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Original Research Article

Before we document we listen

Annu Gaidhu

Abstract

Child and Youth Care (CYC) is grounded in relationships, presence, everyday life, and meeting young people where they are. Yet practitioners work within systems that rely on documentation for communication, continuity, safeguarding, accountability, and decision-making. Records are necessary, but they are not neutral: the selection and interpretation of information can shape how young people are understood across services and over time. When institutional documentation precedes meaningful relational engagement, professional narratives can take precedence over young people's lived realities and become enduring representations of their identities. Drawing on the author's professional experience reviewing more than 50 child welfare files in Ontario, Canada, including files concerning children in extended society care, alongside current frontline CYC practice, this article proposes Active Listening Before Documentation as a practice-informed ethical orientation. It asks practitioners, wherever circumstances permit, to encounter and listen to a young person, reflect on their own assumptions, and then translate the encounter into institutional language. Five principles are proposed to support this approach. The article does not present the framework as a new listening technique or an empirically validated intervention; rather, it makes explicit the ethical significance of sequencing relational engagement, reflection,

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and recording. Although grounded in Ontario, the issues explored are relevant wherever professionals create institutional records about young people's lives.

Introduction

Before we make a record of a young person, have we really listened to them?

Child and Youth Care (CYC) practitioners work within institutional environments where documentation is essential to communication, continuity of care, professional accountability, safeguarding, and decision-making. Records can preserve important information about young people's experiences and ensure that concerns are communicated across practitioners and services. However, documentation also involves decisions about what is considered significant, whose perspectives are included, and how experiences are translated into professional language. These decisions have consequences beyond the immediate purpose of recording. Research with care-experienced people has demonstrated that institutional records can influence how individuals understand their own histories and how they are perceived by subsequent professionals (Hoyle et al., 2019, 2020). Participants described the experience of being preceded into placements and educational settings by a 'paper self': an institutional representation that could shape how others understood and treated them before establishing a relationship with them.

This raises an important ethical question for CYC practice: when does the institutional record begin to stand in for the person it describes? Although records are necessary, the language used within them can establish enduring professional narratives through which subsequent behaviour, relationships, and decisions are interpreted. Descriptions such as 'defiant', 'manipulative', or 'non-compliant' may become detached from the circumstances in which they were initially recorded, while the young person's own explanations, relationships, and lived experiences remain less visible. The concern, therefore, is not simply whether documentation is accurate, but how institutional knowledge is produced, whose knowledge is privileged, and what consequences follow when professional interpretations become the dominant account of a young person's identity.

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These concerns can be examined through critical theory, which interrogates how power operates through institutions, social structures, historical arrangements, and dominant systems of knowledge. Critical consciousness refers more specifically to the developing capacity to recognize and question how these arrangements shape everyday experience and professional interpretation. In practice, this awareness can inform critical reflection and action: practitioners consider how their positionality, institutional authority, and assumptions influence what they notice, interpret, and ultimately document (Freire, 1970/2000; Watts et al., 2011; Igbu & Baccus, 2018). The relationship is therefore not simply conceptual. Critical theory offers a broader analysis of power; critical consciousness brings that analysis into professional awareness; and critical practice translates it into reflective and ethical action.

Drawing on the author's experience reviewing files of children in extended society care in Ontario, Canada (formerly designated Crown Wards), alongside current frontline CYC practice, this article proposes Active Listening Before Documentation as a practice-informed ethical orientation. The proposition is not that listening is a new professional skill, nor that documentation should be delayed when immediate safeguarding or statutory responsibilities require action. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of relational engagement and critical reflection before translating a young person's experience into institutional language, wherever circumstances permit. Five principles are proposed to support this approach, with particular attention to practitioner self-awareness, the distinction between observation and interpretation, the inclusion of young people's perspectives, and the institutional conditions that shape documentation.

