

Intersecting Research and Practice: Effort to Both Acknowledge and Act on How the System Impacts Children and Youth in Care

A Review of *Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care: Critical Conversations*

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Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care: Critical Conversations (Andrea Christensen, editor, Canadian Scholars, 2025) both educates and advocates for identity recognition and change within the child and youth care sector. Diverse voices not always present in the past decades of professional dialogue for the sector unpack, explore, and share about the necessity for anti-oppressive approaches, why they should exist, and how they can be implemented.

Key words: *child and youth care, child protection, anti-oppressive policy, youth participation*

A call for perspective

In *Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care: Critical Conversations* (Andrea Christensen, editor, Canadian Scholars, 2025), child and youth care counsellor Andrea Christensen convenes an eclectic collection of authors to present a call to action founded in reflection and expert narratives. The collection is purposefully diverse, including both research and practice experts. The core concept from all authors is a focus on creating an anti-oppressive approach to child and youth work with decreased attention paid to a child's behaviour and focus placed on the system impacts for the child that may be underpinning observed behaviours.

In the opening, the editor positions her own land acknowledgment with more than geography, offering a commitment to change and personal reconciliation to the land and the children and youth growing on it. In the same spirit, I share that my reconciliation efforts within the framework of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action are focused on #6, the repeal of Section 43 of the Criminal Code of Canada which allows for a defence of the use of corporal punishment on children, and #66, multiyear funding for community-based Indigenous youth programming. I concur with the authors: Acknowledgment is only one step. Action is required at both individual and systemic levels to be agents of anti-oppressive work.

Personal commitments, biases, and perspectives are essential areas of reflection to engage in anti-oppressive child and youth care. Christensen utilizes the common analogy of the lens through which we each view the world: "Depending on which colour of glasses you are wearing, you *experience, interpret, and navigate* the world differently ... you look at the world through a *feminist* lens, or a *de-colonial* lens, or a *queer* lens" (p. 5, italics in original). Both she and the authors throughout the collection use metaphors and examples to explain sector jargon and academic terms. This effort makes the text quite approachable for new students and nonacademic readers.

Christensen uses this lens analogy to open the dialogue of the collection with the necessary element of self-reflection. She writes:

In AOP [anti-oppressive practice] we start with reflective practice by turning the lens on ourselves and the systems we work in to better understand how power, oppression, privilege, white supremacy, and colonization have collectively shaped societal values. These values have been the foundation of policies, legislation, and governments that we, as professionals, enact daily in our work with children and youth. (p. 7).

The position and understanding of one's own bias, power, and connectivity is engrained in child and youth care (CYC).

In breaking down the normalized and routine practices of child and youth care, Christensen makes the call to action to have true moments of reflection. It is not enough to state that as a practitioner you "create safe space" within your programming, or that as an academic, your research acknowledges the protocols of "safe space." These statements, standing on their own, are "void of action and [show] no critical thinking skills on how to integrate theory into practice" (p. 8). Evidence on how we as adults will make different choices, manage accommodations, act differently, and be humble to ask questions is what is necessary.

In the introduction, and throughout the voices of the multiple authors each in their own way, there is more than a call for reflection and criticism; there are practical, real, tangible suggestions and recommendations on how both practitioners and academics can be more mindful in their approach to working with children and youth, such as "Honour the strength and importance of community and trans-generational relationships. Build relationships with seniors' homes, connect with community associations, or build or participate in community garden." (Christensen, p. 11). This community-level guidance flows throughout the text.

This mindfulness, taking the time to pause and reflect rather than "check the protocol boxes," is what is necessary within anti-oppressive child and youth care. The goal of this collection is not an overall call for radicalization, repeal, or reform—there are other platforms for that work within the sector, and a small nod to this area of effort is even present within this text. This collection is an ask for perspective and approach within the system to acknowledge the system exists.

Eclectic range of authors—which is the point

Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care's editor has held strong to the commitment to decolonize and has taken an anti-oppressive approach to the presentation of voice within the composition of the book chapters themselves. This effort upholds and models the value of making space for all voices.

Perspectives and positionality that have been typically missing in prior decades from academic texts and practitioner learning are given a place within this collection. The reflections of these authors are personal, often emotional, and demonstrate the importance of lived experience and sharing learning within the sector.

The expertise of some of the chapter authors also presents readers with a historical backdrop with enough context to frame social justice issues within a child and youth care context. This history is framed in a Canadian landscape, with overviews, for example, of the creation of Parks Canada and a short recap of slavery within Canada.

Readers who are new to the sector will receive an overview, specifically within the second chapter by Nicole Ineese-Nash, regarding the necessity to understand the failings of child and youth care for Indigenous communities. Ineese-Nash writes:

To authentically support Indigenous youth, we must challenge and critically analyze these foundational aspects of CYC. This involves not only acknowledging the field's historical role in the oppression of Indigenous peoples but also actively working to decolonize its practices and ideologies. Such a transformation is crucial for CYC to evolve into a field that genuinely supports the holistic development of Indigenous youth and aligns with the principles of equity, respect, and cultural safety. (p. 57)

This chapter in particular brings readers away from a historical overview and into current conversations, noting the Millennial Scoop and the impact of UNDRIP. By quoting voices such as Cindy Blackstock and the late Honourable Murray Sinclair, the chapter also demonstrates that advocacy for Indigenous youth across Turtle Island is not one monotheistic voice.

