

CHILD & YOUTH CARE

ASPECTS OF RELATIONAL PRACTICE



Editors

JACK PHELAN and THOM GARFAT

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Contents

Preface	iv
Introduction.....	5
Support for Developing your Relational Practice:	
Understanding it as a Threshold Concept	6
Laura Steckley	
Relational Weaving in Interaction with Kids	18
John M. Digney	
Relational Practice: Intense and Intentional	42
Thom Garfat	
The Developmental Complexities of Relational Child and Youth Care Practice	50
Heather Modlin	
Self Development and Relational Practice	67
Jack Phelan	
Embracing Relational Practice: A Journey of Love and Advocacy in Education.....	89
Christine Gaitens and Trina Hoadley	
Relational Practice in Group Facilitation	103
Michelle Briegel, Pennie Sibbald and Jenny McGrath	
Embedding Relational Practice in Organizational Culture	119
Michelle Holbrook and Andy Leggett	
Contributors	132

Preface

When I first began in this field some 50 years ago, I never could have imagined a book such as this which focuses on relationship as the locus for healing and development. Back then we, as a field, were primarily focused on behavioural change and promoted this by working from the outside, essentially ‘doing to’ the young person. Certainly, we were not focused on the whole person, let alone the characteristics of the interaction between worker and young person.

Relational Practice, as described in various ways in this book, is relatively new to our field. Indeed, it is seldom referenced in the literature, let alone defined. And such is as it should be as we, as a field, move forward into this new territory. This book is one point in this process.

It was several years ago when our field started to use the term ‘relational CYC practice’ – see, for example the change in the title in 2003 of the journal *The Journal Child and Youth Care* to *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, published by The CYC-Net Press.

However, although the term ‘relational CYC practice’ has become quite common, the reality is that, while many use the term, actual practice has not changed. As I encounter programs using the term ‘relational practice’ I see, in many cases, no difference between what they are doing today and what we were doing 25 years ago.

Relational CYC practice, relationship-based practice and authoritarian-based interventions with youth are, simply, not the same thing. And that, my friends, is a disturbing reality in our field.

This book offers some ideas about what is, still, a relatively new way forward. We hope you embrace this approach as the authors in this volume have – with enthusiasm, curiosity and courage.

Thom Garfat, C.M., PhD

Introduction

This book is an exploration of relational ideas and how Child and Youth Care (CYC) practice has been implementing them. We often look to the experts for answers, but I believe that it may not yet be time for experts as we continue to expand our understanding and appreciation for relational approaches. So, we have asked people with expertise and deep experience to explain their use of relational practice.

The book begins with an overall description of relational frameworks and concepts, then discusses how practitioners develop relational skills and then gives practical examples of doing relational practice in schools, with groups and in organizations.

As explained in Chapter 1, relational ideas are complex and often difficult to embrace because they challenge some of our more 'common sense' ideas about relationships. However, once grasped, they change our thinking significantly and deeply. Experienced skillful Child and Youth Care practitioners often smile when they recall their early years of practice, since they no longer think the same as they did then. Yet skilled supervisors know that it takes time and experience before relational practice is fully possible.

Relational tasks and qualities are explored in Chapters 2 and 3, to lay the groundwork for the curriculum for relational practice.

The need to challenge thinking processes and using mentors who can carefully scaffold the understanding required to master relational concepts is elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5, with developmental steps and time frames.

The final three chapters give practical examples of how to use these ideas in a variety of ways.

Hopefully this book will assist you in your journey to become a mature, successful relational practitioner.

1

Support for Developing your Relational Practice: Understanding it as a Threshold Concept

Laura Steckley

Introduction

Right from the start of my work in Child and Youth Care, I was acutely aware of the importance of building good relationships with young people. My first CYC job was in a residential treatment center, and there were 18 of them and only two of us on many evening and weekend shifts. I was very much preoccupied how to bridge the ‘them and us’ divide while maintaining safety and boundaries. My early learning about relational practice was as much about survival as it was about developing good practice.

At the same time, the center’s treatment model was Positive Peer Culture. This meant we were expected to focus on facilitating the young people’s relationships with one another. They were a particular type of relationship we were meant to foster – ones that were primarily concerned with supporting, challenging and holding one another accountable. Too much focus on our own relationships with the young people, particularly with individual young people (as opposed to

focusing on our relationship with “the group”), was regarded with suspicion. And, as it happened, one of the members of staff was having an inappropriate relationship with one of the young people. This further reinforced a sense of precarity in terms of the adult-youth relationships.