Although grounded in Ontario's child welfare context, the ethical questions explored here extend beyond a single jurisdiction. Across child welfare and residential care systems, institutional records can serve necessary protective, communicative, and accountability functions while also becoming enduring representations through which young people are understood. The article considers how CYC practitioners might use active listening, critical consciousness, and relational practice to produce documentation that remains accountable to institutional responsibilities without losing sight of the person whose life is being recorded.



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What active listening before documentation adds

CYC does not need another reminder that listening matters. Listening, presence, relationship, and the use of Self constitute the foundation. The contribution here is temporal, ethical, and epistemological: listening should precede the institutional act of recording. Epistemologically, this approach foregrounds the sources and legitimacy of knowledge within child and youth care practice. It disrupts the assumption that institutional records are objective or neutral repositories of truth by emphasizing that what is known and subsequently documented about a young person is deeply shaped by the sequence and quality of relational engagement. Prioritizing listening as an epistemic act acknowledges that the meanings, experiences, and voices of young people must inform the construction of knowledge, rather than allowing institutional interpretations to dominate the narrative. In this way, Active Listening Before Documentation not only shapes ethical practice but also critically interrogates whose knowledge is privileged and how knowledge about young people is produced and sustained within organisational frameworks.

Documentation is not a neutral administrative afterthought. The language practitioners use shapes how a young person is understood across practitioners, meetings, assessments, placements, and decision-making processes. Active Listening Before Documentation creates a deliberate pause between encounter and institutional translation. Within that pause, the practitioner can listen to the young person’s meaning-making, examine their own assumptions, consider power, and distinguish observation from interpretation.

The proposition extends beyond the assertion that CYC practitioners should listen; rather, it emphasises that practitioners should listen before translating experiences into institutional language.

This connects active listening to critical consciousness. The practitioner is not only hearing the young person’s words but is also examining how power dynamics, institutional expectations, professional language, and their own positionality influence what is ultimately documented. Importantly, this practice does not require extensive conversation before each written note and does not advocate postponing documentation, as immediate reporting is legally or ethically mandated. However, implementing Active Listening Before Documentation is subject to important limitations: in situations where institutional protocols enforce

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strict timelines or urgent safety considerations, opportunities for intentional listening and reflection may be significantly reduced or unavailable. Therefore, while this approach advocates for practitioners to create - even briefly - a space for intentional listening and reflection whenever circumstances allow, there will be contexts in which such practice is not feasible or must be balanced against overriding procedural or legal obligations. Acknowledging these practical constraints clarifies that the potential for more ethically sensitive and critically aware documentation depends on the specific institutional and situational context in which practitioners are operating.

Institutional documentation and the production of knowledge

Child welfare systems require structures. Young people need clear standards, policies, assessments, accurate records, timelines, reviews, legal procedures, and accountability. The difficulty is that systems designed to create accountability can gradually become systems primarily concerned with measurability: What can be recorded? Demonstrated? Checked? Categorised? Reported?

A young person's life can become increasingly legible to an institution through documentation. In this article, the term technocratic practice describes processes through which complex human experiences are translated into standardised categories, procedures, measurements, and institutional knowledge. Such processes can support consistency and accountability, but they can also create an appearance of certainty: forms are completed, notes are entered, assessments are conducted, and plans are updated. The presence of documentation, however, does not necessarily indicate that a young person's experience has been understood.

Research on child protection records has shown how children’s perspectives can become marginalized within professional documentation and institutional discourse (Ogle et al., 2022). A young person can be highly visible in the system while remaining personally unseen. CYC has historically insisted that young people are not simply cases to be managed. The relational tradition stresses the everyday, the ordinary, mutuality, presence, and relationships developed through lived experience (Garfat et al., 2018). Active Listening Before Documentation builds on

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that tradition by asking: What happens when we deliberately place listening before the institutional act of recording?

Before writing: pause and ask, ‘What do I actually know?’ Distinguish carefully between observation—a factual account of what occurred—and interpretation, which involves attributing meaning or motive. For example, recording that ‘the youth left the room at 7:15 p.m’. is an objective observation, whereas stating ‘the youth was being manipulative’ imposes a subjective interpretation that may not reflect the young person’s actual intentions or experiences.

