Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

Volume 37, No.2

ISSN 2410-2954

The CYC-Net PRESS
press.cyc-net.org

Contents

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ISSN 2410-2954 Volume 37, No.2

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Editorial

Creating Space for Reflection, Connection, and Care

James Freeman

As with every issue of *RCYCP*, this edition offers a collection of thought-provoking articles designed to inspire reflection and foster meaningful engagement. We encourage you to take the time to fully immerse yourself in the insights presented here, not just to absorb new knowledge but to thoughtfully integrate it into your everyday practice.

In our fast-paced work, we often fall into the trap of rigid routines, overlooking the importance of creating moments of stillness and reflection. When urgency and crisis demand quick reactions, we risk rushing through the subtle, yet powerful, moments of connection. We are tempted at times to fill the silence and cram activities without giving children and youth the chance to slow down, reflect, and appreciate the world around them. **This issue invites us to rethink how we create space for those essential pauses, allowing both young people and us the opportunity for deeper reflection and connection.**

In the opening article, Chelan McCallion and Patricia Kostouros explore the concept of awe, offering practical strategies for finding "potential encounters of gratitude" and even encouraging practitioners to “act as the memory for the child or youth, walking them through their day to find these moments.”

Rob Grandy and Shane Theunissen unfold outcomes in experiential learning, particularly in the context of boat construction. Their work sheds light on the barriers to inclusion and the nuances involved in fostering personal agency within these learning environments.

Neil McMillan's research provides a powerful blend of academic rigor and personal introspection, exploring the lasting effects of moral injury—when individuals act against their values—on one's sense of self. His reflections remind us of the profound emotional impact this can have on those in caregiving roles.

Christine Pope and Jenny McGrath encourage us to reflect on the language we use to describe our everyday work, reminding us of the importance of intentional, meaningful communication. Meanwhile, Tara Winney shares a personal narrative about her experiences working with young children in education, offering a rare glimpse into the emotional journey of an educator.

Lastly, Sheva Leon's review of a newly published children's book highlights the struggles faced by young people forced to leave behind their homes and cultures. The book's portrayal builds empathy, not just among young readers, but for adults as well. One line in particular stands out: "I think that if you've been really afraid, a bit of fear stays with you even when you're safe." This poignant insight may well encourage you to add this book to your collection.

As you read and reflect through this issue, know that you're joined by colleagues, friends, and supporters from around the globe. You are a valued part of the *RCYCP* community.

James Freeman, MA, CYC-P

is a contributing editor for *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*. He facilitates leadership development for Child and Youth Care organizations through Training Grounds and may be reached at james@training-grounds.net

Understanding Awe and Gratitude as Interventions

Chelan McCallion and Patricia Kostouros

For a long time there has been discussion in our close knit group of child and youth care instructors about how we could turn things around in the continuum of care for the children and youth with whom we work. Some of the settings in which child and youth care practitioners find themselves could be anywhere from community recreation programs, in home support services or campus-based treatment. In each of these settings we are likely to engage with children and youth who struggle with hopefulness due to their difficult circumstances. Often, the resources and referrals these young folks receive can be difficult to access and/or the staff working with them in the daily life space are not versed in the interventions that are provided. In this paper we offer an understanding of how the use of being awestruck and gratitude can shift perspective and hope for the present moment as well as the future.

Gratitude and being awestruck are two interventions that anyone can implement which can change the trajectory of one's wellness and ability to be more present when practiced regularly. The positive emotions that come into play when one encounters good things in life and recognizes these as such can be sustained through regular practice. According to Stellar et al. (2017) gratitude and awe are self-transcendent and complex emotions with social functions that bind us together.

Gratitude

Those who have studied the concept of gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2004) described three ways in which people experience gratitude. One is as a disposition or a trait; something that is innate and is easily conjured when a positive encounter

occurs. Another is as a mood, something that can fluctuate based on what is encountered and when. When gratitude is experienced as a mood, then other factors are at play that might override the feeling of gratitude, but initially the gratitude is a felt experience which can be sustained if desired. The third is as an emotional experience also related to what has been encountered, is less sustained and relates only to that one experience.

In child and youth care we might notice a child who is perpetually happy and kind. We wonder why they are so positive given their circumstances, but this might be a person who has a gratitude trait. In this case practicing gratitude will come more easily and having the child or youth engage in gratitude practices will be fairly easy. The second experience of gratitude, mood, could be thought about as a locus of control. In this case the locus of control of mood is external and the child or youth will mostly only experience gratitude if something external helps them feel grateful, for example a grade in school, or an invitation to a party. It could be more difficult to help a person who experiences gratitude based on mood or external events, however, a regular practice can create a neural network which could be built upon allowing a transfer from an external locus of control to an internal one.

The third experience of gratitude, an emotion that is not sustained, typically means that the person has more difficulty conjuring experiences of gratitude. In this case the practitioner will need to work diligently to find potential encounters of gratitude. The practitioner may have to act as the memory for the child or youth and walk them throughout their day to find these events. The practitioner may also have to engage the child or youth in ways that allow for these encounters to occur in the daily life space.

