THE FUTURE OF CHILD AND YOUTH CARE EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM CANADA

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Abstract: This article reports on an analysis of a conversation held at a World Café gathering in the spring of 2014. At that time, a group of 25 professionals involved in higher education in Child and Youth Care engaged in a discussion of challenges that have implications for the future of the field. Four major themes emerged: tensions between theory and practice, issues related to Child and Youth Care values, trends and traditions in Child and Youth Care, and questions about professional integrity and identity. These themes are discussed in light of ongoing debates in the literature. The results of our discussions also underscore the need to harmonize divisions in the field and consolidate an agreed-upon knowledge base for Child and Youth Care.

Keywords: child and youth care education, knowledge base in child and youth care, professional identity, world café

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Prior to the Child and Youth Care in Action Conference at the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care in May 2014, as part of their fortieth anniversary celebrations, there was a preconference event focused on the future of education in Child and Youth Care (CYC). There is a long tradition of conferences in the field being preceded by an educators' day, in recognition of the critical role that education and training play in the field. At the 2014 event, conference delegates were invited to come, to take an active role in stimulating the conversation, and to suggest critical issues to include in the conversation. Based on the suggestions received and the work of the planning team (Drs. Hardy, Mann-Feder, and Scott) the participants gathered for an afternoon session before the official start of the conference.[1]

This preconference session was planned using a World Café model (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The model provides a structured approach for the promotion of "strategic dialogue", and is characterized by time-limited small group discussion in relation to a series of prepared questions. The large group is broken down into small groups (the recommended number for the small groups is about eight participants), who sit at round tables and work together throughout the event. A facilitator is assigned to each small group and records the highlights of each discussion. An important feature of the model is that after the series of questions has been discussed, the responses from each group are presented, and the total group engages in reflecting on the salient points from the conversation.

The dialogue at the University of Victoria was attended by 25 participants, all of whom worked in higher education in CYC. The vast majority were from Canadian colleges and universities, although there were also a handful of participants from the United States and the United Kingdom. Five of the participants agreed to act as facilitators at separate tables. The session lasted about three hours and was guided by the following questions:

1. Where are we headed as a field?

2. What should we add to CYC education to reflect the expanded range of settings where we practice?

3. What is the role of theory and research in CYC education?

4. What is the range of approaches we need to consider? How do we represent the diversity of the field?

5. What are the next steps to keep the dialogue going?

Approximately ten pages of detailed responses to the first four questions were gathered and then presented to the large group. All participants then engaged in discussing the responses, and took up the last question, which solicited comments about the potential for follow-up to the event.

The written notes were made available to all present. Lastly, the authors of this article undertook to analyze the responses, tracking major themes across questions. The purpose of this article is to report on the major themes that characterized the concerns of CYC educators at the 2014 conference for the future of CYC education and the CYC field more broadly. Implications for CYC education will be identified.

Major Themes

Four major themes characterized the discussion of the questions. Participants debated the relative importance of theory and practice in CYC education, and the definition of theory more generally. Two themes that arose repeatedly, regardless of which stated question was being explored and where the conversation started out, were those related to CYC values and to CYC traditions. Lastly, there was a major preoccupation with professional identity.

What follows is a description of each theme, with quotes from the notes that were especially characteristic.

Tensions between theory and practice

The role of theory and practice in CYC education was debated throughout the World Café. This theme dominated the discussion of all four guiding questions, and there was by no means unanimity regarding the ideal theory–practice relationship, nor even about the definition of theory as it applies to CYC education. Given the range of positions expressed, and the lack of consensus, the group was divided on this question. For some participants, theory played a critical role in CYC education and was stressed as an increasingly important focus for the future, while for others, CYC education overemphasizes theory, leading to a lack of authenticity and a distancing from relationships. In some cases, theory and practice were viewed as dichotomous, as were theoretical versus relational approaches to education. Beyond this, there was a significant diversity of opinion, even among those who valued theory, about how theory and practice should be integrated and which theories should be emphasized.

Participants who downplayed the importance of theory in CYC education stressed the "general relational focus" and the importance of skill building, especially interpersonal skill, as the core of CYC education. Some participants emphasized that theory should not provide the basis for relating to youth. "Who you are and how you relate" were cited as critical components that needed to be stressed more in the future.

