

THE PROMISE OF PROFESSIONALISM ARRIVES IN PRACTICE: PROGRESS ON THE NORTH AMERICAN CERTIFICATION PROJECT

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ABSTRACT: The North American Certification Project (Mattingly, Stuart, VanderVen, 2002) is a joint response by the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (ACYCP, US, formerly NOCCWA), the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations (CCCYCA), and the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care Work (ILC) to establish professional-level certification for child and youth care practitioners. Five domains were identified: Professionalism, Applied Human Development, Cultural and Human Diversity, Relationship and Communication, and Developmental Practice Methods. The proposed requirements for certification include a minimum of a Bachelor's degree, related experience, training related to the domains, professional references, and professional membership. Competency assessment methods, including examination, supervisor evaluation, and portfolio are being designed.

Key words: child and youth care, professionalization, certification

In recent years, a workforce crisis among practitioners in the field of child welfare has developed (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003) as workers in the child welfare field have become frustrated and feel poorly supported (Light, 2003), leading to high rates of turnover (Drais-Parillo, 2002). The fields of child day care or early childhood education (Macdonald & Merrill, 2002), after-school programs (Halpern, 2002), and psychiatric institutions for children and adolescents (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2002) face similar issues. Evidence in the literature suggests that the presence of some or all of these workforce factors also correlate with abuse of the children or youth in care (Bednar, 2003), increased use of physical restraint with children and youth in care (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2002; Jones & Timbers, 2003), poor client satisfaction with the services provided (Bednar, 2003), and inadequate service quality and outcomes (Bednar, 2003; Halpern, 2002; Macdonald & Merrill, 2002). Savicki (2001) found that a lack of peer cohesion, poor supervisor support, work overload, environmental disorder, and a lack of autonomy, in addition to certain

individual personality factors, all correlated with burnout among child and youth care workers. The same study showed that 21% were suffering extreme symptoms of burnout, 62% were classified in a *mixed burnout* category, and only 17% were classified in the *low burnout* group.

Lochhead (2001) stressed the "chicken and egg" nature of many of the problems in the field. For example: the profession of child and youth care does not have a positive and clear identity; which means that there is no strong public support for funding for the field; which means that the system is under-funded and working conditions are dire; which leads to poor training, low standards for workers, and rapid turnover; which means that the quality of practitioners is often not good; which leads to problems that are played up in the press because of the negative image of the field; which leads to less positive information and a poorly-defined identity for the profession. According to Lochhead, the challenge for the leaders in the field is to take practical steps that will break some of these cycles.

For the past thirty years, a group of practitioners, educators, researchers, and theorists in the field of child and youth care have discussed, written about, and organized a profession of child and youth care practice in North America with the goal of changing some of the underlying factors that have contributed to these chronic problems (Kelly, 1990; Krueger, 2002; Lochhead, 2001; Thomas, 2002). When a profession has been established firmly, the benefits to employers could include lower levels of burnout and turnover among direct care workers; the benefits to the children and youths involved in the systems could include more competent and compassionate care in the context of more stable relationships; and the benefits to the practitioner could include enhanced status, more autonomy and authority, and higher wages.

Although definitions of *profession* vary and the literature includes evidence of disagreement on the steps to be taken to reach the goal of professionalization, a consensus has evolved in recent years that a system for certifying that individual child and youth care practitioners meet defined standards of competence will be necessary. Relatively little has been published in the child and youth care field about the methods for assessing a practitioner's competence. However, a substantial literature exists in other fields about certification examinations and other methods of assessing professional competence.

The North American Certification Project (NACP) (Mattingly, Stuart, VanderVen, 2002) arose from a broad opinion that North American certification for Child and Youth Care Practitioners is urgently needed. This project is a joint response by the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (ACYCP, US, formerly NOCCWA), the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations (CCCYCA), and the International Leadership Coalition for Professional Child and Youth Care Work (ILC). The organizations formally supporting this are: the Academy of Child and Youth Care Professionals, the Albert E. Trieschman Center, ACYCP, the Child Welfare League of America, CCCYCA, ILC, and the National

Resource Center for Youth Services. The project is unfunded and supported by the efforts of the Child and Youth Care professional community. Numerous mature child and youth care practitioners and academics from Canada and the United States have provided, and are providing, project leadership, support, materials, and critical comments, all essential to the success of this effort.

The project is guided by the current description of the field, and is committed to the principles of inclusion of organizations and persons concerned with setting standards for CYC practitioners, credibility, generic standards applicable to the broad array of practice settings, reciprocity among governmental units and practice settings, and support for the ethical standards of the field. Three levels of certification are probably needed for the full development of the profession: entry level, first professional level (roughly comparable to that of a teacher or social worker), and an advanced level. NACP currently is focused on developing certification for the first professional level.

This paper reviews the work completed and in process toward the establishment of the competencies, the proposed certification process, and the design for the assessment of the competencies. The educational system, governmental organization, and the development of professional bodies differ between the US and Canada. The certification process described here is for the United States. Appropriate Canadian bodies and constituencies are attending to this issue for Canada.

DEVELOPING THE COMPETENCIES

For many years, organizations concerned with child and youth care practice have developed statements of standards--most are not part of the indexed literature. To develop the NACP competencies document, materials related to practitioner standards and competency in the field were collected, reviewed, and prepared for analysis. In a process spanning about five years, a group of child and youth care professionals, both academics and practitioners, worked with this material. The task was to use the collected documents as a foundation, and also to include an interpretation of meaning, fill in existing gaps, remove what was not useful, articulate new directions, make the language clear and direct, and establish congruence with current scholarship.

