

The Accidental Practitioner

HOW DO NORTH AMERICAN CHILD AND YOUTH WORKERS VIEW CULTURAL DIVERSITY?



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“Professional practitioners actively promote respect for cultural and human diversity. The Professional Practitioner seeks self-understanding and has the ability to access and evaluate information related to cultural and human diversity. Current and relevant knowledge is integrated in developing respectful and effective relationships and communication and developmental practice methods. Knowledge and skills are employed in planning, implementing and evaluating respectful programs and services, and workplaces.” (Mattingly, M., Stuart, C., & VanderVen, K., 2002; revised 2010).

The above statement from the North American Certification Project (NACP) Competencies for Professional Child and Youth Work Practitioners introduces the competency domain of cultural and human diversity; one of five domains that underlie the development and implementation of the Association of Child and Youth Care Practice certification program administered by the Child and Youth Care Certification Board (CYCCB) www.cyccb.org. This column summarizes some of the research findings conducted by Imani Reynolds (McNair Scholar) at Kent State University who explored child and youth care workers’ understanding of cultural diversity and culturally responsive practice.

Reynolds (2018) conducted a content analysis of 48 randomly selected portfolios submitted to the Child and Youth Care Certification Board by applicants as part of the requirements for the professional level child and youth care worker certification. The focus of the analysis was section 7 which is composed of 3 options (a, b, c) for an applicant to choose and respond.

The items are as follows:

7(a) discuss the role of cultural and human diversity in the development of healthy and productive relationships. Include a specific situation in which you were aware of cultural differences and how it affected your interactions

7(b) Describe a personal experience with elements of a culture different from your own. Include examples of cultural differences (e.g. values, family life, daily living) and how they impacted your personal and professional development.

7(c) Describe a specific situation (e.g. with an individual, family, supervisory relationship) in which you became aware of your own personal bias. Include how this awareness influences youth interactions and impacted your personal growth.

Findings revealed that fifteen applicants chose to respond to option a; nineteen selected b and fourteen c. Overall it is clear that child and youth workers (CYWs) work with and advocate for many marginalized and oppressed individuals. CYWs tend to view diversity with a very broad lens including:

- (1) nationality (e.g., South American, Chinese, Aboriginal, Spanish speaking persons, Jamaican, Punjabi),
- (2) race/ethnicity (e.g., African American, mixed race),
- (3) religion (e.g., Mormon, e.g., Amish, Pagan, Wiccan, Jewish, Sikhs),
- (4) socio-economic status, politics and power (e.g., poverty, education, political views),
- (5) sex/gender (e.g., LGBTQ, gender discrimination, sexism),
- (6) populations based on specific needs or funding streams (e.g., juvenile justice, mental health, sexual offenders, gangs),
- (7) family structure (divorce, single parent, blended families), and
- (8) age (older teens, younger children).

Apparently, the CYWs' perception of diversity is very diverse.

Based on an analysis of key repetitive words, several additional themes emerged.

Out of One's Comfort Zone

The importance of exposure to new situations was a common theme. Some examples include attending a preschool; attending a Pagan festival; a move to a more diverse community from one filled with prejudice; participating in different activities such as art, dance, sports; partnering with a Jamaican man; learning different ways of experiencing daily routines (meals-difference in how frequently eating together-time spent together-emotional closeness); and volunteering in a women's shelter. A few of the certification applicants' statements below also exemplify the importance of stretching beyond one's comfort zone in promoting cultural competence.

"Expanding my cultural diversity and learning about my friends and neighbors has made it a little easier to go outside my comfort zone and learn new things."

"Working with this family was such a learning experience for me because it took me out of my "comfort zone" and really challenged my mind and what I thought I knew about social work as a profession."

"That day was a big day for me. It forced me out of my comfort zone and I ended up having a great time with the fellas."

Communication Gap

A recognition of the importance of effective communication was evident in the portfolio responses. One of the other five domains that are foundational to the CYCCB certification program pertains to relationship and communication. Cultural understanding is important for effective communication and effective communication skills are important in cross cultural interactions. A few statements below highlight the important interrelatedness of communication and culture.

"A specific case in which I was aware of cultural difference was when I worked with a parent that spoke minimal Spanish and no English. It was difficult to communicate with the parent..."

"Looking ahead, I am sure I will see this young woman at our juvenile center and will communicate with her mother at some point. I hope I have bridged any possible communication gap that may have existed."

"I gained knowledge and improved my ability to communicate with families through this experience."

Open-Minded

Having an "open mind" repeatedly appeared in the responses.

"This experience was something that helped me learn to be more open-minded and understanding..."

"This experience taught me to approach every family with an open mind and let them teach and guide me regarding their cultural norms."

"In this conversation, this professor strongly encouraged that I open my mind, and consider interning at a residential treatment center for juvenile sex offenders."

In addition to the diversity examples that appeared in the diversity section of the portfolio, diversity examples were evident throughout the other sections of the portfolio as well; particularly in section 1 that focuses on how life experience affects current practice. For example, one person mentioned the experience of having a brother with cancer. Another mentioned how volunteering in a women's shelter opened one's eyes to economic disparity. Being bullied because of one's weight was another personal life experience. Observing inequality in service delivery was cited by another applicant. The prevalence of diversity experiences in multiple sections of the portfolio is probably an indicator of the importance of cultural understanding in all facets of child and youth work.

So, how do those of us who arrived in the field accidentally (fellow "accidental practitioners") view cultural diversity? What steps do we take to be more "intentional" about improving our cultural understanding so that we can more effectively provide culturally responsive service to a wide spectrum of young persons, families and communities? Do we have a broad understanding of diversity; recognize the importance of being open-minded; willing to risk moving out of our comfort zones; and ready to improve our cross-cultural communication skills? ◇

Imani Reynolds, a native from Cleveland Ohio, attended Kent State University and received her Bachelor of Science in Human Development Family Studies with a concentration in Child youth Development. During her undergraduate career, Imani completed research on the risk and protective factors of marginalized youth in the school to prison pipeline. She also presented research at the Undergraduate Research Symposium on perceptions of cultural competency in the counseling profession. She is currently completing her Master of Education in the Clinical Mental Health Counseling program. Following her Masters, Imani plans to attain her Doctorate in Educational Policy and Leadership. Her research interests include the school to prison pipeline, mental wellness, inequality in education, and juvenile delinquency.

References

Mattingly, M., Stuart, C., & VanderVen, K. (2002; revised 2010). North American Certification Project (NACP) Competencies for professional child and youth work practitioners. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*, 17, 16-49.

Reynolds, I. (2018). Child and youth care certification portfolio analysis. Poster session presented at Kent State University Undergraduate Symposium on Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity, Kent, OH. ◇