

Building a Child and Youth Care Culture of Relational-Centred Praxis: Ours to Make

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ABSTRACT

Our purpose here is to draw upon the insights, perspectives, and ideas we have acquired in life and in our professional practice experiences as child and youth care (CYC) students, practitioners, and educators so we can frame a much needed discussion about the concept of praxis as considered from a relational ontological perspective. Our premise is that to truly fulfil the vision of being a relational-centred profession grounded in the core values and principles of trust, fairness, integrity, honesty, caring, tolerance, and respect for diversity and equality, CYC practitioners must reach deeper into the nuance of the concept of praxis to fully grasp its meaning from a relational-centred perspective. Thus, we present the case that a teaching and learning pedagogy that encourages critical thinking and promotes relational-centred praxis is more likely to bring about the deep learning and self-reflection CYC practitioners must acquire to generate the inspiration, confidence, competence, and moral courage necessary to act as transformational leaders in the field.

Keywords: *Child and youth care, Culture, Praxis, Relational.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Wonder is the beginning of wisdom” — Socrates

What we share in common as co-authors is a comfort with “not-knowing,” or, to put it differently, we embrace uncertainty because it is necessary to how we learn and grow. Being at ease with uncertainty is about inhabiting the “space-between” knowing and not knowing. The concept of the space-between is a uniquely relational notion of a reality that is greater than the sum total of the experiences of self and other (Bellefeuille and Ricks, 2010). It is a being-in-the-moment encounter with curiosity, exploration, non-judgmental awareness, and open mindedness. Hence, as practitioners and educators we approach the practice, teaching, and learning of CYC as a deeply intrapersonal meaning-making process that occurs between self and others. We understand relational-centred practice as a collaborative endeavour in which CYC practitioners work with others in an open and respectful manner to make sense of what is (i.e., meaning-making). Nothing is “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad.” There is no judgment of fault, blame, or inadequacies because the focus is on understanding the potential of what is possible (Bellefeuille et al., 2012). Our ethical obligations, therefore, do not strictly focus on professional codes of ethics nor on categories of thought grounded in prior experiences nor on assumptions about what is right or wrong; instead, they are situated in the relational space. In other words, ethical action begins by seeking to understand (i.e., make meaning of) another person’s situation, perspective, and vulnerability so that we can more appropriately determine what ethical action entails.

1.1. Riding the Butterflies

What unites us in our commitment to relational-centred praxis is our willingness to step out of our comfort zones and journey into the unknown with a sense of excitement and adventure, rather than seeking “more of the same” as a means to stay safe or secure. In his book *Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance* (2012), Jonathan Field talks about the fluttery feelings of stomach butterflies that people experience when they feel anxious or nervous and he notes that many people tend to run from those internal flutters of anxiety, uneasiness, and uncertainty. Field states,

If only we’d learned how to harness and ride rather than hunt and kill the butterflies that live in the gut of every person who strives to create something extraordinary from nothing. (p. 27)

It is important, however, to make clear that we do not embrace a kind of inconsequential or whimsical uncertainty that tolerates idleness, nor do we promote a “whatever-happens” attitude. Instead, we intentionally strive to maintain open-mindedness and avoid the limits of dogmatic thinking shaped by personal opinions and beliefs; such limits are found in all professions in the form of absolute certainties or “truths” that disrupt and impede open inquiry. We view ourselves as educators and practitioners, not as “knowers” in a static, compartmentalized, and predictable world. We are non-knowing critical thinkers in an infinitely complex universe and are incapable of achieving absolute knowing; paradoxically, the only certainty is uncertainty. While we recognize and accept that all humans have the tendency to be dogmatic about some things, we strive, as Mark Twain suggests, against dogmatism wherever we encounter it and in all forms, no matter how unpopular we might become in the process. Twain’s essay “What is Man?” (is a Socratic dialogue between an old and a young man about the nature of man. It implies that we all need to be on guard against the mere appearance of things, and that we must confront truths with scepticism:

...that as soon as the Seeker finds what he is thoroughly convinced is the Truth, he seeks no further, but gives the rest of his days to hunting junk to patch it and caulk it and prop it with, and make it weather-proof and keep it from caving in on him. Hence the Presbyterian remains a Presbyterian, the Mohammedan a Mohammedan, the Spiritualist

a Spiritualist, the Democrat a Democrat, the Republican a Republican, the Monarchist a Monarchist; and if a humble, earnest, and sincere Seeker after Truth should find it in the proposition that the moon is made of green cheese nothing could ever budge him from that position; for he is nothing but an automatic machine, and must obey the laws of his construction. (p. 25)

Mark Twain's essay underscores what is at stake when we assume a dogmatic attitude, because when people hold dogmatic attitudes they are actually engaging in acts of oppression by imposing their power on others, replete with destructive and harmful effects, regardless of its particular manifestation.

1.2. The Evolution of Child and Youth Care Education

Like many other professional disciplines, CYC has undergone a profound metamorphosis in recent decades. With its roots in residential treatment, CYC education was traditionally taught within a distinct psychodynamic paradigm characterized by a heavy emphasis on behaviour management and intervention techniques (Krueger, 1991). Redl and Wineman (1951) promulgated the use of psychodynamic management techniques with the introduction of their book *Children Who Hate*. Redl and Wineman were followed by Trieschman *et al.* (1969) *The Other 23 Hours*, which is considered by many in the field to be one of the most influential books in the history of CYC education. *The Other 23 Hours* articulated a psychodynamic approach to understanding and using the residential milieu as a therapeutic tool. Over the past three or four decades, significant developments thinking, curricula, and teaching and learning methods have occurred. For example, Garfat (2004) writes, "there was a time in our professional history when the family was not seen in a positive light. Indeed, in the early days of our field, family was considered irrelevant" (p. 4). More recently, in commenting on some of the "traditional" but nonetheless very harmful behavioural management practices previously used in residential care, Gharabaghi (2010) offers a confession:

Over the course of my career, I have always had a paradoxical disposition toward group homes. On the one hand, I loved working in them and I believed firmly that it is in fact possible to provide for meaningful experiences for young people within the context of residential group care. On the other hand, except for very short periods of time, my experiences of working in group homes have consistently confirmed that this is no way to care for kids. More than once I came to the conclusion that residential group care is really a nuanced way of practicing institutional child abuse. (para. 1)

Gharabaghi goes on to describe, in his words, "three profoundly...stupid ideas" that shape behaviour management interventions and that need to be eliminated from residential care. These include the behaviour management contract, early bed times, and grounding after returning from absence without leave. With advancements in scientific knowledge come new insights, with new insights come new theoretical perspectives, and with new theoretical perspectives come new practice methods. The point is that no issues can be permanently settled in terms of how we understand, teach, and practice CYC. Our past, present, and future experiences as CYC educators and practitioners will be shaped continuously by insights gained by future generations of CYC scholars who engage in scientific inquiry.

In this context, then, the concept of relational-centred praxis is critical as a tool for overcoming personal and ideological subcultures of resistance—such as the conservative traditionalist, and individual fear and insecurity. This is because relational-centred praxis, which we discuss in depth later on, provides something more than just knowing, more than just doing, more than just being. In other words, relational-centred praxis is more the sum of its parts. The significance of relational-centred praxis lies in its transformative powers—which is to say, once you

get “it,” “it” is always with you, always “in you,” always “on.” If we are to build a CYC culture of transformational leaders, we need to teach relational-centred practice relationally.

Thus, we argue that a teaching and learning pedagogy informed by relational-centred praxis situated in a relational ontology is more likely to bring about the deep learning and self-reflection that CYC practitioners must acquire. Once practitioners have developed these qualities, they will be able to generate the inspiration, confidence, competence, and moral courage necessary to participate as transformational leaders in the field.

