



## **A Stakeholder Needs Assessment To Gauge The Interest In And Demand For A Child And Youth Care Postgraduate Specialization Certificate Program**

**Gerard Bellefeuille**

Professor, Department of Child and Youth Care  
MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

**Jenny McGrath**

Assistant Professor, Department of Child and Youth Care  
MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

**Catherine Hedlin**

Assistant Professor, Department of Child and Youth Care  
MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

**Donna Jamieson**

Assistant Professor, Department of Child and Youth Care  
MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada

### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this needs assessment was to explore child and youth care (CYC) learning needs and interest of stakeholders in the development of a CYC postgraduate specialization certificate. A purposive sample strategy was used to recruit CYC practitioners and senior CYC administrators. The data collection strategy consisted of an online survey, an online discussion forum, a key-informant focus group, and a round-table discussion. Findings indicated that participants had a strong interest in a variety of professional development topics, including advanced mental health practice/expressive therapies, addictions, child protection, and family work.

**Key words:** child and youth care education, postgraduate specialization certificate

### **INTRODUCTION**

To stay relevant in today's increasingly diverse, interconnected, and rapidly changing world, human service professionals must embrace a lifelong learning mindset to keep abreast of the shifting contexts of practice and maintain their ethical responsibility to be competent practitioners. This is especially the case for child and youth care (CYC) professionals serving vulnerable children, youth, and families with multiple and challenging needs who live in very complex environments. It is critically essential, therefore, that CYC professionals have access to high-quality educational opportunities that enhance and expand their knowledge and skills. For many helping disciplines, postgraduate specialization certificate programs have become a popular option for practicing professionals unable to commit to graduate level education for a variety of reasons but who wish to enhance or acquire specialized knowledge and skills in their selected fields.

## **POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATES**

Postgraduate certificates are generally intensive, highly specialized programs of study (typically three to five courses) designed to address the professional development needs of practitioners in a wide variety of areas (e.g., child welfare, youth mental health, administration/leadership) and are developed in collaboration with experts in the field (e.g., key stakeholders, graduates practicing in the field, CYC faculty). Postgraduate certificate courses may be either credit or non-credit programs and are considered advanced courses equivalent to a masters' level of education.

## **NEEDS ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVE**

The primary aim of this stakeholder needs assessment was to solicit the opinion of graduates from the four-year Bachelor of Child and Youth Care (BCYC) degree currently working in the field, CYC stakeholder supervisors and senior administrators, BCYC forth-year students, and BCYC instructors at MacEwan University. The goal was to determine the interest in and demand for a postgraduate BCYC specialization certificate program. The needs assessment was purposely designed to obtain firsthand information about the learning needs of CYC practitioners with respect to practice competencies and skills, and emerging issues and challenges that CYC agencies and organizations confront.

## **PARTICIPANT SAMPLING STRATEGY**

A non-probability purposive, sampling strategy was used to identify and recruit needs assessment participants. Purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling method that is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions (Duan, Bhaumik, Palinkas, & Hoagwood, 2015; Patton, 2002). Maximum variation was achieved by recruiting participants from a variety of settings within the field of CYC in order to capture different perspectives (Byrne, 2001). Maximum variation is a good method for controlling sample bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and ensuring saturation of categories (Glasser, 1978). The variation of the sample was maximized by including participants who represent the residential care sector, family support services, community-based youth work, school-based settings, government agencies (i.e., child protection), and a general other category. The variation of the sample was also maximized by separating the participants into four sample frames that included frontline or direct practice practitioners, senior administrators and individuals in supervisory roles, fourth-year CYC students, and CYC instructors at MacEwan University.

## **DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY**

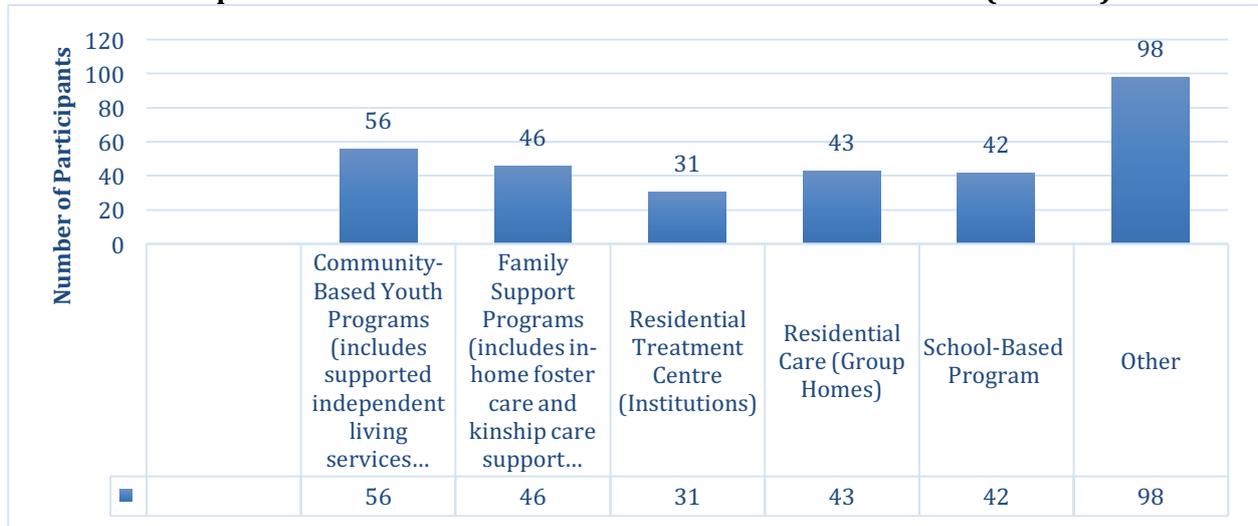
Data was collected using an online survey, an online discussion forum, a key-informant focus group, and a round-table discussion. Data triangulation is the use of multiple data collection strategies as a means to enhance the reliability and validity or strengths of the results (Flick, 2002; Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012).

