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Youth Work Practice with Poverty in Mind: Ethical Considerations of Socio-Economic Mobility for Youth

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Abstract

This article provides insight into the ethical imperative for Child and youth Care (CYC) practitioners to support children and youth affected by poverty, advancing the notion of creating conditions for self-actualization and empowerment with a future orientation toward socio-economic mobility. Poverty and oppression are not random occurrences but are rather deeply rooted in systemic inequities. This article offers insights for CYC practitioners to better understand poverty's impact on youth, and the significance of education attainment on breaking out of generational poverty. Drawing on a study of first-generation college student perceptions, relational youth work and pedagogy literature, and socio-economic statistics, it advances a perspective on the need for CYC workers to support youth in developing agency to positively influence their own socioeconomic future. The article points to four key areas of focus with poverty in mind: building a sense of belonging; engaging in culturally responsive practice to challenge structural injustice, considering education as a conduit to future socio-economic mobility and; reflecting and learning with children and youth.

Keywords: Child and youth care practice, culturally responsive CYC practice, ethical considerations in youth work, inter-professional practice (CYC and Education), poverty and youth work, and socio-economic mobility for youth

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Introduction

Developing socio-economic mobility for low income and under-resourced youth is an ethical imperative for the child and youth care (CYC) workforce. This article addresses the responsibility practitioners have to engage youth in developing agency to positively influence their own socioeconomic future. It offers insights into the importance of CYC workers supporting children and youth affected by poverty, advancing a notion to create conditions for self-actualization, and empowerment with a future orientation, while simultaneously supporting their immediate needs.

We are authoring this article as an inter-generational, father-son pair of youth work professionals who spend considerable time discussing the ethics of care. One (the son) is new to the field – with one year of professional full-time experience serving low-income youth, and the other (the father) has more than three decades of experience working in various CYC settings in low-income communities across the US. At its core, this article is related to our belief that understanding and tending to impacts and predictors of poverty are of paramount importance in the CYC profession. For us, it is clear that despite the significance poverty and its associated oppressions have on youth, such issues are rarely addressed at anything other than a superficial level – both in practice and in academic or professional preparation. Avoiding such critical topics contributes to an ethical dilemma of placing the tyranny of the moment (tending to immediate needs) for youth as a singular priority, sometimes at the expense of a future orientation, including potential socio-economic mobility.

The most pervasive reason we hear from CYC practitioners for their lack of engagement in critical conversation about topics related to poverty and class (including race, prejudice, imbalance of privilege, etc.) relates to *fear* (Korsmo, 2022). People frequently state they are afraid to ignite an emotional firestorm that they won't be able to contain, or they fear that someone will inadvertently be hurt during such discourse. To this, we think, "*Fair enough. Caution and precaution are certainly advised*." Many relay that they are afraid they simply don't have the expertise, knowledgebase, or credibility necessary to effectively address these topics themselves. To this we think, "*Understood. Having some degree of awareness on a subject matter certainly helps in practice*." And most commonly we have been told of a fear of overstepping roles, and concern that it is not their place, their responsibility, or even their right to address these issues. And to this, we think, "*OK, but if not yours - or ours - than whose?"*

This is not to say that these fears are not real or unfounded, or powerful, nor even important. They are all of those things. Fear of the unknown and trepidation with charting troubled waters is natural, and a lack of such would in fact indicate a degree of naiveté about the real potential risks involved. But retreating in the face of these fears does not serve anyone well. Child and youth care workers can play a crucial role in supporting young people's socio-economic mobility, and in doing so they must navigate complex and often fear inducing discourse in their efforts to promote equity and justice. Whether you are approaching this concept from the identification as a CYC educator, residential or community-based child and youth care practitioner, or human services professional more broadly, one thing is certain; poverty will play a role in your work. This is not to say that you will exclusively work with youth and families in poverty; perhaps you won't. Rather, the consequences of poverty are so pervasive that they affect all of us. In fact, the simple term, "poverty" continues to evoke disputes of its meaning, its prevalence, and how it ought to be confronted (Desmond, 2023; Gorski, 2017; Korsmo, 2022). This often conjures political, moral, and ideological tensions, which makes it all the more challenging to address.

