

NEXUS: A CONNECTION, LINK. A CONNECTED GROUP OR SERIES

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For this column, interconnected motions, actions, and attitudes in youth work—also, the name of a fictitious agency for youth where effective youth work is practiced.

"The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions and new sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or uncharacteristic, marked by all the defects of a weak draftsman. And when they were rejected a number of tolerable ones were left, which now had to be rearranged and cut down, so that if you looked at them you could get a picture of a landscape. Thus the book is really only an album (from Wittgenstein's preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, 1951, pages unnumbered)."

At Nexus, the youth workers and youth create moments that become part of their stories. Their goal is to create as many moments of connection, discovery and empowerment as possible. Intertwined with these moments are moments of struggle and failure, which are equally important. One way to think of these moments is as photos or sketches, as Wittgenstein did in his work, that help the youth make new meanings of self and the world around them. As they interact, together, the youth workers and youth create tolerable and enlightening experiences (sketches, photos, etc.) to add to their stories (albums).

Transitions*

Nicole and Matt are working together with six youth, Cathie, Maria, Ramon, Ron, Cheryl, and Nick at the group home, Nexus, a two-story house in the center of a medium-sized city. It's an older building that has been decorated and livened with the youths' art and music.

Nicole is sitting with Cathie, Maria and Ramon at the dining room table, working on budgets. She is teaching them how to manage money, a skill they will need when they leave the group home and have to live on their own.

"My parents never had a budget," Maria says.

"Neither did mine. They never sat down like this and wrote down how they would spend their money," Ramon says.

**The story Transitions will be published in the next book, *In the Rhythms of Youth Passing*, forthcoming in 2004 from Haworth Press.*

"Each family does it a little differently. My parents didn't do it quite like this, but I find it helpful myself to have a budget, otherwise I tend to spend more than I have," Nicole says

"How can you spend more than you have?" Cathie asks.

"Charge cards."

"Yeah, I can't wait to get a charge card," Ramon says.

"Charge cards can be helpful especially if you don't want to carry a lot of money, but they can also be a problem."

"How?" Maria asks.

"You spend more than you can pay back and get further and further in debt," Nicole says.

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"We're leaving now," Matt, Nicole's co-worker says, as he walks through the dining room with three other youth: Nick, Cheryl, and Ron. They are on their way to the playground to play basketball. It's a familiar walk, one they take together two or three times a week..

Nick is sad and worried. He's leaving the group home. In a few days he'll be going into independent living. Like the other youth in the program, at age 18, he will have to make it on his own.

It's a warm fall day. They choose sides. Cheryl and Ron will play Nick and Matt. As they warm up with jumpers and hook shots, they playfully try to block each other's shots.

The early moments of the game go smoothly, as if choreographed by their history of playing together. They know and anticipate each other's moves. The score bounces back and forth. A shot is blocked, a rebound grabbed, a ball falls cleanly through the net.

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During the game, similar to the way he works with them in other activities, Matt tries to get a feel for where each youth is and positions himself in a way that he can help advance the game. After about forty-five minutes of play, the score is tied. They take a break and drink from the jar of ice water Matt brought from the group home. Nick sits next to Matt on the asphalt with his back to the chain link fence. As Cheryl and Ron stand nearby, ribbing one another about an errant pass or blocked shot, Nick begins to think again about his departure from the group home. Then he stands and knocks the ball out of Ron's hands and the game is on again.

The pace intensifies. Matt and Nick stretch the lead, then the others catch up and go ahead. Nick shoves Ron as he goes for a loose ball. Ron turns and gets in Nick's face. "Cool it," Matt says, holding the ball. He waits until they back away from each other and throws the ball back into play.

Cheryl scores, putting her team ahead by four. On the inbounds, Matt passes to Nick in the corner. He goes up for a jumper. Ron times his leap perfectly and blocks the ball an instant after it leaves Nick's hand.

"Foul!" Nick shouts.

"Bull, it was clean," Ron responds, mocking Nick by imitating how he blocked the shot.

"Fuck you!"

Fists clenched by his side, Ron walks slowly toward Nick.

Matt steps in between them.

"He's just worried about leaving," Ron says.

"No I'm not, motha fucker," Nick responds.

Ron raises his fists, lunges forward, pretending he's ready to fight.

"Cool it, Ron! You too, Nick. Let's take a break," Matt says.

"I don't need to settle down. He fouled me," Nick points at Ron.

"Ron and Cheryl, take a few shots at the other end while I talk to Nick," Matt says and motions for Nick to follow him to the side of the court.

"Why do I have to talk to you, he's the one who started it," Nick says.

Matt takes a drink of ice water and hands it to Nick, then says, "Look, I understand about your leaving. I'm going to miss you and so are the rest of the guys, but getting into it with Ron won't help. If you want to talk, I'm here to listen."

"I don't want to talk about it here."

"Okay, later then, but cool it for the rest of the game."

Nick looks down at his shoes.

"Nick?" Matt says, waiting for a response.

Nick nods, reluctantly.

"Okay, let's get rolling," Matt shouts and the game regains its earlier rhythm. They play for about fifteen more minutes. Cheryl and Ron win by a basket.

"Good game," Matt says, then looks at Nick and playfully bumps him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, good game," Nick says.

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As they walk back, their pace slower now than before the game, Matt thinks about how leaving is always difficult for the boys, those who leave and those who stay. Nick's leaving has probably stirred up similar feelings in Ron and Cheryl, who will leave in a few months. He shifts position to be closer to one youth, then another, and talks about dinner and the program about jazz they will watch on TV after they do their homework.

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The smell of tacos has filled the group home, a duplex that was converted a few years ago into a group home for youth transitioning to independent living. It's full of symbols of youth—posters, pictures, music and magazines that say this is a place where young people live and this is who they are.

