

## ON WORDS, THINGS, AND FUZZY SETS IN CHILD CARE (In Search of Clear Thinking in an Unclear Field)

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*E-Street Benny is a sixteen-year-old in residential care. As he and his youth practitioner sit down to discuss his next court review, Benny says, "Hey, m-a-a-n...if you still listenin' to all that he-say-she-say-stuff... you crazier'n I think you was!" Does any of that sound familiar to you? Better yet, repeat E-Street Benny's words to yourself. Immediately, check what feelings you have within you now – those quick and spontaneous gut responses – not those the "professional" you are "supposed" to feel.*

For all of us, regardless of position, the youth's words, tones, and mannerisms elicit varied responses. Yet, just how truly are we aware of the ways such "street language" affects us? Obviously, we all have to answer that question for ourselves.

This type of subtle, yet common, part of being a youth and child care practitioner points directly to the context in which we live, breathe, work, and play – the realm of words. The context of language itself is woven into all the actions and silences we experience with those we serve. In fact, we function most often surrounded by so-called *ordinary* words. Usually, it is the common words which make up the very fabric of our everyday existence, and seldom the "high falutin" ones we learn in school. This may include utterances we pour out in the process of being paid helpers or simply used while ordering lunch. Yet, at the same time, regardless of context, human language is perennial and constant.

Interestingly, the workings of everyday language are seldom studied with the same zeal with which we explore our physical, social, or geopolitical cosmos. It is just, "No big deal," say some. It is all "Just talk," say others. "Sticks 'n stones..." cry many others. As for the daily child care world itself, some feel that most words are merely incidental. But, are they really of such little import? Can we so easily pick and choose our words and effect little change in meaning? In so doing, are we confident that the intended idea in our minds will be well sent to the listener, regardless of which expressions we choose?

In the literary world, there is much discussion of how *style* and *meaning* relate to each other. Some argue that the HOW of what you say, de-

termines the WHAT of your meaning. Students of language, transformational grammar, neurolinguistic programming (NLP-Trademark, Bandler & Grinder), etc., are in fact unveiling whole worlds of fascinating relationships between the Word-Spoken and the Thing-Itself-Unsaid.

Okay, okay. What does all this have to do with child care, you rightly ask? A great deal. To explore just one child care application, let us open that yet unwritten – but ever-growing – “Lexicon of Child Care Practice.” In this volume are terms we use often, but which this practitioner sees variously. First, as a list of essential concepts, or, secondly, as jargon or argot. Lastly – and of most concern – are those, “polarizing-take-sides-or-else” kinds of words. At the very least, some may become sacrosanct – untouchable – and as such are used without occasionally reflecting upon their fundamental meanings. Too often, terms become materialized, and as such are “finished,” not in process. If this rigidity sets in, and no conscious attempt at consensus in the field has been attempted, then child care is allowing change to happen *to* it, not by itself as a field.

By way of illustration, try reflecting on just what images or feelings the following words conjure up in you: *structure, therapeutic milieu, community, community-based, deinstitutionalization, open/closed setting, group home, emotionally disturbed, family, family-based, intervention, crisis . . . (add your own).*

In daily usage most of us know that churches, schools, colleges, nursing homes, etc., are examples of the term “institution.” Yet, in many a treatment of the subject of residential group child care, the words “institution” and “institutional” seem to have accrued the following inferences in the public media, and even some professional journals: *bad, uncaring, custodial-not therapeutic, cold, expensive, depersonalizing, inferior, destructive (of family), less professional, simplistic, over-controlling, unclean/overly antiseptic, bulk-order clothing, industrial-hierarchical management, outdated, patriarchal, warehousing humans, large dorms, orderlies in whites (usually ignorant, underpaid, probably sadistic), etc.* Need I go on? (Or, as Beckett said to the King, “I trust I make myself obscure.”)

In similar fashion, look at the terms, “group home,” and “Specialized Foster Care.” You be the judge of whether the following connotations of group homes/foster care accurately describe common inferences or perceptions: *caring, therapeutic, modern, personalized, humanized, individualized, treatment, programmatically advanced, professional, team-based, family-oriented goals, homelike, aesthetic surroundings, etc.*

So, what’s in a word? Really? More than we know. While it is granted

that we need labels as semantic essentials, there is lately a strong use of certain labels in such a way as to – unwittingly or not – violate the inherent, natural logic of all language. Such sloppy thinking – particularly in high places – leads to stereotypical thinking, division where unity is needed, and instead ends up with so many crossing over into “fuzzy sets.” While only semantics, such fuzziness on terms so critical to children’s needs not only breaks down communications, but confuses all those whom we need to illuminate. In such a realm of hidden generalizations and prejudged terminology, certain words become weapons – they become concepts unexamined.