Participants who saw practice concerns as more important than theoretical considerations stressed "real world practical information", "co-teaching with practitioners to transmit understanding of the world", and "the role of the self and interaction" in CYC education. It appears

that for some a relational focus or a practice orientation was seen as a theoretical orientation. However, some other participants who espoused these perspectives considered these approaches to be atheoretical. One participant noted: "We need to problematize theories and maybe theory more generally. Practice needs to be flexible, relatable, constructivist, experiential, and experimental."

Participants who favoured theory as an important component of CYC education stressed its role in informing practice. The following are examples of comments that underscored the need to integrate theory and practice: "Theory can help education and inform CYC to engage groups", "Theory and research can help us to reclaim territory in terms of the revolutionary potential of care", and "Theory supports professionalism". One participant commented that "The link between theory and practice is central and research may be the answer to uniting them, but with a CYC voice." It is interesting to note that the participants who saw theory as critical to CYC education had different suggestions about how theory and practice could work together. One participant commented: "Theory should lead to practice and then back to theory again", while another asked which should come first and how both can be taught. Others cautioned that "Theory should not be prescriptive", and that "You can learn theory but experiences need to be first", while it was also observed that "Practice should be grounded in theory with praxis". There was some disagreement about the diversity of theories that need to be included in a CYC curriculum. Many participants made reference to reflexivity as an important element in both theory and practice, while others stressed political analysis, Indigenous ontologies, and critical theory as elements that needed more emphasis going forward. Some participants praised multidisciplinarity, while others stressed the importance of the unique CYC perspective and the need to re-theorize our position and the field. Social work theory and developmental theory were both mentioned as being overemphasized, while it was also noted that CYC has favoured analysis of the micro over the macro, and has not privileged "diverse ways of knowing".

It appears there is an anxiety for some that new theories (particularly "post" and critical theories) mean that somehow practice and practice-based approaches are being called into question. For some, deconstruction is problematic because it is not rooted in practice (and cannot be admitted as a way to critique or consider practice). However, people view "theory" — the word itself — as having quite different overtones for people in different locations in the field.

Some see relational practice as a theoretical location but there were others working from a relational practice approach who view themselves as outside theory. For them, there is a sense that practice is and must be practical and not theoretical. Theory is seen by these traditionalists as academic, perhaps obscure, and not speaking to the day-to-day realities of practice.

There is another cluster who see theory and its role in a much more deconstructionist way. An exploration of theoretical location, in that view, is essential to understand what theory or theories are in play, what their historical roots are, and, from that analysis, what implications there are for practice and for refining both theory and practice through critical examination and self-

examination. The tension is more than a binary dynamic because amongst those for whom theory is a necessary and critical part of thinking about and doing practice, there are differing understandings of the role of theory and the theories that matter. Theoretical approaches are seen as valuable and critical for developing practice, for enriching its scope, and for critiquing existing approaches to consider hidden assumptions and potential blind spots.

Child and Youth Care values

In this wide-ranging conversation between CYC practitioners and academics, the theme of values came up time and time again.

Many participants talked about what they saw as the critical importance of advocacy or, more specifically, the role of CYC practitioners as advocates. The comments seemed to suggest that we should be advocates. One participant saw "advocacy as a hallmark of CYC rather than an outcome"; another stated, "Radical advocacy is required." Some participants felt a need to advocate for a cultural shift so that "CYC workers [become] agents of this change" and a need "to become [a] political force but [we] can't do this by continuing in the same way — some of our strategies have developed the problem". For some it was clear that currently, we are not advocates.

This theme then linked to a broader discussion about professionalism and the role of professionalism in CYC. It was by no means a unidirectional conversation. Professionalism was not seen by all as necessarily positive and a number of participants seemed to suggest that a move towards professionalism was potentially a move away from advocacy. This in turn led to a discussion about the role of education in professionalism and in CYC in general. In a wide range of comments, participants spoke about how, currently, CYC education "was not necessarily relevant to child and youth care practice", "was not supporting advocacy", "needed to make itself more current and less mired in the past", and "was not as relevant as practice". In addition, one participant observed that educational research was driving practice "when in reality it should be the other way around".

This conversation about education, practice, and research was a passionate dialogue that illustrated tensions in the field. Some participants were strongly in favour of trying to "understand our own positions in neoliberal contexts — our work is political — how can we expect/hope for students to help children and youth transform worlds if we're not also doing it?" They wanted to draw on political, structural, and anti-capitalist analysis both "in classrooms, [and] in the real one-on-one relations with one another." They saw that there were tensions between "post structural values and regulatory pressures."

