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# Centering Vulnerabilities, Readiness, and Wellness within Child and Youth Care Practices

Talia Esnard and Aurrora De Monte

This year we are pleased to bring you research by various students and institutions from around the globe. We are grateful for the participation of the following institutions and the supervisors who have supported their students/graduates: University of the West Indies, Brock University, and the University of Strathclyde in both the MSc in Child and Youth Care Studies as well as the MSc in Residential Child Care. As *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice* continues to grow, these contributions add to a global body of knowledge that is much needed. This type of knowledge building is particularly needed to broaden the understanding of the practices that support young people and families, and to develop more critical global scholarship with new points of examinations and directions. This type of scholarly engagement is also required to expand the evidence that informs how we understand notions of care, the practices around us, and the strategies that are being developed to support care work.

The volume covers a rich examination of contextual and relational aspects of Child and Youth Care practices that cover the Caribbean, Singapore, Scotland and Canada.

These papers aptly capture some of the challenges for families and young people that are conditioned by the context wherein they exist. The papers center critical areas of concern such as mental health and wellness, familial and residential care, as well as discrimination and incarceration.

### **Mental Health and Wellness**

Globally, issues of mental health and wellbeing emerge as key areas for young people. Patel et al. (2007) describes mental health of children and young people as a global public health issue that requires urgent intervention. This sentiment is captured in the work of Manmit Rakhra, Shannon Moore, Heather Ramey, and Naomi Andrews. They provide a critical review of existing literature on the factors that impact the provision of mental health support for middle to high school children in Ontario, Canada. They highlight the role of school resources, teacher preparation, distribution and ability of professional staff (including social workers, psychologists, child and youth care workers) to support aspects of mental health and wellness. The authors end their contribution with a call for more transdisciplinary research and interventions to address some of the critical gaps that exist within the field.

### **Familial Care, Support and Resilience**

The issue of familial care as an aspect of how people care for their loved ones and how they build both capacity and resilience within that process is well situated within this volume. This aspect of care for loved ones often remains an underexplored aspect of care work that exists outside of the readily studied cases of institutionalized residential care facilities. This is particularly the case given the sense of solitary within that journey (Boland & Sims, 1996), the lack of preparedness of persons to take these roles (Ziemba & Lynch-Sauer, 2005), and the stresses and negative outcomes that emerge from that process (Monin & Schulz, 2009). Janice Daley and Rebekah Norman speak to the challenges for young and older caregivers.

Rebekah Norman addresses the challenge of young carers supporting adult family members who live with illness, disability, or other social and cultural challenges. Through her critical participatory action research, that was completed in partnership with two young carer organizations and four young carers in Ontario, Canada, the research focuses on relational leisure to support young carers in their lives. The work also calls for a strengthening of support systems and other psycho-social services for young carers.

Janice Daley captures the stories and experiences of grandparents who care for the young. She shares with us an exploration into the needs of grandfamilies (grandparents that are looking after their grandchildren) in Eastern Newfoundland, Canada. Her research illuminates their strengths and resilience. Using the Child and Youth Care perspective, her work focuses on the value of providing opportunities for training and knowledge building to support them in their caregiving journeys.

### **Relational and Professional Pillars of Care**

The focus on relational care within practice remains a central aspect of advancing the wellbeing of all who work with young people and families. This represents a notable shift towards humanizing care that centers the experiences and wellbeing of key stakeholders. Three contributions address some aspects of this discussion with attention to issues of gender, place attachment, and decision-making capacities.

In her paper, Fiona Campbell brings issues of gender within discussions of interventions aimed at harmful sexual behavior among adolescents within residential child care homes in Scotland. The work calls for practitioners to be conscious, knowledgeable and capable of addressing issues of gender inequality as part of the experiences for those within residential care, but more importantly, as part of their own reflective approach to their practice as professionals within that space. The study underscores the need for further unsettling of patriarchal systems and pervasive gender norms within institutional dynamics and relations of care, and for the gender-based sensitivity training for residential care workers.

Thérèse Simpson starts with the recognition of place attachment as an understudied area of research. Using qualitative research to capture the voices of young Singaporeans, she examines the processes through which place attachments are formed through their lived experiences at home, in their neighbourhood and with their emotional connection with Singapore. The findings bring attention to the evidence of place attachment, and its impacts on identity development and wellbeing and underline the importance of physical and social environments.

Adrienne Cryne and Dr. Laura Steckley explore young person participation in decision making within a residential care home in Scotland. Using interviews, the research points to practitioner skills and abilities, as well as organizational attributes that promote or inhibit young person participation within decision making processes. The research highlights the need for a developmental approach to supporting young person engagement, ultimately signaling the need for practitioners to enhance opportunities for participation of young people to the best of their abilities, whenever they can.

