

Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

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Relational
Child & Youth
Care
Practice

(formerly *The Journal of Child & Youth Care*, established 1982) is committed to promoting and supporting the profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people.

This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, including personal growth and development, are essentially "relational".

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The Ritual of CYC Practice

Heather Snell

Last month I 'became' a Child and Youth Care (CYC) practitioner ... after nearly thirty years in the field I was 'welcomed' into the profession as part of the inaugural Ring Ceremony held at the close of the 2017 Ontario Child and Youth Care Conference. It was a moving experience ... one that surprised me beyond expectation.

First, a little background. CYC practice in the province of Ontario remains, as in most provinces in Canada – an unregulated profession. Despite countless inquests, reports and studies, and despite the active presence of over 22 highly respected CYC diploma and 2 CYC degree programs – 'anyone' can practice child and youth care in this, the largest province of Canada. In response to this situation, The Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care has been politically active for years – advocating on behalf of children, youth and families, and OACYC members, and lending its voice to national initiatives to bring a legislative framework to CYC practice. But without regulation, membership in the Ontario Association of Child and Youth Care remains 'optional' causing both new graduates, and seasoned professionals to question the necessity of membership in what remains a volunteer organization.

It is not surprising then that efforts to foster a professional CYC practice identity have been either largely ignored or limited at best. But something changed this year.

Something collective was experienced by those who participated in the first OACYC Ring Ceremony. It was about ritual. Fulcher (2003) tells us about the importance of 'rituals of encounter'. In CYC practice ritual is thought to be so important that it is

identified as the second characteristic of a relational CYC approach (Garfat & Fulcher 2011). Describing rituals, Garfat and Fulcher suggest “like transitional objects, rituals of encounter strengthen purposeful communication.”

If CYC relational practice so respects the importance of ritual encounters, then why as a profession have we been so slow to acknowledge, to embed and to participate in our own rituals of practice? What are CYC rituals of encounter that strengthen our purpose?

As individual practitioners we seem comfortable engaging with rituals when they are external to our professional identity or when they are inherent in the spiritual or secular belief systems of ‘others’. But we are hard pressed to find evidence of formal ritual in our own professional identity. Perhaps ceremonial traditions seem too ‘exclusive’, or too exclusionary? Our aspirations to maintain an open professional stance that does not exclude seems to have made us uncomfortable with inclusion. As a result we have eschewed ritual as perceived evidence of privilege and elitism. As a profession we seem to have become preoccupied by defining who we are ‘not’ rather than celebrating and welcoming who ‘we’ are. It seems a shame, for ritual is so important to identity formation and to our existence as social beings. From daily routines to the ways we meet and greet each other, rituals place us with one another, bringing us together by framing shared experiences; helping us to recognize self in each other. Rituals can also be a way of showing resistance to injustice, a way of contesting power through a public celebration of common purpose. The OACYC Ring Ceremony welcomed ‘like-identified’ people. During the short observance, each participant was given the opportunity to accept a ring offered to them by a child. When receiving their ring, the child faced each participant and asked of each if they “believed in children.” This simple and collective act brought many together – a shared identity created by a belief not by privilege. The multiplicity of backgrounds, entry points and experiences represented by those who donned the CYC Ring last month evidenced that the ritual of the Ceremony did not dictate a singular notion of identity. The ritual was a process – a way of mediating the self, the ‘other’, children youth and the profession. This ritual did not celebrate privileged achievement; rather it recognized how, as individuals, we each aspired to ‘be’ in the world – acknowledging the held trust that is central to CYC practice.

It is with an awareness of a new ring on my finger that I reviewed the final proof of this issue of *RCYCP* – an issue that continued to authenticate the importance of ritual observances. In this issue Jeremy Millar writes about the significance of community –

how individuals build community through sport, play and the simple ritual of sharing of soup; demonstrating again how CYC practitioners working in community need to pay attention and participate in rituals of place making. In this issue Leon Fulcher writes about what he calls the shared 'rhythm and blues' of residential child care noting the presence of ritual in the everyday – the scheduling of work and shared supervision. And Patricia Kostouros observes how feelings of belonging emerge when through rituals of encounter group members become aware they have things in common. And finally, Laura Mitchell muses about that ritual known as graduation. In this, as in every issue of RCYCP, there are observations about ritual that add depth, dimension and distinction – making the ordinary and the everyday seem more. This is our work; it becomes our shared experience. In CYC practice we know that by recognizing and participating in rituals of encounter we find portals through which we can respectfully enter the experience of children, young people and families. Could it be that by sharing rituals of practice and professional observances we can co-create a collective identity as prepared, present, passionate, and principled practitioners united in our core beliefs?