Ask: Did I hear the young person’s perspective? Reflect: What am I bringing into this interpretation? Document: What is necessary, accurate, respectful, and relevant?

Even when time is constrained, practitioners can apply this guideline by intentionally taking a brief pause—such as 30 seconds—to consider their own reactions, assumptions, and observations before documenting. For instance, this pause may involve silently asking, 'What did I actually observe?' and 'What meaning am I assigning to this behaviour?' Such deliberate self-awareness, even if brief, can enhance the accuracy and ethical quality of the resulting documentation.

Children in Extended Society Care: An Ontario Context of Extensive Documentation

Reviewing the files of Children in Extended Society Care brought the question of documentation into sharp focus.

Under Ontario’s Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017, Children in Extended Society Care (CES) replaced the earlier designation ‘Crown Ward’. These young people are subject to substantial state responsibility for care, custody, and decision-making, and consequently to extensive institutional documentation - placements, education, health, behaviour, planning, assessments, legal proceedings, and reviews.

The change in terminology matters. ‘Crown Ward’ located the young person in relation to the Crown; ‘child in extended society care’ identifies a child receiving care while avoiding language that reduces identity to wardship.

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Yet changing terminology does not automatically transform institutional relationships. A young person can be called by more respectful language while still being extensively observed, assessed, categorised, documented, and interpreted.

When the state assumes substantial responsibility, robust documentation and oversight are essential safeguards.

Documentation performs several overlapping functions. It can support communication between practitioners and agencies, continuity of care across placements and staff changes, safeguarding, planning, professional accountability, audits, complaints, and legal proceedings. It can also help identify patterns, gaps in service, and instances of institutional neglect. Although developed for social care practice in the UK rather than Ontario child welfare specifically, guidance from the Social Care Institute for Excellence emphasises that recording is integral to person-centred support and should be undertaken, wherever possible, in partnership with the person whose life is being recorded (SCIE, 2021). Research on care-experienced people's records further demonstrates that records can carry long-term significance for memory, identity, and how people are understood by others (Hoyle et al., 2020). These functions are not mutually exclusive: a record may protect a young person and support institutional accountability while also shaping the narrative through which that young person is subsequently known.

Documentation, however, is never simply a collection of facts. Someone decides what is observed, what is relevant, what language is used, how behaviour is distinguished from context, how an event is interpreted, and whose account becomes the official account. Those decisions matter.

When reviewing files, I encountered placement histories, court documents, assessments, educational information, case notes, behavioural descriptions, service referrals, plans of care, recommendations, incident reports, and reviews. In one anonymised file, for example, a series of incident reports described repeated conflicts in a group-home setting, an assessment characterised the young person as 'defiant', and educational records noted frequent absences. Taken together, these documents conveyed adult observations and professional conclusions but offered limited insight into the young person's own understanding of the events or the circumstances that may have shaped them. In other files, practitioners had included young people's



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explanations or reflections, either through attributed statements or careful summaries of their accounts. Such records offered a fuller account by placing professional observations alongside the perspectives of the young people concerned. This illustrates that records can support participation when practitioners actively seek, accurately represent, and contextualise young people's views.

After reviewing numerous pages, I often found myself asking: Who is this young person beyond the events and assessments documented in the file? What brings them joy? What matters to them? What would they want adults to understand? These questions drew attention to the difference between the volume of information held about a young person and the extent to which the record communicates their perspective. The absence of a young person's account does not establish that they were never asked; it does, however, limit what subsequent readers can know from the record itself.

These are questions about knowledge and power. A file is an institutional representation of a young person, not the young person. Subsequent professionals may encounter someone who already has an institutional story attached to them. Descriptions such as 'defiant', 'manipulative', 'non-compliant', 'difficult', 'high needs', or 'poor emotional regulation' can become durable when repeated across records and settings. Hoyle et al. (2019) describe how care-experienced people may be preceded by a 'paper self' that influences how they are received and treated. The implications are not limited to whether a label is factually defensible in the moment it is written; they also concern how the label travels, what context is lost, and whether the young person has an opportunity to understand, challenge, or add to the account.