### **Stigmatization, Discrimination and Incarceration**

Issues of inequality, stigma, separation, discrimination, and incarceration also represent key concerns for young people (Feingold, 2021). Yet, there is still a lack of substantive research on the experiences for young persons who have experienced stigma based on their perceived social, personal or communal backgrounds, and the connection to experiences of discrimination and incarceration. This is particularly the case for young people outside of the global north where much of the literature exists. The papers by Ayodele Eastman and Renee Maingot-Pesnell, both from Trinidad and Tobago, as one of the Southern most countries within the Anglophone Caribbean, offer critical insights into the experiences and dynamics for young persons.

Ayodele Eastman shares with us research that investigates youth responses to crime reporting in the community of Morvant Laventille in Trinidad and Tobago. She uses critical race theory and photovoice as a way for young people in what is dubbed as at-risk communities, to speak back to some of the racialized narratives that unfolds

within media representation and to re-narrate their imagined communities. Her research also points to issues of stigma, association of neighborhoods with criminal activities, and discrimination as direct consequences of racial stereotypes for young Black persons living within these communities. Through this research, she pushes for greater critical media literacy, with the potential for both community members and media personnel to be conscious and proactive in how they treat issues of microaggressions.

The research of Renee Maingot-Pesnell in Trinidad and Tobago investigates the connection between juvenile detention and adult offending exploring how the label of delinquent may negatively impact perceptions of self and lead to continued offending. The title, *Today's Criminal, Yesterday's Delinquent*, aptly captures the connection between juvenile custodial sentencing and adult incarceration, with challenges for negative self-concepts and behavioral patterns. The work speaks to the need for more rehabilitative and restorative approaches to supporting young people within the prison system (Butler, 2011; Cuffman et al. 2021) with stronger systems of social support that allow these people to be empowered and committed to the process.

### **Unique Contribution of the Volume**

The volume centers some of the critical challenges around mental health for child and young people, the experiences, strengths and challenges of care (both for younger and older persons) and the complex connection between stigma, discrimination and incarceration. These studies move outside of the focus on the social, economic and structural underpinnings of these realities, to capture key relational and experiential aspects that impact the lived realities and outcomes. The volume also calls for more expanded examinations that (i) cut across socially constituted groups, (ii) that capture some of the silences related to care, mental health and support, and that (iii) move beyond the boundaries of the global north to capture the experiences and challenges of young people across social geographies. These areas of investigation are critical given the lack of research within the global south and the related lack of knowledge

and sharing of best practices to address some of these fundamental issues impacting children and young people globally. The volume fills in some of these gaps.

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# The Provision of Mental Health Supports in Ontario Schools: A Critical Literature Review

Manmit Rakhra, Shannon A. Moore, Heather L. Ramey and  
Naomi Andrews

## Abstract

*In Canada's largest province, Ontario, over one-third of students ages 12 to 18 report experiencing mental health challenges. As children spend a significant amount of time in school, this setting might be expected to provide support outside of academics. Through a critical literature review, we aimed to uncover insights into factors impacting the provision of mental health support for school-aged children from middle to high school. The review revealed that, although children seek mental health support from adults in schools, most Ontario schools are not equipped to respond to mental health needs, creating a gap in access. Child and youth care practitioners are part of the education system and are effective in supporting children's mental health. We also explore the roles of teachers, social workers, psychologists, and child and youth care practitioners, in supporting student mental health. To meet the unique and complex needs of children, a transdisciplinary approach is recommended. Although the focus of this study was on Ontario, Canada, our findings likely have implications for school settings outside of Ontario.*

## Keywords

*school-based mental health, Ontario schools, trauma-informed, intersectionality, transdisciplinary*



**M**ental health includes mental, emotional, psychological, physical, spiritual, and social well-being (Cefai & Camilleri, 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018; School Mental Health Ontario, 2023). Mental health challenges can arise in early childhood (Harvard University, 2021), which is a concern as positive mental health is foundational to resilience, emotional regulation, self-esteem, learning, thinking, and communication; all of which impact the formation of healthy relationships and the ability to adapt to change and adversity (American Psychiatric Association, 2021; Lige, 2021). Worldwide, 20% of children ages 10 to 19 are affected by mental health problems and may require mental health services (Cefai & Camilleri, 2015; World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). In Canada's largest province, Ontario, over one-third of students in grades 7 to 12 are experiencing mental health challenges, making it difficult for them to learn and adhere to classroom and social norms (Boak et al., 2021; Children's Mental Health Ontario, 2020b). A survey by Boak et al. (2021) showed 30.8% of Ontario students in grades 7 to 12, aged 12 to 18 had reported visiting a mental health care professional and 42.4% of students reported requiring mental health support, however, students were uncertain of who to reach out to, or how to access support.

