It also remains at best a vague concept

amongst the decision-makers of child and youth-serving agencies. How else can we explain the hiring practices of such agencies that freely mix qualified child and youth workers with individuals who have no training whatsoever in this field? And perhaps most disturbingly, child and youth care remains somewhat of a mystery amongst those who one would surely expect to hold a common understanding and appreciation for the profession — child and youth workers themselves.

The profession of child and youth care has moved forward in leaps and bounds over the past fifteen to twenty years. With more child and youth workers on the job, in more diverse service settings than ever before, we are well represented amongst those dedicated to helping kids experiencing some troubles. But much of this expansion within our field has been accidental. Many child and youth workers find themselves doing family work not because someone in the agency decided that the profession lends itself for this purpose, and not because the child and youth worker read and reflected on Garfat's excellent book called *A Child and Youth Care Approach to Working with Families*, but instead, simply because agencies have replaced residential care programs with in-home family preservation programs, resulting in a need to re-assign the staff. Similarly, many school boards are hiring child and youth care practitioners to support students in the classroom, but often the roles of Educational Assistants and child and youth care practitioners are merged, integrated or simply confused. And even in our traditionally most familiar sector, residential care, child and youth workers are asked to adopt evidence based practices that reflect few if any of the elements of child and youth care theory and philosophy.

So, I think in order to provide a much stronger basis for developing meaningful child and youth care associations, we need to spend some time presenting our disciplines where it matters. Three steps are needed:

First, we should introduce our profession to the public by writing and contributing to popular media about children, youth and

families. Short letters to the Editor in local newspapers, articles to magazines such as *Parenting Today*, and presentations at conferences and public events that are themed around the issues of children, youth and families would help to provide some clarity to people about the profession. Along these lines, we also should develop a communication plan with other professions and institutions that often come across child and youth workers without really knowing what they do. The police comes to mind, as do the courts and their crown or district attorneys, as well as family lawyers and judges. Teachers, principals and school trustees would be important, as well as newcomer, refugee and immigrant groups seeking to understand the service system in their new home.

Second, we should seek out and engage decision-makers in social service agencies and provide some education about what the profession is about, what the practitioner's qualifications are and what the possible applications of such qualifications might be. Rather than demanding that agencies hire certified child and youth care workers without really knowing what that means, perhaps providing some better, more coordinated and more effectively articulated information about the profession would lead them to that conclusion without us having to demand it. In the end, we don't just want child and youth care practitioners to become eligible for new jobs, but surely we also want the philosophy and approach of our profession to become integrated into new programs and approaches to service delivery. Without this latter part, child and youth workers getting better jobs is little more than an exit strategy from the profession.

And third, we have to do a better job creating a common understanding amongst those practicing child and youth care right now about what the profession is actually about. There are, without a doubt, many individuals who do an amazing job in their specific roles as child and youth care workers. But I often wonder whether these individuals really feel like they are part of a profession that has local, national and international constituents, organisations and interests. So long as practitioners in the field don't feel like they are a part of

something much bigger, the motivation to join an association will be limited.

I believe that we have plenty of energetic and articulate individuals at all levels in our field who can take the lead in a new communication strategy. There are academic leaders of international standing who have been trying to do just that for years. Jack, Thom, Mark, Carol and so many others come to mind. But there are also practitioners who have risen to major leadership positions in the public and private sector without ever abandoning their roots in our profession who could help. And there are front line practitioners in so many different settings who just need to be invited to join the communication strategy, to become part of presenting our profession to the world at local, national and international levels.

When I ask my students about membership in their professional association, I typically get a rather dull, muted and disinterested response. This is a real shame, but I can't really blame them. They just don't see the point, not because they don't respect those currently leading the associations, but because they can't recognise the profession as a community of individuals with very special ways of being with children, youth and families, and as a community of knowledge, skill and evidence based approaches that can really make a difference.

A little South Africa for everyone

As I am enduring the seventh hour of my 11 hour flight from Cape Town to Amsterdam (to be followed by another eight hour flight from Amsterdam to Toronto), I am reflecting on my experience in South Africa; it's still early for me to reflect on this experience since I have barely left. Over the past ten days, I had the opportunity to visit service sites and CYC-involved individuals in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. In each of these cities, I was able to visit several Children's Homes and other types of services, and in both Durban and Cape Town I had an opportunity to sit down with the leadership of South Africa's National Association of Child Care Workers. In Cape Town, I had the enormous privilege of visiting with the individuals responsible for bringing us CYC-Net, and I even got to watch Brian Gannon sitting in front of his computer uploading the Daily Features section. Although I just left, I am already anxious to write about what I have seen, heard and sensed in this land of contrasts and painful memories for a vast majority of its people.

The legacy of apartheid is everywhere around me. I see it in the restaurants, where the patrons are white and the servers are black. I hear it in the language, where groups of people are identified as blacks, coloured or whites. If I didn't know that blacks form the vast majority of the population here, I would have never guessed by looking at people at airports; almost everyone is white there, which aptly indicates not only who has access to physical mobility, but also who has access to social and economic mobility. And while each of the three largest cities in South Africa have beautiful places and peaceful spaces, these cities are marked much more so by their informal living spaces, the squatter homes and the abundance of individuals who appear to have no home at all. Perhaps most symbolic of the current

South Africa is the issue of security; wherever there is wealth, even moderate wealth, there is barbed wire, elaborate physical barriers to access, and an abundance of security guards and other kinds of security systems.

Apartheid was without a doubt a brutal system of oppression and South Africa will be marked by it for generations. But oppression, even on a mass scale, is certainly not unique to South Africa. My current home, Canada, has its own ghosts to face with respect to the First Nations and Innu peoples. My trip to South Africa was not to explore the nuances of apartheid and its legacy, nor does a ten day journey lend itself to gaining even a modicum of appreciation for such a complex history and still unfolding psycho-social dynamic. My trip was really a beginning of exploring my profession in an entirely different context than the one I am exposed to every day. Child and youth care, as I have come to know and love it, is very much a profession at the cross roads in Canada, and I suspect in the US, Ireland and the UK as well (and perhaps elsewhere too). In all of these places, much work has been done and progress made to advance the principles of the profession and to entrench these principles in the every-day experiences of children and youth facing special challenges. And that work certainly continues as academics, policymakers and practitioners carry on their daily arguments and debates about next steps. While it is not my intention to dismiss or minimise the excellent work that has taken place already, I confess to feeling a little tired from the technocratic and often mundane tasks required to keep the profession on track and moving forward. And I also confess to being perhaps more than a little pessimistic about the prospects of child and youth care to consolidate the many advances in thought, research and knowledge that have been achieved in the past couple of decades. My pessimism stems from this: I am not hearing anyone screaming; no one is fighting these days, few are protesting, nothing is said or done that causes anyone to take notice. Child and youth care in Canada just unfolds, every day and everywhere, but in so doing it carries with it the baggage of mediocrity in far too many places. Sure,

practitioners have made a world of difference in the lives of countless children and youth, but as a field, much less as a profession, we have no presence. Policymakers almost never consult child and youth workers when turning their attention to the plight of children in our society. Conversely, neither child and youth care practitioners nor their representative bodies have all that much to say about the politics of the day. It seems we are content, perhaps even complacent, with respect to the status quo.

This is where South Africa comes into play. Without a doubt, South Africa has not solved anything that Canada hasn't solved. Child and youth care is facing many of the same problems here as it does in Canada and probably most other places around the world. And children's services in South Africa are far behind their counterparts in Canada in some areas (residential care), and perhaps a little ahead in other areas (community work). Yet, ten days of talking with child and youth care professionals at many different levels and in many different contexts in South Africa have given me a feeling that has largely been absent for me at home: hope.

In writing this, I need to emphasise again that I claim no expertise whatsoever on the South African context of child and youth care practice. All I can comment on with some assuredness is the impact, on an emotional level, that my experiences over the past ten days have had. With that in mind, let me articulate three observations in particular that I think bear enough cause for the field in other places to pause for a moment and reflect on what it might mean for the rest of the world.

Child and youth care in South Africa is much more than a job; it is an expression of a spirit of hope, of collectivity and of a shared sense of responsibility for those left vulnerable by the ravages of history. The child and youth workers I have met give not only their skills but also their presence, and they give this without an expectation of mutuality. Their work is an expression of duty, but it also reflects their ambition to develop their careers and to seek out more and greater opportunities for personal and professional growth. They respect their

clients and their position of relative privilege (in South Africa, being employed is a privilege). Perhaps most importantly, they respect themselves, as is evidenced by their ongoing commitment to practice the principles of the profession every day and always in the children's life space. Each and every child and youth worker I spoke with was able to reference the core concepts of our profession more extensively than what I have heard from child and youth workers I have spoken to in Canada in quite some time.

The leadership in the field is radical when necessary, pragmatic when prudent and committed to creativity and the imagination beyond anything I have seen at home for many years. The representative body of child and youth care, the National Association of Child Care Workers, does much more than representing; this body also initiates projects, serves children, youth and families directly, actively develops and executes formal education curriculums as well as informal training for practitioners and advocates on their behalf at every level of government relentlessly. The individuals involved with the NACCW spend much of their time planning and executing the latest attacks, battles and initiatives in the context of a seemingly hopelessly paralysed bureaucracy. They seem to get energised by the slightest sign of hope, and they drive forward even as they are being pushed back. A few days at their offices in Durban and Cape Town left me with no doubt whatsoever that they are a force to be reckoned with.

Child and youth care practice is situated clearly and concretely within the context of national development. Far from being limited to a peripheral intervention when nothing else has worked, the profession is a core component of pushing South Africa forward as a community of very diverse peoples. Everything that happens within the field forms one component of national development and identity formation. Practitioners and leaders alike are politically aware and astute. Child and youth care is about saving the nation by empowering the children. It is a battle against Aids, poverty and oppression. The profession is integrated into the every day experience

of living in South Africa, and the professionals involved seek nothing less than a new dawn for all South Africans, one small step at a time.

Perhaps it all sounds a little too idealistic. I likely would have thought so before coming here. But I don't think so anymore. The energy I witnessed while observing my hosts in Johannesburg, my new friends at the NACCW and my friends and colleagues at the South African headquarters of CYC-Net have convinced me otherwise. They have what I have missed at home for some time: that twinkle in the eye, the 'it' that makes this profession special. They talk, argue, debate, seek out new perspectives and challenge each other from moment to moment. They take risks and analyse their mistakes, only to set out again with yet another assault on the unacceptable suffering of the vulnerable and abandoned. And they do it all with a fraction of the resources that we have come accustomed to in Canada and many other places. In short, they inspire, even when there is disagreement or questioning amongst their ranks. In fact, part of the inspiration comes from their ability to disagree and question without this mitigating their mutual respect and even love for one another.