Others were concerned with "real world" practice, stating that "Families focus must not get lost!" and that we should be "trying/needing to match competencies with children and youths' real needs." The conversation included concerns about low wages, the qualifications of practitioners, and the accompanying challenge in Canada of establishing national standards and education. There were questions about residential and group care, overstretched resources, and

what practices in the field are valued. Some saw a need for "practical information helping students [to] better understand youth experience and not reducing youth to current problems." One participant said that there was "a need to move back to the foundations of the field and possibly away from the trappings of professionalization."

The discussion ended with many questions about the role that CYC practitioners and educators should take when it comes to the funding of programs, the politics of funding, and the work of policy development. Many believed that CYC needs to take on a more significant role in these areas, particularly in creating policy and influencing policy makers. Does care work need to include attention to policy, political realities, and the historical context of care work? If care work is not adequately funded what is the role of a CYC practitioner in addressing the social and political context that has produced the underfunded context? These questions remain as considerations for ongoing work in CYC education.

Trends and traditions in Child and Youth Care

Another major theme was that of CYC traditions. Some of the discussion centered around the belief that child and youth care is a young discipline and as such needs to be able to develop and articulate its own view of the world before looking to integrate those beliefs with other disciplines. Consequently CYC traditions related to multidisciplinary practice featured prominently in the discussions. There were many who spoke about the importance of acknowledging practice, research, and education from allied fields while others felt that a multidisciplinary approach was watering down CYC. Again there is not a single clear perspective in CYC. Some wanted to "acknowledge the diversity in age of those served" and "recognize the diversity of approaches to the field" and the "range of roles" that CYC practitioners fill. There was some disagreement about the diversity of theories that need to be included in a CYC curriculum, and about how best to balance the relational with the theoretical and the academic with the practical in CYC education. At root for many was the belief stated by one participant: "There are many approaches, but at the core of all of them is the relational." For many practitioners that is the core tradition of CYC.

Within the dialogue relating to multidisciplinary practice, there was an additional discussion that focused on multiculturalism in both CYC practice and CYC education. This discussion raised a number of questions:

- Is CYC reflective of a wide range of multicultural practice theories?

- Is CYC practice reflective of the multicultural communities in which we practise?

- Is CYC doing a good enough job responding to Aboriginal/Indigenous practice issues?

- Do CYC educators reflect the broader community and the broad base of students?

- Do CYC educators focus on the future of the field or do they focus on the past?

- Is CYC open to different voices?

- Is there a role for CYC educators in training CYC practitioners in policy issues?

- Should CYC be more political in its approach to practice?

- Does CYC do enough action-based research?

- Should CYC be more politically driven?

There was a tension about what counts as CYC practice. Our field has roots in residential care, youth work, and early childhood care and education. For some, the primary focus remains on children and youth in difficulty and this drives their approach to practice and their understanding of the field as rooted in care for those in crisis. For others, practice includes a wide range of environments where addressing difficulty and crisis are not central to practice. Recreational programs, early childhood sites, community development initiatives, and other environments all require different orientations to practice. This diversity in the growth of the CYC field seems to be a part of the tensions and divergence in the conversation we hosted.

As the field has developed and broadened the scope of engagement across diverse age groups, social and cultural settings, and practice foci, there are many contexts to consider. A single approach is not adequate to meet all contexts. How can CYC educators and practitioners be open to the needs of multiple settings, various ages of children and youth, and families who come from different cultures and contexts? Who are the clients in CYC now? Where is the work taking place? How old or young are they? How much are families involved? What are the links to communities? Again a range of questions arose that illustrate the complexity of the developing field.

Questions about professional integrity and identity

Throughout the World Café conversation, a variety of perspectives on the nature, identity, and issues of CYC education and practice was evident. There was a sense that this conversation has been going on for some time without any clear direction, and in the context of this event similar comments arose around each of the questions asked.

For some participants there was a desire to reinvent "who we are", calling for a much more informed political sensibility that would be "taking risks [with] more analysis of material conditions", and a concern that we in CYC do have "a particularly high level of political understanding" and that impedes our work. A number of participants felt that we "need more cogent analysis of the living conditions of young people" and that we "need theory and research to resist the commodification and marketization of the field, of children and youth". The desire to resist seeing children, youth, and families as "customers or consumers" was articulated with a hope that "theory and research can help us reclaim territory in terms of the revolutionary potential of relationship and care".

