

CAN A PROFESSIONAL EXIST WITHOUT A PROFESSION? A RESPONSE TO DUNLOP

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Editors Note: This response was not presented at the conference. The preceding piece raises issues in relation to the current movement towards professionalization. Because of the significance of the debate for the field right now, it was the view of the editorial board that a balanced presentation of the issues was merited in the form of a dialogue.

When I assumed the responsibilities of my first job as a child care worker in a residential treatment center for preadolescent youths, I was immediately faced with ambiguity. Some of my more experienced colleagues encouraged me to be strict with the children in my care, since they would manipulate me any time they could. Others assured me that the kids were okay and that as long as I got along with them everything would be fine. Some of my fellow workers seemed to see their positions as the opportunity to help troubled young persons with the problems in their lives. Some child care workers saw their positions within the center as recumbent – lying on the couch and drinking soda with their feet up on a cushion. I had completed my four-year degree in Psychology, but most of the other staff members had degrees in History, Business Administration, Fine Arts, or Engineering. There was little in-service training, and when we were provided training, it was taught in traditional classroom form by a psychologist, nurse, or social worker, the professional staff members, who would lecture us on the identification and treatment of childhood schizophrenia or on the effects of medications used with manic depressive adults.

None of us could have explained to the professionals what we needed to learn, but from our discussions with them, we knew that they did not know what to teach us that would really help us. Knowing the diagnostic indicators listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual did not help me to understand what to do when faced with a boy screaming curse words in my face at midnight while I was alone on the unit. When another boy seemed to want to talk to me about something but seemed shy or scared when I tried to talk to him about anything more serious than what was on television, the psychiatrist's theories on hyperactive disorder did not prepare me. Memorizing the procedure manual was not enough when other staff members called me to help with a girl in the unit next door who was biting her own wrists until they were bloody. From our observations, we understood that when the Psychologist or Social Worker was present during a crisis, it was usually clear that they did not know what to do.

In later years, when I worked with other groups of children and youth who did not behave in the same ways, I discovered that the challenges could be just as great with young persons who were not diagnosed and who did not display the more extreme behaviors I witnessed in the residential treatment center. By then, however, I had attended child and youth care conferences, read professional journals, and consumed books by Redl and Brendtro. I also had learned the hard way, through trial and error, how to defuse a power struggle with a teenager and how to calm a girl who was threatening to slash her wrists. Through listening to the children I worked with and learning from them, I had learned how to establish relationships with them even when they were frightened or distrustful.

As I grew personally and gained skills and knowledge in child and youth care, the work I was pulled into by a force like gravity, I began to look for opportunities to write about my work, to present at conferences, to assemble an association of child and youth care workers, and generally to connect with and learn from others in my field of practice. Eventually, as a group we established a statewide association and helped to bring about a national organization for child and youth care workers. Along the way, other child and youth care workers established professional journals and a code of ethics to guide the decisions we made in our work with children and youth. Working with others who supported us, some of us established college and university programs in child and youth care at the Associate (two-year), Bachelor's (four-year), Master's, and doctoral levels. Some of us began to conduct research into the work we do with children, youth, and families. Some of us moved into administrative positions and teaching positions to establish fertile ground for the practice of the knowledge and skills we had learned.

Along the way, almost all of the individuals who worked alongside me in child and youth care went on to careers as nurses, educators, lawyers, social workers, psychologists, physicians, postal carriers, and United Parcel Service employees. A very small group of us stayed. Our motivations for staying were as diverse as the individuals who remained in the field. Some of us enjoyed learning about ourselves through the work with children and youth. Some of us felt we had been called to this work in a way similar to the summons that ministers receive to work in the church. Others of us loved the work and the children. Still others saw the possibilities inherent in the connection between the person who was a child and the person who was a child care worker in one unique, quiet moment of mutual understanding.

Is a Profession by Any Other Name a Craft?

In his article in this issue of the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, Ted Dunlop (2004) challenges the concept that child and youth care should be a profession distinct from other professions. The author, along with others quoted by him (Eisikovits & Beker, 2001), questions whether the trappings of a "profession" are either necessary or beneficial for the

field of child and youth care. Dunlop proposes instead that child and youth care workers see themselves as a "craft" that involves a universal code of ethics and a framework of practice that is built on key competencies, with a core based in "direct, intensive face to face interaction with clients from which these key competencies emanate." Dunlop also proposes that the craft include a grasp of policy and political influences, an awareness of the importance of including an indigenous perspective, a better awareness of the economics of service provision, and more research. The craft also apparently would provide some kind of "passport of practice" that would verify the practitioner's competence in a variety of skills and knowledge areas. In addition, Dunlop would have us keep the educational programs in child and youth care that exist, and I assume from his remarks that he would not object to the creation of more such programs, since he explicitly states how important systematic educational preparation is for child and youth care practitioners.