My ideas about what constituted good relationships were based on an understanding that I’ll call *relationships as vehicles*. It could be characterised along the lines that good relationships will more likely than not make the shift go better, and they help to support the effectiveness of the actual treatment or therapy. Over many years of direct practice, training and management in residential treatment and residential child care, and even more years of related teaching, research and scholarship (indirect practice), I’ve come to have an understanding that I’ll call *relationships as intervention*. Child and young people’s experiences of their relationships with Child and Youth Care practitioners¹ are as impactful, and therefore potentially as therapeutic, as any other treatment or intervention. Maybe even more so.

This process of change in how I understand relationships, and within it the process of how I learned to *do* relationships – what we often refer to as *relational practice* in Child and Youth Care – wasn’t always a smooth path. Along the way, I also learned more about how we all learn and develop as Child and Youth Care practitioners. **Threshold concepts** were especially helpful in that learning, and so this chapter explains what threshold concepts are and how knowing about them can support you in developing your relational practice.

¹ I use the term ‘practitioner’ rather than ‘worker’ because this chapter is about the *practice* of care, and within that, the *practice* of co-creating relationships with children and young people. Referring to you as a practitioner is one way of honouring the skills, knowledge and personhood that is integral to good Child and Youth Care practice.

Reflective Questions

1. What have been the most confusing or difficult aspects of learning how to *do* good relationships in your Child and Youth Care work?
2. What are some of the characteristics of good relational practice that you've witnessed other colleagues do, or that you've experienced yourself? What does it feel like when you're 'in the zone' of good relational practice?

Why Threshold Concepts?

Before getting into what threshold concepts are, it might be helpful to first explain why knowing about them might be of use. When I started learning about threshold concepts, I immediately sensed that they could shed light on the challenges of coming to master the most important, but also the most difficult areas of practice. I was in indirect practice by this point, and I thought learning about threshold concepts could help me be more effective in teaching, research and other forms of supporting practice development. This led to some reading and writing, and then some research to explore whether there are threshold concepts in Child and Youth Care, and if so, what they might be. This chapter draws on that research, including the practice example below. If you'd like to know more about the research and how it was carried out, you'll find related details at the end of the chapter.

As I mentioned above, my process of developing relational practice wasn't a smooth path. It was difficult at times. I wish I had known about threshold concepts then, not because it would have made it all so much easier, but because it would have given me reassurance that some areas of learning and practice are troublesome for everyone, that difficulties are to be expected, and that persevering with them is likely to lead to "getting it." In fact, from the perspective of threshold concepts, "getting it" doesn't just mean mastery, it means transformation.

Contributors

Laura Steckley leads the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care at the University of Strathclyde and so has the very good fortune of doing teaching and learning with residential child care practitioners. She has worked in direct and indirect practice in both the United States of America and Scotland. Her teaching, research and knowledge mobilisation are mostly addressed to CYC practice and education, with a particular focus on physical restraint.

John Digney, PhD has been working with children and families since 1991. He has professional qualifications in various associated areas, including psychology, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, business, project management, adult education, as well as Child and Youth Care. John has been the National Training Development Coordinator for Ireland's Child and Family Agency (Tusla) for over a decade, having worked in and managed residential programmes for troubled children and youth. John is involved with many child and youth care organisations around the world, and annually in November each year hosts the annual Unity Conference in Dublin. (www.unityconference.org).

Thom Garfat, C.M., PhD has been working in Child and Youth Care for over 50 years. His focus is on 'actions that make a difference'. Thom is the co-founder of the *International Child & Youth Care Network* and the journal *Relational Child & Youth Care Practice*. He is the developer of the training *The Purposeful Use of Daily Life Events* which is used in various countries. Among many acknowledgements, Thom was admitted to the *Order of Canada* in 2023 and recently was acknowledged as a *President's Distinguished Alumni* from the University of Victoria. Thom lives in Quebec with Sylviane, who always makes his life better. More information about Thom can be found at www.trct.ca

Heather Modlin has worked in Child and Youth Care for over 35 years. She is currently CEO of a non-profit organization providing a range of services to children, youth, families and adults across Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Heather has published numerous journal articles and book chapters and co-edited the book *Relational Child and Youth Care in Action*. She has served on several national and international boards, including as Chair of the Board of Governors of The International Child and Youth Care Network (CYC-Net), Steering Committee member of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, and a board member of FICE Canada. Heather has a PhD in Child and Youth Care from the University of Victoria.