Cathie, Maria, and Ramon are in the kitchen with Nicole making dinner. This is one of many activities they engage in to develop the skills and feelings they will need when they live on their own. Throughout the day they do chores and develop skills that will help them when they get a full-time job. They also learn how to problem solve, open banking accounts, drive a car and talk about their feelings.

Maria and Nicole are chopping lettuce, tomatoes, onions and green peppers for the tacos. Ramon is grating cheese. Cathie is frying ground beef.

"When will we eat? I'm starving," Ron says.

"In a few minutes. You can set the table," Nicole responds.

Nick, Matt, and Cheryl help Ron set the table while Nicole and the other boys put the food into bowls and set it in the middle of the table. Before they sit down, Matt lowers the volume of the music. Each meal begins by having one youth share something that happened during their day. Tonight it's Cheryl's turn.

"Ron and I crushed Nick and Matt in two-on-two," she says, imitating a jumper by flicking her wrist in front of her face.

"Crushed us? What game were you playing in?" Matt jokes.

"Two f...lousy points," Nick says, catching himself before he says the curse word.

"Pass the cheese, I'm starving," Ron says, preparing his taco. The bowls begin to move around the table, passed from one hand to another as the boys and workers build tacos. As the conversation and the meal take on a rhythm of their own, there is a sense of harmony, but then suddenly the rhythm is interrupted.

"Give me that!" Ramon shouts at Maria.

Nicole looks at Ramon.

"She's hogging the tomatoes," Ramon says.

"Maria, pass Ramon the tomatoes," Nicole says.

The meal regains its flow. After dessert, they work together to clean up. There is some jostling, swearing and playful teasing as they wash and dry the dishes together. Matt and Nicole treat each situation in context, ignoring some incidents and intervening in others, then the youth go to their rooms to study.

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During study hour, Matt and Nicole make sure that each youth gets individual attention. The tone of the group home is compatible with study, with both quiet background music and noise as they question and praise the youth, looking for moments of connection and discovery.

"How do you think that problem might be solved?" Matt asks Maria, putting his hand on her shoulder as he stands behind Maria, who is at the desk in her room.

"What's another way of thinking about what that story means?" Nicole asks Ron as she sits with him in the living room reading a short story for his literature class.

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After study hour they break into two groups. Cathie, Maria, and Ron go with Matt to watch a documentary on jazz and the other three go with Nicole to the recreation room in the basement to continue work on a mural. The mural is a work in progress that covers and circles the walls in the recreation room. Each youth is asked to add something that is an expression of him or herself. What they paint is entirely up to them as long as they do it with respect for the work of the others and the spirit of the mural. No gang symbols, swearing, or scenes of graphic sex or violence, in other words. They work together, each youth and Nicole in his or her own space.

"I like that, especially the color scheme," Nicole says to Cheryl.

"It's a mandala we were learning about them in class," Cheryl says and explains to Nicole about mandalas.

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Upstairs the others are watching the documentary, which is portraying the history of jazz and blues and its many leaders.

"I told you the brothers started rock and roll. Jazz, blues, then rock and roll. Elvis, this guy Benny Goodman, they were just along for the ride," Ron says.

"Yeah, but they got all the money," Cathie says.

"I never knew all this," Maria says.

"Man, where you been," Ron replies.

Matt comes in with a bowl of popcorn, hands each boy a napkin and soft drink. He's learning as much about music as the boys are.

"Hip hop comes from jazz," Ron says. "It all does."

Nicole pokes her head in the room.

"I thought I smelled popcorn. I'll get the others and we'll join you."

"Good," Matt says.

Ron and Nick quickly fill their napkins with popcorn.

"I can make more, don't worry, there'll be plenty," Matt says.

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The youth and workers sit together on the floor in harmony, eating popcorn and watching the rest of the documentary. Then it's time for bed. Nicole turns off the TV and picks up the empty bowl of popcorn. Matt turns on some quiet music and says, "Okay, let's go."

There is some playful pushing and shoving as the boys climb the stairs and take turns using the bathroom. Matt and Nicole help them straighten their things and get their materials ready for school.

"Lights out," Nicole says.

Each youth slowly gets into bed. Roommates, Ron and Ramon, like a little quiet music as they fall to sleep. Cheryl likes her room totally dark. Cathie and Maria leave the blinds open so the streetlight can shine through. Nick, like most of the youth when they are getting near the time to leave, has his own room.

Nicole and Matt spend a little time with each youth, giving them the attention they need. Some youth like to talk a little, others just need a friendly goodnight and perhaps a hand on the shoulder or a cover pulled up to their chin. Nicole stops in Nick's room last. He's still reading.

"C'mon, time for lights out," Nicole says.

"I know, I was just reading a little longer. This book is hard to read, but it's really good," Nick says referring to *Portrait of An Artist as a Young Man*.

"Yes, it was hard for me too," Nicole says.

"The author is really trying to be himself, isn't he?"

"Yes. How are you doing?" Nicole asks, as he sets the book on the desk for Nick and turns off the reading light.

"Okay, I guess."

"Yeah, it's difficult, I know, but I think you're going to find your way too, and we'll be here if you need to come back to talk..." Nicole catches herself, tells herself to listen and not try to make things better, a weakness of hers.

"I know, but I'm still worried...." Nick says.

Nicole pulls up a chair, sits and listens as Nick talks about home and being on his own.

In another room, Matt talks to Cheryl, who has been sexually abused.

"Will I ever find a man who will want and respect me?" she asks. Matt tries to assure her that she will.

Afterthought

Recently several leaders in the field met to discuss implementation of professional certification (see the report titled Cream City Summit III in this issue of Child and Youth Care Work). It just struck me again that it is very important to frame the competencies in the contexts, such as the ones above.