This is not to say that the future of the profession lies in South Africa. Quite to the contrary, so many of the accomplishments of Canadians, Americans and practitioners from all over the world are badly needed to be replicated, customised to its unique context, in South Africa. Some of what I experienced in South Africa hardly corresponded to my sensibilities about how care for children and youth ought to unfold. Residential child and youth care appears under-represented in national initiatives, community child and youth care reinvents the discipline in ways I am not sure will ultimately strengthen services for very marginalised communities, and the child and youth care discipline has not yet made any notable in-roads into the education sector, where it is arguably needed the most. But these shortcomings simply reinforce that we all have much to offer to each other. I do think that we could all use a little South Africa to freshen up and re-ignite the spirit that has driven our profession this far. Re-discovering the concepts of collective action, spirited engagements

with the barriers we face, and a resolute confrontation of all the issues and themes impacting those less fortunate in our societies can only help us grow stronger.

As the holidays approach this year, this is what I wish for: a little courage to think big, to believe in our capacity to change the world once again, and to join with our friends from around the world in a united chorus: we must all be present in the life space of our children. It is there where they will lay us to rest one day.

Foster Care in Germany

Last month I had an opportunity to attend a special symposium on foster care in Germany, organised by the Ministry responsible for children and youth services in Niedersachsen, one of the Bundeslander (provinces) of Germany. I was especially interested in doing so because after exploring child and youth services in Germany for several years now, and currently very intensely during my six months stay in Germany this year, I was curious to find out why foster care almost never comes up in discussions with colleagues or even during site visits of residential group care programs. Indeed, although nearly 50% of all children and youth living in out-of-home care in Germany live in foster care, the overwhelming emphasis of professional and academic discussions related to residential care is on group care. Foster care has been chronically neglected both in terms of research and in terms of its development as a placement option for children and youth. Only in recent years has there been an increasing emphasis on examining foster care more closely, and even this only in a few of Germany's 16 provinces. One of the provinces that has taken the lead on developing this system further is Niedersachsen, one of the larger provinces in terms of area but a mid-sized province in terms of population (encompassing cities such as Hannover, Osnabruck, Braunschweig, Bielefeld and Hildesheim). To this end, the responsible Ministry in Niedersachsen recently published the second edition of a report entitled "Further Development of the Foster Care System", which outlines the different types of Foster Care as well as the processes that support each of these types.

Foster care in Germany is covered by the same federal law as residential group care, and just like residential group care, it is administered and financed through the municipal or county-based

Jugendamt (child and youth services office). Most foster care is offered through private-sector, not-for-profit organisations, many of which have religious affiliations. There are some private, for-profit organisations as well, however, there is relatively little discussion about the organisational form of foster care. Foster care homes overwhelmingly serve younger children, although a built-in assumption of the regular foster care system is that foster parents make a commitment to children for their entire journey to adulthood. As a result, most foster families have experience with only a few foster children, since they typically would provide a home for those children for many years, and there is considerable emphasis placed on fostering one child only.

Teenagers requiring out-of-home placements are almost always placed in group care, in part because most foster parents prefer not to start their fostering journey with teenagers, and also because it is generally assumed that the issues of teenagers may be greater than what can be accommodated in a foster home. Indeed, not unlike in other jurisdictions around the world, most foster care breakdowns occur at the time when young people reach puberty. Children placed in foster care are often not seen as particularly challenging to care for, and foster care is often avoided when there are obvious and acute mental health issues involved.

There are six types of foster care placements that are identified within the Niedersachsen system. The first of these is "Short Term Foster Care", typically limited to a three months period and geared toward providing additional and often relief support to families already receiving various forms of non-residential support. This type of foster care is not very frequently utilised, but to the extent that is does occur, it is usually limited to foster parents who have already existing social pedagogic qualifications and experience, and who are able and willing to work with the child's family in order to strengthen family relationships upon reunification.

A second type of foster care is referred to as "On Call Foster Care", which is essentially a crisis service for placing children who are in need

of child protection measures. This type of foster care is seen as particularly unique because it is not defined by a specific time period for the placement. Foster parents providing this service are typically individuals with higher social service qualifications, and their role extends from care giving to intervention and even aspects of case management functions. In general, this type of foster care requires extensive collaboration with other professionals and service systems.

A third and relatively new type of foster care is called "Foster Care with the Option for Re-unification". This is designed to provide greater focus on working with the families of children experiencing various forms of neglect, and foster parents take an active role in the case planning and implementation of preparing for reunification. The time frame for this to happen is not specifically defined, and the expectation is that this process can take anywhere from several months to several years.

Fourth, there is "Regular Foster Care", where the foster parents are typically middle class families wanting to assist children in need. These foster parents receive relatively low compensation (based on the real cost of raising a child) and where virtually no training or continuing education is provided. Indeed, an interesting feature of the German system is an explicit rejection of the idea of professionalising foster carers; training or continuing education, so the argument goes, would inherently negate the very nature of family-based care, and render foster care as just a different manifestation of institutional care. This approach has resulted in multiple challenges to the foster care system. Particularly notable amongst these are the difficulties foster parents encounter when dealing with the families of origin of their foster children. Access for families of origin is frequently court-ordered to take place on a daily basis, with visits usually taking place in the home of the foster carers, who in turn are asked to supervise such visits and provide a range of assessments without any specific training for doing so. Another major challenge relates to issues of cultural competency, because a disproportionate number of children and youth living in out-of-home

placements are children and youth with migration backgrounds. So far, at least, migration backgrounds are under-represented amongst foster carers, resulting in many challenging scenarios related to the management of cultural diversity.

Aside from "Regular Foster Care", there is also "Social Pedagogic Foster Care", similar to what in North America might be referred to as Treatment Foster Care. In this form of foster care, at least one of the care givers is expected to be a qualified Social Pedagogue, whose role it is to develop a plan for the social and emotional development of the child long term. Children placed in this type of foster care often have diagnosed mental health or developmental challenges, and reunification, while not entirely ruled out, is not considered a likely outcome and therefore is not pursued within the Plan of Care to any substantial degree.

Regular Foster Care and Social Pedagogic Foster Care are the most common types of foster care placements, and both of these are seen as commitments to children from the time of placement until their transition to adulthood. Much of the focus on foster care in Germany is centred around these two types of foster care placements, and ongoing support for such placements is offered through workers from municipally or county-based Children and Youth Services Offices (similar to Regional Authorities in the UK or Children's Aid Societies in some parts of Canada).

Relatively new and precarious are two additional types of foster care that are still being developed in Germany. One of these is Kinship Care, which has, in practice, had a long and substantial role in the upbringing of children and youth who cannot live with their birth families, but where the specific organisational forms and issues of compensation are only now being articulated. German law provides for kinship care inasmuch as it specifically declares that kinship care givers cannot be disadvantaged relative to foster care givers in terms of compensation and support. Kinship placements have increased dramatically in recent years, and the formal system is just now catching up with designing appropriate processes and

regulations for this kind of foster care. Perhaps most interesting is an entirely new kind of foster care referred to as "Sponsored Foster Care"; this is a specialised form of foster care whereby responsible adults (or families) from within the child's familial or social circles provides relief care (during evenings or on weekends, but not overnight) specifically for children living with parents (or a single parent) impacted by significant mental health challenges. The care provider in this case receives compensation on an hourly basis, and there usually is a maximum number of hours per month designated for this kind of relief care. The thinking is that children living with parent(s) impacted by mental health may require respite from time to time, especially if the parent's mental health challenges go through periods of acuteness which may compromise their capacity to parent. Consideration here is also given to the idea that children with parents impacted by significant mental health concerns often must fulfill caregiving tasks for younger siblings or even for the parents, and therefore may not have their own developmental and everyday living needs met. At the same time, the parent's mental health challenges are not, in and of themselves, reason for out-of-home placement, and maintaining the family unit is seen as a priority. This type of foster care is not frequently used in practice. The responsible child and youth services offices across Germany have different comfort levels with this type of foster care, and therefore, significant regional variations exist with respect to the frequency of this type of fostering arrangement.

The foster care system in Germany is developing very unevenly from province to province. Perhaps because of its strong position with respect to NOT professionalising foster care, the German child and youth care research community has not engaged this system in any significant manner. As a result, national data abut the effectiveness of the different forms of foster care, or even about outcomes for young people who grow up in foster care, is largely absent. Nevertheless, foster care is an important component of child and youth services here, and considerable efforts are underway (at

least in some regions) to raise the profile of foster care and to engage researchers to collaborate with foster care providers on developing best practices and new and innovative models.

Clinical Dead Ends

Clinical work is a little bit like dispassionate sex; the mechanics of everyday intervention can be understood and even executed, but the excitement of the event is really manifested in the often exaggerated report about it afterwards. Yet I have been struck over the years by the desire of practitioners, as well as the pressures of managers, to engage in clinical work rather than to find excitement in the process and the experience of being with young people. Indeed, clinical work has everything that child and youth care ought not to have: it is planned out, discussed in detail beforehand, imposed rigidly, and evaluated thoroughly. It is also a one-way street at best, and a dead end most of the time. The one thing it is not is something that holds meaning beyond the language that encapsulates it. As a reasonably intelligent person, with much experience in working with children, youth and families and a fairly active involvement in research and program development and evaluation, I have yet to figure out exactly what is meant by clinical work, and how it adds any value to the process of being with kids as they grow, change and formulate identity and sense of belonging in this world.

With so much energy being expended by the field of child and youth care to find its identity, to earn the respect of other professionals and to validate the approach centred around relational work, life space intervention and everyday moments, I find the quest to sound and be seen as a clinically competent profession to be counterproductive and altogether misguided. Notwithstanding our increasing involvement in settings that value the term clinical above all else, such as hospitals, crisis intervention programs, health centres and community counselling clinics, I think that trying to re-articulate what we do from a clinical perspective (which essentially means throwing in some clinical-sounding language) is a dead end strategy as a way of promoting child and youth care practice, and represents, in

many ways, our failure to articulate what we do based on our principles and values. It also has the effect of opening up child and youth care as a profession to fit just about any circumstance, any setting and any context in which children, youth and families can be encountered. Fundamentally, it alters how we prepare people to enter this field, and I believe that we are doing a disservice to just about everyone involved by pursuing this strategy. Specifically, I am concerned about three dynamics, which I will briefly outline below.

