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Editorial: Developing Foster Care: Towards A Collaborative Practice

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"The healing process for me is being given the opportunity to tell my story."
(Marge Campbell, this issue).

Introduction

It gives me great honour to be associated with this very timely, special edition of the Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies. This edition brings a welcome focus on the development of Foster Caring Systems in Ireland. In doing so, this edition continues the development of this relatively newly established journal as a strong voice of academic and practice debate within Ireland and also within the international field.

This issue; 'A Celebration of Foster Care,' brings together a cacophony of voices from Ireland and also further afield including Scotland, Australia, Uganda and Canada. Together with this geographical and comparative spread of papers, this issue brings forward the voices of the various stakeholders within the care system. Academics, Policy Writers, Psychologists, members of the Legal Profession and Social Workers write alongside Foster Carers, Youth who care and Children and youth who have grown up within the Irish Care System. In bringing these various voices together in one edition, this publication achieves a central intention, which has been to invite contributions from all parts of the caring system. This includes the perspective of the

'real experts' in the functioning of the care provided, the service users, the children and families who's lives we are actually talking about.

The effort throughout all of the pieces in this issue has been guided by the mantra of the Irish Foster Care Group, the 'Circle of Friends,' which is to, "Pay tribute and celebrate the voices of the Foster Care system that too often remain unheard." (Blaak, M. 2001, p. 21). The 'Circle of Friends,' group consists of Foster Parents, Birth Parents, Social Workers, Educationalists, Policy Writers, Youth Who Care and Children who live in Foster Care. The Group have constituted themselves as a mutual support group and work together to further the development of positive and strengths based foster care systems. (Cregan and Kennedy, 2000. Hogan et al 2001., Keating et al, 2001).

The papers included in this edition are intended to focus our thinking in relation to our overall shared concern of improving the care we all provide to the children in our world, country and families. However in bringing together such a diverse collection of voices this publication is also centrally concerned with stimulating a debate in relation to the question how we should care? With this, readers might be warned that they will not find themselves in easy agreement with all that is said within the covers of this collection and while this difference of opinion is healthy and creative, readers might also be well warned that reading some of these papers will be painful. I know for myself which papers and parts of people's stories I have found painful and challenging to my own sensibilities and ideas of 'good enough practice.' Each of us however will be touched in different ways, finding comfort in some of the writings while also finding ourselves challenged to answer back or disagree with other pieces within this collection. The beauty of this journal is that those of you who are stirred to comment on and develop these ideas can do so and we would invite you to make your own contribution to future issues of this Journal of Applied Social Studies.

However, the critical challenge of facing any discomfort in the words we read and the

stories we receive, is to place ourselves in a position of reflection, which asks of ourselves why does this effect me in this way? This is the invitation I offer on behalf of all of the contributors in this edition to you our readers.

Context of Child Care in Ireland

This collection of papers in relation to Foster Care in Ireland comes in the midst of a significantly fertile time of critical thinking, professional development and writing in relation to children and child care in Ireland. Less than ten years ago in 1993, the Irish Foster Care Association (which had been formally established in 1981) hosted the World Conference on Foster care in Dublin (McTeigue, D. 1995) Only seven years later in September 2000, the European Foster Care Conference was held in Cork. (Kelleher, D. 2001) The significance and the success of these conferences recognises Ireland as a major contributor in relation to the development of practice in relation to foster caring systems throughout the world.

At home in Ireland the context of childcare has also undergone significant change and development. The adoption of the 1991 childcare act came about following an unprecedented era of interest, critique and concern in relation to the adequacy of professional child protection systems to respond to and adequately assess the risk and safety of Irish children.

Most specifically, however, the past two years has seen the successful publication of a number of key official government publications, which have been centrally focused on highlighting the position of children within our society. 1999 saw the publication by the Department of Health and Children of the "Children First," National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children. These guidelines, which were initially delayed in their full implementation due to lack of training of related personnel are now being enacted through the appointment of key staff who have designated responsibility for the training and dissemination of the information contained in the report.