This question cannot be separated from the colonial history of child welfare in Canada and Ontario. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and youth continue to experience profound and persistent overrepresentation in child welfare and out-of-home care. In Ontario in 2023, child welfare investigations involving First Nations children aged 0–15 occurred at approximately five times the rate of investigations involving non-Indigenous children (estimated rates of 218.35 versus 43.32 per 1,000 children; Crowe et al., 2025). Rates of out-of-home placement following substantiated investigations have been reported as substantially higher for First Nations children than for non-Indigenous children (Crowe et al.,

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2025). Nationally, Indigenous children account for a small proportion of the child population but more than half of children in foster care (Hahmann et al., 2024; Statistics Canada, 2022, 2024). Ontario's 2023 review of the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 also recognised that historic and present-day systemic racism and discrimination continue to shape involvement and outcomes within child and youth services (Government of Ontario, 2023).

These contemporary patterns sit within a longer continuum of state intervention that includes the Indian Residential School system, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing disparities in funding, service design, and decision-making authority (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Institutional records—including assessments, case notes, behavioural descriptions, placement histories, and permanency plans—have been part of the administrative and professional processes through which Indigenous children and families have been classified, assessed, and governed. Research examining Ontario's Assessment and Action Record has shown how documentation can shape the educational experiences and representation of Black youth in care (Kikulwe et al., 2021). For Indigenous children and youth, records must therefore be understood within the specific historical and contemporary context of colonial child welfare in Canada.

This does not mean that documentation is inherently colonial. Rather, records are produced within historical and institutional systems whose assumptions and power relations can influence what is made visible, how people are classified, and whose accounts are treated as authoritative. Critical consciousness requires practitioners to examine both the provenance and the function of institutional knowledge: which experiences are recorded, which are omitted, what categories are applied, and how these choices may reproduce or challenge established inequities. Where a young person's file contains years of accumulated professional interpretation, each new entry may reinforce an existing narrative unless practitioners actively consider context, seek the young person's perspective, and distinguish observation from inference. Documentation therefore carries an ethical responsibility to examine whether the official account perpetuates historical silences or makes room for a more complete representation.

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The broader argument—that institutional records can be used by state and institutional powers to classify, regulate, and marginalise people—is also evident in research from other jurisdictions. In Scotland, archival research commissioned by the Scottish Government has documented policies affecting Gypsy/Traveller communities, including the removal of children into institutional settings and the use of state practices to encourage cultural assimilation (Third Generation Project, 2025a, 2025b). These histories are distinct from the histories of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada. They should not be treated as equivalent. Rather, the international literature supports the more limited and general point that records and professional judgments can participate in systems of institutional control, while the form and consequences of that control must be understood within each community's particular history, culture, and political context.

The value of this international comparison is therefore not to collapse different histories into a single account, but to demonstrate that documentation can operate as more than a neutral repository of information. Across distinct settings, records may authorise decisions, preserve institutional interpretations, and shape how people are subsequently understood. The specific mechanisms, meanings, and harms differ according to the communities, legal systems, and histories involved. This distinction matters: a critical analysis must recognise broader patterns of institutional power without erasing the particularities of the people and places through which those patterns are expressed.

Active Listening Before Documentation assumes ethical significance when practitioners work with young people from communities historically subjected to institutional surveillance, classification, and removal. Practitioners must consider how cultural, social, political, and intersecting factors shape the meaning of an event, and whether institutional categories reproduce deficit-based interpretations. A young person's cultural knowledge and account should not be treated as optional context added after a professional conclusion has already been reached. Instead, practitioners should consider whose interpretation is privileged, whether the young person has had a meaningful opportunity to contribute, and how their perspective can be represented accurately and respectfully within the record.