First, I worry about the ever-evolving curriculum and structure of child and youth care practice in post-secondary institutions (whereby I am most familiar with those in Canada and the US, but I suspect that similar issues apply at least in Europe and Australia). It seems that we are placing ever greater emphasis on teaching psychology, pathology, developmental theory, clinical practice, psychiatric disorders, developmental spectrums and the like, as well as broad sociological theory which sometimes may also include some emphasis on anti-oppression, children's rights, social justice, etc. In addition, many programs are now incorporating entirely sector-oriented themes and topics, such as autism, child protection, child life, and others. I believe that there are at least two major problems associated with these directions in pre-service education for our field. One is that the retention of knowledge rate in all of these areas is almost zero. Very few students in child and youth care programs remember much about what they studied once the final exam has been completed. They might have some vague recollection of having heard names such as Freud, Piaget or Erikson, but beyond that, there is almost nothing. The other problem is that this approach to education places the emphasis on having studied things rather than knowing anything. Having taken clinical courses is seen as a qualification for working with young people, even if one is unable to reproduce any of the information studied. Knowing something about being with young people is seen as informal and therefore not worthy of professional designation or value. In effect, it is about what one has accomplished to get the job that is recognised, instead of what one can do on the job.

Secondly, a clinical pre-service education as well as a commitment to clinical practice, place the evaluation of the quality of child and youth care practice not within the worker-young person relationship, but instead within the worker-other professionals communication performance. It doesn't really matter how one behaves within the relationship with young people and their families; what really matters is how one articulates one's work at case conferences, team meetings, and multi-disciplinary discussions. The skills we have acquired during our pre-service education prepare us not for being with anybody in particular, but they prepare us instead for 'framing' the case. The work is not reflective but descriptive, and the role of young people is not to partner with the worker but instead to provide data for the worker to report to other professionals. Relationship-based work in this context really means good customer relations, whereby the ultimate goal is to get kids to buy as much of our clinical work as possible and to label what they don't buy as an indication of their limitations of recognising what is good for them.

And third, the valorisation of all that is clinical results in the mythical presence of expertise about something (and usually someone) that doesn't really lend itself to an expert model. Expert models are relevant in situations where problems must get solved. If we want to connect two cliffs with a bridge, we do need an expert to design the bridge in such a way that it will not collapse. Expertise is the flow of knowledge and technical ability to make something possible. Human relationships, on the other hand, are not seeking to make anything possible, but instead are about evolving in interesting and potentially rewarding ways. The goal of human relationships is not to avoid collapse; many such relationships ought to collapse, sooner rather than later (such as abusive, violent or alienating relationships). Indeed, the ability to sabotage relationships is a strength that many young people hang on to with some desperation; the need to sabotage all relationships may well be a vulnerability, but is not likely going to get resolved by the provision of clinical services.

These are just three dynamics that I find concerning in how our

field is moving forward these days, both in the context of education and training, and also in the context of the way in which practitioners articulate what they bring to their practice. It seems to me that we have largely abandoned our efforts to help the world understand the value of caring, engagement, becoming present, being with, becoming with, connecting and joining, reflection and self exploration. There are currently three strands of thinking that seem to inform both theory and practice in our field. There are the traditionalists who continue to work on articulating those roots and core concepts of child and youth care practice that are premised on the pioneers and early innovators of our field, such as Redl, Kovacs, Addams, Maier and of course Trieschman and colleagues. Then there are those seeking to align our field with social science orthodoxy, and thus producing much of the rhetoric related to evidence-based practice, clinical approaches and measurable outcomes (these folks have certainly captured the hearts and minds of policy-makers and funders). And finally, there are the post modernists who are challenging us to integrate into our thinking not only considerations related to being with young people, but indeed the whole of the human condition in which theory takes centre stage over praxis, which is seen as inherently embedded in political rhetoric and vested interests.

I have the greatest affinity for the traditionalists (although I consider it quite radical to self-identify as a traditionalist), but I see value and potential in postmodernist approaches and I am not yet willing to entirely dismiss the orthodoxy either (although primarily for pragmatic reasons of getting a job and higher pay). Still, I think we are making a mistake in going along with the clinical utopia. Child and youth care, in my view, would be better served to re-energise the discussions about some of the essential elements of being with young people and families that create opportunities for change and growth, discovery of Self and possibly of as of yet undiscovered paths, as well as new concepts of empowerment, collective action and individual belongings. These are the concepts of caring, engagement and

relationship, which certainly have been core factors in my life, probably yours, and we have no reason to believe that these won't be the core factors in the lives of the young people and families we encounter in our work.

I am saddened to say that I find both graduates of child and youth care programs as well as practitioners these days to be rather unprepared and also disinterested to engage these kinds of concepts. Employers don't want to hear about it, practitioners don't want to talk about it, and educators are too busy testing their students' ability to regurgitate knowledge about clinical crap. I am not suggesting that we make a U-turn and go back to where we started. I am, however, advocating for a stop-over that might afford us a moment to re-think where we want to end up. On our current course, we will forever be 'wanna-be' clinicians, tolerated because we are cheap, but ultimately marginalised in the re-engineering of defective kids.

The Residential Group Care Dilemma

Over the years I have had an opportunity to work in, visit, examine and even evaluate many residential group care programs in many different jurisdictions, including Canada, the United States, Germany and South Africa. I have learned much about these programs and it will come as no surprise to anyone that in spite of my deep desire to see residential group care provide good care and good living conditions for children and youth, I remain critical of much of what I have encountered in this sector. From the physical appearance of many of the programs to the quality of staffing teams, and from the program designs to the incessant need of agencies to exert control over what children and youth do and think, I simply am not convinced at all that we have found a way of providing a home for kids that we, and they, can be proud of. Notwithstanding my misgivings, however, I will not write about the problems of operating group care this month, nor will I criticise what even I recognise to be sincere and well-intentioned efforts on the part of so many professionals to make group care a meaningful and beneficial approach to being with young people. Instead, I want to articulate what I think is arguably an irresolvable dilemma for residential group care, particularly if we are prepared to think about this from the perspective of the young people themselves.

What might the experience be like for a young person admitted to a group home? I would suggest that there are few environments that could possibly offer greater challenges. Here we ask young people to live together with six to ten other young people who they do not know. Each of those other young people faces his or her own demons,

sometimes through the medium of mental health challenges, or resulting from developmental challenges, or, all too often, from the impact of trauma incurred through earlier life experiences. While trying to navigate the challenges of group life, we also expect these young people to take comfort in being cared for by adults who are, at least at first, complete strangers. Amongst those adults will be those who at least appear to be caring and interested, but almost always there will also be those who seem disinterested, perhaps tired, and often not too competent. Sometimes the staff person most trusted calls in sick or goes on vacation, and then the young person must accept care from a relief staff person, someone who may not have been at the homes for days or weeks or perhaps ever. During holidays, the staffing schedules change, the most senior staff get time off, the supervisors are away and even some of the peers might be away on a family visit. From time to time, one of those peers might suddenly be discharged, and a new peer is introduced who might change the established peer dynamics altogether. These social dynamics are unfolding in what are often inadequate physical spaces that offer limited privacy, moderate safety, and furnishings and equipment that are well used, show signs of previous ownership by others and frequently are defective or in a state of disrepair. The neighbourhood is not always welcoming, and sometimes outright hostile. The food, even if attempts are made at maintaining quality and nutritional value, rarely offers the same comfort as a home-cooked meal. The young person has to share the bathroom with many others, deal with someone's urine on the toilet seat, body hair in the shower, toothpaste stuck to the sink bowl. Every aspect of everyday life is governed by rules, many of which are in place to maintain control that is necessary to manage the social and physical context of a building occupied beyond its intended capacity. Many items that would be readily available and accessible in a family home are locked up, including kitchen knives, razors, and sometimes valuable equipment like computers, gaming devices, cell phones, and other gadgets. People who are unknown to the young person walk in

and out of the house, usually workers for one of the other kids, repair people hired by the agency, managers dropping by to see what is going on, tours for visitors, researchers, regulatory people like health inspectors, food inspectors, licensing specialists and a host of others. And virtually everything that happens is documented somewhere, including bad moods, performance problems at school or in the program, medication use, and indeed, the young person's contact with family, friends, workers, doctors, dentists, recreation staff, soccer coach, and whoever else might be involved. The list of strange happenings could go on and on.

None of these things are signs of bad care, or are indicative of poorly functioning programs. These are just the things that happen in the semi-institutional context of residential group care; for the most part, these things are unavoidable, no one's fault, and ever-repeating themselves. Neither the staff nor the young people can entirely control any of this. Even when everyone tries their best, approaches every day with every intention to be kind, helpful and generous, most or all of these things still happen.

Most of us know that living with others, even with family members, our partners, our own children, perhaps college roommates or good friends, has its challenges. At the best of times, sharing one's living space can be difficult. But being admitted to a group home is hardly the best of times. Even before ever setting foot into the place, the day of admission is also the day of loss; loss of being at home, loss of the familiar (good or bad), loss of a world that is known and predictable. So what does it take for a young person to manage all of this? What skills, what competencies, what sort of resources will mitigate the challenges associated with that day of admission and the days that follow?

I would suggest that these challenges can only be mitigated through highly developed social skills, an ability to manage the unpredictable, a strong focus on one's own strengths and capacities and the confidence to draw on these. Surviving these challenges requires excellent decision-making, the ability to think strategically

and act both cautiously and courageously. One must be able to navigate multiple priorities, manage multiple loyalties, have the capacity to engage others positively, to initiate meaningful relationships, to draw on strong and healthy attachment habits. In other words, managing the challenges of residential group care, from the perspective of young people, requires strength, wisdom, maturity, and general competence to deal with the unexpected, the annoying, the painful and all things difficult.

But who do we typically admit into residential group care programs? In my experience, when young people demonstrate great competence, social skills, resilience, strength, and all those other characteristics cited above, we do not typically place them in group homes. Instead, they might gain access to a foster home, manage in a kinship care scenario or even receive support for early independence. The young people we do place in group homes are typically those who have none of these characteristics. They struggle every day with just about everything for all kinds of different reasons. They are reactive, uncertain, scared, and suffer from acute trauma. They channel their insecurities into difficult to manage behaviours, they place themselves in harm's way, they hurt and are in pain. Many face developmental challenges, concurrent disorders, co-morbid conditions, dual diagnoses. Some are impacted by ASD, others by FASD, and most can point to multiple acronyms in their psychological assessments. Their attachment is insecure and sometimes disassociated. They mistrust (for good reason, usually) adults, authority and even peers.