November 2000 saw the publication of the "National Children's Strategy." This report most significantly included a concerted effort to consult with the service users themselves the children and as such has been thoroughly welcomed. The active role that the current Minister of State with Responsibility for Children, Mary Hanafin, T.D. has taken on, not just in the work and consultation process involved in the creation of the national children's strategy but throughout her portfolio has not gone unnoticed. Some would say her greatest political achievement to date has been the way she skillfully dealt with the barrage of questions that Dustin the turkey threw at her on her famous appearance on the Den, others however recognise the huge contribution she has made in bringing about the creation of Dail Na nOg, the first real children's led Dail which has been created out of the National Children's strategy to add further weight to the fact that in future children will have a voice in matters which affect them. Further details of Dail Na nOg can be found in the current issue of the Newsletter of the Irish Foster Care Association. (Autumn 2001, Issue No. 15) These various contributions highlight Mary Hanafin's, personal and professional commitment to furthering the voice of children within Irish society but more importantly these developments reinforce the real need for the creation of a full Ministerial portfolio with responsibility for children and families across all departments rather than the current allocation of a Minister of State with responsibility for children.

Most significantly however, in terms of Foster Care Systems in Ireland, has been the publication this year of the "Report of the Working Group on Foster Care: Foster Care A Child Centred Practice." (Department of Health and Children, May 2001). This report on foster care represents the first major effort to standardise foster care practice throughout the various health boards in this country. And while the report is in the early stages of being critiqued and implemented it has been generally received with positive approval.

Foster Care in Ireland

Rosmary Horgan's opening paper "Foster Care in Ireland," makes a huge contribution to a clear and concise overview of the history and development of the foster caring system in this country. This essay brings together an analysis of the current policy, legal framework and practice guidelines, which work together to shape the current framework for foster care practice. As such students of social work and social care will find this essay a 'gift' in that week before the all important essay or exam in childcare! Teachers too will now have a concise reference in relation to both the historical development and current framework for foster care practice.

Some of the statistics that Rosmary references in her paper highlight the current demand and need for appropriate foster care placements. Provisional figures for 1999 show that at 31 December 1999 there were 4216 children in care. 60.13% of these were in foster care, 16.91% in relative foster care, and 14.11% were in residential care. (Department of Health and Children Provisional Figures for 1999). These most recent figures show an increase in the number of children coming into care (there were 3090 children in care in 1992) and the continued use of foster care as the main for of care provision.

For the first time these statistics now include an analysis of the numbers of children being placed in "Relative Foster Care." Prior to the publication of the child care regulations in 1995 (DOH, 1995a; 1995b) it was not possible to distinguish between children placed in foster care as distinct from relative care, as both groups were recorded as being in the foster care system.

Valerie O'Brien's paper, "Relative Care, Issues for Social Care Workers?" Sets the scene of the use of relative care in Ireland, tracing our deep roots of caring for children and extended family through to the current need to actively make use of the extended family once again as a resource in protecting the welfare of children. Valerie's paper recognises that currently, "approximately one–quarter of all children entering care are

placed in relative care, though variation exists across the regions." (O'Brien, this issue). The central contribution that I believe this paper makes is the way it challenges all of us to reflect on the similarities and differences involved in placing children within the extended family network as opposed to using 'straight forward' foster care. Valerie brings the reader through a self reflective process where we are invited to begin to consider our own personal and professional prejudices in relation to the type of 'care' that we believe is the best for children.

Valerie does not shy away from the often, difficult political considerations at the heart of caring for children. This paper offers pause for thought on the changing roles of social workers and social care and child care workers in the environment of foster care. Also the paper warns how a split between relative carers and foster carers has developed in other jurisdictions, raising a forewarning as to how we in Ireland might develop our care of children in partnership or in competition?

Critical Issues in Current Practice

Two of the contributors to this edition focus their attention to two specific issues of critical concern in the field of foster care currently. Frank Keating's paper "Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, the implications for fostering," offers a consideration and explanation of the cause and effect of this very serious condition. Deborah Browne's work, "An evaluation of Foster Parents Attitudes towards Birth Parents," offers an inside view through her recent PhD. research which explored the world of foster care from a psychological perspective. Both of these authors bring to their writing their considerable experience and knowledge of the foster care system.

Frank is one of those rare species being both a foster carer of long standing and also a social worker. Living proof that one of the greatest mysteries of the caring world, the relationship between social workers and foster parents can be bridged!

