

The right to be heard, but is anyone listening?

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Report from the International Child & Youth Care Conference, June 20-24, 1994, Milwaukee, USA

The Conference

About 600 delegates from all over the world attended this international child and youth care conference under the combined sponsorship of FICE (the International Federation of Educative Communities) an organisation of European origins, and the North American Association of Child and Youth Care Workers. Five Australians represent our country. At a memorable opening ceremony, each country's delegation stood and greeted the assembled masses in their own language. A moving moment was when the South African contingent were greeted with a spontaneous standing ovation. It was also wonderful to see a number of Eastern block countries well-represented finally, and one sole Romanian. FICE has consultative status with UNESCO, and hence, has access to the professional simultaneous interpreting services of the United Nations. This enabled the annual general meeting to be conducted simultaneously in English, French and German assisted by headphones for each participant or observer.

FICE - Australia?

Australia has not yet taken its place in this international network of residential child care practitioners and researchers. The establishment of a national peak body for child welfare in Australia may enable this affiliation to take place.

The Workshops

A frustration of the Conference was the large number (up to 30) of workshops by presenters from all over the world, which were run simultaneously.

British research

I attended three workshops run by English presenters and which were all of a high standard. Two grappled with the issue of the intangible, yet crucial, definitions of quality in residential child care, now almost an obsession in the UK following what is beginning to seem like an interminable parade of public scandals and inquiries. Another was on recent research findings in the UK, and lived up to the generally high standard of British child welfare research which seems to be made possible by the fairly solid ongoing financial support from the Department of Health.

The right to be heard, but is anyone listening?

This was the title of the fourth workshop, and it was a highlight of the conference. This workshop was jointly presented by three representatives from the National Youth in Care Network (Canada) (NAYPIC), together with one young person who had been active in the British National Association of Young People in Care (NAYPIC) - which unfortunately has now folded.

This was definitely a session for workers to sit back, listen carefully and examine their own preconceptions. It may not be possible for workers to agree with everything that was said, nor would the speakers necessarily expect this; what they did do was to show us how, despite our best intentions, we often fail to listen carefully, and to take seriously the feelings and opinions of the young people with whom we work - because we think we know better what they need. It was a radical shake-up; it was also an impressive

report of the persistence of these young people in their work, in the face of the resistance they experienced.

The speakers commenced by outlining the beginnings of the Canadian Youth in and From Care Network at the 1985 First International Child & Youth Care Conference in Vancouver.

They saw themselves as having been invited as an after-thought, and felt that they ended up being showpieces to whom lipservice was paid. Nevertheless, they bonded together following this conference and formed the Canadian Young People in Care Network. One of their first aims was to get together, at least once a year, young people in and from care from all over the country.

In the early stages, they found their auspicing agency very controlling, and decided to split from them. They felt they were criticised for the split and that people felt they wouldn't make it on their own. A year later, the auspicing body folded, while the Network continued to function!

Canadian Youth In & From Care Network

Achievements

- an annual conference of young people in and from care in Canada;
- applying for non-profit status - achieved in 1991;
- publication of three books by members:

To be on our own with no direction from home, by Brian Raychaba, an ex-ward (1988). This book ends with 20 recommendations for independent living programs and is being used in social work classes across the country.

Pain, lots of pain by Brian Raychaba (1993) – about family violence and abuse in the lives of young people in care.

Thursday's child, by Cathy Ryverse (1990) – a review of the effects of child poverty.

- A review of the Ontario assistance program for adolescents.
- A presentation to the Legislature regarding a Bill dealing with allegations of sexual abuse, which led to a number of amendments to the Bill, including the permissibility of videotape testimony, the disallowing of the previous sexual history of the victim as evidence, and the admission of lay people to Hearings (1987).
- An HIV/AIDS education program for young people in care by the Network, using street (kids') language.

Barriers

The young people spoke of examples of resistance from residential and social work staff which they felt they had received along the way.