1.3. Relational Ontology: Understanding all Beings and Things as Inherently Connected

Ontology is the study of the nature of being. The term derives from two Greek words: *on*, which means “being,” and *logia*, which means “study.” The use of ontology provides different approaches to assessing how we understand what it is to be a human being (Orme and Shemmings, 2010). CYC practice, when approached from a relational-centred perspective, is informed by relational ontology. In a relational ontological perspective, “it is by our relations to others that we ontologically exist as meaningful singularities” (Thrasher, 2015). As Nancy (1991) explains, “it is by our being-with others as a singular existence within a plurality of unfolding relationships...[that] we meaningfully exist” (p. 9). Hence,

Ontologically[,] by being with others we are exposed to who we are as a relating person and it is in the space of our ontological sense of relationality that we are understood by our life experiences. Furthermore, our everyday relationships portray a sense of meaning that defines us, that gives us an orientation to our lives, which gives our lives a sense of meaning (Thrasher, 2015).

But before going any further, we ask that you first reflect on a time in your life when you were either on your own or isolated from others. If you really stop to consider this, you will likely agree that even though you were alone (i.e., without companions), solitude can be profoundly relational (e.g., hiking in a forest or sitting by the ocean). Our point is that we are always in relationship with other people and our surroundings in some way, because as humans we are relational to the very core of our beings. We are even relationally interconnected with the rest of the cosmos in the form of the air we breathe and the water we drink (Benjamin, 2015). For example, when we breathe, we are being affected by the air we inhale and modifying the air others breathe by what we exhale. Simply put, we are not beings defined by the boundaries of our skin. Rather, as human beings we live and exist relationally.

I Think Therefore I Am

To fully appreciate the significance and, above all, the implications of viewing human beings as overly cerebral, disembodied, and interdependent, it is important to understand the origin of the current, dominant Western view of human beings as autonomous, ego-based individuals (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2012). This construal of the independent, self-determining individual has a long history in Western philosophy and is deeply rooted in post-Cartesian thinking, an ontological perspective that effectively views human beings as self-enclosed entities, detached from the external world. The Cartesian view of the human being in the world is tied to the belief that human beings, by their nature, are self-interested, disembodied, atomistic individuals.

Generally considered to be the foremost proponent of Cartesian individualism, 17th-century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist Rene Descartes thought of the individual as an independent thinking-self who observed the world as an outside object. In other words, Descartes asserts that humans are defined as human beings by their minds. This interpretation implies that we find our truest selves not through our relationships and interactions with other human beings or with the rest of creation but, instead, through introspection. As such,

Descartes fashioned his most famous phrase, “Je pense, donc je suis” (“I think, therefore I am”), which became so influential that it became the starting point for the emergence of Western notions of individualism (Gergen, 2009). Although the profession of CYC is built upon a more relational view of human beings, the teaching and learning of CYC practice is most often taught within the framework of Western theories of human development, which examines human nature through the lens of individualistic ontology.

I Feel and I Relate, and Therefore I Am

The basic contention of relational theory is the notion that the self is a process of relatedness. Consequently, the self is not so much a personal possession as a reflection of one’s relational experiences (Bellefeuille and Jamieson, 2008). This model contrasts with the individualism of Cartesian ontology, wherein humans are identified as freestanding, self-sufficient, independent beings who simply happen to operate in certain social relationships, rather than being understood as constituted by, and situated in, social relationships (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2013). Relational ontology rejects the Cartesian maxim, “I think, therefore I am,” and replaces it with a far more intuitive and holistic description of the human condition: “I feel and relate, and therefore I am.” From this perspective, relationality with another is fundamental to our being: Without it, we cannot be. It asserts that we are relationally constituted and that meaning-making itself is a co-constructed relational process. To this end, relational ontology does not deny the place of the individual but, rather, illuminates the significance of such relationships by shifting “the center of gravity from the individual psyche to its relational matrix” (Churchill, 2011). As Gergen (2009) explains, “It is not individual minds who come together to form relationships; it is out of relationship that individual functioning emerges” (p. 298). The concept of the relational self can also be linked to the African Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes how the fundamental condition of the individual is intrinsically connection to other people, places, and spirits of ancestors (Battle, 1997). In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu (1999) writes the following:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “Yu, u nobuntu”; “Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life. We say, “A person is a person through other persons.” It is not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.” A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 31)

1.4. The Neurobiological Evidence of Relationality

For skeptics and doubters, the Ubuntu notion “that a person is a person through other persons” might sound downright silly and could, perhaps, be likened to medieval debates over the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. Though there is nothing wrong with being skeptical of anything, recent advancements in neuroscience research have broadened our understanding of life, love, and work. It has produced a substantial body of scientific evidence that rejects the individualistic Cartesian view of personhood (Seigel, 2005; Hari and Kujala, 2009; Lynch, 2009). Modern neuroscience has revealed human beings to be fundamentally emotional and social creatures. In particular, neurobiological evidence suggests that learning is a complex process, a network that includes the integration of emotions and higher-order thinking. For example, according to world-renowned child

psychiatrist Dr. Bruce Perry, one of most enlightening and striking insights from neurodevelopment research on human growth and development suggests that, from birth, we have a wired-in need for emotional contact and responsiveness from the significant others in our lives. According to Parry, our earliest relationships actually build the neural circuitry of the brain and brain structures that regulate how we feel, deal with emotional stress, and form relationships with others throughout the course of our lives. Hence, we are just waking up to the complexity and interconnectivity of our own brains and to the ontological understanding that we are truly social creatures.

1.5. Relational-Centred Praxis

While there are many interpretations of the term *praxis*. In higher education praxis is generally linked to the work of Paulo Freire. Praxis equates, roughly, to the combination of knowledge (theory) and action (practice). Praxis, however, amounts to so much more when it's considered from a relational-centred ontological perspective. This is because relational ontology begins with the theoretical assumption that all people are social beings (Gergen, 2009). As Bellefeuille and Ricks (2010) explain, the ontological assertion of our essential non-separateness from the world presumes a direct epistemic relationship between experience and meaning. As such, it is assumed that one's sense of self is not so much a personal possession as it is a reflection of one's relational experiences (Bellefeuille and Ricks, 2010). Thus, the meshing of the self—as a relational being—and a CYC professional is at the heart of relational-centred praxis.

1.6. More Than Just Theory; More Than Just Practice; More Than Just Me

Building on the work of White (2008) relational-centred praxis embodies a continuous and dynamic interplay of thought (knowing/non-knowing), being (ethical awareness), and doing (showing-up). Relational-centred praxis displaces the emphasis on teaching students to become professional, competent CYC practitioners by means of translating knowledge (knowing) into practice with a more holistic view of teaching and learning that addresses the broadest development of the whole person by focusing on the relationship between the head, heart, and soul, and the interconnectedness of knowledge, theory, and practice. Relational-centred praxis thus involves a deeper interpersonal reflective journey in which knowing, doing, and being are deeply interconnected and inseparable aspects of the same process; these aspects sustain one another and are forever unfolding. Thus, relational praxis is more than just theory; more than just practice; more than just “me,” in that it assumes that knowing, doing, and being are inseparable aspects of the same process. It is more than the mere integration of knowing and doing. Expressed in general terms, relational-centred praxis is not so much a matter of what one knows or does, as it is a way of “being” in the world.