Engagement with Core Competencies

This ethical consideration in youth work practice connects directly to numerous core competencies in youth work as identified in the North American Competency Project (Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, 2010), including:

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Table 1: Core Competencies in Youth Work (ACYCP, 2010)

Professionalism	Foundational Knowledge	▪ Current and Emergent Trends ▪ Significance of Advocacy
	Professional Competencies	▪ Awareness of the Profession ▪ Professional Development and Behavior ▪ Professional Ethics ▪ Advocacy
Cultural and Human Diversity	Foundational Knowledge	▪ Cultural Structures, Theories of Change, and Values with Culture Variations ▪ History of Political, Social, and Economic Factors which Contribute to Racism, Stereotyping, Bias, and Discrimination ▪ Variations Among Families and Communities of Diverse Backgrounds
	Professional Competencies	▪ Support Children, Youth, Families and Programs in Overcoming Culturally and Diversity Based Barriers to Services
Applied Human Development	Professional Competencies	▪ Assess Client and Family Needs in Relation to Community Opportunities, Resources, and Supports ▪ Assist Clients to Access Relevant Information about Legislation/Regulations, Policies/Standards, as well as Additional Supports and Services ▪ Empower Clients, and Programs in Gaining Resources which Support Healthy Development
Relationship and Communication	Professional Competencies	▪ Assess the Quality of Relationships in an Ongoing Process of Self-reflection about the Impact of the Self in Relationship in order to Maintain a Full Presence and an Involved, Strong, and Healthy Relationship ▪ Form Relationships through Contact, Communication, Appreciation, Shared Interests, Attentiveness, Mutual Respect, and Empathy ▪ Demonstrate the Personal Characteristics that Foster and Support Relationship Development
Developmental Practice Methods	Professional Competencies	▪ Recognize the Critical Importance of Genuine Relationships based on Empathy and Positive Regard in Promoting Optimal Development for Children, Youth, and Families ▪ Assist Clients in Identifying and Developing their Strengths through Activities and Other Experiences

Understanding Poverty's Impact on Youth

There is no shortage of reasons why youth experience poverty and the adverse consequences associated with it. The primary one being a matter of random bad financial luck: having been born into a family already experiencing poverty. Given that childhood poverty is on the rise (US Census Bureau, 2022), and the decades-long stagnation in generational upward mobility (Mcnair, 2024), this is a critical period for our field to do what we can to counter this trend. Poverty significantly affects the lives of young people, influencing their opportunities, aspirations, and well-being. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (Koball et al., 2021), nearly one in five children in the United States lives in poverty, facing challenges such as inadequate housing, food insecurity, limited access to healthcare, and increased exposure to violence and crime. For CYC practitioners, understanding the systemic nature of poverty is essential. Poverty is not merely a result of individual choices but often stems from structural inequalities, including systemic racism, economic disparities, and inadequate social support systems. This understanding is crucial for developing ethical approaches to CYC practice. Without it, there is increased potential to take a deficit orientation to low-income youth and their families, and fuel the misinformed trope that poverty is a choice, or otherwise somehow indicative of inadequacies of a child's parent(s).

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The proportion of youth who go on to earn more than their parents has been declining since the 1940's. For perspective, 50% of those born in 1980 grew up to earn more than their parents, opposed to 90% of those born in the 1940's. It is not only financial earnings, however, that is troubling our youth. Modern day socio-economic trends have negatively shifted their perspective on their future outlook. This occurs for myriad reasons, including an increase in anxiety and fear for the future and a lack of trust in some of our most dominant and significant institutions, such as government and education (Miller 2024). In addition to this is a growing sense of doom looming over our children's lives associated with a variety of issues, including global climate change, international conflicts, observed surge in racism and divisiveness, impacts of a pandemic, nonstop information surge through social media, and much more. As explained by Derek Thompson (2022), the Unites States is experiencing an extreme mental health crisis. From 2009 to 2021 the number of high school students across the country who indicate persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness rose from 26% to 44% (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2024). Such stressors are magnified for youth experiencing poverty in the United States, as elsewhere. A report by the National Centre for Social Research in the UK for instance (Mandalia, 2024) recently shared results from the Youth Opportunities Fairer Futures, indicating that having enough money to cover basic needs has become the most common aspiration for 9 in 10 young people.