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Heather Snell

has been involved in Child and Youth Care practice and education for over 30 years. From direct care in a variety of settings to CYC education Heather's practice and approach is often eclectic, drawing her to the 'in between's', merging disciplines, and supporting collaborations. After teaching and coordinating the CYC and BCYC programs at Humber College for many years, Heather is currently part time faculty with both the Ryerson University CYC undergraduate and graduate programs, and with the University of Strathclyde MSc in CYC. She is also a member of the Child and Youth Care Education Accreditation Board where she chairs the Research Committee.

School Connectedness in the Field of Child and Youth Care

Mary Anne De Salvo

Abstract

School connectedness is gaining recognition as a means to support students towards success in their academic and non-academic learning. To promote student development, Child and Youth Care (CYC) practitioners are employed as part of the school support team. As the first known study of its kind, this cross-sectional mixed methods research study explores school connectedness in the field of CYC with the following foci: the concept of school connectedness; CYC theoretical framework and approach; and CYC professional knowledge and experiences. Eight CYC practitioners employed in the educational sector, and residing in two Canadian provinces, responded to an online survey collecting demographic data and structured texts. Coding and basic descriptive statistics were used for quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The findings suggest evidence of a relationship between CYC practice and school connectedness. It also presents supports and challenges. Further, it proposes CYC practitioners have a significant role in promotion.

Keywords

school connectedness, student success, Child and Youth Care, relational practice, social pedagogy, life space, ecological approach, gender

Introduction

The concept of school connectedness and its benefits is gaining recognition in the education system. As a result, it creates a paradigm shift in the education of students. The literature articulates a significant relationship between connectedness and student success. It further indicates that children and youth who experience physical, mental, social and intellectual challenges can encounter poor academic and non-academic outcomes. Subsequently, school systems employ support staff to attend to and meet the

needs of its students. As part of the support team, Child and Youth Care practitioners engage a variety of roles as they walk alongside young people by means of a relational practice. While challenges may exist, with supports in place, CYC practitioners can experience an effective and satisfying practice. Through different school systems and structures, this researcher has participated in and witnessed the positive effects of connectivity on the development and well-being of children and youth, as well as the school community, and thus proposes that the concept of school connectedness is closely associated with the core of CYC practice.

As the first research study of its kind – to the knowledge of this researcher – an exploratory approach was used to study school connectedness in the field of CYC. The literature defines school connectedness and outlines benefits for students and the school community. Further, it speaks to the importance of a CYC approach via a reflective relational-centered practice. To gain insight and understanding on this research topic, the methodology focused on obtaining a CYC perspective from professionals working within the educational sector. It is hoped that the voice of CYC practitioners will contribute to enhance the practice, encourage collaboration, and promote the concept of school connectedness, thus providing a space where children and youth feel connected and flourish within a healthy school community.

Literature Review

Defining School Connectedness

The term school connectedness has changed through time and perspective. As the earliest found source, Goodenow described it as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (as cited in Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006, p. 170). Similarly, Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, and Chan (2009) defined it as “students' perceptions of being accepted by the school and identifying themselves as being part of the school” (p. 264). Another description is based on student bonds developed through trust, a sense of belonging and security, and assurance of school support (Preece, 2009). The most current definition, “School connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2010, p. 21), is adapted from Blum (2005). The

student perspective is at the basis of these definitions. In relation to viewpoint, Lee and Robbins pointed out that “connectedness is a ubiquitous and enduring experience of the self in relation to the world” (as cited in McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2013, p. 137). School connectedness is comparable to other terms: school engagement, school bonding, and school attachment (Libbey, as cited in Shochet *et al.*, 2006, p. 170); Frydenberg *et al.*, (2009) also listed these terms, adding school belonging and teacher support (p. 263). Rowe and Stewart (2009) identified “school connectedness as an ecological concept” (p. 397). Regardless of definition, embedded is the positive relational connection felt by students within the school environment.