1.7. Pedagogy of Relational-Centred Praxis

So, how can CYC students develop relational-centred practice in the classroom? What pedagogical approach to teaching and learning will best assist students with developing relational-centred praxis? How can the educational experience of CYC students prepare them to become transformational leaders in the field? We believe that relational-centred praxis requires a teaching and learning pedagogy¹ that includes the core skills and competencies of CYC practice and also focuses on the broadest development of the whole person by emphasizing risk taking, critical and creative thinking, unconventionality, interpersonal awareness, and stepping into the unknown. A

¹ *Pedagogy* is the discipline that deals with the theory and practice of education. In essence, it is the art and science of teaching.

pedagogical approach that prepares students to act with moral courage as they face ethical challenges in the field, and to serve as cultural stewards of the profession.

The Nexus Between Relational-Centred Praxis, Child and Youth Care Teaching, and Learning Pedagogy and Professional Culture

In our experience, there is a huge discrepancy between the vision of a relational-centred CYC profession taught in CYC education programs and the manifest culture experienced in the day-to-day world of CYC practice. *Professional culture* can be a broad and nebulous concept, so, for the purpose of this discussion, we use the term to represent the overriding set of beliefs, assumptions, myths, values, and tolerated behaviours that define “how we do things around here.” In fact, professional culture is formed over time and can often become so embedded in the psyche of a given profession that it can be hard for the profession to embrace change. It’s like the old story of the fleas jumping in the covered jar in an attempt to escape; eventually, after many unsuccessful attempts, the fleas stop jumping and fail to escape even once the jar’s lid is removed. In another words, as human beings, we often continue to react as we always have, even though old obstacles have been removed and new pathways have been opened. We posit that the professional culture of CYC and the attitudes and behaviours of its professionals (in both academia and the field as a whole) are inextricably linked. Consequently, it is imperative that we recognize the ways that the professional culture of CYC enables or constrains relational-centred praxis, both in the classroom and in the field.

1.8. Distinguishing Between Educational and Professional Practices that Foster and Suppress Relational-Centered Praxis

Analogies, stories, and real lived experiences are great ways to illustrate the act of engaging, applying, and exercising relational-centred praxis in the field of CYC. There is a Scottish Traveller proverb which says a story “is told eye to eye, mind to mind, and heart to heart.” Traditionally, storytelling has been used for centuries to pass on wisdom. They help us to discover the meaning in our experiences as we imagine new possibilities and open our hearts to renewed hope. So we offer some examples from our personal experiences in the field as a way to illustrate what CYC practice looks like when understood and approached from a relational-centred practice perspective. These real life practice-based stories can best be used to demonstrate what we like to refer to as relational-centered praxis boosters and busters. They include a commitment to ethical practice and respect for other and demonstrate how relational-centred *praxis* is always a risky endeavor.

Stephen’s Story

For me, relational praxis boosters fall into three categories: (1) they reject viewing youth from a single-story mentality, (2) they build intimate trust through reciprocity and cooperative experiences, and (3) they are practices that value the autonomous actions of youth in care. Praxis boosters manifest their valuable impact on me as a practitioner through my relationships with youth. In contrast, praxis busters delegitimize youth voice and minimize the potential impact youth can have in their own environments, often under the guise of safety. The ultimate praxis busters are rigid rule regimes that prove unfounded when challenged. Second, busters fulfill my needs for ego and progress but rarely build legitimate relationship. The following experience demonstrates my interaction with relational praxis.

When Kim (her name, identifying information, and details have been changed to protect her identity) and I met at our regularly scheduled meeting time, I could tell immediately that she was struggling to hold herself together. At the time, I was an outreach worker working with pregnant and parenting teens. I remember inquiring, as I did at the beginning of all of our visits, how she was doing and was a little surprised to hear her say that she was doing fine. I

remained quiet and told her that I knew something was wrong but I would like to respect her wishes to share only as much with me as she felt comfortable. It was only a few minutes later, with tears welling up in her eyes, that she divulged the details of her story.

Kim is an amazing young woman with Indigenous heritage who became pregnant when she was 14 and gave birth to her daughter shortly after she turned 15. Far from ruining her life as she expected, her daughter gave Kim a new lease on life. Kim quit doing harmful drugs, removed herself from her hard-partying lifestyle, and earned very high grades upon returning to high school. She had her own apartment, had her daughter in full-time daycare, and, with my help, was beginning to apply to various college programs. Her boyfriend at the time was a childhood friend who had had a run-in with the law for breaking and entering and was incarcerated at a local prison. His jail time had been beneficial, in that he had attended counselling, finished his high school diploma, and had a job lined up after he finished his sentence.

One evening, Kim's boyfriend called and told her that one of his friends was getting out of jail the next day and needed a place to stay for one or two nights. He vouched for his friend's character and assured her that he trusted him. Kim met her boyfriend's friend at a bus stop near a mall to decide if she wanted to let him stay the night on the couch. After only a short time, she felt confident that he was a safe guy. He was given the couch and profusely thanked her for her kindness. Her first inkling that something was not right arose when he knocked on her bedroom door a few times and immediately walked in to ask to borrow her lighter so he could go outside and smoke. It made her a bit uncomfortable, so she took her daughter down the hall to her friend's suite to have a few drinks. She returned after midnight; she told me that she was feeling a little bit buzzed but not drunk. She put her daughter to bed and then went to her own bedroom to sleep.

The tiny apartment was quiet and she fell asleep quickly. Sometime in the middle of the night, she was woken violently to find her boyfriend's friend on top of her. He was raping her. Scared and shocked, she pretended not to be awake and waited for him to leave. She spent the rest of the night listening with hyper vigilance to hear if he was near her daughter's room and vacillated between angry tears and deep despondency. In the morning, she immediately kicked him out without telling him that she knew what he did. She was devastated. When her daughter tried to climb into her bed in the morning, Kim felt horrified. How could she let her daughter be in the same bed where she had experienced this horrible act? She immediately stripped the sheets off the bed and threw them in the garbage, she closed her door so her daughter could not go into her room, and she spent the morning avoiding going in there herself.

While she struggled to complete normal daily routines like making breakfast and getting her daughter dressed, she wrestled with guilt, shame, and fear. She opened up her laptop to play a children's video for her daughter and was confronted with hundreds of pornographic images. Not only had he raped her, he had used the computer, on which her daughter watched children's videos, to search for sexually explicit images and videos. This was a turning point for Kim. She suddenly got very angry and called her friend from down the hall to go with her to the police station and to the sexual health center to find out if she was pregnant. Thankfully, she was not pregnant and had not contracted any sexually transmitted infections.

Four days later, during our visit, she sat in the front seat of my car and tearfully told me what had happened. I was devastated. Anger, frustration, guilt, and sadness immediately coursed through me as I played out all the possible repercussions of this young man's actions. I was angry he had violated her as a woman and had betrayed her ability to trust, something we had carefully been reconstructing over the past 8 months. I was frustrated that all of the hard work Kim had put into creating a meaningful life for herself and her daughter could potentially be derailed. I felt guilty because, in the course of our work, I had been encouraging her to thoughtfully show kindness to others to support her spirit of generosity. I also had an overwhelming sense of sadness that this was something Kim had to endure. It

broke my heart when she told me she was struggling to carry on with daily chores because they felt hollow. Kim said she felt disingenuous in her interactions with her daughter and had a tremendous sense that normal tasks were senseless. She said that over the course of the past few days she had begun to feel that her life was worthless.