Education as a Gateway to Upward Mobility

Education has long been hailed as the great equalizer, offering a path to success regardless of background. However, for many youth who are experiencing poverty, and particularly those among the first in their family to pursue post-secondary education, this path is often riddled with obstacles that can hinder their academic experience and overall success. These obstacles are often greater and more frequent with additional areas of identity the student may hold that have a history of marginalization, discrimination, and subjugation (e.g. based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.). There is extensive research about the financial benefits of educational attainment over the lifespan and despite the growing costs associated with post-secondary education, the financial benefits are notable. For instance, the incidence of poverty among bachelor's degree holders is 3.5 times lower than it is for those who hold a high school degrees alone. As can be seen in the table below, there is a correlation between typical income earned and unemployment rates based on levels of education. There is an annual increase of nearly $10,000 for those who graduate high school over those who do not complete. An Associate's Degree on average brings an additional $8,000 annual income, and those trends rise with increasing levels of education attainment. Related, in 2023 the unemployment rate for an adult without a high school diploma was 5.6%. For those with a high school diploma alone, the unemployment rate was 3.9%, and 2.7% for those with an Associate's Degree. Not to be overlooked, vocational certifications or licensure earned through technical and trade schools and apprenticeship programs often create opportunities for living wage, and higher-income professions.

Table 2: Wages and Unemployment based on Education Attainment

Degree Obtained	Median Usual Weekly Earnings ($)	Unemployment Rate
Doctoral Degree	$2,109	1.6
Professional Degree	$2,206	1.2
Master's Degree	$1,737	2
Bachelor's Degree	$1,493	2.2
Associate's degree	$1,058	2.7
Some College, no Degree	$992	3.3
High School Diploma	$899	3.9
Less than a High School Diploma	$708	5.6

Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, 2024)

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Many young people in poverty receive both subtle and explicit messages from CYC practitioners, educators, and others that they are "not college material" or otherwise conveyed a message that does not empower them toward holistic career exploration. Racist and classist biases are pervasive when it comes to the messages young people receive from others about their future education and career prospects. Child and youth care professionals are well positioned to counter the narrative that such youth are destined to fewer options, with less potential than their wealthier or more socially privileged counterparts. There are multiple factors influencing the wellbeing and success of youth who come from generational poverty and familial and community backgrounds who have not previously accessed higher education. Of note is the belief that while poverty, class, and other socially constructed areas of identity are fundamentally important in child and youth care, all too often we avoid discourse about them (Gorski, 2018; Desmond, 2023). On the contrary, when we engage in empathic and relational youth care, with socio-economic futures in mind, we create a foundation to consider and honor these influential areas of youths' lives. This in turn assists in developing a sense of belonging that can support youth in aspiring to advance in their academic and professional pursuits.

The multiple interactions involved in a youth's social and educational activities in youth serving organizations contribute over time to feelings ranging from comfort and respect to a pervasive sense of invisibility (Flores, 2016; Hong, 2012). Family engagement and empowerment literature suggests this continuum of reactions is often associated with how CYC practitioners and teachers understand students' social capital and how aware they are of a child or youth's awareness of how CYC and educational institutions operate (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Pérez-Carreón, et al., 2005; Warren, 2005). There is an extensive literature base on family engagement to reference when considering the ways in which we can build trust with low-income youth who are prospective first-generation students (Epstein, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002, Jeynes, 2005; Longwell-Grice, 2021). The role of the CYC practitioner who values trusting relationships, especially with those whose culture, class norms and experiences differ from the dominant middle-class, White context, is to recognize and respect all families' enormous positive influence on a young person's overall development and dispositions toward learning.

