

Childhoods: Experiencing an International Conference

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The University of Oslo in Norway hosted an international conference from 29th June – 3rd July this year. The title of the conference was *Childhoods: Children and Youth in Emerging and Transforming Societies*. The conference was organised by the University of Oslo, Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), the Norwegian Centre for Child Research and Childwatch International Research Network. The conference itself took place at the Blindern campus of the university during four gloriously warm, summer days. Irene Stevens, Laura Steckley and Andy Kendrick represented the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care (SIRCC) and between them presented four papers at the conference. Irene presented a paper on child protection and risk in care which looked at how health and safety policies in units can restrict activities for young people, and the need to develop appropriate risk assessment processes. Laura and Andy presented a paper on the experiences of children and young people and residential workers of physical restraint. Andy also presented papers on social exclusion and social inclusion in residential child care and on residential work with sexually aggressive young men.

The purpose of the conference was to view modern childhood, children and young people from a global perspective and provide an opportunity to learn from research across a range of disciplines and from a large number of countries and regions. The international focus is particularly crucial in the current climate, where local and global issues are intertwined.

The conference was attended by around 1,000 participants from over 50 countries. Conference participants could attend sessions in 28 thematic streams covering a wide range of issues affecting children and young people. Some streams focused on particularly troubling topics: *Children and trafficking; Child labour; Children and violence; Consequences of AIDS; Children, youth, poverty and marginalisation*. Other streams focused on more general topics of children's engagement with society: *Welfare – money, time and space; Culture, communication and textuality; Children and art; Religion and spirituality of children; Children's perspective on citizenship and nation building*. Another set of themes addressed policy and research: *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – Implementation of the*

principles of the convention; CRC in developmental practice; Changing perspectives in child and childhood research; Bridging the gap between research, policy and practice. The thematic streams constituted the main part of the programme with individual keynote speakers, as well as thematic paper presentations and workshops. There were also plenary presentations to the whole conference.

The thematic stream which most interested Laura, Andy and Irene was *Caring for separated children and youth*. The coordinators for this stream were Elisabeth Backe-Hansen, senior researcher at Norwegian Social Research (NOVA) and Robbie Gilligan, Director of the Children's Research Centre at Trinity College, Dublin. The main objective for this stream was to examine the challenges of caring for separated children. The child's separation from home could be caused by public intervention, war or other disasters. The aim was to develop 'best practices' in different aspects of the work of caring for separated children. Participants in this stream presented results from research, and practice from around the world. The presentations explored issues which affected separated children; from those in state residential care and foster care, to those children who are separated from their families because of war or disease. A particular emphasis was given to children and young people's experiences of being in care and out-of-home care as we move into the new century. However, Laura, Andy and Irene also attended sessions in the other streams as they seemed relevant to the work of SIRCC. For example, some of the sessions on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights for the Child were highly relevant because they had implications for working in residential child care.

The plenary speakers were particularly interesting, as they came from a wide range of disciplines and had many fascinating points to make about modern childhood. Barbara Rogoff is the Professor of Psychology at the University of California and she spoke about child development in different cultures. Her presentation was thought-provoking because it highlighted different cultural approaches to helping children learn. Her main message was that by comparing practices in other cultures to those evident in the West, we can see that they do a much better job of preparing their children for life as problem-solving adults. David Buckingham, Professor of Education at the University of London, gave an excellent presentation of how children and young people are represented in the media. He discussed the role of children and young people as consumers and highlighted that children and young people are real actors in their environment, not just passive recipients of care. Suniya Luthar, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University in New York, discussed resilience. The benefits of taking a resilience-based approach were emphasised and this topic came up repeatedly in workshop sessions and small group discussions. She stressed the importance of relating resilience theory to

practice situations. Martha Santo Pais is Director of the UNICEF Innocenti centre for child research in Florence and she spoke tellingly about the promotion of children's rights.

Although it could be argued that these were not specifically about residential care, they had great relevance to our field. For example, all good residential child care workers should know about the importance of child development and resilience, and which residential worker in Scotland has not had the conversation about designer labels and clothing with the teenagers in their care?

The conference also had a range of artistic and cultural displays. Beautiful giant masks were dotted around the campus of the university. An exhibition entitled *C for Courage* included works of art which helped the viewer to focus on how children and young people respond to the often immense challenges presented to them in the world. There were also some excellent presentations by young people on issues around children's rights. It was heartening to see that young people feel passionately about issues affecting them, no matter what part of the world they are from.

Irene's favourite presentation was by Marie Sallnas from the University of Stockholm. This presentation described an in-depth study of two residential homes. The studies were carried out using participant observation techniques. She highlighted how residential homes are often promoted as being home-like environments, but that they are not experienced in this way, either by staff or by the children who live there. Irene found the richness of the descriptions of residential care particularly useful and felt that there should be more studies like this.

Laura enjoyed the plenary presentation by Suniya Luthar from Columbia University which discussed current research on resilience in young people, and how a resilience framework can guide interventions in promoting strengths and competencies. The particular highlight for Laura was the analysis of how current use of resilience terminology can suggest that resilience *resides* in children and, therefore, some children just 'have what it takes' and some do not. This way of thinking does not take into account the complexity of environmental influences affecting children (and their resilience), and unfortunately can be used to argue against social justice policy. As a result, Luthar cautions against the use of 'resilient' as a categorical descriptor and offers some evidence to demonstrate that resilient attributes in children are malleable and influenced by their environment. She also addressed the issue of children showing indicators of resilience whilst experiencing a high level of inner distress. Current policies, she claimed, reflect an imbalanced focus on external behaviours and achievement indicators, without adequate attention to emotional distress. She argued that future research must explicitly consider the co-existence of social

competence and ongoing emotional distress if efforts are to maximise benefits to young people at risk. As a result of this presentation Laura's thinking related to resilience has developed further and this will have a definite impact on her future teaching.

We all agreed that the presentations by the young people were well considered and thought provoking. They conveyed a great sense of joy and hope in their future. They emphasised the over-riding message of the conference that childhood is about being a child as social actor and active agent, not simply as adult-in-waiting. This is a crucial message for policy and practice in residential child care.

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