Sarah Reddington and Rafaela Muriel Alarcon's chapter focuses on inclusion within care. It is a strong example of how the systemic nature of services for children and youth means that these services fall victim to mentalities of siloing based on the most "obvious" barrier and then subsequently failing to adequately meet the needs of the child with justification of jurisdictional funding barriers or available services. The authors note that "early child care centres in Canada apply a traditional psychology (medical) model of disability with a focus on intervention, which significantly impacts how young children with disabilities experience inclusion" (p. 76).

The downfall is obvious when read in black and white, and yet overmedicalization stereotypes are perpetrated continuously every day across Canada. As Reddington and Alarcon explain, "When we emphasize a young child's medical signifiers as the core of inclusive child care, we often do not think about other areas of their identities, such as ethnicity, gender, culture, family experiences, social relationships, and the environment" (p. 77). We do not take this singular, medical-issue-only lens when adults receive treatment plans, yet we do with children and youth.

Acknowledgment of expert knowledge

Kiaras Gharabaghi's chapter offers the analogy of an onion to examine the layers of oppression that need to be pulled back when doing anti-oppressive work. Gharabaghi asks readers to uncover, eliminate, and mitigate the layers wherever possible. but the onion itself is notably nothing but layers. This author offers a solution in mitigation of the impact: co-creation. After first acknowledging that youth are experts in their own lives, the call to action here is to engage them in co-creating the processes, policies, systems, and decisions that impact their daily lives. Referring to Collin et al. (2021), Gharabaghi reminds readers that

we should honour this expertise and facilitate their voices to have impact. Young people should not only be able to participate in the everyday programming of the group home or the classroom, but they should co-design these spaces with practitioners so that they become safe, more in tune with the needs and desires of young people, and offer pathways for change that correspond to young people's aspirations. (p. 102)

This type of approach to co-creation is what builds an anti-oppressive system.

In terms of practical implementation of participatory rights, this chapter offers a reminder of how basic upholding the human rights of children and youth can be, how basic it is to be anti-oppressive in your work with them: Say hello. Greet them. Help them get through breakfast without stress to start their day (p. 115). Act towards children and youth as if they have the same elements of humanity that you do—because they do.

Additional chapters and authors offer case studies and "moments in practice," which, in addition to the metaphors, curate for the reader a clear, easily accessible understanding of the authors' motivation and the changes that are possible with the implementation of an anti-oppressive approach.

Credit can also be given to authors in the collection who advance the need for more radical, or creative, mechanisms of disrupting the norms of how the systems of child and youth care operate. Marie-Jolie (MJ) Rwigema does so with their example from the late 1990s in Vancouver, where youth had daytime access to homeless supports (a rarity) coupled with employment services. Within the same organization, youth and city decision makers came together for regular meetings to discuss city policies that impacted the youth and that they could in fact give expert opinions on. A concept to invite politicians to experience life on the streets was appropriately named “Hard Night Out.”

Sadly, these types of efforts become, or need to be, labelled as radical. I see them as humanity. I argue that they are simply community building: Experience what it is you have power and authority over. Talk to people who are impacted by what you decide. As Rwigema notes on the capacity and necessity to build community through co-creation, “instead of being simply clients, [youth] were essentially leaders in the organizations that served them” (p. 130). This shared power is often labelled as radical, because most adults hold the belief that sharing power means giving it up entirely. Often, children and youth are the ones re-teaching adults the importance of sharing.

Threads of connectivity

As reflected on in my own most recent research, there are thin threads of connectivity that always appear to exist within the child and youth sector. I have explored how relationships across staff teams, boards of directors, those with lived experience, political and policy decision makers, and consultants all have elements of relationships once sought out and explored.

One could make this argument for many sectors; lawyers know judges, cardiac specialists know general medical practitioners. What I present as unique within child and youth services, and specifically those who choose to do this work from an anti-oppressive framework, is that there is a distinct factor: We all have elements of our own lived experience, our own expertise. Some professionals share more than others in this regard. When discussed in trusting spaces and relationships, there is usually a canon moment or a series of experiences that become the driving factors of a life of social justice.

The authors in this collection have been forthcoming about their own lived experiences, humble in admission of their own past missteps, and reflective about their future learning and work. These types of narratives create social bonds between colleagues and between teachers and students.

I believe there is also an element of this connectivity that can be leveraged to create increased accountability. When we humanize the system into being each of us, into knowing who we each are, then the role we have been humbled to be asked to serve in, the function we execute in daily routines that support marginalized children and youth may carry a heightened sense of responsibility. Group think can shrink. Systemic change can only occur when we understand who the system is comprised of and who the decision makers are. This is what I advocate for in my own work. I see this collection as another call to action to buttress the strength of relationships that exist within the system of services for children and youth.

Conclusion

The collection Andrea Christensen has assembled represents conversations which indeed are critical within child and youth care. We cannot simply maintain the processes and thus the systems that have existed for decades to address what are increasingly more complex issues children and youth in care across Canada are facing. We cannot advance and uphold the human rights of children and youth unless we actively adhere to them—and amplify them.

The more we are aware that the onion has layers, the more we have to do to mitigate them. This effort includes acknowledging our own lens and viewpoints of the world we interact with. Advocacy must include a call for humanity to speak to, and engage with, children and youth as the experts they are.

While the messages of this collection are strong, as can happen with a magnitude of writing styles within a coauthored book, there are vast variations in basic chapter organizational elements such as author introductions and bios, narratives, and flow. While the point is indeed to do things differently and allow for authentic and diverse voices, editorial oversight to present continuity for scholarly use still provides benefits to the intended readership.

Overall, the collection is a needed and welcome presentation of voices in a space that has not always made room for them.