In his article, Dunlop quotes Conway (2003) to establish the key parameters of a "profession." Conway's list of attributes parallels the characteristics of a profession listed by Kelly (1990) based on work Kelly cited by Cullen (1978), Moore (1970), and Vollmer (1966):

- Formal education in the subjects and competencies relevant to professional practice
- An organized body of knowledge base that includes minimum competencies and theories that define the work
- Ongoing research to improve the knowledge base
- A code of ethics used to regulate practitioners' conduct
- A culture or community to support practitioners' long term commitments to the profession
- Autonomy and self-regulation
- Clients who recognize the legitimacy of the professional standards (p. 168).

Dunlop clearly asks us to replace the concept of a "profession" with something else, a "craft." Which of these elements of a profession would Dunlop have us omit in the new craft of Child and Youth Care? Which of these attributes constitutes the "trappings" that he so opposes? Does he oppose formal education and training in the competencies of child and youth care work? He assures us in his article that he supports "educational and training opportunities for building on core competencies." We could conclude that he finds a body of knowledge irrelevant or harmful, except that Dunlop also assures us that he would support programs that preserve and disseminate "the core of child and youth care practice which has been so well articulated in the past 30 years." There is no evidence in Dunlop's article to support a conclusion that he is opposed to research, and in fact there are some indications that he would encourage ongoing research. If he opposes a culture or community that would support pro-

fessional practitioners, it seems odd that he would do so in an address presented at a large gathering of that community (the 7th International Child and Youth Care Conference in Victoria) and then seek to publicize his opinions through the principle publication of that culture (this very *Journal*). Does Dunlop find no value in his own participation in the child and youth care community? Similarly, both the tone and many specific observations made by Dunlop in his article, such as his desire for a "passport for practice" that sounds suspiciously like reciprocal professional certification, lead me to believe that he supports practitioners' autonomy and self-regulation.

When Dunlop states that he opposes "our precious views of professional turf, privileges and ownership of priestly 'competencies'" then, he must mean that he simply objects to using the term "profession" and any status or legitimacy that could accompany it. Dunlop contends that we child and youth care practitioners "can act in a professional manner without expending a great deal of time and energy obsessing about status as a profession however we wish to define the word." Can Dunlop mean that we can behave in all respects as a profession while we must call ourselves a "craft" so that we do not place ourselves and our work on the pedestal of status and privilege? If so, then (as Dunlop, Eisikovits, and Beker have noted so urgently elsewhere) child and youth care is a long way from the point in its development where we practitioners can express superiority over others.

What Is a Profession if No One Is There to Recognize It?

In many settings, little recognition has been accorded to the profession of child and youth care work. There has been some change in the 22 years since the National Organization of Child and Youth Care Worker Associations was founded in the United States and serious national efforts to professionalize began, but not a lot in some quarters, a point made by Dunlop emphatically in his article. The thousands of ways that child and youth care workers were rendered invisible in the past continue to be apparent to this day, but we all experienced it even more in the days before the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work* was born, before NOCCWA, before degree programs in child and youth care existed, and before it was possible to become a certified child and youth care worker.

During my fifth year in the field, during my tenure as President of the Texas Association of Child Care Workers and in the midst of another barrage of disparaging responses from practitioners in other professions, I experienced an epiphany. It occurred to me that if we were waiting for someone else or something else, whether it was social workers, the administrator of the agency we worked in, or the United States government, to tell us that we were practitioners in the legitimate profession of child and youth care, we missed the whole point. The reason that a small group of us in Texas were creating a professional organization, getting ourselves educated, conducting research, writing and publishing our con-

tributions to the field, putting a Code of Ethics into place, holding seminars and conferences, creating college and university programs in child and youth care, and establishing a system for recognizing minimum competence in the field was not because we were waiting for someone else's approval or acceptance. The purpose of becoming a practitioner in a profession that centers on direct care of children, youth, and their families was – and has to be – so that each of us was better equipped to conduct ourselves in a professional manner for the purpose of becoming more effective in our work. The answer to the question is that the sound of one professional practicing may be silence, but the effect is that the children, youths, and families benefit.

Is it taking too long for child and youth care to become a profession? Is it a profession already, or is it an emerging profession? Are we making progress toward professionalization of the field or not? The answers to these questions may simply reflect the biases of the observer, like a boy standing in front of a mirror asking "am I handsome?" What is too long? How long did it take medicine or law to become a modern profession? A hundred years? A thousand years? Social work began to become organized as a profession in the 1920's. Nursing began its trek toward professional status when Florence Nightingale was commissioned during the Crimean War in 1854. The first teachers began to claim that education was a profession in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the argument might be made that in the age of the Internet and global communication professions should be created faster, but that view is similar to arguing that other social institutions are evolving faster in the modern era – a dubious claim given the history of the 20th Century. The fact is that no one can say how quickly the profession of child and youth care should evolve, or even what it will look like when it gets there.