- Staff kept raising confidentiality as a barrier to speaking out, even anonymously, and despite their perception that everyone in the system had known all the young people's life histories.
- Staff sometimes did not tell the young people in their homes of a planned visit by the Youth in Care Network, resulting in poor attendance at meetings.
- A no-names tape of young people's views, which was given to staff for safekeeping, was erased.
- The HIV/AIDS education program for young people in care, which is run without staff present, has, at times, been sabotaged by staff who felt uncomfortable with the young people's methods.
- The adult advisory committee started to give unasked-for advice, rather than putting alternatives.
- Funders wanted to dictate the rules of the Network.

On adults

About adults they said:

- they want to hear particular things
- they find it hard to let go when they have offered help in getting going;
- they want to control.

On young people

About themselves they said:

- kids want immediate results, many don't come back;
- it's hard to get a group going and keep it going;
- you need a couple of people in the group with a lot of persistence to carry things through;
- it's our group
- we may need to fall flat on our faces at times, we don't need to be rescued;
- we do need adults to help us get going, but not to control.

Messages

An audience participant asked the presenters what their message was to us. Here are their responses:

- take us seriously;
- Inform us about everything that's going on;
- plan our futures with us, not behind our backs;
- treat every child as an individual;
- help them grow up to be good citizens;
- don't put them down;
- staff are always treating the symptom – the behaviours and not the root cause;
- the causes of our behaviours are usually needs – not just general deprivation;
- alone, hungry, cold, tired, waiting – this is often how I felt.

A bigger message

This was the message from one young person with a lot of experience of residential care:

Hold on to your seats while I tell you about your own needs. Sometimes staff are insecure and needy, and need to be there to be needed and to find meaning for themselves. You need to be able to acknowledge your own needs, and to know when your work with us is serving your needs. We need you to be there for our needs. I'm a counsellor now and I have to recognise when I'm getting a benefit, not the kids. That's when I need counselling. Sometimes staff get burnt out and need time out.

Agencies have their own definitions of success which they expect every kid to fit into. Most agencies see success regarding education. Not all kids will fit into this definitions of success. A lot of kids will throw in the towel when they feel that they don't fit into the agency's definition of success.

Success may be that a young woman has a baby at sixteen and can raise it herself.

Stop giving them lip service. Don't do it to them. If your hands are tied, tell them. Communicate with them.

'What do they want?'

There will always be tensions when young people speak out in criticism of their carers. We social workers and caregivers often think we know what is best for kids. Now we must learn to listen to what they tell us; and it's hard when what they might tell us is that sometimes we are wrong. We have encouraged them to speak out, but maybe we only want them to say what we want to hear?

Postscripts

From the UK

NAYPIC (The National Association of Young People in Care) has been a very influential and active force in effecting change in child welfare in the UK. Recently it folded, but other regional groups are still active. Voices from Care exists as a Welsh national organisation. The Who Cares Trust continues to publish a magazine with contributions from young people across the UK.

Young people in and from care have been participating in the selection of staff in a range of child welfare services, including residential care, in different parts of England. More information can be obtained from the author who is researching the selection and support of residential child care staff.

From Canada

Books, newsletters and a videotape are available from the Canadian Youth in Care Network. Contact the author for details.

From Australia

The first conference of the newly-formed Australian National Association of Young People in Care (AAYPIC) was held in Sydney from 9-11 September 1994. Ms Marlene McDonald, from the Canadian Youth in Care Network, was the special international guest at this conference, and provided the young people with an international perspective on their issues, and on possibilities for change. On 12 September, the young people made a sensational presentation to the National Conference of the Association of Child Welfare Agencies in Sydney, *Families with children – rebuilding the partnership*. Audiotapes of this presentation, and a video of the young people's conference, are available from the National Co-ordinator of AAYPIC, Jan Owen (tel. & fax 07 217 1362).