

THE NORTH AMERICAN CERTIFICATION PROJECT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: In 1999, individuals and organizations representing a wide range of child and youth care workers came together to set up the North American Certification Project. The goals of this group include the identification of core competencies of the field, determination of the educational, ethical, and other requirements for entry into the profession, and establishment of a national system for credentialing child and youth care practitioners. Progress to date includes the completion of the first publishable draft of the core competencies document, a developing consensus on the educational and other requirements for a "first professional level" credential, and a schedule for the completion of the project. In this article, the author places current developments in the context of the project as a whole.

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The field of child and youth care has evolved from the days of orphanages and insane asylums into the modern world of community-based work with a wide variety of children, youth, and their families. As the world has changed more rapidly, the field of child and youth care has changed more rapidly. Long-term social trends have combined to create a crisis for children in need of care and supervision by adults outside of their own families. As turnover among the direct-care workers responsible for the care and treatment of these children and youth continues unabated, as the complexity of the problems faced by these children escalates, and as the level of sophistication required from child and youth care practitioners increases, the field faces new difficulties in selection, training, and retention of workers who are capable of providing safe and effective care. The creation of standards of practice, methods of credentialing competent professional workers, and professionalization of child and youth care has become a high priority.

The Problem

The field of child and youth care has always faced serious workforce issues. However, in the past few years these challenges have grown to a crisis level. Currently, workforce challenges include: a wide variance in the professional attitudes, knowledge, and skills among direct care staff members; high rates of turnover among these individuals; difficulty in attracting new staff members with the potential to become proficient practitioners; and the challenge of training new staff to meet the needs of children and youth, some of whom are more disturbed and troubled than ever before. At the same time, practitioners are now routinely expected

to work not only with the children and youth but also with their families and the communities that surround the families. Legal and ethical considerations, some of which conflict with one another, govern the day-to-day work. More is expected of child and youth care workers as the demand and the complexity of the challenge grows, but the resources available have not kept pace.

Over the past two years, national organizations such as the Child Welfare League of America have assembled study groups, held conferences, and issued reports on the workforce crisis in an attempt to address the issue at a level that Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) defines as a macrosystem. The North American Certification Project was formed to address these urgent questions: What does a professional child and youth worker need to know? What does a professional child and youth worker need to be able to do? What are the standards of practice in the field?

In my own practice as the administrator of a residential treatment center, the effect of these problems is to make it more difficult to provide a high level of care and treatment to the children, youth, and families we serve. The frequency of staff turnover has increased significantly over the past few years. This turnover has forced us to accelerate our orientation and training of new staff members, while increasing the cost of staffing programs. The problems we face at the mesosystem level clearly are related to the issues in the larger system: a lack of any national standards of practice for the profession, the vague image of child and youth care as a profession at a national and international level, poor reimbursement by the government for the costs of employing professional staff members, and the absence of any organization with considerable influence to advocate for increased pay, training, and recognition of professional child and youth care workers.

At the microsystem level, the individual child is served by a constantly changing cast of staff members, which increases the child's caution about becoming attached to any individual. The individual staff member is often less educated, less experienced, and less trained than in past years, which leads to difficulties in the child's treatment. Untrained and inexperienced staff members are more likely to engage the child in a struggle over control issues rather than helping him/her focus on accepting responsibility and learning to respond in more positive ways. Children get hurt and staff members get hurt more often, which means that the treatment process is complicated by issues of trust and safety. In community-based programs, the individual youth worker works with an individual youth in the context of differing cultures, complex family systems, and differing standards for parenting and child care.

Without staff members who are well-educated, empowered, and committed to the field, child and youth care work in the many programs across North America can never meet the challenges of caring for and treating children and families, especially given the complexities of that mission today and in the future. The chronic erosion of professional standards, pay, and support for most direct-care staff members over the past

dozen years has simply made worse a system that was already in trouble, transforming a problem into a crisis. It is time now for those in the forefront of the field to provide the leadership that will turn this situation around.

THE HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM

As Hersey and Blanchard stated, "a problem in a situation exists when there is a discrepancy between what is happening (the real) and what you or someone who hired you (point of view) would like to see happening (the ideal)" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p. 334), and further, "once a discrepancy (problem) has been identified, the goal of analysis is to determine why the problem exists" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988 p. 335). Management experts recommend that, before setting out plans and solutions, a leader should analyze what in the environment might have created the problem or the discrepancy between the real and the ideal (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988).

