

History and politics in the child & Youth Care profession

Carol Stuart

"Being in the moment"
(Krueger, 2004)

I think that I fitted in well as a child and youth care practitioner when I first started in the field, because history simply didn't interest me, it never had. This was a major source of contention with my father as I entered grade 9, but that's another story. It was easy for me to follow Krueger's notions about "being in the moment". As I become a part of history though, historical influences and patterns interest me more.

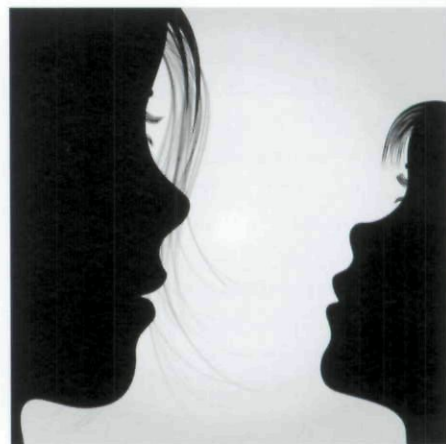
In an extensive review of *A History of Childhood*, Heywood, (2001) states "Childhood is of course an abstraction," (pg. 4). The notion that childhood is an abstract concept is interesting to me. On one level, it means that children or the idea of childhood is "not real" and we know that in our work on a daily basis children have their "childhood" torn from them because of abuse and

neglect. On the other hand there are many day to day examples that childhood is in fact "not real". Laws that govern child abuse have been in existence for about 100 years and followed laws that prevented animal abuse. Schools and the laws requiring children to attend school are less than 100 years old. To vote you need to be 18 years of age, an adult. But to drink alcohol in Ontario you must be 19 years of age, at least right now you must 19; when I was 18 it was legal for me to drink in Ontario. Sometime between when I left Ontario and when I returned it changed. In Alberta and Quebec the age is 18. To learn how to drive in Alberta you need to be 14. My friend from Alberta drove out to see us, with her daughter, a good friend of my daughter, the summer that both girls were 14. By the time they got to Ontario her daughter was an accomplished driver and indeed when they left, she drove them through Montreal — at 14!

There are many indications that what we think of as adult responsibilities (driving for example) and tasks requiring adult reasoning are assigned at different ages. Childhood therefore must not be "age related". Therefore it is a "social construct" and the laws related to age are an example of how this social construct manifests itself. On the other hand I have a hard time imagining a parent not loving or caring about a child and therefore protecting that child to the best of their ability. This kind of idea means childhood is a "psychological construct", an idea that is present in the individual, rather than an idea that has been

generated by society. I think that it would also imply that the "construct" can be missing in someone. Psychology is about the study of people and their behaviour and when the behaviour toward a child is abusive then I could argue that we have an "abnormal" construct of childhood in that person. In each of these examples though childhood is still an abstraction-how the individual defines childhood varies according to the individual. Of course teens would say that they should be treated like adults-they have an idea of what the abstract notion adulthood should look like and it relates to how people treat each other and speak to each other.

Is there any evidence that it is a concrete period of time? Some would argue that children are taking longer to grow up, thereby implying that the "end" of childhood for an individual person is getting longer. Others argue that children are growing up too soon and taking on adult personas these days, pointing to the overt sexuality found in children's clothing and exemplified by la Senza Junior, etc. So there is some argument for childhood as a concrete



idea, although it has changing definitions-which leads us in a circular way, back to the abstraction of childhood. In any case the changes in how children are viewed, the laws surrounding them, and surrounding our profession change with time. This is "history" and it affects the work that we do. So both socially and psychologically childhood does seem to be an abstract idea.

Indeed, perhaps the abstraction of the concept relates to some of the difficulties that we have with professional regulation in our field. Now that I have enough time in the field, I can recognize some of those influences on my work and the work of our profession.

When one examines the political conditions over time and how they have influenced the helping professions, some of our struggles become more understandable. People are both individuals and a collective. I have an individual history of events and experiences that makes up who I am. By and large as a child and youth care practitioner you are likely interested in individual history. I happened, by chance to apply for a summer job as waterfront personnel at a camp for "emotionally disturbed" kids and from there I was tied to the profession of child and youth care. Of course I didn't know what it was at the time; I just found the youth interesting. They were open, vulnerable, had a different history from what I had been exposed to. I stayed. I didn't much think about the political conditions at the time; how the collective was influencing what was available to me. There was no requirement

that I be educated to work with children. I was paid \$7200 a year to work from 7:30 in the morning until 9 or 10 at night. Whenever we got the kids to bed, and the logs finished, we were done. There was no "office" just a locked cupboard in the dining room for logs, meds, and sharps. If you wanted to chop the vegetables you had to get the knife out of the cupboard. Depending on who was living in the house the knife might be out for short periods of time, but if we had a "cutter" or someone that was threatening, which was most of the time, the knives were locked up. Those were the day to day realities that concerned me, not whether or not the government of the day was liberal or conservative, or even whether there was a trend toward "universal access" or "children's rights". It was cheap and convenient for the government to put children there. I didn't know then, and I can't answer, even now, who funded the agency and therefore what Ministry was responsible for the children. I had no awareness of the professional association. Assuming that the same funding and agency structure existed then, as now; it was a conservative-corporatist state. These political influences devalue children and youth. The professional association in Ontario will be challenged to move forward with legislation for professional regulation.

