

THE CYC "SWAT TEAM" AND OTHER THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF OUR PROFESSION

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ABSTRACT: Using the recent case of a 16-year-old Ontario boy, this article looks at the benefits derived from the recognition of child and youth care as a major profession. This is discussed in relation to the need for the creation of a specialist designation for community-oriented CYC workers, who would have the training, ability, and power to make systemic and community-wide interventions.

If you want to see why we should be working to make child and youth work a major profession, look no further than the recent case of the 16-year-old boy from Crysler, a small town midway between Ottawa and Cornwall in eastern Ontario. Two weeks after writing a story for his drama class about "a tormented boy who bombs his school to get revenge against the students and teachers who mistreated him," he was arrested for issuing death threats. Within days of the news hitting the national media, he became a *cause célèbre* for writers and freedom of speech advocates, since the charge seemed so out of proportion to the offense. One of Canada's top criminal lawyers offered to represent him free of charge.

Follow-up newspaper articles revealed the boy was often the victim of bullying; as one article put it, "Kids in this town call him weird, scary, a freak." His family was also shunned and taunted, but others in the mainly rural community say the family brought it on themselves. The boy's family say part of the reason they are ostracized is because they are anglophones in a predominantly francophone community. The only positive community experience mentioned among a host of negative experiences between the boy and his family and the community was a reference to a neighbour who the father could talk to. And all of this had been going on for years.

Now imagine if child and youth counselors (CYCs) were a developed profession like medicine, with highly trained specialists, called in to perform delicate operations on a community in crisis. Let's call the specialist, a Community Crisis CYC. Think of them as similar to a SWAT team or hostage negotiator in the police, or a cancer specialist in medicine.

Like the police, they would have other CYCs in the community, at schools, social service agencies, youth centres, etc. Well before the crisis, the school CYCs would be picking up information ("intelligence" as the police say, "symptoms" to doctors) about the teenager in question — the scapegoating/bullying by peers, the response of the school staff (teachers, principal) etc. Community-based CYCs would be noticing the ostracizing

of the family. Other CYCs in social services might have had to deal with a particular problem, like the parents arriving with concerns about the welfare of their son for instance. Maybe a CYC in a youth centre would be aware of the peer culture picture, perhaps knowing about the one or even a few kids who have some sympathy for the teen.

All of these CYCs would do their part to deal with the problem. But let's say that the CYCs in the school and community tried in their individual work areas to address the problem and it was just too severe — these "general practitioners" had to pass the problem on to a specialist. In comes the CCCYCU (Community Crisis CYC Unit). First of all, it's a unit, a unit made up of males and females because all CYCs know that gender plays an important part in any intervention.

They have had their basic training in child and youth work but along with that a Ph.D. or D.CYC (the designation for a more practical doctorate) in community milieu, community child and youth work. They understand group behaviour in communities. They are familiar with all the resources in the community from sports teams, to the police, the hospital, schools, clubs, and social services — all the elements in the community concerned with youth. They also have a reasonable knowledge of all those elements relevant to the adults in the community, the churches, the ethnic groups, the major employers, etc. As part of their Ph.D./D.CYC, they learned to identify all the major points for intervention — the places where the community culture can be changed with the greatest effect. And they also learned how best to do that.

Like any specialty, their training was based on a more detailed and specific form of the basic skills and knowledge of the profession. So, instead of assessing the group in a residential agency or classroom, the personality of the individuals, etc., they went on and learned how to assess a community (the sectors, the interest groups, the culture of the community). They added to their skills in behaviour management, activity planning, and handling routines, and learned how these translate into community child and youth work. Instead of physical restraints, they learned how to do "community restraints" (how to use police, the courts, community leaders, and powerful peers and family members) to restrain behaviour.

Instead of learning how to run a game or activity therapeutically, they learned how to get community activity leaders to alter activities for the good of the community. They learned how to get athletic leagues to include kids who are not normally included, how to get service clubs and businesses to sponsor a greater range of activities, how to get small specialized community groups to pool resources to better serve less popular youth interests in the community. They learned how "community routines" worked in the same way they'd originally learned about the structure of meals, break times, bedtimes, etc. And like all professional CYCs today, they paid particular attention to the transition times — but at the community level, the transition from home to school in the morning

for kids, from home to jobs and appointments for parents, from supper to evening community activities. They knew how to set up car pools and how to affect public transit providers, like the school bus companies responsible for the major transition times for young people.

They just knew how to do good basic CYC things but at a very specialized level. And in the Cornwall area, of course they were bilingual and were well aware of the dominant cultures there. Besides their knowledge of group dynamics taken in basic training, they had also studied group dynamics at the community level, the dynamics between dominant cultures and subcultures. They also knew, both theoretically and practically, how the larger societal groups interacted, the church, the justice, educational, and medical system. They were as good on community dynamics as Fritz Redl was on group dynamics in a residence. They were specialists.

Maybe they were employed by the Ontario Provincial Police, or the county government. But more likely they were part of a division in the greatly expanded Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Provincial CYC Division. It was formed after the province realized (from extensive research and after intensive lobbying) that dealing with youth social problems through the justice system was like the early medical treatment of epilepsy by beatings and restraints, futile attempts to treat symptoms rather than causes.

However they were employed, one thing was certain. They had clout. If the principal or school board wanted to persist in charging the teen, the CYCs could (community) restrain them. If the bullying group persisted, there would be meaningful consequences (probably delivered through their families). If the ostracized family persisted, there would likely be consequences through their employer.

But let's face it, most of this is pretty unrealistic — such heavy-duty methods would likely never be required. If CYC services were in the community the way they should be, the teen would have been integrated long ago, in elementary school or earlier. A school-based CYC through her connection (“relationship”) with the teacher and the principal, and the kids in the school, would have picked up on the boy and been working to find a place for him in the peer group. She or he would have found activities for the bullies long ago, so that they wouldn't need to use bullying as a way to feel important. Maybe some of the bullies would have been in the same writing club as the teen, and the others into their various clubs, teams, and so on.

Likewise, there would have been, as part of the restructuring of social services, an expanded social work team in the county. Trained in the new methods, and properly funded, they would have dealt with the (now) ostracized family on their arrival, before the exclusion dynamic had a chance to get entrenched. As with the CYCs, early intervention would have prevented the situation from ever reaching the ridiculous level outlined in the news reports.

And the CCCYC Unit would never need to be involved. They would be working on a much trickier problem in the Cornwall area, one that was extensively covered in the media a couple of years before this story about the teen making death threats. It was about a well-organized child abuse ring involving a number of influential members of the community. That's where the expertise of a Community Crisis CYC Unit should really be put to use — in the detection and "treatment" of the CYC equivalent of a very insidious cancer. And both situations, the child abuse ring and the ostracized teen and his family, cry out for CYC expertise at all levels — and gives us all another reason to make child and youth work a major profession.