And yet, they too are resilient, but in their own unique way. Protecting their resilience requires activating their defensive shields the second they arrive for admission, or in many cases, not too long after having been admitted and running out of steam to uphold the pretense of comfort and confidence (sometimes referred to as the honeymoon period). And therein lays the dilemma. On the one hand, these are not the youth who should be placed in the most challenging social context imaginable. Surely it makes no sense to ask the most of those who have the least, to ask the fragile to be strong, to

expect the most vulnerable to feel safe, and to hope for the least trusting to trust the power of relationship. Indeed, it seems almost sadistic to ask the very young people who have been traumatised by relationships in their lives, often the closest and most important relationships in their lives, to then turn around and connect to strangers in a strange setting. They are to believe that the very process that got them there in the first place (usually the collapse or corruption of relationship, but relationship nevertheless) will now be the process that saves them, further their growth and development and lead them to the much sought after place of emotional and physical safety, comfort and peace.

On the other hand, if not child and youth workers, trained to relationally become engaged with the most vulnerable youngsters, committed to an ethical, professional and also intimate and personal approach to being present, then who could we offer them as possible escapes from misery? If not residential group care, then what? Most of them already experienced failure in other forms of care. Many have travelled through multiple foster homes, various kinship arrangements and sometimes many different couches, basements and sheds in the homes of peers or strangers.

This is a dilemma indeed, and I am not sure we, the practitioners, or they, the young people, can escape it. But I think there is value in remaining conscious of the circumstances. They are not good circumstances. In fact, they are miserable circumstances that call for a level of understanding and empathy that I am not sure we always present to the young people. This dilemma ought to remind us that the task at hand is both profound and profoundly difficult. There is no place for mediocrity, for complacency or for taking for granted the young people's acceptance of their situations. More than anything else I think this ought to compel us to reverse the increasing entrenchment of a fundamental assumption in residential group care. It is not the young people who need to prove their commitment to the program. It is the practitioners who need to prove they are up to the task.

External Supervision

Supervision has long been recognised as an essential component of effective child and youth care practice. In fact, it is probably fair to say that supervision is or at least ought to be a central component of all disciplines engaged with young people and their families. In child and youth care practice in particular the importance of supervision, and also the approach to supervision, is based on the construction of effective child and youth care practice as a reflective activity; guidance in reflection strengthens that process immeasurably. Given that much of the workforce in child and youth-serving agencies and organisations is often young, relatively new to the concept of reflective practice and eager to receive guidance and feedback, the provision of supervision becomes, in my view, not just a matter of effective practice, but also an ethical obligation. Meeting this ethical obligation is made easier by virtue of the excellent material available on supervision in child and youth care; the work of Frank Delano for example has consistently been great and always relatively easy to translate into practice. Others, notably Garfat, Mann-Feder and Krueger (and many others) have also provided excellent reflections/conceptual approaches and stories in this respect.

Logistically, on the other hand, meeting the ethical obligation of providing supervision has been much more tenuous. In far too many service settings, practitioners go for months without any offer of supervision beyond the more administrative type of meetings that might settle issues related to vacation time, performance concerns or other relatively trivial matters. Equally concerning is that many supervisors whose job it is to provide supervision to practitioners have themselves very limited training in how to do this. In so many cases, supervision is an ad hoc process often performed more as a way of checking in with one another than an approach to guided reflection. Moreover, if the supervisor is under pressure to attend

meetings or deal with unrelated issues elsewhere, supervision meeting invariably become the last priority and are cancelled or rescheduled.

In fact, in spite of the recognition of its importance, there has been a long standing culture in many areas of our field to become complacent about its non-existence. This is why I think it is important that we consider an entirely different approach to supervision, either instead of what we have been doing or to complement what we are doing. I suggest that we take a serious look at developing supervision models that rely on external supervisors rather than supervisors who form part of the agency management structures. This is not, of course, a novel idea at all, and there are many places where external supervisors are already in use. In North America, however, external supervision has not taken hold in many settings, in part because of anxieties about what might go wrong.

External supervision models in North America have typically focused on executive type positions, where an executive leader within an agency hires an external supervisor either through her or his own funds or with the blessings and financial backing of the Board of Directors. What I want to argue in favour here, however, is a little different. I want to suggest that this external supervision model would be particularly useful in the context of residential care and treatment. In fact, external supervision is the common set up in residential group care facilities in Germany. Teams of practitioners are provided with the necessary resources to pay for a supervisor who can provide group or individual supervision depending on the need at any given time. The team can select a short list of possible candidates, choose its preference from amongst those short listed and then seek agency approval; the agency, in turn, typically maintain a veto right on that choice, but not the right to install an individual based on management preferences.

In the larger residential group care programs in Germany it is taken as a given that agency management could not possibly provide effective and meaningful supervision to front line staff; the contradictions between having the authority to fire workers and

guiding them through some of their more challenging moments is too great. At the same time, there is a strong commitment to ensuring that practitioners have access to someone to guide them in their reflections, personal/professional development and also in their processing of traumatic or near-traumatic experiences on the job.

The benefits of external supervisors are many, and I think it is time for North Americans to get passed their professional arrogance and agency loyalties and consider doing what is necessary to provide practitioners with what everyone seems to agree is needed: skilled supervisors who are reliably present and attentive to the experiences of practitioners. A commitment to using external supervisors would allow for the development of a highly skilled group of external supervisors that is unencumbered by the everyday politics of agencies or employee-management relations. Moreover, it would then be possible to ensure that supervision unfolds consistent with the principles of child and youth care practice, at least where it impacts primarily child and youth care practitioners. It also guarantees that supervision actually happens, and practitioners can rely on having access to someone at regular intervals. Finally, an external supervision model allows for confidential reflections on themes and topics that otherwise might be suppressed or simply deemed too risky to bring up.

An external supervision model does not require the abandonment of internal supervisors altogether. These positions are still necessary and require access to ongoing professional development opportunities as well. With the external supervision model in place, however, internal supervisors can focus on some of the logistical aspects of managing a staff team more effectively. Most importantly, this would allow the internal supervisors to really focus on issues of team development and team dynamics, which often are not captured effectively in any supervision model.

It is unfortunate that the North American context of service provision is often structured along extremely competitive and territorial lines; agencies rarely cooperate within their own service

THE CONTEXTS

A new economy, a new kind of youth work?

Although it is not often mentioned in the Child and Youth Care literature in academic and more casual sources, I think we have to begin thinking about an issue that is hardly new, but that has intensified in recent years with a relatively bleak outlook for the future. Specifically, I am thinking about youth unemployment, particularly in OECD countries but also in other parts of the world. In recent months, a number of international studies (by the OECD, the International Labour Organisation as well as the World Bank) have pointed to some worrisome trends in relation to youth unemployment in OECD countries. Unlike unemployment more generally, which has fluctuated significantly for many years, youth unemployment has steadily increased. And so while it is true that unemployment generally was actually at record lows throughout North America and Europe only a couple of years ago, therefore implying that the current high levels of unemployment may well reverse themselves eventually as they typically have in the past, youth unemployment has been high and growing even during times of massive, global and regional economic boom.

It is furthermore worrisome that even where unemployment is averted by youth, the job market for new entries into the economy is hardly inspiring; for many young people, minimum wage jobs, often part time, typically with no benefits, are the only prospects. Three factors seem to make a difference in terms of successful entry and ongoing mobility within the job market for young people: first, the level of education completed; second, the entrepreneurial spirit and knowledge of the youth, and third, the personal networks and

connections of youth in the high-achieving areas of the labour market.

Equipped with this knowledge, we ought to pause for a moment and think about the way in which we have approached services for young people facing challenges in their lives and requiring the support of formal youth-serving sectors, such as children's mental health, child welfare or juvenile justice services and so on. We already know that we have not been particularly successful in helping these young people achieve the highest levels of education that would allow them to compete with other less disadvantaged youth. On the positive side, educational success has moved up in the list of priorities of governments in the US, Canada and Britain in particular (perhaps elsewhere too), but outcomes have not yet reflected this increased priority. It is perhaps also important to point out that a straight comparison of educational outcomes for youth in care (or looked-after) or youth affected by mental health challenges on the one hand, and the general youth population in any particular jurisdiction is not entirely fair either; clearly academic achievement is impacted by developmental challenges and mental health issues that the education sector has been ill-equipped to address and mitigate.

But education aside, what of the other two factors that impact on a young person's chances in this new, minimum wage, disposable labour force, economy. We do know that higher education, although clearly an advantage, is still not a sure ticket to economic success. Aside from the changing landscape of competencies for particular career tracks, factors such as personal mobility, health, and the ability to invest up-front in one's career (cash to buy clothing, work items such as computers, tools, health & safety equipment required by law, etc.) also will impact on a young person's success, and we already know that the young people we tend to engage with are at a disadvantage in all of these factors[1]. What I really worry about,

1 It goes without saying that other, more sinister factors also continue to impact, including gender-based discrimination, homophobic culture,

however, is the degree to which youth-serving agencies and sectors are incorporating those other two major factors for economic success in their everyday services: entrepreneurial spirit and the building of networks within the economic elite (at least amongst local or regional employers).

I am aware that there are some services that do in fact focus on precisely these kinds of issues, but they are relatively small and serve only very small numbers of youth. In reality, the vast majority of youth-serving sectors continue to operate under the assumption of an old economy. By this I mean that the values and skills being promoted, enforced or rewarded are things like compliance, conformity, risk-aversion, safety-focus, citizenship. In many cases, youth are being streamed toward industries and employment sectors that have all but disappeared in the new economies of the OECD countries, including manufacturing and vocational endeavors of many different kinds. The message "you are good with your hands" remains a common one.

And yet, here we are at a time in history when many things are changing rapidly and quite profoundly; quite clearly the deal we have had from the beginning of the industrial revolution to the end of the 20th century is off (perhaps that deal ended in the late 1960s, or specifically in 1968 as many French theorists have argued compellingly).

I think it is fair to take a moment and consider the characteristics of factors that lead to economic success in this new world: being persuasive, manipulative, connected, aggressive when necessary, assertive all the time, loyal to capital more so than to individuals, companies or even nations. Having capacity to assess risk and boldly step into the fray, knowing where to find information immediately, understanding the multiple languages of communication, some based entirely on technology platforms. Engaging, disengaging and

racism, and discrimination on the basis of mental health, physical or other disability, etc.

re-engaging with people, in projects, to movements. Skills in public speaking, presentation technologies, and creativity reflecting the vast array of social, fashion, business and relationship trends.

None of these things are really compatible with the values and expectations of much of the youth-serving industries. This is not to say that everything needs to change, be abandoned or re-developed, or that all that we are doing is for naught. But it is to suggest that the time to critically reflect on whether youth work, youth services and the culture of youth engagement that has entrenched itself in much of the OECD area and especially in the US, Canada and Britain, is still as relevant as it could be.