At the same time other voices were calling for "authenticity in our relationships" and wondering if it is time to "let go of the abstract — political — … to abandon professional identities". These voices drew on the traditional discourses of CYC saying our work is "more about who you are and how you relate to and understand youth" and expressing a need to "move back to the foundations of the field and possibly away from the trappings of professionalization".

There was general acknowledgement that in the context of reduced funding resources and the rise of managerial approaches, there are deep concerns for professional integrity and identity. CYC work was seen as facing many challenges ranging from worker burnout to the wide scope of the field, from early childhood care to group and residential care, and from street work to therapeutic interventions. Another challenge is the call to respond to the "hot-button issue" of the day, be it autism, trauma-informed practice, or suicide prevention. There was general acknowledgement that CYC workers needed to have skills that are transferrable between settings. What was not evident was a shared sense of "what grounds our perspective and our practice". One participant wanted us "to clarify our ethos" and another to "infuse leadership through curriculum".

Lingering in the discussion regarding professionalization and its implications were concerns regarding the role of educational institutions in setting standards for CYC education and deciding core and minimal requirements for professional qualification. Some anxiety was expressed regarding standardization as potentially limiting.

And so the conversation circled back to the challenges for education. What do the priorities need to be? How can we as CYC educators respond to multiple and sometimes contradictory demands: to standardize the field and work from shared competencies, while at the same time developing astute political and critical sensibilities, and encouraging the formulation of new ideas and approaches, that in turn may challenge our current ideals. The passion is shared but the direction is uncertain.

Discussion

It is clear from our analysis of this conversation amongst educators that, as CYC develops, having a view of education for practitioners as focused on one sort of client and one context is not possible. Furthermore, there was little consensus as to what constitutes an appropriate theory base or even what role theory should play going forward.

The recognition of the deep divisions in the field of CYC and CYC education is not new, especially in relation to the fundamental questions about the relationship between theory and practice. In 1993, Karen VanderVen observed:

> There is a pervasive lack of connection … between theory and practice in Child and Youth Care Work. Despite the insistence of some that this field, due to its practical, instructive nature, does not require theoretical frameworks, many others feel they are essential (p. 264).

As recently as May of 2016, a gathering of CYC educators at a national conference in Halifax was characterized by a diversity of positions. "The themes that resonate for one [educator] will perhaps not even be noticed by another. This seems to be the nature of our emerging Community of Practice" (Snell, Shaw, & Weninger, 2016, pp. 118–119).

Is this a bad sign? Not all CYC scholars agree on this point either. In 2013, Freeman observed, "The fact that it is difficult to find a commonly agreed upon definition of CYC is perhaps a sign that the field is in a distinct, emerging phase of its history." (p. 100). In 2015, Ranahan, Blanchet-Cohen, and Mann-Feder observed that the lack of unanimity reflects the increasing complexity of the context in which young people and families develop. White (2011) argued that absolute definitions of the field should be resisted, while Bessant (2012) advocated the integration of diverse approaches over the search for a single approach.

What is clear is that there is by now a well-documented history of disagreement on fundamental issues in CYC and CYC education. This may be absorbing too much energy in our field, as "self/other and either/or permeate our institutions, professional discourse, and general conversations" (Little, 2011, p. 3). Perhaps most concerning is that this lack of agreement creates undue challenges for CYC educators in higher education because the field is still not consistently recognized as an academic discipline. As stated by Fusco (2012), "If those closely engaged in the field do not agree on language and content, it will be difficult for the discipline to grow deep roots within higher education" (p. 113). Consensus is needed, even consensus that draws on a "multiplicity of perspectives" (Fusco, 2012, p. 113). This need for an agreed-upon knowledge base has a profound effect on practice as well: intervening in the absence of a theoretical framework has been compared to navigating Tokyo without a map (Steckley, 2009).

CYC has become a diverse community and learning to live in and with that complexity seems to be a necessary process. Our persistent engagement in debate on basic issues threatens our legitimacy. Naming what holds us together, what our driving principles are, our shared ethos, our practice approaches, and our educational needs will require a continuing dialogue. It appears there will not be one answer to these questions, and it will take courage and persistence to arrive at a consensus. It is evident that further discussion is both necessary and inevitable, by both CYC practitioners and students, and especially by CYC educators. Are we mature enough as a field to live with that reality?

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