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Active listening is not passive listening

Active listening is sometimes reduced to communication skills such as maintaining attention, reflecting feelings, and asking questions. These skills matter, but listening in CYC involves more than improving the flow of conversation. Rogers' (1957) person-centred account emphasises empathic understanding of another person's internal frame of reference and communicating that understanding in a relationship. In practice with young people, this requires curiosity, attention, and a willingness to check whether the practitioner's understanding is accurate rather than assuming that behaviour speaks for itself. A young person slamming a door may be labelled oppositional—or may be overwhelmed. Refusal to participate may be labelled non-compliant—or may reflect feeling unsafe. Withdrawal may be described as disengagement—or may be a strategy for self-protection. Behaviour does not automatically reveal its meaning. The young person is also a knower of their own experience; listening involves taking that knowledge seriously.

Critical consciousness: Listening to what lies beneath the behaviour

Critical theory provides a broad orientation for examining how power operates through institutions, social structures, historical arrangements, and dominant systems of knowledge. Freire's (1970/2000) concept of critical consciousness brings this analysis into the process through which people learn to recognise and question the conditions shaping their experiences, and to connect reflection with action. In CYC, this means moving from 'What is this young person doing?' to 'What is happening to and around this young person?' and further to 'What assumptions am I bringing to my interpretation?' Critical consciousness is therefore not interchangeable with critical theory: it is one way that a critical analysis can become part of individual and collective awareness and inform practice.

Watts, Diemer, and Voight (2011) discuss critical consciousness through critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. For practitioners, critical reflection begins with questions such as: Why am I interpreting this behaviour this way? Would I interpret it differently if this young person had a different social location? What assumptions about 'good behaviour' am I carrying? Who has the power to define what happened, and whose interpretation becomes official? Critical consciousness changes

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how we listen: we attend to context, power, meaning, history, and voice. Relational practice can become disconnected from structural analysis; Igbu and Baccus (2018) argue for a relational praxis that remains critically aware of history, power, and broader social conditions. Active Listening Before Documentation attempts to make this awareness practical by bringing critical reflection into the moment before an encounter is translated into an institutional record.

The practitioner is also in the room

Listening is embodied. Before I speak, my assumptions, professional authority, previous experiences, emotions, discomfort, desire to fix, fear, and fatigue are already present. Active Listening Before Documentation therefore requires awareness of the Self. Fewster (1990) emphasises practitioner self-awareness and the use of Self within relationship, while the relational CYC tradition positions the practitioner as an active participant rather than a detached observer (Garfat et al., 2018). Research with child protection workers suggests that stress responses can influence aspects of risk assessment and professional judgement (LeBlanc et al., 2012), while research on compassion fatigue has identified potential effects on how social workers perceive and make decisions about child welfare cases (Denne et al., 2019). What I write about a young person may therefore reflect not only what occurred but also the conditions under which I encountered them. Frustration may draw attention to defiance; fear may heighten attention to risk; hurry may narrow attention to compliance; curiosity may open space to notice communication. These possibilities do not invalidate professional judgement, but they make reflexive scrutiny necessary.

Self-knowledge becomes an ethical necessity. Before translating an encounter into institutional language, the practitioner must ask: Am I documenting what occurred, or my reaction to what occurred? What did I actually observe? What meaning have I assigned? Have I mistaken my discomfort for the young person’s risk? Have I confused my need for order with the young person’s need for control?

Supervision provides an important organisational space for this scrutiny. Ontario's Child Protection Standards identify supervision as fundamental to service quality and decision-making, including helping workers examine how personal values, beliefs, and life experiences may affect their interactions and objectivity (Government of Ontario, 2016). Research on

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clinical supervision in Ontario child welfare also highlights the relationship between supervisory practice, organisational context, and the support available to frontline workers (Dill & Bogo, 2009). Supervision should therefore do more than check whether documentation is complete; it should support critical thinking about how observations, interpretations, power, and the young person's perspective have shaped the record.

These questions create a pause between reaction and interpretation. Once recorded, an unexamined interpretation can acquire professional authority. A feeling can become an assessment; an assumption can become a behavioural description; a moment can become a narrative that travels.