When I moved from Ontario to Alberta I stayed in the field I became more aware of political conditions and their influence. I looked for a similar agency with a similar approach in Alberta. One

that used community based schools, more of a family atmosphere, not institutional, etc. and while the work was much the same but there was more money. Professional recognition and the professional association were important. The political conditions were different. The Alberta government trained its workers-and employed them-not so in Ontario. Therefore there was increased accountability of the government and the benefits were transferred to the private sector. We had access to training and there was a move to make salaries equitable between private and government workers because we were all serving the same children. There was more of a social democratic state, largely enabled by the wealth of the province at the time. In the context of that time certification of workers was accepted, as were higher levels of pay for the work, and these were applied with relative consistency across the political jurisdiction. This climate has changed in Alberta recently as the money is embedded in the corporate sector and workers leave the field to make more money in the oil fields (or the local coffee shop) and the government does not step up to provide additional funds. Children are not politically valued. The professional association in Alberta will also be challenged to move forward with legislation for professional regulation, though they move forward with a history of awareness and recognition by government that seems absent in Ontario.

Now, I guess I AM history, or at least a part of it. It's an odd notion, one that I'm not really sure



how I feel about, but when I read about the history of the field and see my name mentioned it is both frightening and comforting. Frightening that others might assign that kind of credit and the responsibility that comes with it; and comforting that the field of Child and Youth Care is small enough still that leaders and potential leaders still meet regularly at conferences and know each other on a first name basis. It increases my sense of responsibility for being politically aware and active to bring forward and advocate to government for the needs of the profession.

References

- Heywood, C. (2001) *A history of childhood: Children and childhood in the West from medieval to modern times*. Malden, Mass.: Polity Press.
- Krueger, M. (Ed.) (2004) *Themes and Stories in Youth Work Practice*. New York: Haworth Press.

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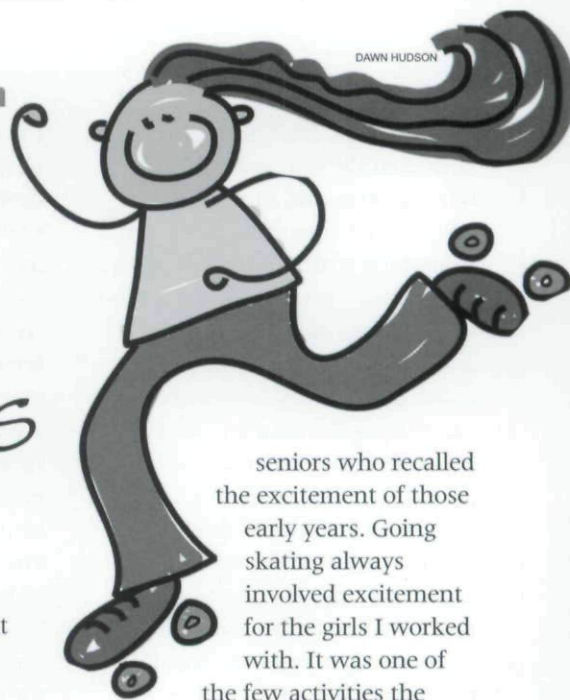


around and about with Garth Goodwin

GOING AROUND IN CIRCLES

Recently, there was a dramatic change in my community. Not one, but two roller skating rinks were closed within months of each other. Nothing dramatic about that, you may think, yet both were once central to my child and youth care experience. Perhaps, I should write not necessarily *my* experience but that of the youth in my care. Going around in circles on roller skates was huge for several generations of young people for many reasons. The loss of these facilities represented to me, another ending in the grand common traditions that once facilitated growth passages for young people. Perhaps, I am just being nostalgic, even over-dramatic, and yet I have to wonder if by abandoning the notion of universal social recognition of children and youth, society is abandoning them generally.

The oldest roller rink had been operating since the 30's. It was a big old barn of a place unique for its hardwood skating surface. For decades, it was the place a young person went to for fun and to meet others. There was a final skating session which was attended by



seniors who recalled the excitement of those early years. Going skating always involved excitement for the girls I worked with. It was one of the few activities the entire group would almost always want to do. The other would be going to a midway and riding for hours. Hair would be done, make-up fussed over and the best outfits worn to go skating. There was a sense of it being *their* place and my being a tolerated chaperone! They were not there to skate with me, but more to the point, to skate with the potential of meeting some boy. The tension would build until the slow waltz of the 'couples-only skate'. Who would get chosen and by whom was always a major matter and a minor coup when an invitation was extended.

A spanking-new rink displaced the old one in the 80's. It was located way out in the suburbs and involved a long drive, which only added to the rituals of getting ready by rushing supper. The rink opened with an all-night skate, something I volunteered to attend after much discussion among the team. The place was packed and the powder blue vinyl floor and

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