

The Art and Science of Professionalizing in British Columbia

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In the work that I do on professional committees and Boards related to certification, educational accreditation, and legislation I talk to people all over North America and beyond and I have a fairly comprehensive, though not complete picture of the professional status of child and youth care in many different locations. I have recently recognized that my understanding of the scope of professionalism in the field is a picture with quite a bit of detail and rich colour, applied using various mediums. For other people the picture is in various stages of completion and indeed created in different mediums depending upon who is viewing the picture. Even a photograph, the most accurate medium to capture reality is time sensitive and one-dimensional. The elements that contribute to the



professional status of child and youth care in any given location are not specifically recorded and indeed is difficult to find descriptions of past and current work because such work is often oral history and/or documented only in committee or Board minutes and therefore held by those who are privileged to be members of those Boards. This means that if you were not directly involved it is hard to develop an understanding of how far the profession has advanced even on a local level. Each province and state takes a different approach to professionalizing and has achieved a different level of professional recognition. I intend to highlight some of those developments and the contributing factors in a series of columns, addressing the professional status of child and youth care in the Canadian provinces. My hope is to help others develop a more complete picture.

What makes the child and youth care profession in British Columbia?

Formal recognition of professional status means that government and/ or employers have recognised through pay or legislation that the profession of child and youth care is worth something. Informal recognition means that the work is valued and visible and that people feel good about themselves and the work they do. They seek out specific education, because they believe it has something to offer them in their career. Informal recognition is not what we usually strive for, not the usual criteria for being a profession, but in British Columbia they seem to be the criteria that the field of child and youth care has met. There is a demand for child and youth care practitioners in the province. They are hired on to child protection teams and in family support programs, community development programs, schools, and they are hired in the few residential care settings operating in British Columbia. They are found in senior government policy and administration positions in the Ministry of Child and Youth Development; running the Federation of Community Social Services representing service organizations, teaching in college and university CYC programs, and simply working front-line.

- How did the profession get to this position of status?
- Was it a planned, conscious effort?



- Was there leader with a vision, a professional association that ensured standards were in place, and children were protected?

I don't plan to answer these questions, but I hope that the reader will take some time to develop their own answers to the questions about how to professionalize and to consider the implications for their own role in the professional development of our field. If you are not directly involved it is hard to develop an understanding of how far the profession has advanced. In no particular order of time or importance, let's consider some of the events related to professional status, as they occurred in British Columbia. Many of these events remain "unfinished", ready to be picked up and continued.

The Child and Youth Care Association of British Columbia (CYCABC) began researching and developing standards for certification in the early 1990s and received a grant from the Ministry of Community and Social Services to facilitate the process. It was unusual that the government would give a professional association funding to develop its own standards. Several things must have occurred; a relationship with someone in government, who had some money; a strong executive board for the Association with active connections advocating for themselves and

for the children that they served; a political climate that was favourable to standards in the field, which probably means there was a scandal; and finally a government that had a surplus, not a deficit budget or poor economic times. A committee was struck and a consultant hired to finalize the standards and to propose a



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certification process (including application and evaluation processes). The certification standards were built around principles and values which had been developed and debated over time in the Association. The committee consciously chose to include specific skill competencies in the context of each value, rather than within a knowledge or practice domain. They considered issues of values and ethics as paramount to guiding the work that we do with children and youth. In the late 1990's Association faced a financial crisis and was bankrupted when the treasurer stole a sum of money from the Association. It has struggled, like many associations, with membership, executive leadership, and the ongoing

connection to the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Care Association's. The certification standards have never been approved or implemented, but remain a unique and original example of a value base approach to certification.

In 1999, a multidisciplinary advisory working group was initiated by the government to develop a proposal for legislation and regulation of the social services field. The *Working Committee to Establish a Legislative Framework for Social Services Professions* included representatives from child and youth care, social work, early childhood education,

and the unions representing government employees. The mandate was to develop and to propose legislation to regulate the social services field. With the change in government, this work was shelved and legislation was never implemented. On April 28th, 2008 legislation was introduced into the B.C. legislature entitled "The Social Workers Act". The government ministry responsible, Ministry of Child and Family Development, was interested in a broader mandate than just social work, but was not open to or interested in several different legislated colleges, creating independent legislations, rather the government let it be known that they would welcome some amendments involving a

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broader definition and regulation of the human services field. The regulations for the legislation (passed on May 29th, 2008) indicate that social workers mandated under the Child, Family, and Community Services Act which legislates child protection and family services in the province are exempt, meaning that the definition of a Registered Clinical Social Worker, does not apply to those whose title might be that of social worker, but who have a BA (CYC). In essence, the way has been left open for child and youth care to pursue additional legislation.