While I wrestled to be present and in the moment with Kim, I quickly recognized I was also carrying a great deal of vulnerability. At the time, my own daughter was 9 and I was projecting my feelings of inadequacy about being able to protect her when we were not together. As my work and personal life merged in that moment, I decided to tell Kim exactly what I was experiencing. It was an excruciating and vulnerable conversation for both of us. I told her how angry I was and she seemed to relax, perhaps feeling reassured that her own anger was justified. I told her that she was not to blame for showing kindness and that she should not feel any sense of guilt for going to her friend's house for drinks. I told her I was frustrated that this one selfish act could potentially undo so much of her hard work and that I would support her in any way I could to keep up the incredible level of success she was generating at school and her job. I could see a glimmer of hope shining through her tears. I expressed my sadness that he had taken advantage of her vulnerability, and we began making a plan to restore a sense of safety and comfort in her home.

We took the mattress and box spring to the landfill and bought a new one. We bought new bed sheets and took her computer to a repair shop to have it swept clean of pornography. These physical things were only the beginning of the work we had to do as she grappled with a shattered emotional state, struggled under her own feelings of inadequacy to protect her daughter and herself, and searched for renewed purpose and meaning. Kim did not want to take on the identity of being a survivor of rape; she did not want to give him that kind of power in her life. She wanted to be able to create her individual and precious uniqueness on her own terms. I wholeheartedly admired and supported her strength and courage. My initial response was to "do" things. It was my attempt to stave off feeling helpless about not being able to protect her. I had to make a conscious effort to hold myself back, to support her through a grieving process I knew was valuable and necessary. This was one of the many moments of internal conflict that I faced in the ensuing months of my relationship with Kim. This initial, significant moment of reflecting on my own processes, which inevitably overlapped with Kim's, began a progression of critically identifying other poignant issues for which I would have to recognize that my own needs were also present while I was attempting to support her needs.

Many questions arose for me as I navigated this treacherous terrain. Did I believe that Kim was able to form an identity apart from being a victim of rape, or was that indelibly part of her new reality? How did this incident confront the larger socio-cultural perspective of what is allowed for men and expected of women? As a practitioner, did this event challenge my philosophy of encouraging generosity, building relationships through vulnerability and trust, and extending kindness to others for the sake of personal development? I was also confronted with whether my success as a support worker was entangled with Kim's ability to navigate this personal tragedy. According to [Brendtro et al. \(1992\)](#) "helping behavior may result from an instinctual drive to protect related members of one's own species" (p. 121). Perhaps I would try to resolve some of my own feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy around not being able to protect Kim (and potentially my own daughter in the future) by making sure she was successful in healing and moving on with her life. [Perlman \(1979\)](#) adds a heartfelt question to my growing list: "What value does relationship, in one or all of its dimensions and expressions, seem to have in enabling a person to cope better with [her] problems or to enrich and enliven [her] capabilities?" (p. 203).

In these vulnerable moments, we worked together to reject the single story of a youth who is cared for by support services and a youth who was a victim of rape. We built intimate trust by being a part of each other's healing journeys and found solace in being able to work out our pain through rigorously honest conversations. As a practitioner, my relational praxis was interwoven with Kim's investment in a cooperative healing endeavour. The temptation for me, in my moments of needing to "do" things, was to distance myself and act as an objective support worker. I could have

sated my ego by offering solutions and busying myself with trying to fix things. I could have easily destabilized our relationship and minimized the deeply personal pain she was feeling.

The consequences would have been a devastating praxis buster. I was fortunate that this incident did not harden my spirit toward Kim's suffering, and, instead, helped me recognize that our individual healing was entangled with each other's suffering.

In all of this, I credit Kim with the bravery she demonstrated in her ability to be vulnerable and authentic with me. Had it not been for her courage, I could have easily succumbed to the temptation to be distant and "strong" for her. Her vulnerability was the catalyst that helped me experience personal growth and maturity. It is truly humbling to recognize that in the midst of her pain, the beautiful gift she gave me was vulnerable trust, which helped me realize my own development as a relational practitioner. This story identifies both relational boosters and the potential pitfalls that are busters. What could have potentially busted my relational praxis would have been allowing my ego its desire to fix a desperate situation. This would have fulfilled my need to be useful and competent. What Kim did not need was stoic, rational advice. She needed someone to care deeply about her pain. Fortunately—and this has not always been the case for me—I chose to be rigorously honest about my fears and vulnerabilities, which provided a platform for both of us to experience healing through relationship. What emerged was an incredibly valuable relationship that set the tone for a journey filled with joy and tears, a journey that has continually helped shape my approach to giving myself before expecting youth to put their trust in me.

Rebecca's Story

My dominant memory of my CYC program experience was my first-year seminar group. At first, I found it a bit awkward; I was placed in what felt like a (very) small class intended for processing the challenging and complex situations we would confront in the field, even as first-year students. That awkwardness soon fell away, however, as we worked through group norms exercises and began the tenuous process of learning how to walk with others on a difficult journey. This introduction into the field of CYC practice changed me, but the relationships I had with those with whom I shared the journey changed me more. Seminar class was my first experience of a praxis-booster: a cohesive, purposeful, very imperfect relational experience that helped me to learn about praxis, not only in terms of what others knew or did, but in terms of how they existed in relationship with me. Without this relational imprint, I don't know that my self-reflection would have been adequate to meet the demands of a very challenging practice and praxis environment. Likewise, the relationships I developed with professors were also a major praxis booster. My professors took the lead in demonstrating sensitive, supportive relationships, and provided safe sounding boards as students struggled through both professional and personal problems. I was often humbled by my professors' vulnerability with us as students. In one example, an instructor used one class session on grief to share with us her gift of guitar and singing, during which she sang a song she wrote during a period of grieving. This was a precious gift of authenticity that she gave us. In retrospect, the deep relationships I had with instructors (many of which endure to this day) seemed to lead to a state of attunement in which they were willing and able to engage with where I found myself emotionally and mentally, as a practitioner and as a person.

Another early memory of CYC education that has stayed with me for several years has a different focus. In an attempt to get a class of fairly wary first-year students to grasp the concept of praxis, one professor extolled the group to "get up and stand on the table." In many ways, throughout my CYC education, I grew to love challenging established ideas, turning them over in my mind and examining them, but I wasn't always that way. Suffice it to say, I did not stand on the table; however, I believe it was my first experience of a conscious desire to challenge the status quo. Though I resented it at first, the willingness of my professors to challenge my perceptions and contest what I had already

determined to be true proved to be the most valuable aspects of my education. Coupled with my professors' ongoing encouragement and relationship, these challenges granted me a great gift: gritty self-reflection, which I believe is a necessary ingredient in all practitioners' journeys. I see this "praxis booster" mirrored in my field experience, particularly in supervisory experiences. My professors challenged my perceptions by balancing sensitivity to my development as a practitioner with their awareness of how to help me reflect critically on my underlying belief constructs and motivations. In the same way, my supervisor now challenges my perspectives and encourages me to reflect critically on my practice. For example, over the past year I have wrestled with anxiety and self-doubt: On one hand, I was thankful for the opportunities available to me at work, and, on the other, I had convinced myself that I was not meeting expectations. My supervisor seemed attuned to this; at my most frustrated moments, she was able to draw out my concerns. At the same time, she didn't shy away from challenging my established and unhelpful beliefs; in reflecting on this oft-uncomfortable journey, my supervisor appeared at ease with my healthy disquiet. She was patient with my growth, and arranged her challenges so that they fell within my scope of learning. This supervisor's willingness to have difficult and challenging conversations is what made the difference in my experience of relational praxis. She has continued to encourage the growth of my praxis through critical reflection.