The Significance of Connectedness in Schools

School connectedness is a way to foster student social and academic engagement. Engagement can be represented by physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual involvement. Thus, promoting connectedness is relatable in multiple ways. Dixon, Scheidegger, and McWhirter associated connectedness with “the idea of ‘mattering’: or knowing that one matters to others” (as cited in McWhirter *et al.*, 2013, p.137). Likewise, a sense of belonging fills a basic need (Drolet, Arcand, Ducharme, & Leblanc, 2013; Hill, 2006; Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc, & Meyers, 2013). Connectivity involves the building of authentic caring relationships that can develop into valuable formal and informal supports (i.e. school staff and peers). Garfat (2008) illustrated how a caring connection with a student – even if it is one moment in time – not only instills a sense of belonging, but influences school attendance. Regarding marginalized youth, Poteet and Simmons (2014) revealed students’ educational success was in finding a balance between developing positive social networks and academic focus, while keeping true to their own identity. The result of positive trustworthy relationships can include, but is not exclusive to, the following forms of constructive engagement: mutual dialogue; attentiveness and motivation; participation; and student identification with and investment in school. In addition, supportive adult relationships in the education of children and youth can foster healthy behaviour and lessen family stressors (McWhirter *et al.*, 2013). Although school connectedness applies to all ages, there is significant value during adolescent years (Blum, 2005; Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Ross, Shochet, & Bellair, 2010; Tillery *et al.*, 2013).

School connectedness is also a strong protective factor for cultivating positive academic and non-academic outcomes impacting the development and well-being of young people (Blum, 2005; CDC, 2010; Frydenberg *et al.*, 2009; Lapan, Wells, Petersen, & McCann, 2014; Neely, Walton, & Stephens, 2015; Rowe & Stewart, 2009; Shochet *et al.*, 2006). Libbey stated, "When a sense of truly fitting in at school is present, it serves to stimulate improved academic performance as well as to moderate the adoption of risk behaviors" (as cited in Drolet & Arcand, 2013, p. 30). Comparably, the CDC reported, "Children and adolescents who lack connectedness experience social isolation or rejection and tend to suffer psychological distress, greater mental health problems, and suicide risk" (as cited in McWhirter *et al.*, 2013, pp. 137-138). As school systems seek a way to reach and support the diverse needs of children and youth today, it is not necessary to look any further: "School connectedness is the new way of doing business... because there is a need to connect students to a school that is healthy, safe and inclusive and that provides high expectations for students to reach their goals" (Preece, 2009, p. 23). The challenge to move from traditional to modern philosophy has created a paradigm shift in the educational framework.

Supportive Pedagogy

Pedagogy is the transference of knowledge through a contextual framework (Gharabaghi & Groskleg, 2010). To support and optimize student learning, the education system continually reflects on and alters teaching models. It is important to note that the learning environment goes hand-in-hand with student instructional experience. Coleman, Hoffer, and Terrion voiced that schools rich in social capital perform better than others (as cited in McWhirter *et al.*, 2013). Terrion described social capital as "the network of relationships that surrounds an individual child" (as cited in McWhirter *et al.*, 2013, p. 111). Relational networks and participatory learning opportunities can enhance student development and growth in academic and non-academic areas, as well as health and wellbeing (CDC, 2010; McWhirter *et al.*, 2013, Rowe & Stewart, 2009). Regarding social pedagogy, Gharabaghi and Groskleg (2010) spoke to the benefits of a customized learning process rooted in the daily life experiences of young people. While modifying teaching method and practice may encompass different measures, it strives towards reaching the same goal: student success. However, Rowe and Stewart (2009) relayed, "Such an approach requires an organisational perspective that encompasses structural

elements of the whole school and includes the family and broader community context as part of the school community” (p. 397). To effectively integrate connectedness and pedagogy, it is important to align policies, guidelines, and teaching methods throughout a school system.