Presence is embodied. Posture, pace, facial expression, distance, breathing, willingness to remain - or impatience, distraction, the hand reaching for the computer - all communicate. The capacity to remain present without immediately producing something is itself a sophisticated professional practice.

Trauma-informed listening

Trauma-informed approaches emphasise safety, trust, collaboration, empowerment, voice, and choice while seeking to prevent retraumatisation (SAMHSA, 2014). If a young person has repeatedly experienced adults extracting information, interpreting it, and making decisions about their lives, another rapid professional interview may feel like institutional extraction rather than support. Trauma-informed listening attends to pace, explanation, and the right not to answer.

Trauma-informed listening therefore attends to several important elements: the value that silence can hold as a form of communication, the need to distinguish between a young person’s refusal to engage and acts of self-protection, the importance of providing opportunities for the young person to correct or clarify practitioners’ interpretations, and mindful consideration of how the documentation of their words may be transmitted and used by others.

Meditation and the possibility of doing nothing

Periods of stillness with young people need not become another intervention, technique, or checkbox. In a system that constantly demands observable outcomes, measurable progress, and documented

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activity, the simple act of being present without agenda can itself be radical.

Can we be here? Sit quietly. Notice the breath, the feet on the floor, the sounds in the room, the light through the window. That ‘nothing’ can be deeply meaningful.

The young person does not have to disclose, regulate on command, demonstrate insight, or perform wellness. They can exist in the company of another human being. For many young people whose lives have been shaped by constant assessment, intervention, and recording, this kind of unhurried presence may be unfamiliar—and therefore powerful.

Concrete in-the-moment examples for residential practitioners

- After a difficult evening, instead of immediately opening the electronic record or moving to the next task, sit with the young person in the common area for three to five minutes in shared silence. No questions, no how are you feeling', no agenda. Occupy the same space. Later, when you do write the note, the quality of what you record is more likely to reflect presence rather than residual tension or institutional urgency.

When a young person is withdrawn or dysregulated, and conversation feels impossible, offer parallel presence: sit nearby while they draw, listen to music, or stare out the window. Your stillness communicates ‘I can be with you without needing something from you’. This small act of non-demanding companionship can later inform documentation that distinguishes observation (‘sat quietly in the lounge for 20 minutes’) from interpretation (‘refused to engage’).

These moments of deliberate non-intervention support the practice of Active Listening Before Documentation. By creating space in which the young person is not required to produce content for the record, the practitioner is better positioned to notice what is actually present - rather than what the system expects to be recorded. In this way, stillness becomes both an ethical stance and a practical preparation for more accurate, less reactive documentation.

Practice-informed approach and limitations

This article is a reflective, practice-informed conceptual contribution drawing on the author's professional experience in a formal child welfare file-review role and frontline Child and Youth Care practice. The file-

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review experience involved more than 50 child welfare files, including files concerning children in extended society care, and provided opportunities to consider how institutional records accumulate observations, assessments, decisions, and interpretations over time. Current frontline practice informs the article's attention to the relational encounters through which young people's experiences are understood and documented. These professional experiences provide the basis for reflection and conceptual development; they are not presented as a systematically collected research dataset.

The article does not report a formal empirical study. It did not involve recruitment of research participants, a research interview protocol, systematic coding, or an attempt to establish representative findings. The examples are illustrative reflections on professional practice and should not be read as evidence of prevalence or as claims about the experiences of all young people in care. To protect confidentiality and avoid attributing unverified wording, the article does not reproduce direct quotations recalled from practice. Instead, it discusses the broader questions and limitations that emerged from reviewing records. The author's professional standpoint is both a strength and a limitation: experience across file review and frontline practice offers insight into institutional and relational perspectives, while also requiring ongoing reflexivity about memory, interpretation, positionality, and the limits of what can be inferred from records.

Five principles of active listening before documentation: Practical application and implications

To facilitate practical implementation for both practitioners and policymakers, the five principles of Active Listening Before Documentation are summarised below as a set of visual, actionable recommendations mapped across key domains. Concrete in-the-moment examples are included so that residential practitioners can apply the principles immediately, even under time pressure.

