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## EDITORIAL: Disconnection and Mattering

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## **Disconnection and Mattering**

We are living in a time of disconnection. In democracies across the globe, social fractures are more acute than they have been in decades, and these fractures threaten the foundation of civil society. The fractures present themselves at every level of the social order, from individual and interpersonal relationships, to groups and collectives, to political parties, to nation states. And, it seems, they both come from and reinforce profound experiences of disconnection with far reaching consequences from suicide to loneliness to disengagement from social and political processes. There are, of course, many reasons for these feelings, but at the core it would appear that many of us believe that what we have to say is not heard, is ignored, or is disregarded. Our concerns are not received as legitimate, and we retreat to our corners, from which “we” are both safe from “them” and allowed to critique “them” with impunity. We know that when enough people begin to think that who they are is not important then our social systems start to fall apart. When the systems that are supposed to support us under our social contracts struggle to do so, we collectively begin to spiral into despair and disenchantment that further feeds our sense of having little or no control over our lives. This threatens the very core of our societies. The question is not whether this is happening but rather is what can we do about it.

It is beyond the scope of a single editorial to propose an antidote to this broad social phenomenon. It is beyond the scope of any single journal to offer an analysis of all its applications and implications. But within our own limited scope, we hope to attend to how this disconnection may affect the lives of children and youth. We are struck that for children and youth in particular (though likely not exclusively), *mattering* is at the core of connection. By association, disconnection comes from an experience of not mattering – not mattering to other people and not believing that those people matter to us.

An example is children in care. Children and youth in care often have had experiences prior to coming into state care that lead them to believe that they do not matter to others and therefore struggle to feel they matter to themselves. Backgrounds of neglect, abuse or exploitation can lead to a self-perception rooted in worthlessness. Systemic inadequacies contribute to their feelings of irrelevance. We have systems that purport to care for our most vulnerable young people but let them down time and time again. That is not to say that there aren't good services being provided to youth in care, but rather that what is offered is both systemically and relationally inadequate for their needs.

The ultimate solution to this issue requires addressing the factors that bring young people into care and transforming our service systems to emphasize genuine care and relationship over fiscal

and legalistic concerns. Erasing poverty, ensuring adequate housing, education and housing for all would significantly if not totally decrease the number of young people in care. The proper support for families would also lead to a decrease in these numbers. Empowering child and youth care providers to authentically attend to the individual and relational needs of young people would relieve burnout, facilitate long-term connection, and support increased competence in practice. These must be goals of any society, but as our historic and current circumstances make painfully clear, we fall short of these outcomes.

However, while we work towards these long-term goals, we also have to be aware of our immediate responsibility to youth in care. That means we have to start to reframing how we see the impact of our efforts. It is not just the long-term goals that are important but also the message we give as we advocate for change. The messages need to go beyond what is screwed up and wrong. They need to include a sense that there is hope for a better tomorrow. Trying to counter feelings of despair with messages of despair only leads to deeper despair. Calls to action and our actions themselves should not just be about fighting the forces that are oppressing people. The messages need to include visions of where we are going. Not visions restricted to rhetoric and jargon but rather clear views of what we are building. This orientation is in some ways countercultural; it is often far easier to critique what is than to construct what can be.

When we envision the world that is possible for children and youth, we imagine intentional relationships, connection, and significance. We do not heal disconnection through disregard – of the problem, of the people we perceive to be furthering the problem, or of the social differences that make connection difficult. We heal disconnection through engagement, deliberate messy engagement even with those ideas we may personally or politically reject. We heal it through active and mutually accountable relationship with one another, and that authentic relationship starts with mattering (Charles & Alexander, 2014).

For over 50 years, the research and practice literatures have demonstrated the role of mattering on human growth and development, from early self-esteem literature (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967 on significance) to resilience research (e.g., Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990/2002) have written of the wisdom of Indigenous understandings of belonging in social systems. While terminology varies across literatures, a consistent through-line exists: humans benefit from connection and relationship, and authentic relationship rests on the experience that we matter to the people who surround us.

As we work to respond to contemporary fragmentation and disconnection, we can begin by questioning the message of our engagements with young people – as clients, as students, as research subjects or partners, as members of our shared communities. Through our action, we can on an individual level begin to show young people that they matter. Not just by providing youth in care the supports and services they need but also by examining the processes by which we provide them. This requires an examination of how we do what we do and the underlying messages we may be providing young people by doing how we do what we do. Messages are often hidden, communicated in what we do even though they are not the messages we mean to communicate; often these messages reinforce the distance between adults and youth and reinscribe young people's ideas that their experiences don't actually matter very much. A common example is the use of garbage bags to hold their clothes when we move young people in

care to a new placement. Youth can read many messages into this action; few, if any, would be positive and most would reinforce their belief that they are not important. A youth shelter that closes its door at 11:00pm ensuring that young people who work evenings are likely unable to get there before being locked out communicates to youth that they are welcome only on the shelter's terms. The question becomes: are we communicating messages that tell these young people that they matter to us or are we inadvertently just reinforcing their exiting belief that they do not matter. To answer this question we have to take a serious look at how we interact with the young people in our care. We need to examine how our policies and practices may communicate a message the exact opposite of what we think we are doing. We need to look at what we are doing from their perspective, not just from our own.

One way to do that is there look understand the concept of mattering and then find ways to put them in practice. Getting back to an earlier point, we need to help young people counter their feelings of despair and invalidation by demonstrating that they matter to us. We need to help young people counteract the earlier and current messages that they are not important – in their families, in their schools, in their communities, in the world. There are three simple things we need to do (Charles & Alexander, 2014). We need to show them that they exist as valid and unique. We need to demonstrate that they are important to us. We need to give these two messages in a consistent way that demonstrates that we are reliable. Every interaction we have with a young person should show them that they matter to us. This message needs to be given time and time again until it is heard. The more invalidated they feel, the longer they may need to hear this message. As such and as stated, we need to look at how our policies and practices reinforce this message of mattering and how they may block the message. This is how we can create change for young people on a daily basis while will continue to advocate for larger system and societal transformation.

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