A number of pedagogical philosophies and methods tie into the idea of school connectedness. One concept, pedagogy of listening, involves a mindful and reflective practice that engages socialization, participation, and learning (Macartney, 2012). This holistic approach combines the care of children and youth with education through an inclusive environment. This model raises school climate as an important element to consider, as student discipline and class management can impact school connectedness (Blum, 2005; CDC, 2010; Preece, 2009). From an ecological standpoint, a whole-school approach “provides opportunities for supportive interaction throughout the school community, including between and within classes” (Rowe & Stewart, 2009, p. 409). With regard to promoting social skills, its value lies in prevention and plays a role in connectedness (Drolet *et al.*, 2013; Ross *et al.*, 2010; McWhirter *et al.*, 2013). Further, Gharabaghi and Stuart (2013) relayed, “From the perspective of pedagogy, young people benefit from learning and knowledge that is organically tied into their everyday life-space experiences” (p. 174). Regardless of approach, connectedness is being noticed amongst school systems as a valuable means to engaging students.

Relational Care

Schools have become a place that not only meets the educational needs of students, but also holistic needs (i.e. physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual). As the family structure changed from the traditional two-parent home to different types of family and guardianship, as well as family dynamics and context, schools became a support system for needs beyond academics. As a result, they began to employ support staff to engage the whole student within and outside the classroom setting; consequently, promoting and attending to students’ non-academic and academic development and success. Today, there is a large complement of professionals in the education system.

As part of the support team, CYC practitioners are typically placed in jobs serving children and youth designated as ‘at-risk’ or ‘special need’ students; yet, their work also reaches beyond the student. “The theoretical basis of Child and Youth Care is... the therapeutic relationship from within the life space of the child” (Jones, 2007). Further,

Phelan relayed, “All other intervention strategies and theoretical applications are secondary to the creation and maintenance of this vital element” (as cited in Jones, 2007). While CYC expertise impacts the lives of young people, it also has influence on the school community through an ecological approach. Rowe and Stewart (2009) emphasized:

An ecological view of school connectedness takes into account the quality of connections among multiple groups in the school community and recognises the cohesiveness among different groups, such as students, families, school staff, and representatives of health and community agencies. (p. 397)

Each system within Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model has a direct and/or indirect connection and impact on the child (McWhirter *et al.*, 2013, pp. 21-25). Further, McWhirter *et al.* (2013) relayed that helping professions can collaboratively incorporate their practice within the school system. As CYC practitioners engage a relational-centered practice with young people, there is also the awareness that “meaning emerges within the ‘space between’ individual, family, and community” (Bellefeuille & Jamieson, 2008, p. 38). CYC practitioners act as a network between peers, teachers, parents/guardians, and other informal and formal supports to establish and ensure young people are connected to their community. In walking alongside children and youth, daily life-space interactions are where connections occur and satisfy needs (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2013). Catalano *et al.*, asserted, “The school emerges as one of the critical environments where early adolescents can find their place.... develop solid relationships, and [sic] become firmly rooted in such a center of life experience” (as cited in Drolet & Arcand, 2013, p. 30).

Regarding the topic of school connectedness, there is a wide range of research through the lens of many fields (Blum, 2005). However, up to the timing of this study, this researcher has noted an absence in relation to the field of CYC. It is therefore important to ask the question: “How does the CYC framework contribute to the achievement of school connectedness?” In conjunction with this enquiry, Rowe and Stewart (2009) raised, “Although school connectedness is widely accepted as important, how to promote it remains poorly understood” (p. 397). Hence, another query came to mind: “How does CYC practice promote school connectedness?” Professional diversity

can create complications in attaining communal language, knowledge, and understanding; further, there are difficulties presenting school connectedness as a solid evidence-based concept by today's benchmarks (Blum, 2005). Fusco (2012) explained that studying relational dynamics is complex given that: relationships evolve; personal characteristics are individualized; and articulation of relationships is not easy. Despite such intricacies, it is worth noting that the CYC framework equips CYC Practitioners to effectively engage the individuality of young people within an ever-changing life space environment. Jones (2007) stated, "Child and Youth Care practice is dynamic, adaptive, fluid, and founded on a uniquely relational orientation towards its clients." In this measure, CYC practitioners learn from moment-to-moment challenges and successes by means of the experiential journey.