### **Online Survey**

Although qualitative studies generally use a small number of participants, the online survey targeted frontline or direct practice practitioners engaged in CYC-related work. Three hundred and thirty-six frontline or direct practice practitioners—of whom 19 self-identified as non-graduate BCYC students—completed the online survey (see Table 1 below). Fifty-six respondents (n = 56) represented community-based youth programs that included supported independent living services. Forty-six (n = 46) respondents represented the family support, foster care/kinship care sector. Thirty-one (n = 31) respondents were from the residential institutional sector and another forty-three (n = 43) were from the residential group home

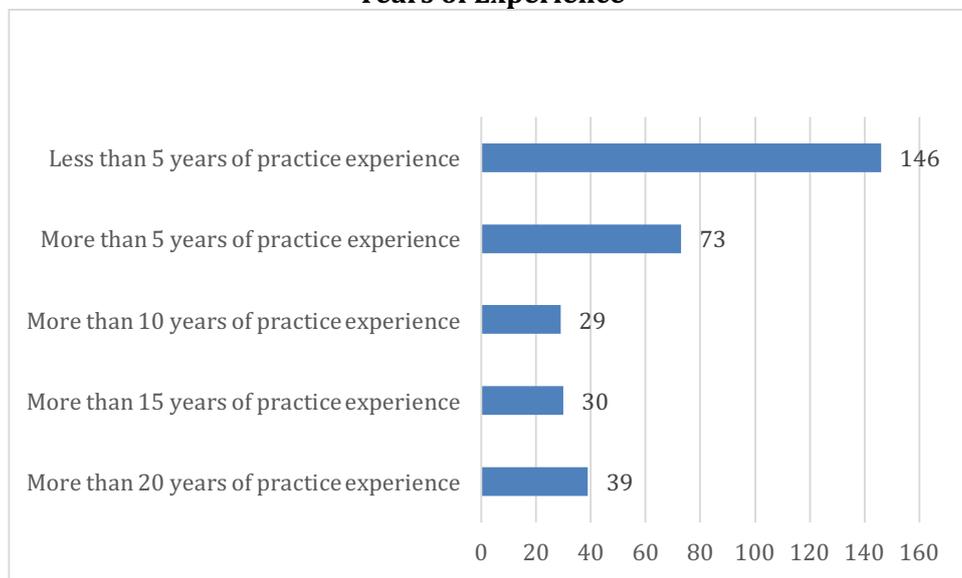
sector. Forty-two (n = 42) worked in the school system and ninety-eight (n = 98) reported “other,” which included day care workers (n =20), government services (i.e., child protection) (n = 24), mental health services (n = 6), and students (n = 19).

**Table 1**  
**Sample Variation: Front Line or Direct Practice Practitioners (N = 316)**



As illustrated in Table 2, 39 respondents (12.3%) had over 20 years of practice experience. Thirty respondents (9.46%) indicated they had more than 15 years, and 29 respondents (9.15%) reported having more than 10 years’ experience. Seventy-three (23.03%) respondents noted having more than 5 years’ experience and 146 (46.06%) respondents reported having less than 5 years’ experience.

**Table 2**  
**Years of Experience**



With regard to respondents’ level of education and qualification, 100 respondents (31.65%) indicated they were BCYC graduates, 124 respondents (39.24%) reported having a CYC diploma, and 92 respondents (29.11%) reported other (see Table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Other**

|                          |    |                                  |   |
|--------------------------|----|----------------------------------|---|
| BA                       | 19 | BPA Human Services               | 1 |
| CYC student              | 15 | Bachelor of Education            | 1 |
| Social Work              | 8  | Communications degree            | 1 |
| ECE                      | 8  | Counselling diploma              | 1 |
| CYC Master's program     | 5  | Master of Art                    | 1 |
| Master of Social Work    | 4  | Nursing                          | 1 |
| CYC Certification        | 4  | MACP                             | 1 |
| PhD (Unspecified)        | 3  | Master in Educational Psychology | 1 |
| Master of Education      | 3  | Mental Health Diploma            | 1 |
| Child Studies            | 3  | LPN                              | 1 |
| Addictions Diploma       | 2  | Counselling Masters              | 1 |
| BAH                      | 2  | Disabilities Studies diploma     | 1 |
| BSC                      | 2  | ELCC                             | 1 |
| MHS                      | 1  | EDAS                             | 1 |
| Justice studies          | 1  | Rehab diploma                    | 1 |
| Outdoor Education Degree | 1  |                                  |   |

### **Interest in Postgraduate Specialization Certificate Program**

One hundred and twenty-seven respondents (43.64%) reported that they would be very interested in taking part in a postgraduate specialization certificate program. Another 142 respondents (48.8%) said they were somewhat interested, and 22 respondents (7.56%) said they were not interested.