Ugly spaces, rotten places: the challenges of finding inspiration in the midst of decay

As is often the case, I am writing my column this month while waiting for something. In the past, I have written this column on the beach, at the doctor's office, on the train and in many other places where my purpose for being there had little to do with what I was writing about. Today, I find myself on a parking lot in the centre of Toronto. I am early for an appointment at a local school with one of my placement students and her field supervisor. I stopped at a local mall with a McDonald's Restaurant because I desperately needed a bathroom, and while I wouldn't touch the food at McDonald's, their bathrooms are ok and more importantly free to use for anyone. Now I am back in my car, and for the first time in a while, I am taking the time to look around.

What I am looking at is ugly. In fact, no matter what direction I look in, I see nothing but ugly spaces. To my left is a dilapidated shop that advertises electronics, household items and gifts, as well as bankruptcy services, which seems like an odd combination. Behind me are a series of shops that sell things nobody wants; broken mannequins, used computers and even financial services from a store front that looks like the owner was not too successful in his or her own financial services endeavors. Just off to the side is a construction crew ripping up part of the parking lot; I can't tell for what reason, but judging from the inactivity now that the pavement has been

destroyed, it is not an urgent project. In front of me is an apartment building with twelve stories. The balconies appear rusted out, the colour scheme of the building is a horrific brown and grey, mixed with some orange around the windows, and a big sign on the roof announces that there are vacancies; I wonder why??

On the positive side, there is a Shopper's Drug Mart (Canada's largest chain of drugstores) off to the right, with a brand new store front that looks quite attractive. Having said that, now I notice that the store front is attached to a decrepit old building; it's just a façade. The sign suggests a visit to the chain's website; I think I might, since the virtual world will likely be much more attractive than this real world of cement, garbage and endless dead end businesses. As I look around, I realise that I don't like this place and that I can't wait to get out of here. I am feeling boxed in by ugliness and urban decay. Nothing really lives here; everything is transient. These businesses won't survive long, the apartments will fill up and empty out and fill up again, and even the concrete itself is being ripped up as I sit here, only to be replaced with more concrete.

I will get out of here soon; just get my site visit done, then I'm on my way. I'll pass some more places like this, but eventually I will get to choose where to go next. I think I'll choose a place that has some trees, a little grass and more attractive things to look at. Maybe I'll choose a place where people live, not just right now, but for long periods of time, perhaps generations of families. I'll choose a place where people hang out, mingle, talk to each other. Where there is some human noise, some human activity and better colour schemes. I feel the urge to go somewhere with a soul, somewhere that is alive and that has spirit. This dead world of second rate building materials slapped together for temporary practicality is dampening my spirits; I feel profoundly uninspired, almost depressed.

As I find comfort in my anticipation of better, more beautiful spaces, I start thinking about what it might be like not to have such anticipation. What if this space was all there is? All I can access; all that I know. What if I had to adjust my life to fit this ugly space? I find

the thought panic-invoking; I realise that I would be ill-equipped to live here. I wouldn't know where to go, what to do or, for that matter, why bother doing anything at all. The rotten core of this place would take me over, control me and make me rotten too. I would live life without inspiration. The point of tomorrow would be to make yesterday possible.

I've met a lot of youth who live in places like this. I know many families, often headed by single moms, who try to teach their kids in places like this. There are schools in places like this where kids go to every day to open their minds and receive new thoughts and ideas. And then the bell rings, they pour out of the school building into… into what? Concrete hell, dead space and broken dreams. I imagine what it would be like to learn about the life cycle of a tree and not be able to see confirmation of this where I live. I wonder what it would be like to walk through the neighbourhood, head down, look at no one and aim for the façade of beauty attached to the core of ugliness, just to pick up some essentials. I wonder what I would feel as a parent letting my kids out to play with their friends in front of the ugly apartment building. What would they be inspired by? Brown mixed with orange? Fast food? Concrete parking lots?

I haven't thought too much about the role of aesthetics in my life, or in anyone's life. It occurs to me now that what we look at very likely affects what we are able to see. When we look at ugliness, we are not likely to see the things that are always beautiful: the human spirit, our Self, and our many capacities, such as love, loyalty and kindness. Ugliness, I suspect, breeds rotten thoughts, rotten feelings and rotten dispositions. It's hard to be inspired by that. But then I think about what this might mean for us, as child and youth workers. Perhaps there is a way of bringing beauty back into the equation. Nothing stops us from creating beautiful spaces where children, youth and families live. Our group homes could be beautiful. So could special education classrooms, psychiatric hospital wards, community centres, recreation facilities and all the other spaces where we frequently find ourselves when being with kids. I wonder what would happen, for us,

for the kids and for our relationships, if we placed greater emphasis on furthering beauty in our work and our work spaces, and in their lives and their life-spaces.

I suspect that we underestimate aesthetics in our everyday professional conduct. I will leave you this month with another observation. My office at Ryerson University is in a section of the downtown core of Toronto, an urban area of about 5 million people. Within one kilometre of my office, there are (according to a colleague) over 100 social service organisations, including several homeless shelters, mental health centres, youth shelters, family counselling programs and the like. Outside of the building where I work, there are many, many individuals who live on the streets, who pan handle to get by or who look like they have recently been victimised by violence. The streets are ugly, garbage and litter are common, and many of the residential areas are falling apart. My building, on the other hand, is quite beautiful, clean, spacious, air conditioned in the summer and well-heated in the winter. The building is always open, accessible to anyone. Security is non-existent for the most part, unless someone calls for security. And yet, I notice that none of the homeless individuals, the pan handlers, the destitute and marginalised ever enter. Why not, I wonder? I don't think it's their fear of security guards. And I don't think it has anything to do with feeling alienated in an academic space. I think it has to do with the barriers that exist between ugly spaces and beautiful places. The former are the everyday spaces of many (but certainly not all) of the youth I have spent time with; the latter are the places that create the façade of openness and accessibility. But if I really think about it, my building is attached to the rest of the neighbourhood, just like that beautiful storefront of the Shopper's Drugmart. I take that beauty for granted because it is always there for me. Many others know that nothing changes when you step in, because a façade can't hide the fact that their life-spaces are rotten to the core.

The next time I come across one of those very local and very grassroots neighbourhood beautification projects that unfold in many

large urban areas, I think I might lend a hand and give some cash. Suddenly, as I sit in my car surrounded by ugliness, these projects seem like a really good idea.

When children suffer

The earthquake in Haiti will have consequences for years, likely decades, to come, and children will be the primary bearers of those consequences. Quite aside from destroyed infrastructure, massive homelessness and pervasive under-development, the children of Haiti have been subjected to a level of trauma that is sometimes hard to imagine, and even harder to imagine being overcome. Our faith in the resilience of children will surely be tested rather severely in the coming months and years. The intensity of natural disasters, combined with the around the clock media coverage that accompanies them, draws our attention and reminds us of the relativism of pain and suffering; whatever challenges we might encounter in our day to day lives, it could indeed be worse.

It is heartwarming and without a doubt positive that around the world, individual and collective action is underway to provide relief to those affected in Haiti. Aside from the massive relief efforts undertaken by the rich countries of North America, Europe, Australia and Asia, it is the efforts of countries such as Rwanda, Ecuador and Cuba, themselves struggling with considerable challenges, that are especially noteworthy for their charity and altruism. Over the past few days, I have heard about young children breaking their piggy banks to donate their last bits of change to the cause, people on social assistance signing their cheques over and in one case, a dying man changing the beneficiary of his estate to the people of Haiti. The generosity in the face of disaster currently on display around the world represents a much needed reminder that we can indeed put our humanity before our insular selfishness.

Unfortunately, one does not have to be a cynic to predict the longer term pattern of this response. We have had previous natural disasters in other parts of the world, and the pattern has been quite

consistent. Intense crisis response with enormous generosity for a couple of weeks, then a slow retreat into the every day realities of local jurisdictions, a fading of media interest in the hardship and eventually a return to 'normal' almost everywhere. We will likely get some renewed media interest at the one year, five year and maybe ten year anniversaries of the disaster (the 'how do they fare now' stories), much as we did in relation to Katrina and New Orleans and the Bam earthquake in Iran and of course the Tsunami disaster in Indonesia, Thailand and other affected areas. To some extent, this temporal nature of our attention is entirely understandable and legitimate; other events will happen in the coming years that will require our renewed outpouring of support and assistance elsewhere. And normalising whatever the life context of people might be is in fact a necessary process to move beyond crisis mode and create opportunities for development and hope for the future.

Perhaps less acceptable is the other pattern that surely will emerge in the aftermath of this intense period of support. This is the political ownership imposed on the suffering of others. Governments will seek public credit for their swift support and humanitarianism; charities will incorporate their work in Haiti into their fund raising campaigns, and individuals who gave so generously will be incensed to find out that not all that was promised during the initial period of crisis response actually happened. No one wants to be the one who financed the new office chair at the global headquarters of a relief agency in New York, London or Frankfurt.

Last night I sat with my three (young) children and watched the celebrity-sponsored telethons for Haiti, first the Canadian one and then the American version. These were good initiatives that jointly raised about $100 million. My kids had lots of questions, not so much about the celebrities, but more about the situation in Haiti and how to best be helpful. My eight year old son asked the obvious question: "If there is no food or water, and if the people need hospitals, why don't we bring them here?" That is not an easy question to answer, especially in a way that might make sense to an eight year old. In fact,

we know that the mass movement of people has historically been much more associated with evil than with good, as evidenced by the forced migration of Jews in Nazi Germany and the many other forced migrations in places like China, the Soviet Union and northern Canada. The politics of where people live are arguably the most complex and perhaps most appalling features of our human condition. Building walls to restrict movement seems much more popular than tearing down barriers for the destitute to reach safe haven.

As all of these thoughts pre-occupy me and occasionally overwhelm me, I remain conscious that in the meantime, the children in Haiti are suffering. Although I have confidence that the many groups currently there to help will indeed do that, and that in the midst of this crisis the human spirit will at least partially negate the otherwise rather different mandates of soldiers and church group members, politicians and critics, I worry a great deal about the longer term. As the children suffer, who will respond to their cries? Some will undoubtedly benefit for some time to come from the work of local and international charities and faith groups, but most will not. In fact, most will experience life rather similarly as children do in other parts of the world that have not captured the imagination of the global community: Uganda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Burma, Somalia and many others.