The concept that increasing gratitude can impact mental wellness has been considered for some time. Other researchers (Jindal et al., 2022) that focus in this area have shown that a regular practice of gratitude “has a significant positive correlation with mental well-being,” (p. 109) particularly, a daily practice was found to be “an effective intervention for wellbeing enhancement in early adolescents” (p. 109). Practicing gratitude may seem to dismiss the experiences that many children and

youth in our care have encountered but in combination with other trauma-oriented interventions, a gratitude practice may increase hope for a better future.

Gratitude essentially allows an individual to value positive encounters in their life and make meaning of these. It is an act of thankfulness which recognizes daily life events, big and small, that may have been appreciated. A regular gratitude practice can change neuronal structures in the brain. When rewiring occurs, through regular practice, our mental wellness becomes more stable and when distressing encounters occur, these have a less negative impact (Smith, et al., 2020).

According to Armenta et al. (2022), a regular practice of gratitude is beneficial amongst adolescents and can increase motivation, prosocial behaviour and life satisfaction. Their study (Armenta et al., 2022) of 1000 grade nine and ten students showed that:

> *... gratitude may stimulate individuals to feel supported by close others, inspired to want to be better, humbled to acknowledge that a change may be necessary, and obligated to make that change, while neutralizing some of the negative affect that stands in the way of that change. (p. 1011)*

In addition, Armenta et al. stated that gratitude can decrease at-risk behaviour. It is important to note that their sample group was not the typical population that child and youth care practitioners serve, therefore, their specific findings may not be generalizable. Regardless, the literature is showing that a regular practice of gratitude can change one's well-being for the better.

Gratitude has several benefits such as emotion regulation, something child and youth care practitioners often teach children and adolescents. General improved wellbeing, feeling more satisfied in life and the decrease of anxiety and depression, as well as anger, are also shown to be impacted by a regular gratitude practice (Baumsteiger, et al., 2019). In addition, gratitude can shift one's physical wellness and decrease future disease (Wong et al., 2020). A gratitude practice is also inexpensive

which could be attractive to child and youth care organizations since these agencies are often stretched financially to support mental health interventions for the children and youth in their care.

According to Kardas et al. (2019) gratitude is when a person can recognize and also appreciate positive things in their life. For those who have had few positive experiences, often the children and youth with whom we work, gratitude might need to be cultivated, since it will not likely come naturally. Kardas et al. completed a study of university students aged 17-30 and compared gratitude, hope, optimism as well as life satisfaction to determine how these constructs are linked and which might have the most impact on wellbeing. Based on their findings, gratitude had the highest rate of predicting positive wellbeing. These researchers suggested that gratitude interventions can be effective.

Gratitude Practice

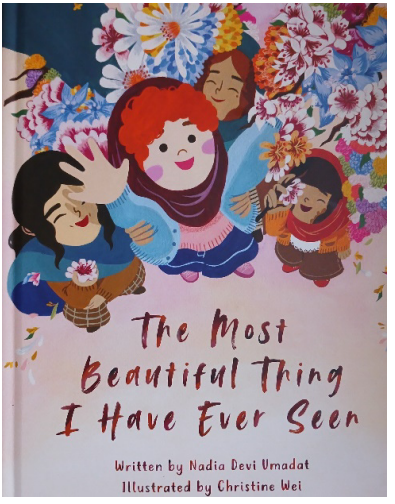
The practice of child and youth care takes place in many settings. Therefore, while the practice of gratitude might look different depending on where one does their work, the opportunity to use the daily life space to create an environment which promotes gratitude is still possible. Garfat et al. (2019) described the 25 characteristics of relational child and youth care and how the practitioner attends to the space to create "purposeful use of daily life events" (p. 16). Regardless of where child and youth care practice takes place, there will be opportunities to provide interactions of kindness and care that promote gratitude opportunities.

Gratitude practice needs to be individually created so that these are unique to the child or youth with whom this practice will be used. For example, a practitioner may not want to use a gratitude journal with a youth that struggles with reading and writing. Perhaps, in that case, more meditation or artistic practices would be appropriate. One important aspect of gratitude practice is that for it to create an attitudinal shift that is maintained, it must be practiced regularly. For example, many studies say that a daily or weekly practice is needed (Smith, et al., 2020).

Book Review

The Most Beautiful Thing I Have Ever Seen

Sheva Leon



The Most Beautiful Thing I Have Ever Seen by **Nadia Devi Umadat**

Illustrated by **Christine Wei**

Publisher: Second Story Press

Published 2023

ISBN 1772603147

Hardcover, 32 pages

'The Most Beautiful Thing I Have Ever Seen' is a beautifully illustrated, hard-cover book for children, that tells a tale of a life-altering experience. The story follows the thoughts and views of a young child who must leave her home and move to a new country. While this book is inspired by the stories of children from Syria, there are no names of countries mentioned, nor even any mention of the names of characters as well. This allows for a broader range of reach with the readers and allows the reader to focus on the main character's emotions. As a result, readers may more effectively feel what many children endure when emigrating to a new country, culture, and existence.