I have come to recognize both personal and professional relationships as one of the foundations of my ability to practice in a creative and reflexive (praxis-based) way. Inversely, I have also experienced and observed relational isolation and its impact as a praxis-buster, in both CYC education and field work. For example, I once heard a worker, who was feeling the typical anxieties of a new position, describe withdrawing into herself due to her fear of being found incompetent. Because she lacked a strong sounding board and support network on her team, she began to use only the technical skills required by her position. Unfortunately, this left little room for creative or flexible work with youth, since it did not seem that the worker could effectively or safely explore relationships with them without being grounded in supportive relationship herself. If relationship is the foundation of child and youth care, it stands to reason that authentic relationship is both the foundation and the result of the relational praxis experience. Likewise, the significance of reflective and intentional supervisory relationships has not been lost on me. In the same way that a lack of supportive relationships can limit a practitioner's capacity for praxis, so the absence of critical reflection in supervision can stymie practitioner growth. From my perspective, the lack of intentional relationship and the lack of supportive, constructive supervision are the two most pressing praxis busters experienced by seasoned practitioners and students alike.

Jack's Story

When working with children who are just starting their formal education journey, I find it fascinating just how free they are. They run, jump, scream, yell, use their vastly creative imagination. They are themselves. Then comes the classroom experience. These same kids I play with—the same kids that exemplify freedom and confidence in themselves—are slowly trained or taught to be compliant. All of a sudden, there are formal rules, such as raise your hand in order to ask a question, walk in a straight line, sit still in a single spot for what seems like an eternity.

I have also worked with older kids, the kids in high school who have had years of experience being socialized to be compliant. They sit in class, paying attention with a very serious demeanour. Where did the freedom go that was present in their early days of education? Then there are the kids who just do not fit into rigid classroom expectations, the kids who show agency and be themselves in a classroom. These are the kids who challenge educators to change their ancient methods; these are the kids who challenge the education system. These are also the kids who get into trouble with their educators, who are put in "special" behaviour classes, the kids stuck in detentions, in in-school suspensions,

and other forms of punishment the school deems appropriate. These are the kids who I run into in my role as a child and youth care (CYC) practitioner in a high school.

At this early stage in my CYC life, I have had several moments in which I was bamboozled by the lack of adaptability of policies, at the failure of teachers and administrators to treat kids as the unique individuals they are—and hence my praxis buster example! These moments provided ample opportunities to give voice to a new way of being, a new way of doing, and a new way of knowing. These opportunities enabled me to grow and own my praxis. Now in my fourth year in CYC, I have grown in confidence when I do things that are not sanctioned by the rigid systems I work within. Praxis has transformed from an obscure concept into a way of life.

Here is a story I hope illustrates this transformation. I am currently at a high school where I work with a school resource officer (SRO). This has introduced me to kids who challenge the education system. There is one youth in particular with whom I have developed a great and fascinating relationship. During his spares, he likes to roam around the school. This roaming does not really disturb anyone; however, it is against school rules. When on a spare, students can stay in the cafeteria, go to the library, or leave school property. Once a student chooses where they will hang out during their spare, they are expected to stay there for nearly two hours. Well, this strict rule does not work for this particular youth. He just likes to walk around and be in motion. He cannot sit still. This need led to his getting into constant trouble. In order to help him, the SRO tried to give him tasks to do, such as reorganizing his binders, relabeling files—busy work. The student did not like this at all, which resulted in my getting to know him. Eventually, after some negotiation, the youth and I were able to walk around the school during his spares. He then told me about a significant problem he was encountering with a teacher and an education assistant (EA). Every day, as we walked around the school, I heard more of the story. We worked on some solutions to address this issue. However, these ideas did not work.

A few weeks later, I was in the office waiting patiently to talk to the principal, and I noticed this same youth sitting and looking extremely annoyed and angry. This was strange, since we had just spoken a little while ago and he had been in good spirits; now, however, he was in the office during class time. I sat down next to him and just waited with him. After about 5 minutes, he started telling me how he hates the school and wants to get out of here and never come back. I was so confused about what had happened. As I sat there and listened, he mentioned to me that the same teacher and EA were still bugging him. I looked around and said, “I think we might be waiting for a long time. It is nice outside, how about we go get some food?” he was confused and responded by saying, “I can’t leave; I was sent down here by my teacher.” I noticed a sense of nervous excitement build up inside of me and decided not to ignore it. I got up and knocked on the principal’s door and let him know that I was taking the youth out to get some food (fortunately, there is a mall across the street). The principal seemed confused, but I was not willing to hear anything other than a yes. It felt like an eternity, but he responded with, “Well that’s not how it works around here.” We had a good discussion in which I explained to the principal that the right thing to do was to not let the student sit and stew in his anger, and that the longer he waited, the more disillusioned he might become about education. I ended with a simple request: Let me help. I succeeded, and right away we were both off to the mall.

The anger that was driving this youth was left behind in the office, and I noticed how relaxed his body became as we were walking outside. Success, I thought: I had created change and advocated for the youth, and I’d tussled with the system and won. After we ate and walked back to school, the youth was ready to go to his next class. I paused for a minute and asked if he still wanted to talk to the principal about leaving, he said no, he wanted to go to his final class of the day with the fresh memory of having fun. However, I suspected the principal was going to bring this up again, so I provided this youth with my school email (something that is frowned upon) and let him know that if he needed me

and I was not there, he should email me and I would get back to him as soon as possible. This was one of my favourite days while working at the school, and a day the youth still talks about fondly.

I was excited coming into the final year of the Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University. After 3 years of “getting stuck in” (a soccer term for “working hard”), I felt that the dichotomy of the student- professor relationship had lifted. It felt like we were all working as equals toward a common goal. This feeling has enabled me to voice my opinion when I disagree with an assignment’s instructions. In one class in particular, I felt an assignment limited the students’ choices and put us all in a box.

Based on students’ individual comfort levels with counselling skills, we were each to be assigned a partner that the instructors deemed the best match. We were also told that friends should not serve as each other’s partner, since they would not reach the deep level of conversation that was required for a counselling tape. When I heard this, I reflected on the previous year.

In the third year of the program we learned about assumptions, and about how assumptions are not guarantees. For example, the assertion that “it will all be worth it in the end” asserts the belief that if you postpone joy and put in hard work, then, when you are done with the hard work, the results will make the suffering worthwhile. In reality, there is no certainty that it will be worth it, so why postpone fun? With this learning fully integrated, I decided to voice my thoughts about how we were falling into the trap of assumptions.

I spoke up and stated that the idea that friends partnering up and not reaching a “deep” conversation was based on an assumption. I suggested that perhaps friends partnering up could lead to deeper conversations. The instructor promptly disagreed, but I just could not let it go and decided to continue the conversation. As this exchange went on, I noticed that some of my peers were looking annoyed. This weakened my resolve to continue to challenge the assumption that shaped the assignment. After a break, and feeling defeated, I told the instructor that I was okay with being partnered up with anyone, it was a painful and sad experience.

One of the roles I have filled as a child and youth care (CYC) practitioner was that of a literacy coordinator at an out-of-school care program. I worked alongside four other CYC practitioners from the program. Our job was to create a summer program that continued the development of life and literacy skills for children in kindergarten through grade 5. Before accepting the offer to join the team, I sat down and talked with the director of the program; we discussed my role and thoughts about CYC. I was asked to detail my thoughts about behaviour modification. I said I believed it has a role to play in the world of CYC, but I believe it is used too often. I also made it clear that I would not like to use this method. We also talked about ethics, and how, in my previous experience, an agency would pick and choose when something was “right” or “wrong,” without providing consistency in determining what makes something “right” or “wrong.” I explained that I have been trying to discover my central ethical framework and that this was an important concept for me. I felt confident that the employment environment would not be too highly structured, and would therefore permit me to utilize my ethical beliefs and praxis to create a summer program that the children would enjoy. I immediately accepted the job offer.