Methodology

A cross-sectional mixed methods study design was used to explore the relationship between school connectedness and CYC practice. A cross-sectional survey sampled a single point in time and employed a mixed-methods approach via generated quantitative and qualitative research questions. Participant responses were translated through a secure online survey tool for data analysis. Maintaining data integrity and accuracy, data was analyzed through the coding of variables to produce quantitative and qualitative results: quantitative data (i.e. demographic characteristics and check box responses in regards to thoughts and experiences on school connectedness) were cleaned, edited and analysed through Google Form Summary and Excel; some calculations were done by hand. Independent variables were coded and most underwent basic descriptive statistics (i.e. measures of central tendency) as prescribed by Bryman, Teevan, & Bell (2009). The remaining qualitative data (structured texts of participant thoughts and experiences in relation to school connectedness) were transcribed, and the compiled data underwent previewing, categorizing and coding as prescribed by Tutty, Rothery, Grinnell, and Austin (1996).

Participants

Through *The International Child and Youth Care Network* discussion group email list, eight participants responded to and completed the anonymous online survey. Thus, there was a 100% completion rate. Sampling criteria for the study required participants to be

CYC practitioners employed in the educational sector and willing to complete the survey. CYC practitioners referred to anyone with the following credentials: certification, diploma, and/or degree in child and youth work. The educational sector referred to any type of educational setting involving children and youth. Participation was self-selected on a voluntary basis.

Discussion

The goal of this research study is to explore school connectedness in the field of CYC. Being the first known study of its kind, data and relevant sources was scrutinized to answer the primary question: “How does the CYC framework contribute to the achievement of school connectedness?” The results support the proposal that the CYC framework marries well with the concept of school connectedness. Both embrace a relational and ecological approach. The second question for this study asked, “How does CYC practice promote school connectedness?” Though participant responses and supportive literature provide sound strategies, the findings suggest that a relationally-based practice will require the creation and maintenance of a collaborative community to foster and sustain school connectedness.

Summary of Findings

Reflecting on completion and response rate, it begs the enquiry as to what factors supported the participants to complete and be part of the survey. Although potential participants were recruited globally, online survey responses came from one country: Canada. This distinction in geographical location narrows perspective from an international to a Canadian one. Further, two Canadian provinces were partly represented. The sample reflects a surprising percentage (37.5%) of male participants, and provides superior gender representation. With a lack of male presence in the CYC field (Smith, 2009), a balanced gender ratio is of interest to this study as it lends diverse perspective. Based on Canadian statistics, the ratio of Child and Youth Workers is: 87% female; and 13 % male (PayScale, 2016). One possible reason behind this anomaly is that males are more likely to respond to internet (Denscombe, 2007). Factors influencing demographic response require further exploration.

Three dependent variables stand out from the results: gender; workplace location; and length of employment. With regard to gender, the findings suggest that males and

females perceive and participate in school connectedness differently; further, males were action oriented, while females tended to be interpersonally oriented. Concerning workplace location, responses revealed: one female participant, working in a rural school setting, expressed adult connections and collaboration as an ongoing challenge; four female participants, from urban areas, relayed a range of relational experiences; and all male participants, from urban areas, expressed no relational challenges. With length of employment, the following observations were noted: the participant (male) with the least employment experience (0.92 years) had slightly different responses (i.e. less depth and breadth) than longer term participants; and two participants (one male and one female) expressed deeper relational connections and success in the third year. With a small sample size, it is premature to suggest a finding.

With the core of CYC practice as relational, it is not surprising that all participants reported meaningful connections with students. Whether in social or academic settings, the findings suggest that a majority of CYC relational practice and approach occurs in the life space of the student. This suggestion is consistent with Gharabaghi and Stuart's (2013) statement: "Child and youth care practitioners have long recognized that intervention in the life-space is a foundational method of working with children, youth, and families" (p. 1); further, that meaningful connections can take place within and outside the classroom (Gharabaghi & Groskleg, 2010; McWhirter *et al.*, 2013; Preece, 2009; Rowe & Stewart, 2009). The findings also suggest that CYC practitioners use a multitude of supportive practices to foster school connectedness. Common to the CYC field, integrative practice crosses competence on orientations to create effective therapeutic interactions (Ricks & Charlesworth, 2003).