It is at times like this that I despair over the seemingly intractable incompetence of our profession to pull together and act as one on behalf of children and youth. It would seem that much as medical doctors have found their role in the world through 'Medicine Sans Frontieres', child and youth care practitioners too could make a difference in their world by developing a way of responding to large-scale and deeply entrenched mass trauma for children and youth. I am conscious, however, just how far away we are as a professional group from doing that. We are barely able to come together on behalf of the children in our own local jurisdictions. In Canada, we have largely forsaken the plight of aboriginal children and

youth in our northern and urban southern jurisdictions. To the extent that we have collective bodies representing the discipline, these have been silent, absent in the mobilisation of the world to rush to Haiti's assistance now, and there is no reason to believe that they will come to life when the rest of the world abandons Haiti in the coming months. We lack both the leadership and the organisational infrastructure to effectively do anything of relevance in the face of this disaster. Perhaps most alarmingly, I do have to wonder whether we even lack the resolve as a professional group to seek opportunities to mitigate the children's suffering.

This last question is particularly worrisome. Somehow I think we have lost track of what the purpose of 'professionalising' the discipline really is or ought to be. If I remember correctly, leaders and contributors of the past sought greater recognition and also better service for children and youth as the core incentive to pursue a more professionalised work force within our discipline. The material benefits and lifestyle advantages were to be the bonus, not the goal itself. And yet here we are, well into our third decade of explicitly pursuing 'professionalisation', and increasingly becoming more disconnected from one another, atomised and compartmentalised into service branches, settings and contexts, allied with other professions more so than with our own principles of care, relational engagement and being present, and ultimately, dare I say, more insular than ever (CYC-Net notwithstanding).

As the children of Haiti suffer today, tomorrow and well into the future, we won't be there to provide comfort, hope and trauma-informed life space interventions. We won't even be present in the political battles that undoubtedly will unfold in the near future, with groups of people (some well-intended, others looking for profit from human suffering) right here at home. In the face of obvious need and acute and direct relevance of our skills, we will stand incapacitated once again.

Author's Note: it has often been said that it is not particularly useful to cite problems without offering solutions. I have always felt

that this is a profoundly stupid popular wisdom; most solutions are collective efforts, and it is useful to develop solutions as collectives from the ground up, rather than for one individual to offer a ready-made solution that is not likely to meet the complexity of collective needs, desires, values, ethics and the like. What I do think is important when citing problems is the offer to be part of this collective move toward finding solutions. So this is what I do in fact offer: I'll be there with you, but you'll have to identify yourself as I have just done.

The rhetoric of youth crime prevention

Shock, sadness, fear, outrage. These are just some of the words heard all over the airwaves and read in the newspapers about the recent wave of deadly youth crime in Toronto. And often they are spoken with such sincerity that one is almost moved to believe them. The commentators themselves are credible and important participants in the public debates: academics, politicians, neighbours, concerned citizens and, for the ultimate in victim participation, youth themselves. And the message is consistent and resolute; 'something must be done' they all shout out, sounding determined to back up this revelation with the utmost in rhetorical aesthetics and unlimited commitment to continued ambivalence.

The solutions proposed vary considerably in scope and in imagination. We hear of small initiatives in neighbourhoods that involve recreational opportunities for youth so that they are too busy to kill each other. And we hear of national initiatives related to legislation and public policy, invariably designed to make us feel better about having imposed ever-toughening penalties against those involved in violent crime. Some years ago we moved from a maximum sentence of three years for young offenders to five years, then to ten, and now our eloquently misinformed leadership is proposing fourteen years. The specificity of fourteen is wonderfully misleading; thirteen would have sounded arbitrary and fifteen might have led some to believe that the policy is based on the careless rounding up of numbers. But fourteen, well, that's just perfect, entirely drawn out of thin air to be sure, completely devoid of any

evidence, yes, but it is specific, clear, concrete and must surely be the brainchild of a man in control of our problems.

And so we continue living our urban life, cheerfully consuming the products of child labour from places where human rights are seen as optional, promenading in our SUVs, and politely declining the requests of our peddlers while expressing dismay, shock and surprise at the apparent explosion of youth violence on our streets; well, technically not our streets, since we don't actually go to the places where these youth live, but still, streets for which we pay property taxes. Our concern for the well-being of youth is really quite touching. After all, some of our leaders have been getting up very early in the morning to express their concern live, on the radio, in conversation with the early morning host. Surely if they didn't care, they would have waited for the afternoon show host to take the airwaves at a much more civilised hour. And then they tell us how all of this is impacting them, their families, and their constituents, and of course, that something will have to be done.

Interestingly, no one ever talks about the other victim in youth violence incidents. Perhaps it is just too much of a stretch to consider the shooter a victim. If the dead youth is the victim, the shooter must be the perpetrator, the sinner, the evil one that needs to be removed from access to society. There couldn't possibly be two victims and no perpetrator. That kind of talk just violates our need for seeing the world in the dichotomous bloom of good and evil. Not to mention that if we recognised the shooter as one of the victims, we would potentially have to do something *for* him. That's preposterous!

Let's be clear: once you kill someone, regardless of your age, you lose the right to claim victim status. Alright, I can work with that. But it would appear that you lose that right not only for yourself, but on behalf of anyone who might be at risk of shooting someone. Now that is convenient. After all, we know that most of the youth engaged in serious violence have themselves had some pretty sad lives; family breakdowns, poverty, under-housing or homelessness, abuse, neglect, marginalisation in most public systems, and, let's face it, frequent

exposure to the often denied monsters of racism and oppression. As long as you don't shoot someone, you can get help with all of these problems, because as everyone knows, our supremely culturally competent and youth-friendly social services have long ago resolved the root causes of violence — poverty, housing, addiction, mental health, oppression, marginalisation.

To everyone's surprise, we are finding that youth at risk of killing someone are not availing themselves of the easily accessible and clearly effective solutions being offered by our service providers. Must be their fault. And so when they do shoot someone, forget all that sappy 'my childhood was a little difficult' stuff and declare them to be the problem. Our creativity is truly awe-inspiring, and certainly this approach of disengaging empathy during the victim years and enthusiastic demonisation following the killing renders our social service system rather efficient too!

One would think that the foundation for any solution to youth crime would start somewhere in the vicinity of decency: give families a decent place to live, a decent place to work, a decent place to play and a decent place to just be, and perhaps we could move forward. Sounds simple enough, but here is the catch: the decency principle applies to all families from all cultural, ethnic and racial background and quite regardless of their degree of thankfulness. In fact, if we dared to dream a little, we might even imagine ourselves as a community where everyone shares the beautiful places, and everyone takes responsibility for renovating the ugly places. This strikes me as much better than talking about fourteen years, or keeping kids busy with recreational programs in the hope that they might not notice they live in a dump, or talking about the need for something to be done, knowing very well that nothing will be done.

Our youth are beautiful. Their actions speak to what we, the adults, have created.

Getting tough on residential group care

Over the twenty plus years of my professional career in the field, I must have worked at least one shift in about 50 different residential group care programs, operated by multiple sectors, including the publically funded children's mental health sector, the publically funded child welfare sector, the youth justice sector (which has both public and private residential custody programs) and the private sector. Over the past four years, the majority of my research as an academic has focused on residential group care as well, and as a result, I must have been physically present in at least another 50 programs. While I have the utmost respect for the child and youth workers, the supervisors and the agency administrators who are committed to providing the best service possible, I have to say that I have reached the end of my tolerance toward a common ailment in the residential group care sector: the vast majority of the programs I have seen are unbelievably ugly and utterly unsuited for the purpose of housing six, eight or sometimes more young people. Some group homes are far too small to accommodate the number of youth who live there. Often the houses are badly lit and appear stingy and dark. Many of the houses stink. The carpets are rotten. The couches are ripped. The bedroom furniture has profane writing on it. There is broken equipment in the recreation room. The mattresses on the beds are uncomfortable cheap foam things. There are rarely any pictures on the walls, and where there are pictures, they are often damaged and almost never representative of the cultural and life style diversity of the urban areas where the homes are located. The list could go on. I do want to acknowledge that I have seen some group care programs that place

enormous emphasis on the need for beautiful spaces. They feature spacious areas for the youth to relax and hang out, nicely furnished bedrooms, good quality furniture and many other positive features. But these are the exceptions, not the rule.

I believe that it is time to get tough on group care operators, regardless of what sector they belong to. What we need, at least in Canada and other highly affluent societies, is a much stronger regulatory regiment that includes both expectations and enforcement. Here is what I would propose:

- Group care operators must provide at minimum 400 square feet of above ground living space for every resident.
- Operators must submit to their licensing body a set of procedures that speak to the upkeep of the home, including a schedule for the replacement of furniture, bedding, carpets and other items subject to significant wear and tear.
- Mattresses used in resident bedrooms must meet the highest ergonomics standards available for that jurisdiction.
- The home décor must be reviewed with the residents at least twice a year, and evidence of resident participation in the interior design of the home must be available.
- Available technology must be employed to eliminate odors related to the cohabitation of large groups.
- Every home must reflect through physical representation (pictures, art, music , etc.) the cultural and life style diversity of its community, or, where residents are placed from other communities, of the current group of residents.
- All bedrooms and all common spaces above ground must meet a set standard for brightness through natural light sources.
- All recreational equipment must be in working order or be removed if broken (and replaced where appropriate) within 24 hours.
- No more than 4 residents share a full bathroom.

- The above standards are enforced through unannounced inspections at least twice a year; the consequence for failing to meet a standard is a set monetary fine for the first time, and withdrawal of the license to operate the second time if found to not meet the standards within 12 months of the original violation.

I always hate to use the proverbial stick to ensure that those entrusted with caring for vulnerable kids actually ensure a decent living scenario for the kids. But far more importantly, I hate the disrespect, the insult and the embarrassment of knowing that in one of the wealthiest societies in the world, the most vulnerable children and youth are housed in ... holes.

Complex Children

It is almost impossible these days to walk into any service setting, and especially any residential service setting, without being told that the children and youth there are 'more complex than ever', or 'the most complex kids in the system'. I am a little perturbed by this linguistic development, in particular because there are a number of obvious implications. First, it would appear that the young people I worked with twenty years ago were really of the simple kind, the sort of one-dimensional type with easy to read and easy to use instruction manuals on how to get better. It didn't seem that way to me, but alas, perhaps I was just too inept. Second, it suggests that childhood and adolescence are not in themselves complex; it is just these 'crazy' kids in our various services that are complex; you know, because they are in our services after all. And third, it seems that once someone claims to be serving complex children and youth, other service providers have to follow suit, whether or not they want to. After all, it would be potentially difficult for a service provider to announce that it only served the 'simple kids'; this just doesn't seem all that advantageous from a marketing perspective.

