

Accidental Practitioner

What is the most practical and economically efficient way to improve child and youth care services?

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A highly competent workforce is one of the most important factors affecting the quality of care for young persons and families. When considering child and youth care (CYC) across the varied practice domains (e.g., residential, out-of-school time, early childhood, juvenile justice, etc.), it is the world's largest human service workforce. It is estimated to be large as six million within the U.S. alone (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Curry et al., 2012). Being the largest human service workforce positions CYC to make the greatest impact (positive or negative) on the welfare of young persons and families. That said, investing resources in such a sizable workforce would seem to indicate the need for a vast amount of financial capital. While there is an enormous need for such an infusion of resources (e.g., funds to increase salaries and staffing levels) to promote the recruitment, training, and retention of highly qualified CYC career-oriented practitioners; a relatively low-cost, evidence-based, and easily accessible ("low-hanging fruit") approach currently exists-CYC PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION.

Evidence in Support of Professional Certification

While most other related human service fields of practice have provided little evidence in support of licensing and certification, a constellation of research has emerged in support of CYC certification.

The exam and other components of the certification process assess competencies determined by a meta-analysis of 87 sets of competencies in North America. This meta-analysis led to the development of the *North American Competencies for Professional Child and Youth Work Practitioners*. To ensure content validity, these competencies guided the development of each assessment component in the CYCCB certification program. In addition, scenarios for the exam were based on actual case studies provided by practitioners from the U.S. and Canada (Curry et al., 2009; Eckles et al., 2009; Mattingly, Stuart, & VanderVen, 2002, 2010).

In 2007 & 2008 research was conducted on the situational judgment exam that included 775 participants (and their supervisors) at 29 sites in six states and two Canadian provinces. The certification exam was found to be predictive of child and youth work (CYW) competence/performance on the job across varied practice settings (Curry et al., 2009).

The exam has a high degree of internal reliability-Cronbach's alpha = .90 and appears to assess one general construct of professional CYW judgment (Curry et al., 2013; Curry et al., 2009;

Child and Youth Care Certification Board, 2011).

The exam also has a high degree of face validity across practice settings. For example, 90% of practitioners agree that the exam accurately assesses important aspects of CYW and 90% agree that the exam's case examples provide realistic samples of CYW (Curry, et al., 2009).

Subsequent research indicated that certified workers are 2.7 times more likely to be high performing practitioners when compared to uncertified (Curry et al., 2013).

The major components of CYCCB certification (education, experience, passing score on the exam, completion of certification including the portfolio) are each predictive of CYC performance. Each component progressively predicts performance—an indication of the incremental validity of the certification process (Curry et al., 2013).

Seven Benefits of Certification

Funded by the Edmund A. Stanley, Jr. national research grant, a qualitative study was conducted in 2012 & 2013 that investigated the value and impact of certification on out-of-school time practitioners. Study participants reported the following as benefits to being certified:

1. *Ensuring a common baseline of competence.*

“I think we should all be on the same page at some level. Teachers have to be certified, why can anyone go into an afterschool peer program? Why can anyone go into a daycare? There should be some level of common knowledge.”

2. *Increased motivation, a sense of accomplishment, confidence and empowerment.*

“It definitely gave me some confidence that I know what I'm doing. I think that it's helpful for my supervisors in that they can count on me because of what I've learned and come to me in a situation if they need advice or another site manager who maybe hasn't had that much training.”

3. *Increased awareness and mindfulness.*

“It's made me more efficient ... When you're more mindful about what you do and you know the meaning and the reason for it, for example the documentation or the building of those relationships; if you understand the why, then you're able to be more efficient and carry it out more.”

4. *A signal of one's commitment to professional youth work.*

Comment from a supervisor. “Letting the workers see themselves as professionals. It is a morale enhancer. It lets them know that you take them seriously as a professional and you want them to have this credential.”

5. *Being part of something bigger.*

“..... has allowed me to have awareness of what is going on in other areas of child and youth work including conferences that I can take advantage of. Also the actual certification process helped me to create and maintain affiliation with member-based programs which created networking opportunities and a sense of community.”

6. *Valuing the learning as an end in itself.*

“I feel like it’s the learning-the information is the most important thing to the individual worker.”

7. *Increased recognition coinciding with awareness of the importance of advocating for certification within and outside the field.*

“I would like to see more on the state and local level to collaborate and communicate about the national certification.”

While various practice and program models exist in the field, one essential factor transcends these diverse approaches-the quality of the CYC workforce. Consistent with a developmental approach to working with children and young persons, the CYCCB provides a developmental model to enhance the workforce: Entry-level, Associate, and Professional-level Certification. A comprehensive system for the review and certification of CYC practitioners and a Board of Directors consisting of individuals from both the United States and Canada has been in place since 2008. It is time for policy makers and program administrators to take notice and take better advantage of one of the field’s most significant achievements.

From a policy and program-level perspective, certifying CYC practitioners is clearly the most pragmatic strategy that can make the most immediate impact on the care of young persons and families. Further information regarding the CYC field’s certification program can be found by visiting the website of the CYCCB www.cyccb.org or contacting the office.

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