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Principle	Guiding Question	Practice
1. Encounter before interpretation	What is happening for this young person?	Meet the young person before deciding what their behaviour means. Where possible, engage through conversation, presence, or shared activity before reaching a conclusion.
2. Listen before labelling	Have I heard the young person's perspective?	Seek the young person's understanding before applying behavioural or professional labels. Distinguish what the young person communicated from what you have interpreted.
3. Notice the Self before intervening	Am I documenting the young person or my reaction?	Pause briefly to notice your own emotions, assumptions, and physical responses. Distinguish your reaction from what you actually observed.
4. Context before conclusion	What else might be happening here?	Consider relationships, history, trauma, environment, culture, power, and structural conditions before reaching conclusions about behaviour.
5. Listen before writing	Has the young person had an opportunity to be heard?	Whenever possible, make space for the young person's perspective before completing the institutional record. Document what was observed, what was communicated, and what remains unknown.

Table 1: Five Principles of Active Listening Before Documentation

A brief pause

Active Listening Before Documentation does not require lengthy conversations before every case note. In situations where safety or statutory reporting obligations demand immediate action, extended

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reflection may not be possible. Even then, a brief pause can help preserve the distinction between observation and interpretation:

- What did I actually observe?
- What meaning am I assigning to it?
- What has the young person communicated?

This framework is offered as an ethical orientation rather than a rigid sequence. The principles invite practitioners to create space, whenever circumstances allow, between the relational encounter and the institutional act of recording.

Quick operational tip

Even under time pressure, a 20–30 second internal pause - 'What did I actually observe? What meaning am I assigning? Have I heard the young person's view? - an improve the quality of the note that follows. This pause aligns with an understanding of Self as a continually evolving way of being rather than a fixed professional instrument (Gaidhu, 2022).

Practising within institutional constraints

Residential and child welfare practitioners operate within institutional constraints, including high caseloads, short shifts, electronic record-keeping systems, mandatory reporting requirements, and organisational cultures that privilege particular forms of documentation. These pressures can make immediate recording unavoidable and reduce the time and cognitive space available for listening and reflection. They should not, however, be treated solely as individual practitioner shortcomings. Organisational responsibility includes establishing workable expectations, providing accessible and reflective supervision, supporting staff development, and designing recording systems that allow practitioners to distinguish observation from interpretation and to include young people's perspectives. Ontario's Child Protection Standards identify supervision as fundamental to the quality of child protection service and require supervisory attention to case analysis, worker judgement, and the accuracy and quality of documentation (Government of Ontario, 2016). Ontario research on clinical supervision demonstrates that supervisory practice is shaped by organisational context and the conditions in which supervisors and workers operate (Dill & Bogo, 2009). The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies' practice model likewise emphasises clinical and supportive supervision, critical thinking, professional

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judgement, and culturally appropriate service delivery (OACAS, 2011). These responsibilities suggest practical responses: protected opportunities for reflective supervision, peer consultation, record templates that prompt practitioners to identify the source of information and distinguish fact from inference, and processes through which young people can review or contribute to records where appropriate. Such measures cannot remove structural constraints, but they can make ethical and relational documentation an organisational responsibility rather than an expectation placed on individual practitioners alone.

From Crown Ward reviewer to frontline CYW

Transitioning between institutional review and frontline practice has rendered this question deeply personal and directly connected to the article's central argument regarding the risks of institutional narratives overshadowing individual experience. While the file inquires, 'What do we know about this young person?' the relationship instead asks, 'Who is this young person?' The critical practitioner must consider both perspectives to prevent reducing the individual to a case file. For example, in my current work with a young person who might otherwise be defined exclusively by their institutional record, extended listening enables me to observe attributes that are often absent from documentation: humour, curiosity, preferences, contradictions, strengths, vulnerability, resistance, and capacity for connection. This experiential evidence supports the main contention that recognising the young person as an individual—rather than merely an object of documentation—not only enriches understanding but also constitutes a radical act within technocratic systems that tend to prioritize procedural knowledge over relational encounter.

