

Creating a space for strangers

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Introduction

For those of you fortunate enough to have experienced a SIRCC annual conference then you will also know that it is an opportunity for so much more than experiential workshops and guest speakers. It is an opportunity for people from all across the residential child care sector to come together, share their knowledge and practice and support each other on the journey.

As authors of this paper, we are both students at Glasgow School of Social Work, and we are undertaking our degree in social work under the residential pathway which is funded by SIRCC. As individuals we are opposites in so many ways. While one of us is focused and well organised, the other is an 'Olympic procrastinator' who tends to wander off on a tangent. We have different backgrounds. One of us returned to learning after having spent time raising her family and working in administration in a busy social work department. The other returned to learning having spent the majority of the last nine years working directly with vulnerable young people. While we differ in so many ways we realised that the conference was an important experience and that we had shared in something that is either the cause or effect of a feeling emerging from the residential child care workforce. We hope by trying to capture our experiences that our voices will resonate with everyone working with our children and young people. We also hope to convey the role that the conference played in creating a space for two strangers who felt welcomed and included by the end of the experience.

Kathleen's view

From my viewpoint, the SIRCC conference felt like a marathon, as there was so much activity packed into the days. On a surface level it was a great opportunity for professional development and there were many choices to suit all sectors within residential child care. The balance in presenting styles was important in keeping weary heads engaged. There was a great sense of welcome from everyone that I met at the conference, and there was an even greater sense of enthusiasm about the social work degree and the residential child care pathway.

Many of the people I met had completed and enjoyed their HNC in Social Care and were looking for the next step. I think I convinced them that the degree may be a good option.

In all of my interactions with other front line workers there was a great sense of 'where next', 'we want to take ownership' and 'keep raising the bar'. The launch of the RCCWA (Residential Child Care Workers Association) was met with thunderous applause. It was so loud that someone standing outside would have thought that there was double the number of people inside the auditorium. During the SIRCC conference it no longer felt that the glass was half full or half empty; it was bubbling over with enthusiasm, dedication, vision and pride.

Perhaps this year it was the theme of reflections and visions and the idea that we were looking back as well as looking forward that created the amazing atmosphere. For me the most important development throughout those days was a stronger sense of identity and purpose. I have been trying since the conference to find something tangible to help me explain what I mean by that. I found various journals relating mainly to the nursing profession and their search for a professional identity and that was the closest I came. There does not appear to be much literature yet about the residential child care workforce and its own identity and vision for the future. Could this be an area for future research?

Personally, the conference reaffirmed my focus for the future in continuing to work within residential child care. Up until the conference, I had a rather naïve view that social work and residential child care were one and the same. I thought that there were no divisions or barriers and that as long as the young person was at the centre, the job title was irrelevant. While this is still my hope, I also think that residential child care workers are now recognising the need to have our own distinct identity and have a greater influence on decisions which affect us. It is a time to create balance within residential child care. We have gone through a process of professionalisation with registration and qualification standards being set. However, it is important that while we aim higher and develop as a workforce that we never lose those roots of which we should be so proud.

I do not think that this sentiment is solely a Scottish one as it is a theme which has been emerging through various web forums including www.residentialchildcarenetwork.com (which I would highly recommend). In a discussion on that forum entitled 'What am I doing here?' (i.e. why do I work in residential child care?), a practitioner from British Columbia in Canada highlighted our need to reflect within our working roles.

Reflecting... sparks the recognition of not only where we are today but also where we have come from, how we have grown and the journey that takes place both within and on the outside (Lalonde, 2010).

Perhaps that is the loudest drum beating for me after the conference. That the journey throughout the conference while engaging our minds reminded us also that we put our hearts into what we do and that we are not travelling alone. I hope that the RCCWA will capture the mood of the conference and take it further.