When summer started, we were having a hard time getting the kids to listen and participate in the activities staff had planned. This went on for a while and we met as a team to discuss how to address it. The other staff members thought that a point system would do the trick; I disagreed. I mentioned that this was a form of behaviour modification and I didn’t think it was necessary in this case. I voiced that the kids liked unstructured activities, such as going to the park and playing. Sure enough, I was alone in this belief, and the rest of the team supported and used a point system.

As the summer went along, we (the staff team) got a new boy to work with. He had this mischievous smile that made me smile, and it reminded me of myself at his age. Throughout the day, I kept hearing from other staff how he was bothering, and creating fights with, the other boys. He also kept swearing. I decided to observe the boy, and, sure

enough, trouble seemed to follow him around. To keep the boy away from trouble and make sure everyone was learning and having fun, I decided to work with him one on one. This seemed to help, as the two of us got along well and enjoyed playing together. Over the next couple of days, this continued. We had a field trip coming up, and the staff was concerned about taking him into the community. Having one staff member work with only one child was not going to work because it put a strain on the other staff. There was a staff meeting and it was decided that if the boy needed one-on-one time with staff he would be removed from the program. It so happened that the program's policies state that the program does not take children who require one-on-one care. I was disappointed, but the other staff felt that this was the best action to take, because parents had expressed their concerns about the boy, and the staff was concerned about safety. I stated that I would love to work with the boy. Unfortunately, the boy had to be removed from the program. Because no one else wanted to tell the boy's mother, I volunteered to deliver the bad news.

A few weeks later, we had the wonderful privilege to work with two boys from Syria. They were an absolute delight. However, I noticed some hypocrisy in the program. We had just removed a boy from the program because he required a staff member all to himself, yet these two wonderful boys needed, at times, two staff members to help them throughout the day. I decided to express my observation with the team. They agreed with me, but I wonder if they did so just so the conversation could be closed. This troubled me, and I continued the conversation for the entirety of the summer, but no one had answers for me. The common theme that emerged from all responses was, essentially, that that's just the way it works here. I felt deeply saddened for the little boy we turned away and for his mother, who was trying to go to school.

Mack's Story

I believe the first context in which we learn about relational praxis—and about going above and beyond our job description and certain rigid rules that are not in the best interests of the child—is in school. For myself, school was the first place I learned about praxis and was challenged by the idea of going against the status quo. In my eyes, praxis is having the opportunity to express yourself within your work. You have a job description, but by exercising praxis you are going above and beyond this to exist relationally with others in your environment in a unique way. The first time I felt praxis deeply was during a class in my first year of university. The final project for the class was a reflection paper on what we had learned throughout the semester. I worked on my paper for several days and struggled to properly express exactly what I had learned. As a visual artist, I find that words can only go so deep. I decided that I could not properly explain myself through a formal university paper. Instead, I took a chance and represented my learning visually, in a painting. I submitted a video of the painting and of myself explaining the different colors, lines, and subjects in relation to the course's learning. I explained to my professor what I submitted and why I chose to do the assignment this way, instead of writing a paper as he'd asked. I was nervous handing in my assignment, but something in my gut told me that I had made the right decision for myself. A week later, I received my final grade and was quite surprised. I had received an outstanding mark. Attached was a note from my professor who said that he appreciated my stepping out of the box and doing the assignment in a way that was unique and that spoke authentically to who I was as a person.

This experience created a mental shift for me. I realized how much we can grow relationally with others when we decide that some rules can and should be bent. Praxis should operate in the best interest of helping others and being in relationship. It should not focus on following rules if they hinder a healthy relationship-building process. I personally believe that praxis is creative. Creativity is stifled by rigidity, and it is therefore important to remind ourselves that praxis exists in a context characterized by freedom of expression and freedom from unnecessary policies and procedures. Being allowed to bend the rules and use my own personal creativity in my final project pushed me to continue to be creative in my praxis and remember that every individual is different and cannot be put into the same

box. In order to truly have praxis, we need to recognize these differences and implement them into our work. My professor's willingness to allow me to complete my project in a way that accommodated my needs and values demonstrated that he cared more about my learning and expression than about expectations set out in the syllabus. By doing the assignment in my way, I learned more and felt more connected to it and the class. I cared more about the class when I felt that my individual interests were acknowledged and encouraged.

I think the primary reasons why people discard praxis include "not knowing," fear of doing the wrong thing, putting one's job at risk, unclear rules, and the fact that praxis is a lot of work. Praxis is a difficult concept to understand, and I find it is even more difficult to implement at times. The field, as we speak, is not kind to the idea of praxis. Rather, most of our energy is focused on following the rules of agencies and not resisting what authorities desire. Why we intentionally or unintentionally disregard praxis, I do not know; however, I believe praxis is hard work that should be implemented in the field for the betterment of relationships and for creating change.

Looking back on my experiences in the field, I have noticed that praxis busters exist where there are unclear rules, strict rules, assumptions, and the viewing of a child through a single-minded perspective. I have an example from an encounter when I faced a praxis buster in my work place.

I was working in an intake house and a new youth was brought in. The youth was younger and was having a tough time transitioning into the house. This was the youth's first time in care, and he was fearful and quite upset. I noticed the other boys and staff were not talking to the youth, so I decided to introduce myself. I sat with the youth for an hour or so, talking about animals, cars, and anything he liked. After the conversation, I decided to ask the youth how he was doing with moving into the house. The youth told me he was scared of the other boys, missed his family, and was sad that he was in a new place. I asked him what we could do to make him feel more comfortable. After some thought, the boy told me he would like to go see the pigs that we had on site. (I find that animals are great for calming down youth and making their surroundings seem more natural and normal.) I went to tell my supervisor that I was going to take the youth to go see the pigs. The youth was standing beside me when I told my supervisor. My supervisor looked at me and then at the boy and said, "You've already seen the pigs earlier today, so choose something else to do. We are going to have a relaxing evening inside and I don't want staff walking around outside doing something you've already done today." Immediately, she shut down the request and focussed on the effort required in taking someone to go see the pigs rather than the needs of the youth. The youth felt uncomfortable in his surroundings and, rather than working with him to make him feel more comfortable—and, in turn, creating a sense of safety and strengthening relationships—we were denied that opportunity. By taking the youth to see the pigs, we could have created a safe experience for the youth and a foundation for his first day. We would have been in the moment with the youth and starting to create a positive relationship.

I was baffled by what I was being told, and I chose not to take the youth to the pigs. Instead, I asked if he wanted to play a game. The youth was upset but played cards with me. Later that night the youth escalated after being upset with not going outside earlier and he was put into a restraint and put into the quiet room for the night. I still often look back on this experience and wish that I had handled it differently. In this case, the rules imposed by my supervisor were the buster, but my advocacy for the youth and his needs could have been a booster of praxis. In hindsight, I wish I had advocated for this individual. It is better to suffer a consequence for myself in the knowledge that I had tried to advocate for a youth. Instead, I let the fear of going against my authority's command determine my actions. By bowing to the rules, I let a relational opportunity slip through my fingers, and I threw my own praxis out the window. This experience has been a transformative one for me. I find that I am now more reflective about my decisions and focus more on what I can do to help a relationship, rather than abide by constricting—and seemingly arbitrary—rules that can govern the field. Will we continue to let ourselves be constricted by the rules? Will we continue to follow rules due

to the fear of losing our jobs? If we continue to follow rules so rigidly, we harm the job we do because we fail to be relational and create change. We are harming relational growth and putting a damper on relational experiences that can promote the growth of self-esteem and positive experiences—before we even realize it.