Relational Praxis

Active Listening Before Documentation is relational praxis—the relationship between reflection and action (Freire, 1970/2000). Critical reflection without action remains observation; action without reflection can reproduce the conditions we intend to challenge. The pause between experience and institutional translation creates space for that praxis. Once an interpretation enters the record, it can influence other practitioners, shape meetings, affect placement decisions, and contribute to a young person's institutional identity.

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We cannot wait for the system to change.

Systemic problems cannot be solved simply by individual compassion. Young people need systemic reform, structural accountability, and attention to institutional racism, colonialism, poverty, inequity, resources, organisational culture, and power. Critical consciousness prevents us from individualising systemic problems. At the same time, waiting for the entire system to change before changing how we practice is also a danger. We can do both: challenge systems and change our encounters within them; advocate for structural reform and listen differently; critique documentation systems and document more thoughtfully.

The system may define the young person as a case; we can choose to encounter the person. The system may require a note; we can listen before writing it.

Conclusion: Before we write about them, we listen to them

Although the examples emerge from Ontario's context, Active Listening Before Documentation is not dependent on any legal category or jurisdiction. Wherever practitioners translate young people's lives into institutional language, the ethical question remains: Has the person been encountered before the experience has been recorded?

In summary, the central argument advanced in this article is that centring Active Listening Before Documentation can safeguard the individuality and lived experiences of young people within systems that might otherwise prioritise institutional knowledge over relational understanding. By foregrounding relational encounters before institutional record-keeping, practitioners not only help ensure that documentation more accurately reflects the young person's perspective but also resist reducing individuals to mere cases within administrative systems.

The institution may possess a file, but the young person possesses a life. While the file may contain years of professional interpretation, the young person deserves to be encountered in the present. Active Listening Before Documentation is a modest proposal. Nevertheless, systems are experienced through small moments: a young person sitting across from a practitioner, a question, a pause, a reaction, a choice, a silence, or a note written afterward. Practitioners retain agency in the moment of

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encounter. Thoughtful application of active listening not only enhances individual relational practice but also has implications for policy and systemic reform. Policymakers should consider incorporating opportunities for relational engagement within documentation requirements, and organizations should prioritise training that emphasises ethical and reflective practice.

Furthermore, future research should examine how implementing Active Listening Before Documentation influences outcomes for young people, including their sense of agency, record accuracy, and perceptions of being understood. In summary, prioritising Active Listening Before Documentation offers a pathway to more ethical, accurate, and person-centred records and relationships in child and youth care practice. In the interim, practitioners can choose whether to rush, listen, question their interpretations, make space for the young person's knowledge, and determine whether their documentation will perpetuate an existing narrative or offer a more nuanced understanding of the individual.

Before we document, we listen. Before we interpret, we become curious. Before we intervene, we examine ourselves. Before we see the case, we see the person.

This is not a departure from professional practice, but rather a reaffirmation of its most fundamental relational principles: centring the lived experience of the young person, prioritising authentic engagement, and ensuring that documentation arises from ethically grounded encounters. In this way, Active Listening Before Documentation represents a return to the core conceptual and ethical commitments that define Child and Youth Care practice.

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About the author

Annu Gaidhu is a Child and Youth Care practitioner based in Ontario, Canada, with experience reviewing the institutional files of children in Extended Society Care (formerly Crown Wards) and current frontline work supporting young people in everyday life-space settings. Her practice and scholarship examine the tensions between relational engagement and technocratic documentation in child welfare systems. Drawing on critical consciousness, trauma-informed approaches, and the relational traditions of Child and Youth Care, she advocates for *Active Listening Before Documentation* as an ethical and epistemological practice that centres young people's voices, resists institutional narratives, and preserves practitioner agency. Her work highlights the importance of presence, self-awareness, and epistemic humility in the face of systemic pressures.

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