

Writing Child and Youth Care Practice



Kiaras Gharabaghi



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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.



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.

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