Luis Moll and colleagues (1992) recognized the disconnect between teachers and diverse students and their family communities. Their research illuminated the ways of being that diverse youth bring into the classroom, that often do not match or align with speech and actions of those from White middle-class youth. Since the majority of those who enter teaching tend to belong to the dominant class, teachers may overlook or devalue behaviors and speech patterns that are not conducive to their preferred classroom culture, overlooking the fact that those behaviors and speech patterns are exactly what is required for diverse students to be successful in their own communities. CYC professionals are well positioned to serve as a conduit between young people in their out-of-school context and in their school environments, including educating youth in care about the ways in which schools and other systems operate. It also lends purpose to CYC practitioners building partnerships and relationships with school personnel – through which they can advocate for the youth in their care. The dichotomy is bridged when youth workers and teachers become aware of, recognize, and respect the funds of knowledge of those groups of students who do not match the over represented identities of middle class, White, and generally female educators (Moll & Gonzales, 2010). By this, Moll is referring to the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (1992, p. 133).

Lessons Learned from Low-Income, First-Generation College Students

Literature Review

In our own research to better understand the current contexts, needs, and aspirations for first-generation college students, a comprehensive review of the literature was conducted. Drawing from education and educational psychology, and sociology we interrogated literature associated specifically with higher education aspirations and attainment, student services, income inequality, and culturally responsive and sustaining practices in education.

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Methods

In order to develop a comprehensive assessment of the aspirations and needs of first-generation college students we utilized a mixed methods approach, combining a quantitative and qualitative design. It is common in education research to rely primarily on quantitative studies reporting numerical statistics. We know however, that quantitative record keeping does not tell the full story. Thus, we utilized both survey and interview methodologies to engage participants.

Surveys represent one of the most common types of social science research. In survey research, the researcher selects a sample of respondents from a population and administers a standardized questionnaire to them. Using surveys, it is possible to collect data from large or small populations. For this study, we surveyed 538 students from a diverse range of community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. Surveys consisted of both closed-ended quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions.

Additionally, we utilized a semi-structured interview process with 116 students to learn their opinions and experiences associated with their education journey including the supports received in academic and other youth-service institutions. This was done in both one-on-one and focus-group interviews. Characteristics of Semi-structured interviews include:

- The interviewer and respondents engage in a formal (scheduled/pre-determined) interview.
- The interviewer develops and uses an interview guide, or list of questions and topics that need to be covered during the conversation, and which were shared with the interviewee in advance.
- The interviewer follows the guide but is able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when relevant information is being discussed.

The semi-structured interview guide provides a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data. The inclusion of open-ended questions and ability to follow relevant topics that may stray from the interview guide provides the opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand and allowing participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Ruslin et al. 2022).

Analyzing the Data

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to assist in the analysis. An inductive approach was then used to analyze the data, as is commonly the case in health and social science research. As noted by Thomas (2006),

> The purposes for using an inductive approach are to (a) condense raw textual data into a brief, summary format; (b) establish clear links between the evaluation or research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data; and (c) develop a framework of the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the raw data. The general inductive approach provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings.

A thematic content analysis was then conducted, which involved identifying themes and categories that emerged from the data. This involved discovering themes and categories in the interview transcripts. While engaging in content analysis, the researchers focus more on the frequency of occurrence of various categories, and during the thematic analysis, it is more about identifying themes and building up the analysis in the most cohesive manner. Thematic analysis can be more in depth and generally provide a broader understanding than content analysis alone. Content analysis assists us to identify important data to focus on, while thematic analysis helps us identify and understand the descriptive data. While this is a rather tedious process it helps us to formulate a more complete understanding of participants' varied experiences and opinions of health and wellbeing in Whatcom County. When coupled with quantitative statistical data in particular, it helps us to paint a more complete picture of the lived experiences of youth aspiring to post-secondary education.