### **Potential Areas of Focus**

Respondents were asked about their preference regarding the focus of a postgraduate degree specialization certificate program. Their responses are illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**Topic of Interest (N = 260)**

| First Choice   | Number of Responses | Second Choice  | Number of Responses |
|--|---------------------|--|---------------------|
| Advanced mental health intervention                      | 81                  | Advanced mental health intervention                      | 44                  |
| Advance family work                                      | 34                  | Child protection   | 41                  |
| Expressive therapies (arts-based, play, movement, music) | 33                  | Addiction  | 40                  |
| Addictions   | 25                  | Expressive therapies (arts-based, play, movement, music) | 34                  |
| Child protection   | 23                  | Advanced family work                                     | 27                  |
| Supervision  | 21                  | Supervision  | 18                  |
| Child life   | 9                   | Community work   | 12                  |
| Community work   | 8                   | Trauma-loss, grief                                       | 8                   |
| Trauma-loss, grief                                       | 7                   | Counselling  | 10                  |
| Indigenous issues  | 6                   | Indigenous issues  | 5                   |
| Diversity  | 5                   | Diversity  | 4                   |
| Disabilities   | 2                   | Youth criminal justice                                   | 3                   |
| Counselling  | 2                   | Disabilities   | 2                   |
| Technology   | 1                   | Local resources  | 2                   |
| Poverty  | 1                   |  |                     |
| Maternal and infant health                               | 1                   |  |                     |
| Masters  | 1                   |  |                     |

The top five first-choice areas of interest included advanced mental health intervention (n = 81), advanced family work (n = 34), expressive therapies (n = 33), addictions (n = 25), and child protection work (n = 23). The top five second-choice areas of interest included advanced mental health intervention (n = 44), child protection work (n = 41), addictions (n = 40), expressive therapies (n = 34), and advanced family work (n = 27). A combined total of the top 5 first and second choices resulted in advanced mental health intervention receiving the highest rating (n = 125), expressive therapies (n = 67) ranked second highest, addictions (n = 65) and child protection (n = 64) garnered the third and fourth highest ratings (respectively), followed by advanced family work (n = 61).

Given the close association between advanced mental health intervention and expressive therapies and the role that addictions play in one's mental health, it would seem reasonable to conclude that a mental health-focus specialization was the preferred choice among front-line or direct practice practitioners.

### Online Discussion Forum

Twenty-seven fourth-year students responded to the online discussion forum. The overall consensus was that BCYC graduates at MacEwan University would likely participate in a postgraduate specialization certificate because of the trust they have in the CYC program to provide an advanced level of CYC education.

### **Key Informant Focus Group**

Key informants for the focus-group discussion were selected from the not-for-profit, community-based family and children services sector. The variation of the key informant focus-group sample was maximized by including participants who represented the major not-for-profit, community-based family and children services agencies in the Edmonton region; participant selection was determined after considering the diversity of clientele served, the types of services provided, and on the basis of participants' respective fields of specialization and their qualifications. A total of eight senior administrators attended the focus-group session. The key informant focus-group discussion was designed to capture the *felt needs of the respondents*; this results, essentially, in an opinion-based assessment. As Eager et al. (2004) explains, there is a difference between felt and real need. Felt needs are commonly thought of as those perceived by an individual as important or of interest; real needs, on the other hand, are supported by hard data through means such as client satisfaction surveys and statistical analysis. The three main thematic categories that were identified in the key informant focus-group discussion were (1) mental health/addictions/trauma, (2) CYC leadership, and (3) cultural diversity/immigrants/trauma.

### **ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSION**

The round-table style discussion proved a suitable and effective framework for CYC instructors to share their thoughts about and perceptions of the needs in the field that might be addressed by a postgraduate specialization certificate program. Seven instructors took part in the discussion. Four of the instructors emphasized the need for an advanced practice specialization with a focus on mental health interventions (i.e., expressive therapies, CYC therapeutic work). A secondary emphasis was placed on supervision and leadership skills, family work, and cultural diversity.

### **SUMMARY DISCUSSION**

This CYC stakeholder needs assessment sought to examine the interests in and demand for a CYC postgraduate specialization certificate program. Findings indicated that participants had a strong interest in a variety of professional development topics, including advanced mental health practice/expressive, addictions, child protection, and family work. Participants affirmed their interest in a postgraduate specialization certificate program and voiced interest in various training formats, including the use of online technology, face-to-face classroom learning, and a hybrid design. Though preliminary, the primary finding of broad interest in advanced mental health practice, expressive therapies, and addictions, as well as child protection and family work, is consistent with the forms other human services-type postgraduate specialization certificate programs have taken.

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