Connectivity is synonymous with CYC practice. As suggested by the findings, CYC practitioners may give wholly of themselves in their connections with young people. Participants expressed: "I greet ...and acknowledge them, even if they are not my student"; "I intentionally interact with all students, and note their accomplishments...and help"; and "I spend each day engaging students....98% of my time is spent with them." These mindful interactions suggest the main focus for CYC practitioners is connecting with youth, even when it is beyond their duty. In line with this thought, Fusco (2012) relayed that youth workers give of 'self', which "can be defined as a nexus of interaction and activity that occurs intentionally, purposefully, and relationally in order to bring about human change" (p. 34). While not stated as a participant concern, this researcher

considers the impact of a contrasting finding: waiting for youth to come to them. Though no consequences to waiting were found in the results, a possible missed interaction could equate to a lost opportunity. This thought gains support by the literature speaking to effective CYC practice: by means of a relational focus, mindfulness, and intentional meaningful interactions within the life experiences of youth (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011; Gharabaghi, 2010; Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2013; Jones, 2007).

As is typical in most schools, the findings suggest the academic setting occurs in the classroom. All participants perceived that in-class support fostered connectedness, including those who shared challenges in the classroom. From a student perspective, support is valuable, as illustrated through a personal childhood story: Garfat (2008) demonstrated how “a simple caring connection” in the classroom can have in-the-moment and life-long impact. Contrastingly, Gharabaghi and Groskleg (2010) relayed that learning can occur beyond traditional educational programs via social pedagogy; moreover, it can enhance connectedness and educational outcomes. Despite the expressed value of connectedness in the classroom, only three participants chose social pedagogy as a supportive practice, which was the lowest frequency. This contrast raises enquiry to the awareness of this educational method, and if so, what the frequency is. With no mention of this type of engagement in the results, it suggests social pedagogy is still a new concept in Canada. This idea is consistent with the use of social pedagogy in Europe and its considered adoption (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011; Gharabaghi & Groskleg, 2010). No other academic setting, besides the classroom, was described by the participants; yet, opportunities of this nature do exist.

Within the social setting, the findings suggest that CYC practitioners intentionally connect with young people by participating in school routines and the comings and goings of student life. The literature supports rhythms and rituals as a part of CYC practice that foster connectedness (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011; Smith, 2009). Further, activities that occur around food are said to promote connection and are an important part of culture (Neely *et al.*, 2015; Smith, 2009). As evidenced by the results, CYC practitioners engage youth through a plethora of activities. One participant reported that intentional connections increased student attendance. It would be interesting to know additional effects on the student population. Pertaining to these findings, Droet and Arcand (2013) relayed that positive social relationships and participation in activities can enhance student development and well-being.

Regarding counselling, the findings suggest the use of life space in formal counselling was nonexistent. Only one participant's job was based on in-office appointments: with the absence of written text from this participant, there were no further results to interpret. However, three participants who checked formal counselling as a means to foster school connectedness – including the aforementioned participant – shared that they were school counsellors. It would be of value to know counselling methods and means of connection. Studies reveal inconsistent results in quality and effectiveness of formal counselling; still, responsive counselling fosters school connectedness (Lapan *et al.*, 2014). In this study, the findings suggest informal counselling is preferred over formal counselling. This preference is consistent with the statement: “A CYC practitioner does not meet with someone for a counseling session at a scheduled time and place (although that does happen occasionally)”, but creates connective interactions and counsels on the go (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011, p. 14). Further, Redl and Wineman stated, “Some refer to the aspect of this CYC characteristic as ‘life-space counseling’” (as cited in Garfat & Fulcher, 2011, p. 14). The findings also suggest that CYC practitioners engage meaningful connections with youth through intentional informal dialogue. This idea is consistent with bi-directional dialogue which forms positive relational connections between staff and students (Droet & Arcand, 2013).

In regard to environmental factors, in which professional relationships play a large role, the findings suggest that supports and challenges can have an impact on CYC practice. This in turn can affect daily life space connections with students. This idea is consistent with the suggestion that practitioners need supportive systems to effectively attend to young people (Blum, 2005; Gharabaghi, 2010; McWhirter *et al.*, 2013). The findings also suggest an absence of connectivity and support from the School Governing Body (SGB); contrastingly, the SGB lends more support to the teaching staff. Hence, the support system for ground level staff appears to occur within a culture that honours a top-to-bottom hierarchy. Further, the findings suggest that CYC practitioners struggle when feeling undervalued or disconnected from the staff team. In relation to this struggle, the literature raised that a relationship-based practice values and engages in collaborative teamwork (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2012; Denholm, 1993; Gharabaghi, 2010).