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Results

As noted above, we administered a survey with 538 first-generation college students and conducted one-on-one and focus group interviews with 116 students. Something of note in the findings was the significant difference in the responses between students based on socio-economic status. Lower income students are *less likely* to report such things as receiving non-financial (emotional) support from others to pursue higher education, asking instructors for help or disputing a grade (in high school and college) and having been satisfied with support to pursue higher education. Further, lower-income students were *more likely* to report that their education separated them from their family (relationally); being overwhelmed and feeling that they did not fit in.

Additionally, low-income students tended to have been enrolled in more schools at the primary, middle, and high school levels. For instance, 36% of the low-income students attended only one primary school, in relation to 59% of their middle-class counterparts. Further, 25% of low-income students attended 4 or more primary schools compared to only 6% of more affluent students. Similarly, low-income students were more likely to attend 2 or more middle schools (29% vs. 15%) and to attend more than one high school (21% vs. 14%). This points to the increased number of educational and social disruptions often placed on lower income students, which add challenges to their formative education and potential preparation for beyond high school. Often times, CYC practitioners play a role in supporting young people during such transitions.

Those from low socio-economic backgrounds were considerably more likely to offer statements such as these:

"My school never even considered a kid like me to be college material…"

"I felt totally out of place when I first got to college…I didn't fit in. It was incredibly uncomfortable at first and I almost dropped…"

"No one ever cared about my education…"

"…I still experience stereotyping and micro-aggression on a routine basis because of class issues in the academy…."

"…I continue to have barriers without support but I'm used to that. Hopefully someday I will be able to overcome the stereotypical statistic and prove everybody wrong. I do this for myself and nobody else. I am proud of my accomplishments especially when others have dissected a portion of my story and not in its entirety…"

Such sentiments point to a potential for CYC practitioners to intentionally engage with young people to establish levels of confidence and comfort with themselves as students. To consistently provide confirmation that they do belong, and that we care about their education and future. A significant manifestation associated with their sense of not belonging was a pervasive avoidance of having communication with teachers or professors outside of a general class period. More than half (51%) of low-income students reported never questioning a grade during their senior year of high school. By the time they completed their first year of college this percentage rose to 70% never conversing with a professor for clarification on assignments or questioning a grade. In other words, 70% of low-income students missed an opportunity to utilize self-advocacy and agency within the educational arena when related to their course outcomes.

This is not to imply that all of those students would have received higher grades by disputing the original, however as one of the authors can attest, with more than two decades as a professor, it is very likely that some of them would have. This sense of inability to converse with teachers, professors, or other classmates about such things as clarifications and other support negatively impacts academic outcomes. And earlier negative academic outcomes are a consistently valid predictor of future negative outcomes, including attrition. This is particularly true for low-income students, who have a 26% college graduation rate within an eight-year time period. This is compared to a 66% graduation rate over the same time period for students whose families have an income of $115,000 or more (Samuels, 2024). Supporting youth in their academic pursuits is of course not the central aim of CYC practitioners. However, incorporating some intentional efforts to connect our CYC work with academic success could support them with their future goals and economic mobility and sustainability.

Additionally, there was a pervasive desire from participants of the study to have someone in the university and high school settings who they felt they could connect to and trust. They were seeking someone who showed genuine empathy, curiosity, and concern for their academic and personal well-being. A wish for personnel who they

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felt they could identify with, and who would better understand them and their experiences, such as these statements:

> *"…I have professors who are also first generation, and they will listen to student stories and talk with us. They are the true text books. They help us stay…"*
>
> *"…staff need to sit down with students one-on-one. We need a connection, early. And it needs to be a mentor who knows more about things than us. Someone who is not afraid to shake us up and tell us the real deal…that connection will keep us here."*
>
> *"…It is important to have things like student outreach, and opportunities for students to make relationships with professors, who understand… like professors who have made it through the same kind of shit…"*

These sorts of consistent statements underscore what CYC practitioners have always known: relationships matter. There is a sold literature base related to relational youth work, including a recently published guide to relational practice (Digney, 2024), which offers insights from numerous leading youth work scholars. Here, as elsewhere, are salient articulation of the significance of relational practice. We add to this here by pointing to the ways in which such practice holds promise to address the deficits and needs expressed by the more than 600 young people in our current study. Considering the long history of the CYC field advocating for relational practice, together with the literature on relational pedagogy and teaching, there is room for enhanced inter-professional collaboration between the fields of CYC and education. After all, child and youth care practitioners *are* educators, and teachers *ought to be* child and youth care practitioners. We bring this to attention here for future consideration – to encourage out of school youth serving organizations to partner more intentionally with educational institutions.