In essence, in numerous settings the word-unchallenged makes helpful communication almost impossible. Worse yet, these errors in language bring out emotions of all sorts – many counterproductive and destructive between parties who need most of all to work as one.

The confusion that is produced arises from what some call, “category mistakes.” That is, to define a class in terms of one member of that class. In plainer terms, if, for example, I were to judge one institution negatively (as above) just by my choice of labels, “fuzzy set” logic would demand that *all* other things called “institutions” would equally share the negative attributes. In a more common-sense approach, phrased this way, of course, we know that not *all* the individuals of a class (i.e., institution, group home, residential service center, etc.) would exhibit the characteristics of just one member of that class. Unfortunately, that latter coolness of logic seldom accompanies carelessly used labels in the child care field.

To help bring this intellectual footwork one step closer to home, pick one similar “buzzword” used in your setting and submit it to a similar logical process. Your results may be interesting. It is hoped, though, that the lesson learned from all such tiptoeing through linguistic gardens is simply this: no matter what our theoretical bias, we may be doing injustice, or even damage, by our own thoughtless use of labels. I suggest that it is far better for us to be our own harshest critics, than to have a stranger and adversary do so out of our blindness.

So in our haste to spread the Word and Wisdom of our particular kind of service to children – from secure psychiatric hospital to alternative wagon train treatment courses – let us avoid the kind of “fuzzy set” comments that confuse rather than clarify, that divide rather than join. Mayer, et al., (GROUP CARE OF CHILDREN: CROSSROADS & TRANSITIONS, New York: Child Welfare League of America, 1977) have stressed – objectively, and in the broadest context – that an integrated spectrum of care is needed to serve the multiple and varied needs of troubled children and families.

Granted, some of us may have worked once at The Gerrymander State

School for Wayward Youth and know first hand that, there at least, BIG institution equaled BAD institution. One bad experience notwithstanding, it remains no new insight to say that some large facilities have residences of no more than eight youth, full professional staffing and support systems. Neither are they depersonalizing in ways described so often in the media with the label, "institution." In fairness, from within our own field, we are painfully aware of marginal to poor group homes or professional foster homes which replicate the "horrors" of "institutions." This occurs in the realm of *quality*, namely by poor quality of care, thin or no support for direct staff, distant or ineffectual supervision, suspect motives, etc.

In looking at both of the above, do we as clear-thinking persons throw out the idea of community group homes? Of course not. Neither should we therefore assume that all residential service centers labelled "institutions" are in the "fuzzy set" of all that we abhor in the care and treatment of children.

Hopefully, out of all this discussion, readers will fine tune or challenge any and all labels used in child care. For as that great thinker, Albert Korzybski (especially in SCIENCE & SANITY), and others have said, "The map is not the territory, the symbol is not the thing symbolized, the word is not the thing." Similarly, as we must challenge all aspects of our care and programs, let us be so very careful that we – in our zeal or scraping for dollars – never be content to blindly assume that the child care labels are automatically what the stereotype infers.

Have you ever seen a "Howdy Doody Boys' Home" renamed to "H.D. Dandy Institute and Residential Treatment Services and Family Counseling Centers, Inc." ? Then, only to find the day-to-day care and program to be substantially unchanged – except perhaps to have a per diem fifty dollars higher a day! Voila! Custodial care becomes treatment! Hoping that a new set of labels will somehow bring a metamorphosis from within is a fine sample of unclear thinking. This only loads the weapons of our critics and discredits so much of the good we are doing.

Now, perhaps, does all that apparently abstract stuff about "sets," "category mistakes," and "class" etc., seem irrelevant to the work we child care practitioners are about? I certainly hope not! Maybe, with all this in mind the next time you sit down with your own E-Street Benny, your enhanced awareness of the power of words will help you be even better at what you now do so well – help kids.

(Responses are welcomed and encouraged. D.L.)