The current workforce crisis in the field of child and youth care results, in part, from the rapid growth and frequent changes in the field itself. One of the largest components of the child and youth care field, for example, is the foster care system in the United States, which removes children in danger from their homes for a period of time. As the number of reported cases of child abuse increased dramatically over the years since the child welfare system was implemented, from 1.2 million reports in 1980 to 3.1 million in 1995 (Curtis, Dale, & Kendall, 1999, p. 10), and the number of children placed in foster care grew from 262,000 children in 1982 to 462,000 in 1994 (Curtis et al., 1999, p. 51), the number of foster parents, child and youth care workers, therapists, caseworkers, and other direct-care professionals grew in proportion to the expansion in client numbers. Meanwhile, the pay, status, and standards for child welfare practitioners did not keep pace with either inflation or with the growth in other fields. Curtis and his colleagues reported that the professionalization and rationalization of the child welfare field has lagged behind many other fields (Curtis et al., p. 234), and the development of the professional standards, knowledge, pay, and status of child and youth workers has lagged behind the development of other professions in the field. Attitudes and beliefs both within the profession and within the public at large may be that child and youth care work is "women's work" best performed by caring but not professional workers (Kelly, 1990). At the same time, from sources both within and outside of the child welfare field, questions have arisen about the effectiveness of the child welfare system in accomplishing its goals and what methods work (Kluger, Alexander, & Curtis, 2000). This has caused priorities and funding in the field to change rapidly and has made long-term planning difficult for leaders in the field, who increasingly react to crises instead.

Many of the same factors affect other child and youth care practice settings (juvenile justice programs, day care centers, community-based recreation programs, for example). Bennis (1989) summarized the pivotal forces at work in society as technology, global interdependence, mergers and acquisitions, deregulation and regulation, and demographics and values. With minor adjustments for nonprofit and public organizations (translating "mergers and acquisitions" into "demands for more interdependence and joint planning" for example), the same factors are transforming the field of child and youth care. These trends challenge leaders to do better work in an environment that is changing rapidly. In response, leaders will have to see more clearly, prioritize better, and transform the rules in order to ensure that qualified individuals are taking care of our children.

THE HISTORY OF THE PROFESSION

Through the last fifty years, as the field has changed and matured, it has produced the profession of child and youth care. Orphanages became residential treatment centers and children's transitional homes in the period from the 1950's through the 1970's, and the professional services of child and family practitioners were extended into communities and schools over the past thirty years. Thus the roles (and the titles) of child and youth care workers changed to fit models that increasingly acknowledged the importance of and need for professionalism in child and youth workers.

Landmark works by the pioneers of the field, such as Fritz Redl and David Wineman (1951, 1952) and Bruno Bettelheim (1950), focussed on development of residential centers and emphasized the importance of direct care work while giving little attention to the role of the child and youth care worker, which Redl referred to as the "housemother" (Redl, 1951, p. 49). By 1963, however, leaders in the field such as Morris Fritz Mayer (1963) and Henry Maier (1963) were writing extensively about the types of individuals who were entering the profession of "child care work," making observations about their training and the development of the profession. As a new generation of nationally-recognized authors began to describe the methods and theory of the field in the late 1960's and early 1970's, "child care workers" became central to the writings of Albert E. Trieschman, James K. Whittaker, and Larry K. Brendtro (1969) and the development of a profession of child and youth care was seen as inevitable and necessary. For example, the indices to three of Redl's books lists child and youth care workers once, referring to a "housemother," while the index for *The Other 23 Hours*, authored by Trieschman and others. (1969) lists six page references for "child care workers" and uses the term throughout the book. The index for Whittaker and Trieschman's book *Children Away from Home* (1972) lists 27 separate page references for "counselor," the title they preferred to use for child and youth care workers, along with another page reference for "Counselor, European."

Beginning in the 1970's, however, the definition of the role of professional child care work reflected the recognition that youth is a life stage separate and distinct from childhood and to the emphasis on working as a support for the child's family in order to return the child to the family as soon as possible. By the 1980's, Frank Ainsworth (1981), Karen VanderVen (1980), and Jerome Beker (1979) observed that the profession of "child care work" or "group care practice" had emerged, although they believed that many steps toward professionalization were still needed. By 2001, Thom Garfat and C. Niall McElwee (2001) wrote about the changing role of the family in child and youth care practice and changes in the settings in which the profession is practiced as "child and youth care workers" acted as facilitators in the relationship between the child/youth and their families, often in the community or in the families' homes.

Three generations of leaders in the field of child and youth care have recognized and supported the development of a profession of child and youth care practice. This would serve as a means of solving the problems of direct-care staff members: a lack of adequate knowledge and skills, poor teamwork as a result of a lack of a clear professional identity, and poor recruitment and retention. The need for and central importance of the direct-care child and youth care worker has been documented in the literature of the field for the past 50 years. Considerable progress toward the goal of professionalizing the practice of child and youth care work has been made.

Ainsworth (1981) outlined the steps that will lead to the development of the profession: the emergence of professional training programs; the creation of national, state, and local organizations that represent the interests of the profession; upgrading the practice standards for the profession, the specification of educational qualifications required for entry into the field; the definition of professional boundaries and areas of competence for the profession; and a state or professionally controlled credentialing system. In 1981, Frank Ainsworth was able to state, "in North America work has clearly begun on all these matters" (p. 227-228), and over the past twenty years the work has progressed.