The story is narrated through the eyes and voice of a young child and is presented alongside detailed, large colourful illustrations. These wonderful visuals may help younger readers to step into the shoes of someone who may be quite different to them, or perhaps find themselves a little less alone because they can see their own experiences illustrated. The story itself is written in such a way that honours some of the hardships but also highlights the strengths and beauty found in the journey. Furthermore, depending on the age of the reader, this book also gently highlights bigger talking points such as fear and trauma but does so in a way that does not take away from the beauty of the story. For example, in the words of the child, it notes that sometimes "I think that if you've been really afraid, a bit of fear stays with you even when you're safe". There are also glimpses into the potential struggles of children from a war-torn country, such as the triggering loud noises (school bells) and flashing fireworks, alongside examples of how to manage these big emotions (one sister helping the other sister take deep breaths). Through it all, there is a bond being woven between two sisters, as they find courage to face the unknowns together.

Overall, these are the kinds of stories that we need for our children growing up in this ever-diverse world. Many stories can be found that depict bad things happening to bad people, yet we know that bad things also happen to good people. This story highlights the message that even though things may seem scary, the process can still be beautiful, and one can cope through the tough situations with the help of others. The children were exposed to this very different place, and yet found beauty awaiting them.

After I read this story to my eight-year-old boy, we had a great discussion about the new people in his class who have just arrived from a different country. We talked about the difficulties that they may have that we know nothing about. We talked about the importance of being warm, welcoming, kind and patient, while also noting that we could learn so much more about the world through them. When I asked if he had any critiques, he squinted his eyes as he thought deeply and finally noted "I just wanted to know who the person speaking was…maybe start with a page to show who she is." This led to another great talking point about while that would help… it's kind of cool that there is no name because it could be a story that belongs to many children, instead of just one.

Sheva Leon
is a professor in the Child & Youth Care Program at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Information

Relational Child and 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".

Certain pieces in *RCYCP* have received peer review. However, we do not peer review all articles as we choose not to exclude those voices where peer review would be inappropriate - or on request from writers.

Publishers

The CYC-Net Press
PO Box 23199, Claremont, 7735 SOUTH AFRICA
https://press.cyc-net.org email: info@press.cyc-net.org

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Past Editors

ISSN 2410-2954 Volume 37, No.2

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Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

ISSN 2410-2954 Volume 37, No.2

Relational Child and Youth Care Practice is committed to providing equitable and inclusive spaces that promote and support the global profession of Child and Youth Care through disseminating the knowledge and experience of individuals involved in the day-to-day lives of young people, families and communities. This commitment is founded upon the belief that all human issues, are essentially "relational".

Relational Child & Youth Care Practice welcomes submissions on all aspects relating to young people, families and communities. This includes material that explores the intersectionality of Child and Youth Care practice and the lived experiences of all who are engaged in Child and Youth Care practice. Considerations will also be given to interpersonal dynamics of professional practice and all submissions that assume a relational perspective. This might include topics such as cultural values, ethics, social policy, program design, supervision, education, training etc. Welcomed are also submissions that address advocacy, social justice and reconciliation practices within the diverse spaces and places of Child and Youth Care. Each issue may include refereed articles that comply with acceptable 'academic' standards; submissions contributed by regular and guest columnists; short pieces that describe particular relational experiences and reflections; poetry; artwork and photographs.

Material should be submitted by email to rcycp@press.cyc-net.org in standard word processing format (eg. .doc, .rtf). Formal articles should not exceed 6000 words in length (excluding references). Referencing should conform to either APA or Harvard format. Author-date citations should be used within the text and a double-spaced reference section should accompany each article. In all submissions, authorship details including an abstract of no more than 150 words should be included, as well as a short list of keywords at the beginning of the article, a headshot photo and a short author bio of about 100 words to publish with your article. Importantly, authors should also indicate whether a peer review is required (in addition to the standard editorial review).

Although no article or submission will be rejected purely for stylistic reasons, the editors reserve the right to return any manuscript for additional work. Authors requiring editorial assistance in this regard should indicate their request in a covering letter. Originality of material is the responsibility of the primary author. Previously published material must be identified as such and will be published only where the necessary permission has been granted from the original source.

Relational Child and Youth Care Practice may include Peer Reviewed contributions, stories, case studies, thought pieces, experiential descriptions and other forms of writing which will not be peer reviewed. In this way we aim to strike a balance between the values of Peer Reviewed articles and experiential voices from the field. This is a unique approach and one which we feel offers the best of both. Peer Review is available on request.

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Proquest Applied Social Sciences Abstracts (ASSIA); Proquest Central; Proquest One Academic; Proquest Social Science Premium

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