Kirsty's view

During my first year at university, as I was a student on the social work degree (residential child care pathway) at the Glasgow School of Social Work, I got the opportunity to attend the SIRCC conference. On 7th June 2010, I arrived at the Macdonald Hotel in Aviemore, where the conference entitled Building on Success: Reflections and Visions was being held. I have to say that I was petrified as I was unsure about what I had let myself in for. As a mature student with two young children, I had made a decision to change to a career where I could make some kind of difference to the lives of children and young people. However the decision did not come lightly, as I had to give up a very good job with North Lanarkshire Council, where I had worked for 11 years, and also give up the very nice salary that went with it. So here I was at the conference. Would I have to talk, discuss or participate and if so how could I actually do that? I had no experience of conferences. I kept thinking that here were hundreds of other delegates, professionals, experts and leading authorities within the residential child care field who would know everything. At this point I was really questioning my decision to enter into the world of residential child care. I was wondering if this was really what I wanted to do, and I questioned whether or not I even wanted to progress further with my degree. Having just come through my first year of university with all its ups, downs, assignments, presentations, exams, pressure, highs and lows, I asked myself did I really want to continue on this path and carry on for another three years. Then Kate Cairns spoke. Kate Cairns worked as a trainer consultant for BAAF and she now has her own training agency. She and her husband have three birth children as well as 12 foster children. She has written books on working with traumatised children (Cairns, 2004; 2006) as well as devising a range of training programmes (www.akamas.co.uk). She was inspirational and after her keynote speech I thought, 'I can do this!'

From this point on, the conference started to unfold and I experienced so many thoughts, feelings, ideas, emotions and opinions. Before attending the conference I had to choose which workshops and parallel sessions I wished to attend. I chose the ones which could reinforce my learning from my first

year at university, as well as those which held a special interest for me. The confidence building this provided for me was immense. Not only was I able to explore the theories which I had learned from my first year but also I was able to challenge speakers (albeit only in my head!) based on research which I had come across in my studies.

The knowledge building, information gathering and learning never stopped throughout the full three days. For me, being a novice within the field, the experience was mind-blowing. Being introduced to all the numerous statutory, voluntary and private organisations that provide residential child care opened up a whole new world for me which I never even knew existed. Being provided with the names of the leading researchers in their fields and the most pertinent reports relative to residential child care, was phenomenal, not only as a university student who is expected to do the majority of their research themselves, but also as a residential child care practitioner wanting to improve her practice. In particular, the importance of theories on resilience, attachment and early child development were emphasised. These were theories I knew nothing about before I started university, but which are fundamental within the residential child care setting. It was great to have these theories reinforced.

As well as access to the most up-to-date research that was going on, there was the networking. I learned a vast amount of new terminology, the meaning of which residential child care practitioners and people in social care take for granted. I was also lucky enough to meet a number of people who have invited me to the premises where they work to observe, interact and learn. It was a tremendous opportunity for someone with no experience.

However it was the afternoon on day two when I was blown away. I had such an intense feeling that I had really identified what I wanted to do with my life and my degree. It was an epiphany. A number of young people had given a presentation about reflection and visions from their lives. They exhibited photographs which they had taken and explained the meaning behind them. It was Fraser and his picture which affected me the most. I can vividly remember each one, but Fraser in particular, with his picture of a door and a bin bag of his clothes, affected me most deeply. He explained what this actually meant to him and how worthless and futile he had felt at the time. It was at this point I realised that I was in the right place, at the right time, doing the right degree.

I think what I am trying to say with this piece is how important something like the SIRCC conference is. If you are doing your degree and you have little or no residential child care or social care experience, or are working within the field, but with no real focus or goal, or if you are someone toying with the idea of developing their career further, then the conference is invaluable. To come from the background from which I have come, having the opportunity to attend

this event has had a profound effect on both my personal and professional identity. I now no longer see my degree as a professional qualification, but a calling. I am more determined than ever to see it through and progress to a career in residential child care.

In conclusion, here are some of the most memorable thoughts and impressions that I have been left with:

- Inspiring – the young people from the residential homes;
- Exhausting – the sheer volume of information learned;
- Exhilarating – finding my vocation in life;
- Astounding – the magnitude of my feelings;
- Amazing – being able to hold my own at the world café, especially as having no care experience.

References

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