In Ontario, children are in school 190 days of the year for at least six hours a day (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). As children spend a significant amount of time in their classrooms and school, these contexts play a critical role in children's development and can be a gateway to mental health support (Phillipo & Stone, 2011; Swick & Powers, 2018). In classrooms, teachers are able to observe early indicators of mental health needs (Fazari, 2015) however, they may not have training and knowledge in the area of mental health, which may pose a barrier (Frauenholtz et al., 2017). Researchers have stated a multidisciplinary school team can be valuable in addressing the mental health needs of children (Phillipo & Stone, 2011; SMHO, 2023). School-based mental health professionals, such as child and youth care practitioners (CYCPs), social workers, and school psychologists, work with school leaders, school staff, and students through an anti-oppressive, equity, and inclusive stance to respond to the unique mental health needs of each student (School Mental Health Ontario

[SMHO], 2023). Nevertheless, research indicates that there is a lack of mental health professional support in Ontario schools (Fazari, 2015; People for Education, 2023).

The purpose of the current study is to uncover insights into factors impacting the provision of mental health supports for middle and high school-aged children in Ontario, Canada, through a critical literature review (CLR) that is guided by a theoretical framework integrating transdisciplinarity, intersectionality and a trauma-informed lens. The gap prompting this study is the lack of on-site mental health professionals available in Ontario schools despite literature indicating schools are in an ideal position to provide mental health support. This study works to fulfil this gap by providing insight of the important roles of school professionals in classroom and school settings. Our specific focus will be an examination of the provision of mental health support from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including CYCPs, social work, and psychology, and particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Below, we will begin with an articulation of our conceptual framework. Next, the CLR will include an overview of mental health supports in Ontario schools, including current services and supports as well as the roles, responsibilities, and training of the range of professionals currently integrated within school settings.

### **Conceptual Framework**

We used a transdisciplinary, intersectional, and trauma-informed lens to assist in understanding the experiences of children, their mental health needs, and the support needed in school systems. A *transdisciplinary approach* transcends single disciplinary approaches to methodology and epistemology (Montuori, 2013) to create new ways of knowing and new approaches to problem-solving (Moore & Ciotti, 2021). As transdisciplinarity emphasizes complexity, it enables professionals to critically think beyond their disciplinary boundaries, embrace uncertainty, and be a learner (Moore, 2024). A transdisciplinary approach “calls for a radical listening, an ontology of humility, deep curiosity, and centering the formation of new understanding” (Moore, 2024, p. 292). When using a transdisciplinary approach, team members from diverse disciplines communicate, interact, and cooperate as a team to teach, learn, and work

toward a mutual goal, outcome, or service (King et al., 2009). A transdisciplinary approach is in line with child and youth care practice, which typically requires cross-disciplinary collaborations.

The appreciation of real-world complexity will be further emphasized in the current review by bringing forward *intersectionality* as a lens to understand the multiple dimensions of identity that shape young people's lives. The term intersectionality was coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990), who emphasizes that social positions are not independent, but rather shape human experience collectively. In the context of children's lives, their daily experiences are shaped by social, economic, and demographic features, and the intersection of age, ethnicity, class, and gender (Dineen et al., 2022). As various social positions at the individual level intersect, they are influenced by the larger systems of oppression (Baur et al., 2021).

Finally, given the impact of power relations on experiences of identity and the social worlds of young people, a *trauma-informed lens* is used to bring insight into the needs of young people in classroom settings (Fraser, 2015). A trauma-informed lens is important to consider in the context of mental health in schools, as trauma in early childhood may impact a child's brain function and development (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017). As trauma can manifest in various ways and children have different experiences, children and their mental health can be complex; therefore, a multi-faceted approach through the collaboration of diverse disciplines is discussed in this study.

## **Methodology**

This study engages a CLR as a methodology to explore previous scholarship focused on provisions of children's mental health in school settings, as well as to uncover the gaps in current research that merit further investigation. A CLR is an original analysis, which compares and contrasts (Graulich et al., 2021), while highlighting strengths, lack of clarity, or gaps in the current knowledge available (Jesson & Lacey, 2006). Such a thorough and critical examination of the literature provides the researcher with a better understanding of what has been learned and

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*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”.

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