Practical Strategies

CYC practice with poverty in mind is centrally about respecting children and youth and their families for who they are, while empowering young people to overcome the challenges they face. By understanding the context of poverty, building trusting relationships, providing holistic support, and empowering young people, we can make a positive difference. In youth work, the impact of poverty on young people's lives cannot be overstated. Poverty affects many aspects of a young person's development, from educational attainment to mental health and future opportunities. But their socio-economic status does not define them. Youth workers play a vital role providing them with resources, opportunities, and guidance to overcome the challenges they face. Following are some strategies and initial resources to advance in this work from a diverse range of perspectives related to culturally responsive practice.

Build a Sense of Belonging

Trust is essential in CYC practice, especially when working with young people affected by poverty. Building trusting relationships requires us to listen actively, show empathy, and demonstrate genuine care and concern for young people's well-being. Trusting relationships provide a foundation for effective support and intervention. Youth who feel like they belong in their social and academic environments are more likely to persist and succeed in and out of school. CYC practitioners have the ability to insert consistent messaging into their daily work that expresses to youth that they are welcomed and valued. That they are smart and capable. That they belong in education. That they can dream beyond any deficit-oriented narrative about them. Establish a safe and inclusive environment where youth feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Emphasize the importance of respect, empathy, and open-mindedness in all discussions. Assure youth that their perspectives and experiences will be valued and respected, and that judgment-free dialogue is encouraged

Resources: *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice* (https://www.rcycp.com/), The *Art of Relational Weaving* (Digney, 2024).

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Engage in Culturally Responsive Practice: Challenge Structural Injustice

Poverty and oppression are not random occurrences but are deeply rooted in systemic inequities. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989) highlights how identities like race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability intersect to shape individuals' experiences of privilege and oppression. Youth benefit when CYC practitioners recognize how these intersecting identities contribute to structural barriers that impact their lives. In youth work, understanding how poverty and oppression intersect with identities such as race and class is not just important, it's paramount. These identities are not isolated; they compound, influencing young people's experiences and opportunities. As Ladson-Billings (2014) argues, culturally responsive engagement involves making connections between youths' lived experiences and the current context (whether in a classroom or youth center), thereby making engagement more relevant and meaningful for them. This includes valuing their family and community histories. Consider, for instance, ways in which you can show respect for the various funds of knowledge that families impart on their children. Cultural responsiveness involves understanding the unique experiences and needs of young people from diverse cultural backgrounds and tailoring interventions accordingly, with sensitivity to cultural differences and creating inclusive environments that celebrate the many assets of diversity. Youth workers have a responsibility to challenge systems of oppression and advocate for social change

Resources: *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies* (Paris & Alim, 2017), Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021), *Culturally Relevant Youth Programs* (Tzenis, 2021), College Success for Students of Color (Rios, et al., 2024), *Stamped For Kids* (Cherry-Paul, 2021).

Consider Education as a Conduit to Future Socio-Economic Mobility

Education is a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty. Youth workers can support young people in accessing and successfully completing educational opportunities, providing them with encouragement that supports their motivation and confidence. Robert Balfanz, a leading scholar on connecting socio-emotional development and academic achievement has shown the degree to which such interdisciplinary support for academic success can positively impact young people (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2021). His findings highlight that students' levels of social-emotional skills are not fixed points but do in fact vary over the course of time and are therefore malleable. Additionally, students' social-emotional levels were significantly related to their academic outcomes and are as strong of a predictor of academics as family background. These findings reaffirm for researchers and practitioners that addressing youths' social-emotional skills is a viable path to raising their academic outcomes. This was further supported by additional evidence that those who received greater amounts of social-emotional and academic support also had stronger social-emotional and academic outcomes. The key early warning indicators for academic struggles and predictors of drop out identified as most notable relate to attendance (less than 85% attendance), behavior (more than two suspensions), and course performance (two or more course failures). Consider ways in which you can incorporate messaging or activities that encourage and support young people in these three areas.