The only question of this nature worth asking is: is child and youth care worth the effort of professionalizing? Dunlop states clearly that he has "reached the conclusion that child and youth care does not qualify as a profession in its own right or in the traditional sense of the word and efforts to shape it into one may not be all that productive or necessary." Clearly, others disagree with him, as I do. Whether we call the process of gaining education, adding to the body of knowledge, conducting ongoing research, inculcating a code of ethics, creating a culture to support practitioners' commitment, encouraging autonomy and self-regulation, and educating clients about the practice of child and youth care a "profession" or we call it a "craft" or a "quilting bee," it is certainly worth doing.

Can We Ride the Horse of Professionalism Bareback?

The term "trappings" originally meant an ornamental covering or adornments for a horse (Ayto, J., 1990, p. 539). Dunlop advocates for us to abandon the concept (or at least the word) of "profession" because of the trappings attached to it. He objects to closing the professional door to practitioners who have other educational backgrounds but who have

mastered the competencies of child and youth care practice. He also apparently objects to placing ourselves above and distant from the clients we serve, and he draws a parallel to colonial subjugation of indigenous peoples. Dunlop specifically wishes to encourage a respect for cultural and human diversity that he apparently has not observed in other professions. By abandoning the effort to establish the profession of child and youth care, he hopes to avoid the adornments of uniformity, specialization, and standardization, which he does see in other professions.

The North American Certification Project participants decided that national certification standards in the profession of child and youth care will allow for multiple educational tracks into the profession. The Child Life Council (2002) pioneered this approach when they decided not to require a degree in child and youth care to sit for their certification examination. The NACP happily followed in their footsteps. Many of us who are involved daily in creating the national and international structure for the profession of child and youth care have embedded, with strong support from practitioners, an emphasis on the primacy of the relationship between the child or youth and the practitioner, along with respect for cultural and human diversity in our work. Most of us share Dunlop's concern that a profession (or a craft) of child and youth care work could become a mechanism for establishing a superior and repressive relationship with others. Consequently, the defined competencies are replete with respect for individuals and how they differ from others. In proposing broad boundaries for the profession that does not define the profession by the type of child or youth, the age or gender of the population, the setting in which the practice occurs, or other specific parameters that would force segmentation into many different, smaller professions, the NACP seeks to avoid the specialization that Dunlop abhors in other professions.

Dunlop has "no problem with the suggestion that it is a unique field of practice that can be treated as a discrete entity or be embedded in traditionally recognized professions such as social work, nursing and teaching where the focus is also placed on children, youth and families." (p. 255) If any of the established professions named by Dunlop did, in fact, have the same focus on developmental care of children, youth, and their families, there never would have been a movement to establish a new profession. If these other professions are doing such a great job in advocating for the needs of children, youth, and their families within the systems that surround us, why do Dunlop, Beker, and others have such a negative view of these professions and of the concept of "profession?"

Perhaps not all horses must come with trappings. Child and youth care may choose to ride bareback on the horse of professionalism. Whether we can do so remains to be seen, and it is up to all of us today to resist the trappings that sometimes have been adopted by other professions. In this quest, I find myself in substantial agreement with Ted Dunlop.

If There Is No Profession of Child and Youth Care, Then What Am I?

Unlike many of my colleagues in the residential treatment center where I began my career so many decades ago, I chose to stay in child and youth care. I continued to work alongside many others to build a profession of child and youth care practice in Texas, in the United States, and internationally. The choice no doubt cost us money, since our profession is never paid equally to other professions, and it denied us some of the social support that others received for their career choices. However, it has been an exciting and interesting journey with many other rewards.

Today, I am the Executive Director of a moderately large nonprofit organization that serves youth. I hold a Master of Arts degree in Child Care Work, and I am completing my doctorate in child and youth studies while I conduct a validation study on the national certification examination for the United States. For years, I was on the faculty of a child and youth care college program. I write articles regularly for professional journals in the field of child and youth care. I sit on the editorial board for this journal. I speak frequently at professional child and youth care conferences. I serve as the President of the national organization of child and youth care workers, a Board Member of the Texas certification board for child and youth care workers, and a participant in the North American Certification Project. I teach in-service classes to child and youth care workers each week, and I maintain contact with a number of youths who are presently or were formerly in our programs.

None of this would have been possible without the profession of child and youth care. I would have moved on into the other professions that Dunlop alternately damns and praises long ago if I had not had the support of other child and youth care professionals, if I had not been presented the opportunities for growth that opened up for me through the profession, or if I had not been able to obtain the education I needed to improve my practice with children, youth, and families. That is what the creation of a profession of child and youth care work does, rather than the empty posturing and callow manipulation that Dunlop observes in other professions.

If Ted Dunlop is right, if there is no profession of child and youth care and never should be, I guess I could settle for being a "craftworker," but the concept, like the word, seems to be missing something. Even with its trappings, I choose professionalism.

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