As a result of numerous investigations into child deaths and injuries within the province, the British Columbia government created the position of Children's Commissioner in 1997, in addition to the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate. The Children's Commissioner was specifically charged with investigating children's deaths (of all children,) and with monitoring the care planning for children under the care of the Ministry of Community Services. The Commissioner reported independently and directly to the legislature. These annual reports slammed the child protection system for poor protection work, under-trained social workers who knew nothing about child development, and a system that failed the children of British Columbia. After five years of work, in 2002, the office was dissolved and some

of the functions combined with those of the Office of the Child, Youth, and Family Advocate, others being assigned to a reorganized Ministry of Child and Family Development and the Coroner's Office.

Somewhat earlier, strong advocacy from the child and youth care education programs in the province established that a BA (CYC) was equivalent to a BSW in the hiring requirements for child protection and family support positions in the Ministry of Child and Family Development, which operated the child welfare system. One of the recommendations of the Children's Commissioner in the annual review of the system was to improve the training for social workers. This recommendation eventually resulted in a child protection specialization in a number of the postsecondary institutions in the province, which was designed with the guidance of the Ministry. Students from social work and child and youth care take a set of courses that included law, child development, interviewing skills, and a practicum in a child protection office. They graduate with a specialisation and can be hired directly into a team doing child protection or family support work for the Ministry. These specialisations have consistent course work province wide, but are operated under different departments in each educational institution. Sometimes the program is a collaboration between social work and child and youth care, sometimes it is

delivered by child and youth care, and sometimes by social work (Gilliespie, Whiteley, Watts, Dattolo & Jones, 2010-seethis issue).The result of the hiring equivalency and the training specialisation is that there are teams of child and youth care graduates with specialisation in child protection working throughout the province and supervising and mentoring new students as they go through their educational programs.

Recently, the federal government has begun to insist that provinces create inter-provincial labour mobility agreements which allow professionals and trades people to move from province to province with some reasonable assurance that their education and experience will be recognised in an equivalent position. Since each province has developed differently in relation to child welfare, child protection and human services in general, these interprovincial labour mobility agreements have great potential to affect child and youth care in a positive manner, given the British Columbia precedent. The Alberta children's service agencies have been challenged to accept the BA (CYC), from British Columbia, as equivalent to the BSW for child protection positions in the province. As new degree programs develop in Alberta, this is a critical precedent.

British Columbia has many post-secondary educational options in child and youth care.



The BA CYC was initiated in 1973, and in 2010 there are four degree programs in the province, three of which are associated with diploma exit options at second year. They all accept, through articulation agreements and prior learning assessment, students into second or third year with related early childhood education, social services, child and youth care, or human services, diplomas and certificates. The Child and Youth Care Educator's Consortium of British Columbia meets regularly and has specific agreements about core curriculum and learning outcomes that guide these articulation agreements. The initiation of a Masters programme in 1995 and PhD program in 2005 meant that the bachelors level programs could hire child and youth care educators from amongst these graduates and that other graduates would go on to government policy and executive agency positions.

Several government initiatives have indirectly affected professionalisation of child and youth care. The Ministry was renamed from the Ministry of Community Services to the Ministry of Child and Family Development in 1998 giving profile to the importance of child development and family issues in child welfare and child protection and bringing children's mental health and youth justice under their responsibility (and moving social assistance to a different ministry). Along with the

multidisciplinary approach to child welfare and children's mental health, the Ministry established an integrated case management process involving multiple players on the team. They require that all agencies who receive funding (over \$500,000) become accredited by one of three established and internationally recognised accreditation programs and the Ministry funds the accreditation requirements. They also require their own regional organizations to become accredited. The Ministry publishes guidelines and information on these initiatives on their website at http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/reports_publications.htm

The British Columbia Federation of Community Social Services needed to become more politically astute and active (<http://www.fcfs.bc.ca/what-we-do.php>) in order to affect public policy and help small and large agencies as the government move toward efficiency and stronger regulation of both agencies and practitioners. Issues such as staffing qualifications, program evaluation, and ongoing enhancement of quality of service through both integrated case management and accreditation of services and programs became forefront in the work of child and youth care practitioners. The Federation has become involved in mentoring and supporting the CYCBC as it does its work to

professionalize the field within the province.

The traditional hallmarks of professionalism include formal education, a knowledge base, legislated regulation with a set of standards, a strong professional association, a code of ethics, and public recognition of the value, power and expertise of members of the profession. At first glance other than the idea of formal education and knowledge that comes from established research programs none of these hallmarks appear to be present in the description of what's happening currently in British Columbia. Nevertheless the profession is recognized, students compete to enter the educational programs and to get in to the higher paying jobs such as child protection and government policy analysis. The critical mass of child and youth care educated professionals with a strong commitment to relationships; an ability to respond to crisis in whatever form it presents itself; and to advocate for the needs of children and youth from a developmental perspective has created a critical mass of energy which can be tapped to further the professional development and recognition of the field.

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