I have tried hard to determine what exactly it means when a child or young person is labeled as 'complex'. To be fair, there would appear to be some relatively reasonable explanations. Young people are 'complex' when they are impacted by dual diagnoses, co-morbid conditions, concurrent disorders, or a host of other unfortunate circumstances that require either hyphenated descriptors or acronyms to do them justice. The increasing prevalence of FASD, ASD, PDD, PTSD and a range of other issues thus requires responses of similar impressive acronym-stature, like DBD, MST, CBT, SNAP, DBT, etc. All of this, quite frankly, makes me LOL, LMFAO, or simply just L.

I do have at least some respect for the clinical language and knowledge that inform working with (or 'on') children and youth

facing adversity (I really don't, but it seems rude to just say so). I am just not sure why the burden of clinical self-aggrandisement has to be shouldered by children and youth. Sure, I can support the development of psychiatric and pseudo-psychiatric industries to ensure that the royalty of psychiatric and pharmacological empires don't go hungry (I have empathy), and I can validate the deeply hidden feelings of inadequacy of clinically-minded managerial types who just couldn't get into med school (more evidence of my empathy); in fact, I can even understand the rational business types seeking to add value to their enterprise by rendering their chosen commodity (children and youth) more precious and delicate (ie: complex); but I am having a very hard time with simply hiding behind the mountains of complexity embodied in these poor, damaged, utterly traumatised and fundamentally dependent children and youth.

Complexity is indeed all around us. Our helping systems are hopelessly complex, so that families can barely navigate them. Our hierarchies are complex and wondrous symptoms of power and narcissism; families are complex after having their simple bonds 'treated' by the expert systems for several generations. Indeed, the very notion of 'expertise' is complex. I suppose it is fair to say that humanity is complex, as are all the stages of and transitions within human development from infancy to childhood to adolescence, to emergent adult, to mid-life (where is my Porsche?), to pre-senior status (what happened to my hair?) to that lovingly ignored, often abused and largely dismissed stage of 'being elderly'.

Young people, however, are not complex, or at least not more so just because our capacity to articulate complexity has increased. The extent or complexity of our 'not knowing' may have increased; certainly the complexity of funding arrangements, community and service collaborations, and multidisciplinary mantras has skyrocketed. The challenge we encounter when trying to readjust ourselves for a different relational experience, the controversies as we argue and debate with our professional colleagues from other disciplines, and our fears about being exposed as experts of only what is not useful in

the moment – these may all have become more complex over the years. But the child is still just that; a youngster living in a world of her or his imagination, hopes and dreams, fears and nightmares. Just because we know more about the brain, and how it is impacted by trauma, and just because we know that alcohol and drugs during pregnancy alter the chemistry and neurological activity within the young person's brain, doesn't mean that the child is now complex. It does mean that the challenge for us is to break free from our self-imposed shackles of complexity-labeling, and return to our roots as caring people seeking to explore the lifespace of young people together, with them, guided by their stories, their 'normal' and their path. In my experience, following the path of a young person is not at all complex, so long as we take the time to see it and worry less about not knowing where it might lead us.

Approaches to social pedagogy

Conversations about social pedagogy with social pedagogues are strikingly similar to conversations about child and youth care practice with child and youth care scholars. One has the distinct sense that there is something very important, very unique and very specific that is being discussed, but it is difficult to identify what precisely it is. Whatever it is, one can easily identify a total commitment on the part of the social pedagogue to the 'field' of social pedagogy, and a certain sense of ownership to the field that is defined primarily based on what it is not. Indeed, an old but still commonly cited definition of social pedagogy, at least in Germany, is that of Gertrud Bäumer (1873-1954): social pedagogy is about 'the upbringing of children', but excludes both family and school. In this sense, social pedagogy is understood as the public (state and civil society) responsibility for the development and upbringing of children beyond the institutions (and sometimes in spite of these) of family and school (whereby it should be noted that more recently, there have also been arguments in Germany that social pedagogy is really a discipline that covers the entire lifespan; for the purpose of this short article, I will not discuss these arguments, except to say that in child and youth care practice too, notwithstanding the name of the discipline, arguments and practices that cover the lifespan exist).

Upbringing [Erziehung] and development are two foundational processes within the broader discourse of social pedagogy. The concept of upbringing relates to how children as subjects are supported in their growth and understanding of themselves and their connections to the world(s) around them, but the emphasis here is specifically on the relationships between children and adults (both adults in general and particular adults such as parents, teachers,

coaches, etc.). It is the interactions between children and adults, and their pedagogical content, that either furthers or mitigates the successful upbringing of children (whereby the specific nature of 'success' is not specifically defined, but generally relates to the social competence of young people on the one hand, and a strong sense of self-efficacy on the other hand). Important here is to recognise the interactive nature of the process of upbringing. Children are seen to have agency in their relationships with adults, and therefore one cannot assume that specific adult actions (or professional interventions) will be experienced similarly by different children.

Development is also recognised as a foundational process within social pedagogy, however, the concept of development is entirely removed from psychological frameworks and instead associated with ecological frameworks, including that of Bronfenbrenner. As the term social pedagogy suggests, it is the interfacing of multiple levels of societal life, and notably the relationships within and between such levels, that is of interest to the social pedagogue. In this sense, there is also a political component to social pedagogy, as young people navigate within and between levels of familial, extra-familial and institutional relationships.

One consequence of this two-process construction of social pedagogy is the concept of 'Bildung', a term that does not easily translate into English. Bildung includes components of what in English might be referred to as education, however, it explicitly excludes school as a place of education, and assigns to schools a secondary (if not peripheral and sometimes even destructive) position in the formation of the child's development path (here one might note that in current efforts to bring social pedagogy to the UK, the 'pedagogy' part of the term social pedagogy is often taken as a bridge between social work and formal (school- based) education). Sometimes translated as 'education in the broadest sense', Bildung is the process by which young people narrate their 'biographical experiences' in relation to their current circumstances. Biographical experiences may include components of one's social history, but they

are distinctive from the concept of social history inasmuch as the latter is the story about the young person, whereas the former is the story as narrated by the young person. From the perspective of 'helping professions', the result is a strong conviction that interventions, no matter how well designed or supported by whatever evidence, cannot in and of themselves be agents of change for young people. Instead, it is the biographical narration that serves to drive change for young people (therefore positioning agency firmly in the lives of young people), and the role of 'helpers' is 'merely' to provide opportunities and possibilities to influence, or to reflect, on such biographical narration.

From a research perspective, social pedagogy is situated very differently than the more 'treatment-focused' approaches commonly seen in North America. Whereas treatment lends itself to the exploration of outcomes, and therefore quantitative research approaches and the production of evidence, social pedagogy research is firmly rooted in qualitative, and often ethnographic or grounded theory-based, observational and reflective approaches. In addition, unlike theoretical frameworks that seek to 'force change' in seemingly adversity-bound developmental or life patterns (in practice, usually with pre-determined time frames), social pedagogy is entirely process-focused, and generally avoids designations of stages or time-limited outcomes. This impacts, for example, the conceptualisation of what happens as young people reach adulthood. Instead of independence, it is interdependence that emerges from this transition, whereby young people experience a time of 'emergent adulthood' during which this interdependence is relatively chaotic and highly variable. Given the firmly embedded orientation toward social structure and process, interdependence is articulated as the condition of relational positioning within broader society and its institutions.

These broad theoretical and conceptual features of social pedagogy have consequences for human service practice (including child and youth care practice). On the one hand, many of the concepts that are

familiar to child and youth care practitioners and also to social workers, such as the centrality of relationship, life space practice, and active engagement are well established in social pedagogy as well (in fact, life space intervention [Lebenswelt Orientierung] constitutes a major concept of social pedagogy and is currently being further developed in German academic circles). Additionally, however, social pedagogy has significant consequences for the role of, for example, diagnostic work, assessments, and treatment plans, all of which are viewed with suspicion and at best marginal interests. Behaviour modification is outright rejected, and work related to tangible goal achievements, such as performance at school or conformity to program expectations, is sparse. The focus is instead on biographical work, which typically means that helper and young person are regularly engaged in reflectively narrating the life experiences of young people in search of patterns (Muster) that may allow for new approaches to current and future challenges.

Approaches to social pedagogy, not unlike approaches to child and youth care practice, are certainly not uniform or homogeneous. Variations in the articulation of virtually all of the core concepts of social pedagogy exist, and sometimes there is talk of multiple paradigms within the social pedagogy field. Within the diverse approaches, however, we can also identify some commonality, or one might even suggest that there are common core values. These include the rejection of empirical designations of childhood and child development, a strong interest in the relationship between agency and structure, and at the same time a strong commitment to understanding children in the context of society and social change. In addition, social pedagogy, both in its historical origins and in its contemporary manifestation(s), can be understood as a social justice initiative as well; considerable focus is on challenging oppressive or inequitable social and institutional structures, both on behalf of young people (or more generally, people facing injustices) and with young people.

Still, I have to confess to this: after spending much of my adult life steeped in child and youth care conversations, I still struggle to articulate decisively what I mean by child and youth care practice. And after spending one month in Germany (so far, four more to go) having intensive conversations with colleagues about social pedagogy, I am equally challenged to articulate concretely what is meant by it. I do, however, understand already that I will likely have the same challenge regardless of how much time I spent thinking about it. Much like in the case of child and youth care practice, I am fairly certain that the presence of unanswered questions in social pedagogy is a good thing.

* * *

Education is learning what you didn't even know you didn't know
— Daniel J. Boorstin

A child educated only at school is an uneducated child.
— George Santayana

Nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts.
— Henry Brooks Adams

Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Pick battles big enough to matter, small enough to win.
— Jonathan Kozol

Stoned

STONE: A hard, solid non-metallic mineral; a small piece of stone found on the ground; verb: throw stones at in order to injure or kill.

Strolling along in one of those leftover green spaces commonly found in new suburbs, amongst the handful of trees lucky enough to have escaped the destructive might of the bulldozer, I came across a boy, no more than 14 years old, looking kind of preppy and all alone. It was a sunny morning, perhaps 10 am in late May, when one might expect a boy like this to be in school. He was startled by my sudden appearance, looked momentarily the other way, perhaps wishing I was anywhere but in this space at that particular moment. Amidst the freshness of the just re-emerging leaves and some wild flowers, I smelled something else. It was an aroma reminding me of my own youth, wild parties with friends, my social scene when I was navigating the turbulence that is adolescence. Preferably from the Caribbean, but acceptable from some parts of the United States, I clearly picked up the scent of grass – not the kind good men living in clean suburbs might mow on a Sunday morning.

I am not usually considered to be a 'prudish' kind of a person, and I have no particular objection to adolescents enhancing their social experiences with what I would consider fairly benign substances. Still, I couldn't help but wonder how this boy found himself all alone in the morning getting stoned. As I looked at him, I saw that his posture was slumped, and his eyes exuded sadness and a sort of dull expression. We stared at each other rather awkwardly, not really sure what to say. It occurred to me that in this situation, this chance encounter, I was considerably better equipped to break the silence than him; after all, he was only a young teenager, stoned, and clearly not where he was supposed to be.