While the findings suggest a variety of significant relationships, only five (62.5%) participants checked meaningful relational connections with other CYC practitioners. It is of interest to note that one female participant, working in a rural location with another

CYC practitioner(s), did not check this as a meaningful relationship. It would require further exploration to determine if rural setting is an influential variable on adult connections. Regarding relations within its own profession, the literature stated: “CYC practitioners are connected by how they think about and carry out their work” (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011); whereas, Gharabaghi (2010) expressed that challenges can occur as a result of conflict based on: differing perspectives; role differentiation; and hierarchical issues (pp. 92- 96).

The findings also suggest that gender may play a role in professional relationships. Female participants expressed diverse experiences, while males reported positive supportive relationships (i.e. immediate rapport and/or strengthened relationships; peer collaboration and support; and acknowledgement, recognition, and praise). Comparably, another study revealed that males “believed their masculinity led them to be given more responsible or difficult roles than women colleagues and that patients and others appreciated them” (Ward, 2005).

In addition, the results establish that CYC practitioners encounter different positions and roles. Nationwide, differentiation was demonstrated between and within Canadian provinces. Comparably, this researcher worked in Ontario with varying roles under the following job positions: Child and Youth Worker; Social Skills Worker; Educational Assistant; Social Skills Assistant; and CYW - Behavioural. Denholm (2005) stated, “There exists a wide range of program models, worker roles and functions, job titles, levels of accountability, referral and tracking systems, settings and therapeutic approaches” for CYC practitioners within Canadian educational settings. This diversity can be confusing to students and adults in the school community; thus, CYC practitioners may not be a recognized profession and/or used to their full potential and skill set. As suggested by Garfat and Fulcher (2011), this researcher uses the term Child and Youth Care practitioner to reflect the shift in our professional name.

In terms of maintaining the practice, the findings suggest that CYC practitioners are aware of their needs and are active participants through: advocacy, ongoing education, self care, and reflection. Consistent with this finding, Jones (2007) relayed, “Child and Youth Care is personal change, reflection, and development.” In regard to job competency, training is an essential element (Denholm, 1993; Gharabaghi, 2010). One of the challenges revealed was the lack of job training for effective practice. While in-service training can be sparse, practitioners have the option to pursue cost effective

professional development, as well as self-care opportunities (Gharabaghi, 2010). With regard to reflective practice, the findings suggest most reflections produce a positive space and/or action. However, negative thoughts can lead to: self-doubt; hopelessness; and animosity. The findings also suggest that negativity can be a product of poor connections and support. Consistent with these findings, Bellefeuille and Jamieson (2008) pointed out that environments counterproductive to relational-centered practice “can lead to feelings of frustration, resentment, and ‘burn out’”; thus, practitioners need to be more conscious in order to withstand bureaucratic culture (p. 67).

The second enquiry of this study asked, “How does CYC practice promote school connectedness?” While the findings depict contrasting feelings about promotion, positive action-oriented ideas were shared through an ecological approach. Further, promotion of school connectedness was already in effect with a range of outcomes. Time presented itself as a possible factor in the building and maintaining of school connectedness. This researcher relates to participants noting that strength in relationships and student success can flourish within a three year time period. Thus, it would be interesting to explore the influence of time on connectedness. The findings suggest promotion is a collaborative effort and requires active support within the school system and the community. Consistent with this thought, the literature states that one of the most important elements in the environment are the staff, whose collaborative strengths can effectively support young people (Frydenberg *et al.*, 2009; Fusco, 2012; McWhirter *et al.*, 2013; Smith, 2009). Furthermore, there is a need for families, schools, and communities to join these collaborative efforts (CDC, 2010; McWhirter *et al.*, 2013; Rowe & Stewart, 2009). When adults build trusting supportive relationships with young people it will foster their health and well-being (Drolet & Arcand, 2013).

Conclusion

The findings from this study emphasize the value of Child and Youth Care practitioners within the educational sector and their expertise on the concept of connectedness. It is also evident that school connectedness is a collaborative effort. To maximize effectiveness, changes must be implemented system wide and communities need to come together. Education systems and their staff can adopt knowledge from other countries, while meaningfully integrating social pedagogy as a living-learning space to foster students’ development, health, and well-being. Through this avenue, CYC

practitioners seek to connect with stakeholders to promote and collectively build a supportive system to benefit children and youth holistically. In turn, young people will feel cared for and that they belong, and thus be empowered and motivated towards achieving non-academic and academic success.

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