

RESPONSE TO "THE CYC SWAT TEAM"

Carol Stuart

*School of Child and Youth Care
Ryerson Polytechnic University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

In his vision of a "CYC SWAT Team" Dennis McDermott gives us many things to think about that have implications for how we "do business" as we build for the future of our profession. His translation of the familiar concepts of residential child and youth work (routines, restraints, therapeutic activity programming, and strategies for easing transition times) into concepts that are equally relevant in working with communities highlights how easily our language and behaviour can be transferred into different milieus. Child and youth care practice is based in the milieu yet only recently have we begun to think beyond the residential milieu as the focus of our intervention and understand that we have much to offer in other milieus. In the past, the seemingly ordinary nature of our job and how we describe it may have hindered our development as a profession, yet McDermott uses the "ordinary" to provoke thought about the future of our profession.

One of the opportunities for thought in his vision is that of applying the concepts and language we use in a residential setting to the milieus of schools, youth centres, hospitals, daycares, neighbourhoods, and so on. Children and youth are the significant members in these settings, where other professionals (teachers, recreation programmers, nurses, physiotherapists, early childhood educators, after school care workers) have specialized functions. In residential settings, such specialists have entered our territory, explained what they do and we have welcomed them. We have struggled to explain what we do when we enter their territories. McDermott suggests we might make that clearer by using the language that we already have. He uses the language of police and physicians to describe our use of relationship to gather information and resources demonstrating how one set of terms can be used to describe the actions of another, translating the ideas into an understandable form.

He asks us to imagine that by using the principles of group dynamics a child and youth practitioner could change the way the justice and educational systems interact with each other. Imagine that the educational system suddenly valued the deviant youth and willingly accommodated their needs, understanding how the structure of the system and its requirements for conformity were harmful to those who are "different." Currently the power to make such change lies only with the policy makers who are under the control of the politicians, elected by the public.

This forces me to think about how comfortable we are with power. Perhaps the reason that we have not developed further as a profession is that we are not willing to command the power that he suggests we must. It is one thing to restrain a child or youth who is acting aggressively and whose behaviour is outside the norms of society. It is quite another thing to actively command power in a community by "restraining" a principal or teacher from charging a child. Such an intervention could require the use of strategies ranging from public embarrassment of another professional to the breaching of confidentiality by explaining the circumstances of a client or family in order to make a convincing and logical argument against laying charges. Are you personally willing to take these steps? Are we as a profession willing to accept these behaviours as strategies for change, or would they be considered ethically inappropriate? We have asked these same questions of 'restraint' in the residential setting. Arguments about its validity, appropriate technique, and ethics have raged for years. McDermott suggests we take our ethical discussions to a new level.

There are many areas that McDermott's vision forces us to consider, but let me comment lastly on his use of the term "CYC SWAT team." The "Special Weapons and Tactics" (SWAT) Team, by its very language, evokes images of force and violence. It is actually a term borrowed from the police to describe what CYCs are, too often, called upon to do in whatever milieu we work; that is, deal with crisis when all other "ordinary" options have been tried. Child and youth care practice consists of what appears to be a set of ordinary day to day tasks (managing routines; programming activities; "relating" to children, youth, and each other) interspersed with crisis. After a period of time on the job, we become crisis experts as well as experts in the "ordinary." Our training prepares us for this expertise in part because we are comfortable with and aware of our own stress in such situations. Thus, we can remain calm when those about us are panicking in the face of their own fears and assumptions about the situation. We can manage the dichotomy of genuine caring in the face of a (often) violent act. The power and violence associated with the "SWAT team" is not our method of crisis intervention. McDermott does not suggest that it is. In fact, his vision of what the CYC SWAT team does is the opposite of what a Special Weapons and Tactics Team is all about. Our special weapons are the strength of the relationships that we have with children, youth, and adults that allows us to intervene in crisis in a powerfully humane manner. This strength is built in our ordinary day to day interactions and in our ability to return to the ordinary following a conflict and continue to value and care about the people we have confronted.

McDermott challenges us to consider a vision whereby we add depth to what already exists in our theories of practice and claim what we already have as a speciality instead of dismissing it as "something that everyone does." In spite of superficial appearances, everyone does NOT

know how to develop relationships; how to make conscious use of one's self to change others, how to manage transitions and program activities in a therapeutic manner. Taking these skills from one setting to another requires a practitioner that is reflective, thinks critically, and recognizes how existing knowledge and skill can solve problems in a new context. It is this development of depth and the transferability of skill that must be the focus of graduate education and will enable the child and youth care practitioner and the field of practice to expand.