Jack Phelan, Faculty Emeritus in the CYC degree program at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Jack has authored two books on CYC practice, one focussing on supervision. He has contributed chapters to over 10 books, has published articles in over 25 journals and is a regular columnist for *CYC-Online*, the journal of CYC-Net. Jack is a speaker at National and International CYC Conferences and has been an officer in CYC professional associations in both New York and Alberta. Jack began his career working with young people in New York City, where he was a direct care CYC practitioner, a CYC supervisor and an administrator, before working in juvenile justice in Denver Colorado. His present interests are in developmental stages of professional growth, CYC supervision, boundary issues, and relational CYC approaches.

Christine Gaitens, MSc. CYC-P has been a Child and Youth Care Practitioner (CYCP) for over 30 years and has supported families, children and youth through her work in residential care, family preservation services, foster care, child care and the education sector. She provided leadership for 14 years at the Toronto District School Board as the Manager of Child and Youth Services where she was responsible to implement professional practice standards,

professional development, and supervision for 500 CYCPs. Currently, she teaches at Algonquin college in the CYC program. Christine lives in Ontario Canada and is a Registered Social Worker.

Trina Hoadley, CYCP has dedicated over 20 years to the field of Child and Youth Care, always leading with love and unwavering dedication. She is passionate about breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for youth, their families, and the communities she serves. Originally from Nova Scotia, Trina now calls Toronto home, where she lives with her supportive and loving husband and two children, who inspire her as she completes her Master's program. With a passion for photography, Trina uses her craft to help young people discover the beauty in themselves and their communities, sparking their creativity and growth.

Michelle Briegel is an associate professor in the Bachelor of Child Studies, Child and Youth Care Counsellor program at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Michelle is a Certified Advanced Practice Child and Youth Care Counsellor and is the current president of The Child and Youth Care Association of Alberta. Michelle has over 30 years of direct practice and organizational leadership in Child and Youth Care.

Pennie Sibbald has over 35 years' experience in Child and Youth Care and has dedicated her career to supporting children and families, and fostering professional growth and excellence in the field. Holding a BA along with certifications in Child and Youth Care Counselling and Adult Education, she has spent 18 years as the Coordinator for the Learning and Development Department at Hull Services in Calgary, Alberta, where she leads a team focused on training and curriculum development for direct care practitioners. In addition to her role at Hull Services, Pennie actively contributes to her profession as a member of the Board of the Child and Youth Care Association of

Alberta as Chair of the Advanced Practice Committee, President of the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations, and Vice-President of FICE-Canada.

Jenny McGrath is an Associate Professor in the Child and Youth Care Program at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Her interests include CYC professionalization, practicum education, creative pedagogy, family support and activity-based interventions. Jenny is a doctoral student at the University of Victoria and is a Certified Child and Youth Care Worker in the province of Alberta.

Michelle Holbrook is a Child and Youth Care (CYC) professional and Executive Director of Sarnia-Lambton Rebound, an organization committed to empowering youth through innovative programs and support. With over two decades of experience in the field, Michelle is passionate about fostering resilience, growth, and well-being in young people. Michelle prioritizes collaboration, relational practice and youth engagement to support youth success.

Andy Leggett is the CEO of Transformative Relational Consultation and Training (TRCT). He is also the CEO of Kalon Services, an agency providing family-based care and staff-modelled services in Ontario and Newfoundland. A proud Child and Youth Care Practitioner for over 45 years, Andy has been providing training and consultation to agencies and organizations across Canada and internationally.

ASPECTS OF RELATIONAL PRACTICE

This book sets a framework for supporting new Child and Youth Care practitioners to be developmentally aware about the limits of what they should be trying to achieve with young people and families. It tempers the impatience and feelings of incompetence that haunt many practitioners in the first year of Child and Youth Care experience.

The information about threshold concepts will guide more experienced practitioners through the difficult path to accurate empathy and strength awareness, which in turn begins the transition into deep relational connections that are the key to the skill set of a mature practitioner. Supervisors will also benefit from awareness of the developmental roadmap to structure the scaffolding of strategies to build an expanded view of one's professional self and intentions for the transitioning, treatment focused practitioner.

Mature practitioners can learn deeper relational frameworks and increase "self" development in relational practice. It will also assist mature practitioners to be effective mentors to less experienced colleagues.

Supervisors will find this book to be a valuable reference for creating developmentally useful plans for staff improvement, as well as a personally challenging read to evaluate their own practice.

Administrators will gain a stronger appreciation of what a relationally-based program is, as well as how to create this type of program for their agency.

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