



## The Academic Turn of Child and Youth Care Practicum Coordination at MacEwan University

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### ABSTRACT

The established agency-based approach to child and youth care (CYC) practicum coordination in post-secondary education is no longer sustainable. It has been impacted by the persistent expansion of professional programs requiring practicum placements for increasing student populations and must be rethought to address the changing needs of stakeholder service providers. This article discusses the creation of a non-administrative, academic CYC practicum coordination position at MacEwan University. The primary focus of this newly created position is to lead the transition from an all-inclusive agency-based placement model of field education to a multifaceted approach to coordination, which will include both research-focused and project-based practicum opportunities.

**Keywords:** child and youth care, ontology, practicum coordination, project-based research-based

### INTRODUCTION

The significance of field education, also known as practicum, has long been considered the pedagogical core of child and youth care education (CYC) (Cragg, 2020; CYCEAB, 2016; Keough, 2016; Forkan & McElwee, 2002; Krueger, 2000). Practicum is regarded by students, faculty, and service providers as one of the most important learning experiences across human service education and is considered the signature pedagogy of social work (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin (2010). However, universities typically manage field coordination as an administrative task, rather than viewing it through an academic pedagogical lens (Asakura et al., 2018). As a result, practicum coordination across professional programs such as nursing, social work, and child and youth care is traditionally funded as a part-time administrative position or is not funded at all. However, in 2021 the undergraduate CYC program at MacEwan University (MU) was granted its first academically defined practicum coordination position, now known as “the Professional Resource Faculty - Field Education Facilitator”. The funding of this position was

established with recognition that field coordination is not simply focused on the development of quality practicum experiences but also concerns seven other aspects. First, it involves locating and nurturing diverse practicum opportunities across a broad range of settings, including community-based agencies, residential facilities, mental health centres, and schools, as well as emerging non-traditional practice settings such research and project-based placements. Second, it encompasses mentoring and coaching faculty practicum educators in designing intentional and relational-centered fieldwork seminar curriculum (years I, II, and IV of the degree at MU) grounded in in CYC theoretical frameworks and congruent in assessment of student learning outcomes. Third, it includes assisting faculty practicum instructors, students, and other stakeholders in resolving conflicts arising out of the practicum experience. Fourth, it involves establishing positive relationships between community partner sites. Fifth, it entails developing up-to-date field policies and standards to respond to the ever-changing landscape of CYC field education. Sixth, it requires that field education is integrated within the larger academic program, advocating for further development and resources where necessary. Seventh, being in an academic position, the newly appointed practicum coordinator could also enhance the overall learning environment through instruction, applied research, scholarly activity, and service that supports the institutional mission.

### **RE-EXAMINING THE UNDERLYING ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF CYC PRACTICUM COORDINATION**

CYC practicums have always been the essential student experience, linking theoretical learning from the classroom with true-to-life situations. The standard model for practicum across human service education places a student with a community partner, typically a non-profit agency, and supervision is shared between the educational program (faculty or other) and the community (staff; Vick, 2009). The objective in this case is to offer a stable and safe professional environment where students can take up professional roles under the supervision of seasoned practitioners while developing skills, testing theories, and applying interventions. Though practicum in CYC education is valued anecdotally, it is rarely critiqued, and there is little research clarifying or supporting the importance of practicum coordination (Asakura et al., 2018). We hope to reimagine how we coordinate and support CYC field education to ensure it is responsive to changing students and a changing world.

The practice context of today is radically different to that of 30 years ago. Globalization's exacerbation of social issues and the explosion of technological advances have reshaped virtually every aspect of our daily lives (Bellefeuille, McGrath, & Jamieson, 2008), which in turn has had profound effects on CYC practice by creating new social issues for the social and human services systems to address. As noted by Bellefeuille and Berikoff (2020),

We now live-in communities that are radically more diverse, much less certain, or predictable, and considerably more complex. It is in this world, that packs more into each day and is changing more rapidly than at any time in human experience, that child and youth care (CYC) education programs aim to prepare their students to practice their profession. (p. 14)

More recently, the novel coronavirus caused a widespread existential crisis, affecting all areas of human life. Many universities were forced to adapt their professional programs, sometimes through a full transition to a virtual practicum model and sometimes with invented projects designed to replace face-to-face contact hours. This propelled students, universities, and

practicum agencies into uncharted territory (Morley & Clarke, 2020). While we are yet to identify the long-term impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on the ways in which universities, governments, and community agencies operate, it is unlikely that there will be a return to the old “normal.”