Holly's Story

My experience with child and youth care has been incredibly eye opening, challenging, growth oriented and, above all, rewarding. I tell people all the time that I love what I do, and I am so thankful that, in my career, I frequently get to walk with people through their brokenness while helping them move toward a place of healing. I cannot imagine a more rewarding professional path, and I truly believe that one's ability to be successful and sustaining in this work depends in one's personal formation of praxis. Though my time in the field is limited, I have experienced praxis-busting moments that have either fuelled my passions for this work or have completely diluted my faith in it.

My first year in child and youth care was a praxis buster for me, because it was a time that really stretched me to see beyond the negativity of my external circumstances and choose, instead, to focus on the personal values I knew to represent my true self. This was fostered in my first practicum in which I was placed within an organization that consisted of a drop-in city program setting. I was very excited about this placement; however, shortly after my start, I found it hard to find value in what I was doing. This placement taught me many significant things, but a crucial experience left me with distorted perceptions of the field and what exactly my purpose was as worker in it. This experience began near the end of my second semester, a month away from completing my practicum. By this point I had been at my practicum for 6 months and had built some fairly solid relationships with many of the youth there. I was casually playing a board game with two female youth when one of them turned to the other and started talking to her about feeling afraid of a boy in their neighbourhood. The other girl replied that she did not feel overly afraid of him and she would probably be fine if she saw him on the street or something. I felt compelled to get more information from the girls regarding this situation, so I asked the girls about who they were talking about. "Just a boy from our school," they replied. I asked why they felt afraid of him. "Because he raped our friend's younger brother in the school bathroom," they responded. Unsure of what to do with this information, I waited until the staff were not busy so I could share it with them, which did not happen until our shift debrief. I informed the staff of my conversation with the two girls and she had me contact the crisis hot line with the information, which then had me contact the police, who came and interviewed me, then continued with their work. I was a little shaken up, but I was glad something was being done with the information.

The next week, I was completing an activity about bullying with two different female youth. During the activity, one of the youth casually asked me why it was that people had suicidal thoughts. I processed this question and then explained to the best of my ability why I believed this may occur. I registered that this question might stem from some personal struggle. I asked if that youth had ever had some of those thoughts herself. The youth smiled and looked down shyly as she admitted that she had; I asked her if she had talked to anyone and if she had supports in place. The other youth with us explained that she frequently confided in her and that it was not serious. Being inexperienced in this area of disclosure, I was unsure of how to present this information to my superior staff, so I waited until they were not busy, which, again, was not until our evening debrief. I presented what the youth had said to me about suicidal thoughts and the staff thanked me for sharing and said that they would look into it tomorrow. They explained that it was very rare to receive a disclosure in this placement and for me to receive two within a week was extremely rare. They laughed and smiled, which gave me comfort. The impression I was left with was that everything was going to be okay, that it had not been a big deal, but that it was good that I mentioned it.

When I came in two days later for practicum, I was completely surprised to find my supervisor there with the two head people from my practicum organization, my supervisor informed me that we were going to have a meeting and, immediately, my heart sank. The head of the organization sat me down and explained that they were going to pull me from my placement due to the two recent disclosures taking place in such a short amount of time and because I had waited a couple of hours before conveying the information to the other staff, which they considered a serious problem. They explained to me that this was a liability for them as an organization, and it was too risky to have me around, given the possibility that it might happen again and, potentially, jeopardize the wellbeing of their youth. The staff member to whom I had conveyed the disclosures then began to share that she had felt unsettled the whole evening over the youth with suicidal thoughts, that the next day she talked to that youth and they had broken down crying, that she walked her home and helped her talk to her mother about what she had been struggling with. The staff explained that she had contacted the youth's school and that youth was now set up with the school counsellor to help deal with their depression and suicidal thoughts. This concern was not conveyed to me when I shared the disclosure, and to learn that such intense action had been taken afterward alarmed me. I felt blindsided by the nonchalant attitude originally manifested by staff in contrast with the worrisome attitude later demonstrated by the same staff. I felt like I was being punished for being trusted, and that the fact that these youths had trusted me enough to open up about such deep issues was disregarded because the staff disapproved of the way I conveyed the information. The organization's leader informed me that they would be pulling me from my placement and have me "tour" other placements for the remainder of my practicum; the goal, they said, was for me to learn from different environments, and I would be allowed back at the end of my practicum to say goodbye to everyone and get some closure. I strongly disliked this decision, so I advocated for myself, noting that I had invested 6 months in this placement and the youth here, and that removing me now would damage the connections I had formed. I explained that I agreed that I could and should have conveyed the information sooner, but the youth were being helped now and that was what mattered. If the youth had not trusted me, then they might not have said anything and things could have turned out much worse. I admitted my fault with respect to timing, but said that I wanted to carry on with the investment I had made in this placement and that I did not believe removing me in this way was a productive way to deal with the situation. The staff and leaders acknowledged my points but said that they were still going to remove me for the time being. I was powerless.

This situation significantly damaged my faith in both the field and in myself as a CYC worker. The organization's leaders did the best they could to deal with the situations effectively, but they placed a higher value on keeping themselves and their organization safe, rather than working with the youth with and with me as a person. This experience was a huge buster for my praxis. Instead of recognizing the value of these disclosures and helping me develop more effective and timely ways of conveying information, I was punished for doing it the wrong way and then removed from the situation so I would not do so again. I felt ashamed of my shortcomings and was denied an opportunity to grow and learn from them in order to avoid such those shortcomings in future. I recognize now that this is often exactly the kind of experience we impose on youth, particularly when we respond to their behaviour with consequences rather than create opportunities for them to learn and grow. Elements of consequence and accountability are often necessary to promote learning. I want to ensure I do not treat youth as though they were inferior to me, especially in the way I felt I was treated during my first practicum experience. I believe we need to foster an environment in which it is safe to "fail," because without this safety, how else can we learn and grow to be better?

For me, praxis was hard to comprehend initially because it is such an abstract concept, no one can "show" you praxis, and no one can make it make sense to you, you have to consciously experience it for yourself and choose to engage its internal development. Praxis goes so far beyond just words, emotions, and societal norms. I believe it encompasses all aspects of our being, all of those unique things that make us who we are. Praxis in comprehensible terms is the

knowing, doing, and being of a person, but I believe meaningful praxis is not just acquiring these things, but rather consciously reflecting on what they mean separately and in correlation with each other. Conscious reflection on the way I know, do, and exist influences my actions. I then need to find a way to make these integral elements fit into an effective working style that enables me to achieve beneficial outcomes. A tangible means I experienced this in my work as a CYC practitioner was during my second year school practicum. I was placed in a group-home setting that housed two youth, a male and a female. It was the male's birthday and for his celebration he requested a cheesecake. As I conversed with the staff, I stated that I thought we should make him a homemade cheesecake! First, this had potential to go horribly wrong, since I am a terrible baker and it would make for some humorous memories; second, it would show that we had invested time and effort into something that was important to him; and thirdly, it would demonstrate that we cared because we had made a personal investment rather than just buying a cake. When I suggested we make the cake the staff objected, saying that we could just buy one. I replied by stating that, yes, we could, but I felt that making him one would be more meaningful. The staff again stated that they thought it would be fine if we bought one and I asserted that I really thought it was important that we make it. A cake seems like a simple thing, but sometimes it is the simplest things that speak volumes to people. In the end, the staff agreed that if I could find a good recipe and get a list of relatively inexpensive ingredients, that would allow me to make the cake. I was overjoyed and quickly found an easy no-bake cheesecake recipe online. As I had hoped, the boy was thrilled with his cheesecake! He wrote his name on it so no one else would eat it because he enjoyed it so much. He kept telling me how good it was, and a couple weeks later he requested that I make him another one that he could take to his girlfriend's house. I was beyond thrilled that he had responded to my cheesecake so positively and that such a simple thing meant so much to him.