In 1999, three organizations (the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care Work, the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, and the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations) united to launch a broad effort to define the standards of practice and credentialing standards for the profession of child and youth care in North America. The coalition that was formed to accomplish these tasks, the North American Certification Project, or NACP, set as its agenda three steps toward this goal: (1) the identification of the core competencies (professional skills, knowledge, and attitudes) of the field; (2) the determination of the educational, ethical, and other requirements for entry into the field; and (3) the establishment of a national certification system for child and youth care workers in the United States. The NACP has solicited and received endorsement of the unified national credential from a large number of state and provincial associations of child and

youth care workers, most of the university programs in child and youth care in North America, many of the individuals who are recognized as leaders in the field, and other national organizations in the field. During the past three years, work groups were assembled to tackle the work required to accomplish each of the three goals of the NACP.

Martha Mattingly, from the University of Pittsburgh, headed up the Core Competencies work group, which eventually included a large number of academics and direct practice professionals. The ambitious task set for this work group was to conduct a meta-analysis of existing lists of competencies for child and youth care workers and, eventually, to create one set of competencies that could be used as the base for creating the national credential and the related training and education programs across North America. In 2001, the Core Competencies Work Group delivered its first publishable draft of the competencies.

The work group assigned to accomplish the second and third goals of the NACP, setting the minimum standards for entry into the profession and creating the process for credentialing practitioners, was chaired by Martha Holden, a faculty member at Cornell University. The committee has succeeded in defining the educational and other requirements for entry into the profession at a "first professional level" (the baccalaureate level) and is presently working on creating the organizational structure and gaining the legal status for operation for NACP so that the system can be administered. This work group will soon be finished with its work.

Within the last few months, Dale Curry and I assumed the positions of co-chairs of the subcommittee on setting up the certification examination and the other assessment procedures to screen candidates for certification. I have been given the honor of serving as both the spokesperson for the NACP and the chair of the third work group, which is responsible for public relations and coordination of the effort with other associations, individuals, and academic programs. This third work group, the Resources and Coordination Committee, is also responsible for the coordination of the NACP plan and for finding the financial and other resources for the project. We have managed to accumulate a substantial amount of money to be used in the first stages of the implementation of the national credential while we also have been able to obtain many donated services to offset other costs. With additional support, we should be able to create the resources to help us with the next steps of the project.

The most important priorities for the NACP over the next two years will be to develop methods of evaluating professional competence and the organizational structure to implement the program. The NACP will be responsible for researching the best practices in constructing and evaluating professional certification examinations, including the use of authentic assessment methods and simulations, and other methods to assess competence. A committee presently composed of approximately 25 experts in the field from cities around the United States and Canada will develop the

assessment tools and implement them. Soon, we will have selected multiple sites where we will test and evaluate the assessment tools and the credentialing procedures. NACP plans to implement the new credential across the United States within the next two years and then will conduct a program evaluation of the certification program.

The publication of the core competencies document is the first significant step down the road towards establishing standards of practice for the profession of child and youth care. It will also lead to establishment of methods for credentialing practitioners who can demonstrate knowledge of the competencies. The achievement of the Core Competencies Work Group can only be understood and evaluated in the context of the history of the profession.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Progress has been made in the field of child and youth care over the past fifty years. However, the urgent need for standards that can be applied nationally (and possibly internationally) and the complexity of coordinating a large number of practitioners, academics, organizations, and institutions has often led observers to conclude that the process of professionalization is bogged down or has been led off track. For example, in 1992 Beker, concluded that "in our private moments, we admit to ourselves and to each other that, despite impressive accomplishments in publication and in a few educational programs, the field as a whole has not moved very far along the road to professionalization (p.4)."

With the birth of the North American Certification Project, practitioners have been given an opportunity to move the process of establishing the profession of child and youth care work forward. This initiative follows in the footsteps of Redl, Maier, Trieschman, Beker, Brendtro, VanderVen, Kruger, Garfat, and the other leaders who have worked at the task for decades. Whether by divine intervention, historical destiny, or pure luck, a large number of the national organizations and leaders in the field seemed ready at the same time to pull together toward a common goal of setting professional standards in our field.

If the certification process is not developed over the next few years, the momentum will be lost, and it is largely up to us to keep it going. We could study the profession of child and youth care to death, literally. It is time to get this done. It is time for action. If we hesitate too long, the opportunity will be lost. We know that many of the steps we will have to take (such as fashioning a certification examination), will create legal, ethical, and political difficulties. From studying the development of other professions, we know how difficult it is to establish and maintain the credibility of a professional credential. From decades of work toward professionalization of child and youth care work, we understand the sacrifices that will have to be made in the process, and the complexity of defining what is best in caring for children, youth, and their families.

The individuals involved in the North American Certification Project are knowledgeable and committed, and the mission of the group is urgent. When we are successful in creating a new profession that can improve the lives of children, it will be because we were all able to work together and bring to bear all of our combined capabilities. The Core Competencies document is the evidence to date that it can be done, and done well.

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