In addition to the changing landscape of CYC practice, the steady expansion of higher education professional programs requiring practicum placements for their growing student populations has resulted in a scarcity of field practicum opportunities, adding to the previously noted challenges facing field coordination. To recognize the increased demand for meaningful student positions in the community, along with diverse student learning needs and backgrounds, it is necessary to reimagine the role of field education coordination. Reimagining efforts must address the pace and fluidity of changes, while supporting shared communication with students, community partners, faculty involved in field education, and the larger CYC department. Community partners are often not aware of what exactly is being taught in university and universities do not know what community trends and issues would benefit from an ongoing and shared exchange of information to increase awareness and learning (Zeichner, 1992; Zeichner, 2010). We are fortunate at MU to have practicum faculty supervisors who are certified CYC practitioners with graduate-level education and extensive practice experience. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, which exacerbates the confusion and incongruence that can exist between classroom and practicum learning (Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

Finally, the increasing demands on social service agencies to “do more with less” mean that it is not always possible for field agencies to find the time to supervise and support practicum students. Agency partners talk about unprecedented staffing shortages, burnout, and turnover, all of which mean that students can experience multiple supervisor changes during their practicum. In fact, there have been instances where students become among the longest-serving adults in their program. This poses challenges for everyone involved and can hinder the learning potential of the practicum.

### **TURNING TO A MULTIFACETED MODEL OF CYC FIELDWORK**

While the long-held assumptions underpinning CYC field education have provided valuable learning opportunities for students for many decades, it is no longer a sustainable model or an ethically accountable approach to the learning needs of our students. Clearly, the sole reliance on agency-based practicums no longer fits the new reality of today’s communities in which social programs are structured and CYC students are practicing. In response, the CYC program at MacEwan University is in pursuit of a multifaceted field education model that will include both research-focused and project-based practicums to complement the more traditional agency-based practicums. To this end, the program adapted the program of study, moving both courses with a focus on research and statistics to the third year, so that students will have the foundational knowledge needed for these new practicum opportunities in year four.

#### **Research-Focused Fieldwork**

Acquiring research skills is a key component of CYC education and integral to students’ success in the field. The research-focused practicum (RF) option is being advanced as a means of providing students with applied experience in community-based research, supervised by CYC faculty members. RF practicums will extend the field education objective of integrating theory and practice to the integration of theory, practice, and research. RF practica are real-life

projects undertaken by students to address some of the needs of community stakeholders that the traditional practicum option cannot address. Projects might involve needs assessments, program evaluations, and knowledge mobilization to encourage program development.

### **Project-Based Fieldwork**

A project-based learning (PBL) pedagogy applied to practicum provides students with the opportunity to practice their skills by engaging in a co-created, supervised project. Projects can include developing and implementing a recreational program for youth, engaging in a community development activity to create awareness around an issue, or designing a training program, to name a few possibilities. With its focus on students completing their final advanced CYC practicum, a project-based practicum can offer unique opportunities for those students who have a passion to address a particular need or to enhance the services currently available to children, youth, or families. PBL opportunities can enhance understanding of social context and career-required skills such as self-directed learning, research, reflection, assessment, collaborative approaches, and program development. Agencies are increasingly looking to hire individuals who demonstrate the resulting readiness for more complex positions that new CYC degree graduates will be well-positioned to fill.

### **SUMMARY**

Recognizing that the traditional approach to practicum is an invaluable part of a student's learning, we will continue the relationships we have with community organizations as we expand and create new opportunities for senior practicum. The development of an academic practicum coordinator at MacEwan University would engender creativity by going beyond the ways in which practicum has classically been organized. It will support responsiveness to student learning goals, the real and relevant needs in the CYC field, and the ever-changing socio-political landscape. New practicum opportunities would be increasingly reciprocal, filling a need for community partners while also satisfying the needs and interests of students. A multi-faceted approach to practicum, one that includes research or projects addressing a current issue or gap, would provide opportunities that contribute to and enhance the scholarship of practicum and would expand both student learning and graduate success.

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