For instance, the most significant factor in a young person's post-secondary education trajectory is their own self-motivation. With this in mind, we can work to promote self-confidence and support children and youth in developing their own sense of agency. We are uniquely situated – outside of the educational system, but within a relational construct – to inform children and youth about the systems of education. Discussing with them openly the significance in communicating with teachers or professors and other professionals, asking for feedback, and even challenging a grade can support them in developing skills to navigate school. Paying particular attention to early warning signals of potential academic difficulties, such as truancy, suspensions, and course outcomes (grades), can have lasting influence on future academic success which in turn influences future economic success.

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Tripp consistently spoke about the role teachers and peers played in helping her understand not only the rules and expectations but also how to regulate her emotions and how to believe in herself. In third grade she became "really sad" when two of her "school sisters" transferred schools. Ms. Nathalie was pivotal in Tripp's ability to cope with the sudden change and to know that the friendship could exist even without being physically present. Tripp's vignette demonstrates how she applied what she learned from Ms. Nathalie in this situation to how she is now processing Ms. Nathalie's transition to another school.

Resources: *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*, (Gorski, 2017), *Connecting Social-Emotional Development and Academic Indicators Across Multiple Years*, (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2021).

Reflect and Learn (With Children and Youth)

Finally, take time to reflect on your own biases, fears, and assumptions about poverty and race. Continuously strive to learn and grow in your understanding of these issues and be open to feedback from youth and colleagues. Before engaging in discussions about poverty with children and youth, educate yourself on the historical and social contexts of poverty and racism that impact young people. Understanding the root causes and systemic nature of these issues will help you approach discussions with greater confidence and sensitivity.

Effective youth work practice requires continuous learning and reflection. It is our responsibility to stay informed about the latest research, best practices, and policy developments related to poverty and youth development. Reflecting on our practice allows us to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for growth. By approaching discussions about poverty and race with empathy, honesty, and a commitment to social justice, youth workers can help young people develop a deeper understanding of these complex topics and become advocates for positive change in their communities.

A key element here is working to overcome fears or insecurities of not knowing all the answers, or the 'right' things to say, do, or consider. We need to work through our fears of entering into arenas within CYC practice and discourse that are outside of our comfort zones or past experiences. This requires us to be transparent with youth about the complexities and challenges of discussing taboo topics such as poverty and race. Acknowledge that these are difficult topics but emphasize the importance of having open and honest conversations. This may include offering historical and social context to help youth understand the broader implications of poverty and inequity. Consider how historical events, policies, and systems have contributed to the current disparities we see today. Be prepared to address tough questions and concerns that may arise, again understanding you can reach out to others for support.

Resources: *Poverty, By America* (Desmond, 2023), *The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves* (Ginwright, 2022), *Social Workers' use of Critical Reflection* (Taiwo, 2021).

Conclusion

The fear of discussing poverty and race with youth is understandable, given the sensitive and complex nature of these topics. Ethical youth work practice, however, requires a deep commitment to equity, justice, and the well-being of all young people. By understanding the complexities of poverty, respecting the autonomy and dignity of youth, and advocating for systemic change, CYC practitioners can play a vital role in supporting the socio-economic mobility of youth. Socio-economic factors are also root causes of many challenges young people face, including academic struggles, mental health issues, and involvement in risky behaviors. By overlooking these factors, we may focus solely on addressing symptoms rather than addressing underlying systemic issues.

Recognizing the intersectionality of poverty and oppression with identities such as race and class is fundamental in our profession. By understanding systemic inequities, addressing root causes, supporting marginalized identities, promoting cultural responsiveness, and challenging structural injustice, we can create more inclusive and empowering environments for young people. This approach is not just about addressing the immediate impacts of poverty and oppression but also about a future orientation to end poverty for youth.

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