I opened with a simple 'hi', and given the lack of response, followed it up with 'how is your day going'? I realised that was probably not a great question, but I had already asked it, so I gave him the opportunity to respond. To my surprise, he did in fact respond, albeit with a quiet mutter that sounded like 'fine'. 'It seems a little early to be smoking that' I said, quickly cursing myself for being so intrusive so quickly. Since he didn't respond, I thought it was time to stop asking questions. I sat down next to him on a fallen tree, played with some sticks, and after a while, said 'I remember having days when things just didn't seem right'. No response. 'Never really knew how to get through them'. Still no response. 'Do you go to school over there'? I asked, pointing to a nearby school. 'Yeah'. 'You got friends there'? 'Of course'. 'Sometimes I used to bag off school, but usually my friends came along' I said staring off into another direction. 'Just don't want to sit through religion class', he quickly muttered. 'I'm going back as soon as the bell rings'. I looked at him closely. His grass must have been local, because now he barely seemed stoned. 'Sure everything is ok?', I queried. 'Yeah man, thanks for asking'. I could have sworn he smiled at me, and suddenly he didn't look lonely anymore.

Shortly after, the bell rang, and true to his word, the boy ran off toward the school. I continued on my stroll, wondering whether there was anything else I should have done or said. I remembered that I had skipped religion class for an entire grade; I think it was grade 5. Then again, I lived in Iran at the time, a revolution was on its way, and religion was to mean something quite different for years to come.

* * *

By all accounts, Farideh was a sweet young woman, barely an adult at the tender age of 18. She had grown up in Teheran, where she never knew a life without a moral police. She had been a good girl, following the directions of her parents for the most part, and staying away from 'immoral' activity. Until she met some other girls, all from better

economic means, and all with a basic understanding of western values and culture. This led her down a path of immorality, as defined by the religious authorities in Iran. She started attending social gatherings, a national euphemism for wild parties. Along with the parties came alcohol, and along with that alcohol came sex.

When I first heard this story, it didn't really occur to me that the ending would be different than it commonly is for young women that age. In fact, 'discovering' parties at age 18 is usually a good sign. Most of the girls I have worked with in various Canadian social service settings had discovered parties, including alcohol and sex, much earlier in life. The majority faced some adversity as a result, but most pulled through and entered adulthood all the wiser for it. Those who didn't live complicated lives, but they do live, sometimes well and sometimes not so well.

Farideh was not as fortunate. One of the social gatherings was reported to the moral police. They came, quietly and well armed, and caught Farideh in the act. She was dragged to the police station, and notwithstanding the pleas and financial offers of her parents, she was charged with moral crimes and sentenced to death.

Contrary to some reports, stonings are very uncommon in Iran, but they do happen, usually to women. And every time they happen, along with the horrifying death suffered by the victim, a little of our humanity disappears as the pleas for mercy go unheeded.

* * *

Jacquie is quite the young woman. Enrolled in college in the child and youth worker program, she is eager to convince me that I should let her do her placement in the residential treatment program where I first met her – as a client.

Jacquie has a history of sexual abuse, and when I had met her about five years earlier, she was sniffing glue, cutting regularly, and she never ever took off her bright yellow jacket. After several tumultuous weeks in the program, during which she suffered many a

consequence for various misbehaviours, I asked Jacquie where her favourite place in the world was. 'Lake Ontario', she answered without hesitation. It was breakfast time, and as usual she wasn't eating much in front of her peers. As the manager of the program, I usually tried hard not get in the way of my staff, all of whom, without exception, were exceptional child and youth workers. But Jacquie had caught my attention. She was the kind of youth who drives everybody crazy, but at the same time, she was by far the most helpful, giving, and sensitive youth in our program at that time. Her behaviour was hard to take sometimes, but she had that magnetic quality that for some kids is the foundation of their resilience.

'Lake Ontario', I repeated pretending to be deeply in thought. 'What a coincidence, I was just about to hop in the car, drive to Lake Ontario, and grab some breakfast while looking out on the water. I don't suppose you want to come along'?

I didn't have to wait for the response. Seeing that she was already wearing her jacket, she was at my car before I could take another sip from my coffee. 'Well let's go' she yelled, mocking me for being so slow. With the protests of the other kids behind me, I jumped in my car, and together we drove off to her favourite place, about a half hour from the centre. Since that day, Lake Ontario ranks pretty high on my list of favourite places too. We had the kind of day that every child and youth worker cherishes, strolling along the beach, talking about this and that, and having ice cream to the point of stomach cramps. We also talked about how she was feeling, the challenges of having a good day when living in residential care, what was good and what sucked. Before getting back in the car to drive 'home', I picked up a stone and gave it to her. 'A little souvenir', I said, 'for you to remember a wonderful day'.

I had just finished explaining to Jacquie why doing her placement at our Centre might not be the greatest idea, at least not for a first placement. She acknowledged my reasoning, clearly not agreeing entirely, but accepting the verdict. Then she pulled out a stone and showed it to me. 'Remember'? she asked. 'I just did', I said, referring

in part to the stone and in part to why I love being a child and youth worker.

Small and Stupid

With glowing cheeks and warmth in the heart I made my way to the assembly hall of my children's school to watch the annual school Christmas play. Two of my three kids were involved in the production; one in the choir and the other as the drummer for the school band. Holding hands with my beautiful daughter, we sat in the middle of the crowd somewhere, filled with anticipation and looking forward to the show. About an hour later we politely applauded, and along with other parents and siblings pretending to have been impressed we proceeded to the exit. Once I had retrieved my two boys, we walked home, slightly irritated by the cold but overall committed to the cause of getting there; my kids because they were tired, and I because I knew I had a stash of red wine and something else that goes well with it waiting for consumption once the kids were confirmed asleep.

Much effort goes into the production of Christmas plays. Teachers work hard to get the kids organised, find costumes, create the play itself and inform parents of the event. The band rehearses, the kids practice their lines, the stage is set up. Chairs have to be brought in from the classrooms, the lost and found box is prominently displayed at the entrance so that it might be relieved from its overflowing condition and the principal is busy greeting and taking credit for the welcoming, progressive and all-around fantastic school spirit on display this night. All over town battery chargers are humming for hours prior to the event in anticipation of getting a serious workout during the show; capturing the memory of children being ever so cute by feeding energy to cameras depending on the blood-mined Colton from the decidedly un-Democratic Republic of Congo.

At the risk of offending, let me attempt a review of the play on this wonderful, wintery, holiday-spirited night. It is not easy to find the appropriate words; my language repertoire seems oddly

under-equipped to label, nay, characterise the proceedings. I want to give credit where credit is due, find words to express my appreciation for the efforts of so many, words that may capture the cuteness and wonders of childhood. In some way, I find myself pressed to capture the goodness, the wondrous, magical, indeed wunderbar experience unfolding in front of my very eyes. Perhaps it is best to use imagery to do justice to the sounds and sights of the play, so here it goes: Picture Mozart having a bowel movement; Tolstoy spilling ink on his nearly completed War and Peace; England participating in an international soccer tournament, Richard Dawkins at the Gates of Heaven, Colin Powell proving the existence of WMDs in Iraq, Steven Segal starring in the remake of Gone with the Wind, Thom without the h…

Just to clarify; the kids involved in the play did everything they were supposed to do. They sang when prompted, recited their monosyllabic lines when asked to, moved from one side of the stage to the other as scripted and dutifully wore their costumes designed by a distant cousin of Liberace. The play itself, however, was about as exciting and meaningful as a colour-blind parrot searching for a mate: "yep, you look good I guess, so to keep Charles happy, let's get this done". My happiest thought throughout the performance was the realisation that my next CYC-net column was being created as I endured the pain and suffering associated with imagining Segal moving in on the lips of the stunning Vivian Leigh.

So how do I get from Amadeus' toilet habits to child and youth care practice? Well, it is all about expectations. The apocalyptic nature of the performance was not the result of a lack of effort on the part of those who created it; nor was it the outcome of poor implementation on the part of the kids. Everyone did exactly what was expected of them, and that was precisely the problem. The planning for the performance went something like this:

1. We need to have a Christmas play;
2. It must involve the kids;

3. Who has time to write up some lines?
4. Let's keep it simple and get it done.

Meeting expectations is only a good thing if the expectations themselves are impressive, grand, shoot for the stars, seek the extraordinary, aim to change, rebel against the norm, create and re-create the possibilities, reflect the infinity of opportunity. Anything less is mundane, boring, affirming of mediocrity, limitations and never-ending logistical meandering. Kids certainly have the capacity to live up to enormous expectations. Far from being taxed to the limit when asked to memorise five-word lines for a stupid play, they can accurately and effortlessly memorise the Japanese names of 200 Pokemon or Yugio characters; they can pick up a stick and imagine a war in which no one dies and they still get to be the hero; some can endure the tragedy of child soldiers and then speak out to the world about the associated horrors; others can stand in front of the General Assembly of the United Nations and implore world leaders to take action on behalf of Children's Rights.

All children can do far more than what we ask of them; all children imagine themselves doing far more than what they are actually doing. All children, including those living in institutional care, those condemned in youth justice bureaucracies, those abused and neglected by family or others, those finding themselves wandering the streets with nowhere to go, those living in desperate poverty and those affected by mental health or developmental challenges hold deep within their hearts and minds the secret of their very own and very special greatness. We will not unleash the power of these secrets by presenting our children with expectations that carry one message only: you are small and stupid, and therefore I expect of you to perform as small and stupid.

It's 2011. Another year, another chance at turning the tide. So to everyone involved with children I say this: don't aim for the banal. Aim for the incredible. Whatever you are doing, do it better. Whatever gear you might be in, shift up. Have expectations of yourself

and others that seem ridiculous, impossible, laughably out of touch with reality. Because reality is just an artifact. Every moment, every activity, every expectation ought to be extraordinary. And everything ought to be memorable. And children and youth everywhere ought to go to bed each night believing they were part of something special, something great, something awesome. Expect miracles – nothing less.

Kiaras Gharabaghi is Director of the School of Child & Youth Care at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. More importantly, he has spent his adult life doing, thinking and writing about child and youth care practice. And he spent much of his youth eligible for child and youth care services, but alas, received none. He lives along the Muskoka River in Ontario, along the banks of which he wrote many of the stories featured in this book, dreaming about a world that values being and becoming as much as performing and accomplishing.

ISBN 978-1-928212-05-8

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The CYC-Net PRESS

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