Values related to practice were extracted and edited and now appear as a Foundational Values for Professional Child and Youth Care Practice. Four competency domains were identified: Professionalism, Applied Human Development, Relationship and Communication, and Developmental Practice Methods. An additional domain, Cultural and Human Diversity, which did not emerge, was added. It is likely that cultural and human diversity did not emerge as many documents are older and the developed discussion of culture and diversity is a more recent phenomenon. Each domain has a domain description, a list of foundational knowledge, and a detailed list of competencies.

The developmental ecological perspective of the field led to a consideration of the competencies in specific contexts of application: self, relationship, environment, organization (system), and culture. Further development of these contextual considerations may be carried out in the future.

The document was edited, posted on the ACYCP web site for comment, and then revised. It was then published and posted again on the web (Mattingly, et al., 2002). It has been accepted by ACYCP as the basis for professional level certification in the United States and is under consideration by appropriate Canadian bodies.

PROPOSED APPLICATION PROCESS AND REQUIREMENTS FOR THE US

The Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (2002) has outlined six basic requirements for certification as a professional-level child and youth care practitioner. Persons certified through this process will be entitled to use the title, Certified Child and Youth Care Practitioner. The initials CCYCP may be used following the practitioner's name, e.g. John W. Smith, BS, CCYCP. To qualify to sit for the examination, candidates will need to document their preparation and competence in the first five areas: education, experience, references, training, and professional membership. All six criteria must be met to achieve certification.

Educational requirements. A baccalaureate degree (or above) from a regionally accredited college or university (without specific major) is required. Waivers are available for the first 7 years of the certification process (see experience requirements).

Experience requirements. Experience requirements are based on paid employment, with the exception of supervised field-related internships for which a maximum of 500 hours may be applied. Serving as a foster parent qualifies. Volunteer work does not qualify. There will also be additional specifications for appropriate experience to relate to the competencies. The degree (experience) ladder is: Master's degree (2000 hours qualified experience), Bachelor's degree (4000 hours), and waivers for the first seven years: Associates degree (6000 hours), High School or equivalent (10,000 hours). All experience must be qualified and documented.

Training requirements. Candidates must document 250 hours of training directly related to the competency areas. At least 100 of these training hours must have occurred during the last five years. Candidates must meet the minimum required standards for each of the competency domains: Professionalism (20 hours), Cultural and Human Diversity (20 hours), Applied Human Development (20 hours), Relationship and Communication (40 hours), and Developmental Practice Methods (80 hours). Qualified training consists of formal agency in-service training, attendance at conferences and workshops (for specific sessions attended only), and college-level courses, provided they address the competencies. Certification will need to be renewed every two years with the completion of 30 hours of qualified continuing education.

Professional references. Four professional references from persons having known the candidate for a minimum of six months are required including: the direct supervisor, the second supervisor or CYC professional, and two peers familiar with the applicant's skills and abilities.

Professional membership. Active involvement in the profession is demonstrated by current membership and participation in at least one qualified professional organization related to child and youth care practice.

ASSESSMENT OF THE COMPETENCIES

To certify individual practitioners, the national association must first create methods for evaluating the individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities in the areas described in the NACP Competencies Document. The work group assigned to create the assessment methods is currently considering whether to employ the use of supervisor assessments and portfolios in addition to the certification examination, as some competencies seem to be evaluated best through these alternative methods. The goal of the group is to prepare a certification examination for field-testing by the end of the year.

The NACP Assessment Work Group includes David Thomas (Coordinator), Martha Mattingly, Carol Stuart, Frank Eckles, Dale Curry, John Markoe, and Susan Wierzbicki. Additional reviewers and consultants to the work of the group include Carol Kelly, Lloyd Bullard, Anne Tubb, Peter Rosenblatt, Varda Mann-Feder, and Tony Maciocia. Most of the work of this committee is being conducted through teleconference meetings, which have been occurring two or three times a month for over a year. The work group has almost completed work on the test design for the certification examination after identifying which of the competencies can best be assessed through the use of each of the different methods.

There was extensive discussion on the use of a certification examination before the North American Certification Project participants, the ACYCP Board of Directors, and the Assessment Work Group reached a consensus on the necessity for the exam. The concerns expressed by participants about the use of an examination included: the difficulties of testing knowledge, skills, and abilities by means of paper-and-pencil examinations; the challenge of placing the competencies in the context of practice in an exam; and possible adverse impacts on minority group members. The literature also reflects these concerns (Haladyna, 1994; Peluso, 2000; Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, & Kabin, 2001). On the other hand, Sackett, et al. (2001) emphasized the value of well-designed tests and assessment measures with high validity, which virtually all professional certification programs use for good reason. The challenge for the NACP work group is to develop and validate an effective examination and other assessment methods to identify the candidates who are professionally qualified.

Although the challenges are substantial, the outcome should be worthwhile. With an effective, widely recognized national certification system, individual practitioners will be able to gain recognition for their abilities in a way that translates across settings, across states, and across

nations. This is a necessary step for child and youth care on the road to full professional status.

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TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF CERTIFICATION

Tasks still to be completed include the following.

- Creation of the procedures and instruments for assessing candidates for certification
 - to be completed by May, 2004.
- National study to validate the certification examination and to research the assessment methods
 - to be completed by October, 2004.
- Implementation of national certification
 - by the end of 2004.