Roughly 9 months later, I had finished my practicum and was working at the home as part-time casual staff, my supervisor messaged me and informed me that the boy would be transitioning out of the home into independent living and that they would be having a going away party for him. At the end of the text message she wrote, "He was hoping that you could bring a cheesecake to the celebration." My heart filled with warmth: A simple act completed nearly a year ago was now one of the things this boy held as a pivotal memory from his time in our care. This was a huge praxis booster for me because it highlighted the significance of simple investment opportunities and how advocating for opportunities was not vain. Buying a cake would have been simpler, but it would have conveyed a completely different message than making one. This experience highlighted the importance of praxis because, when faced with the opportunity to do the least, I advocated for a meaningful step, which is an impulse I think we lose as we enter the field and are met with resistance. The thing with praxis is that it takes time to cultivate; it takes effort and it takes investment, just like a friendship or relationship. We have to choose, daily, to be integral, choose to be advocates, choose to act with intention, and choose to be a person who does not lose sight of what they value in the field because they have become tired of fighting for it. To me, praxis means remaining true to the values I bring into any and everything I do by remaining true to my integral leading, which can make the difference between creating fleeting moments or lifelong impacts.

Cole's Story

It can be incredibly easy to follow rules and agency regulations. It can also be extremely difficult, especially if you are someone who has always had a strong feeling of obligation to move or push a system into a more open and progressive way of functioning—a way of functioning in which we do not need to feel anxious about losing our jobs as child and youth care workers when we do what we feel is right. As a placement student, it felt easier for me to take risks and embrace praxis because the environment allowed for it.

As a student I was always encouraged to have a critical stance when looking at policies and procedures. Because of this, rules and regulations have never felt as though they were written in stone, and I hope they never do (even when my livelihood depends on keeping a job). This work requires us, as child and youth care workers, to reflect on the contexts we face and to come up with the best course of action in a given moment. Such reflection does not occur without acknowledging the burden of what policy permits and restricts. Praxis is not about breaking rules for the fun of being rebellious; it is about asserting an alternative path, with the purpose of benefitting the individuals we work with. It's about using knowing, being, and doing as a catalyst for change.

During my placement as a student in the Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University, I often found myself discovering new ways to insert praxis into my work. One particular occasion happened in the student services office at a high school where I was placed. A youth had just finished working with a school counsellor and was sitting in the office. Because I had developed a relationship with this youth over the course of a few months, it was clear to me that the student was in some sort of emotional turmoil. In the most unthreatening way I could, I approached the youth and asked what was going on. It was obvious the youth wanted to talk to someone and opened up immediately. The youth explained that a year ago that day, a close friend had committed suicide. They told me they had been having a lot of trouble dealing with this loss and that it was strange that it had already been a year. The youth explained that to cope with the situation, they had written a letter to their passed friend. The letter was a few pages long. As I talked with the youth, I discovered that the note was actually the source of discomfort rather than comfort. The youth explained that having the note made them feel overwhelmed by emotion and that they often read it when they felt depressed. The youth described reading the letter as kind of "emotional self-harm." After listening to the youth, I decided to ask what would happen if the youth and I destroyed the note, thinking that perhaps this act could provide some closure. The youth felt empowered by the idea and said that perhaps destroying the note would enable their friend to receive it on the "other side." They then said, "If I am going to destroy this, it needs to be completely gone. I don't want to rip it into pieces...but we probably can't light it on fire or anything..." I was having very similar thoughts. I thought to myself, "Certainly the school would not allow me to go burn this note with this youth. But why not? It would be safe. Maybe this is just what this youth needs." Although these thoughts came to me rapidly, it was long enough for me to decide what to do. I looked at the youth and said "Why not?" I then asked, "Do you have a lighter or should I go find one?" They pulled a lighter out and showed it to me. Almost bewildered by the whole situation, the youth put on their jacket and grabbed the note.

As we walked out the front door of the high school, the youth was very quiet. They told me the story of their former friend and how he was always open to doing anything. This helped me realize how unfamiliar this type of situation probably was to the youth. To them, I was a worker at the school—a worker who was taking a student off school property to allow them to burn a letter in a parking lot. The youth told me that this was the perfect ceremony. When we got to an appropriate spot in the parking lot, we stopped and looked at each other. I asked, "This look like a good enough spot to you?" The youth had a very detached expression, so I commented, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. Whatever you are comfortable with, I will respect." The youth pulled out the lighter and held up the paper. They looked at it as though it were about to be lost forever—which it was. I then spoke up one last time before the burning. "You know; I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little curious about what the letter says. No pressure though..." To my surprise, the youth was willing to read the note to me. This was quite an emotional experience for them, and I felt honoured to be confided in. After the reading of the letter was completed, I commented, "That was beautiful. You ready to light it up?" We stood as the note turned to ash in the parking lot. On the way back to school, the student said, "If you ever pass me on the street, you have to say hi". I assured them I would.

How much this benefitted the youth I may never know, but I refused to deny the opportunity to deliver a sense of closure to a youth who had lost someone. Perhaps the school would have allowed this undertaking had I asked; perhaps they would forgive me if they found out. I am a child and youth care worker, my obligation is to the youth, and my job is to work with the youth. If an opportunity to enable an impactful moment is safe and beneficial to the youth, why not facilitate its occurrence?

Andrea's Story

Praxis—Being, doing and knowing. When this fresh, alluring lens was introduced in my first year of study, I thought it was a foreign and strange concept. But as I'm now half way through my second year in the CYC program, I'm just now realizing that I had come face to face with praxis prior to learning about it in school. The birthplace of that idea of being, doing, and knowing came from my father. Being an RCMP member of 25 years provided my father with some grand insight into the world related to CYC. Through his interactions with all kinds of people, youth, adults, families, mothers, fathers, and others he gained an appreciation for the relationships we can establish, grow, and tend to with other people. That's what led to my father's one key piece of advice to me: "Andrea, if you can't run fast, finish the math equation or write a paper that's fine. The most important thing is to be able to talk to someone and listen to what they have to say. If you can do that, you'll be just fine." This piece of advice has never been more relevant than now. My father understood, without praxis boosters, busters, or hours spent in a lecture hall, that the relationship we craft, protect, and tend to is the most essential element of dealing with people. The genuine nature we have to have when dealing with a youth or adult, being human with them in that special place between two people and seeing them in an honest light. This genuine component may be tone of voice, eye contact, body language, language used, or just openness to hear what's being said. Being in that moment with another person, doing what's needed in a relationship, and knowing who they are from listening to what they have to say. This is the core belief of praxis actively applied in the context of relationships. This was the connection I was able to make through the teachings my father passed on to me, which is a big part of my praxis. My father was being in the moment with all those people, doing what was needed to further and continue the relationship he was forming with them, and knowing the grave importance of those relationships. The combination of the two are increase my understanding of relationships, people, and being alive in the moment with them. As time goes on, my practice continues, and I do some work in the field, I'll start seeing the effects that this idea has when actively applied when working with families and youth.

2. CONCLUSION

What we gather from these personal accounts is a sense of the power of a relational-centred praxis to shape ethical, relational-centred practice. Cultural change in CYC practice will require transformational leaders who are, first, sufficiently sensitive to recognize ethical issues, and, second, have the moral courage to take tough stands and speak up for what is right, even when it is not popular. Relational-centred praxis is about living a life and practicing CYC in ways that defy and contest all forms of injustice and poor professional practice. Together, we must strive to create a culture that supports acts of moral courage in CYC practice. This will require nothing short of moral courage on the part of all who are committed to the profession of CYC.

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