Frank's paper highlights the connection that is not too often remembered in foster care literature; that being the needs of children with special needs. More specifically this paper draws serious attention to the impact and frequency of 'Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Fetal Alcohol Effects." Most usefully this paper points out some of the key identifying features of a child having Fetal Alcohol Effects. It also makes solid suggestions as to how appropriate care plans can and should be put in place to support not only the child, but also the primary carers. Crucially this paper raises a note of warning, which highlights the connection between 'Alcoholic Mothers',' drinking in such a dangerous way as to cause the child to suffer the effects or the Syndrome and the number of children who come into care due to the high levels of parental drinking. Frank is one of the first to warn that the future of fostering will unfortunately involve, more children who are suffering with and experiencing various special needs.

Deborah's work, boldly, yet sensitively lays bare the often, untold stories of the 'feelings' of foster parents toward birth parents. This research paper outlines usefully the process of the research project together with a rich inclusion of quotations from the participants. This paper begins to fill the huge gap in the literature that might actually begin to uncover the nature and dynamics in the relationships between foster carers and birth parents.

Reading both of these papers challenged and excited my own ideas of practice in relation to foster care and both of these papers left me wanting more from the two authors. Frank's paper left me with an uncomfortable-ness in relation to the way, a 'Mother's Alcoholism,' could have such a huge effect on her unborn child. I wanted to hide from the truth of this and the consequent responsibilities involved. With this though I wanted to hear more about the role and responsibilities and the resource that Fathers play in the lives of children? In reading Deborah's work I felt that while we, as 'professionals' seem happy to analyse and examine the relationships between 'others,' (in this instance, foster parents and birth parents) we still seem to avoid

research which turns the spotlight onto ourselves in the relationship. I really look forward to reading research, as lucid as Deborah's that uncovers and speaks about the relationship between foster parents and social workers. Such research must be central to the development of any real efforts to develop a partnership approach between all of us who are concerned with offering the best care possible to the children we know and love.

The Risk of Love and Intimacy in Foster Families

Centrally positioned within this 'Celebration of Foster care,' are the reflections from two women who have given their lives, and families to the care of others. Marie Cregan and Jill Kennedy are both well known to all involved in foster care in Ireland, as well as to many others involved in caring for children throughout the world. Their inclusion in this journal might be understood in terms of their participation in training and development of the fostering system in Ireland, or as a recognition of their presentations of new and critical ideas in relation to care on the international stage. They might also have been asked to contribute to this collection by writing about their involvement in setting up and running a new childcare and foster care system in Romania.

However, in asking both of these authors to contribute to this collection I 'simply' asked them to write on that most difficult of questions; 'Why do you foster?' Those who know either of these women will also know that neither of them would turn down a either a challenge or a request, especially if they believed that it might in some small way help somebody. I now realise that the placing of these two voices, as the centrepieces of this edition, honours, symbolically, the central role that carers, foster carers, women and men really are to the very existence of the child care system throughout the entire world. While this Journal is a celebration of Foster Care in its fullest sense, I am also concerned that the collection be seen as representing recognition of the giving of those who are living at the very Heart of caring for and loving children.

Marie Cregan's paper "Learning to Cry Out Loud," speaks about some of the unspeakable stories which are, our collective history of 'care.' Recently the spotlight has been turned on the shortcomings of the 'child care system,' (of notable example; Raftery and O'Sullivan 1999, Studies 2000, Ferguson 2000) However in this paper Marie offers an insider view on the joy and pain of sharing her own childhood with the children of Irish residential care during the 1960's and 1970's. Growing up never fully understanding why these children had to go back to the 'home' when they did not want to? Having grown up in a family that fostered, Marie realised that these children were different, because they had never 'learned to cry out loud.' Marie shares in her paper the intimacy involved in choosing to offer her own adult life as a foster carer, which is based on the dual approach of wanting to improve the lives of others while also learning from, the often painful, lessons of the past.

Jill Kennedy, (in true foster carer style) has managed to do what most of the rest of us simply would never consider possible; She has found the time and strength to write for this Journal on the core theme, 'Believing in Fostering.' Sadly, Jill's husband Ted, died suddenly, earlier this year. This Journal has been dedicated to the Life and Commitments of Ted Kennedy. Ted's Spirit, Soul, Wisdom and Love is present through the words of many of the authors in this edition. The Honest Simplicity and Emotional Courage represented within the writing of Jill's paper are the clearest reflection of both Ted's belief in fostering and the reality of the day-to-day details of living in a family, which is ever so slightly more unusual than the everyday!

'Ni thuigfidh tu an bas go dtiochfaidh se ag dhoras fein,' (Irish Saying: 'You will never understand death until it comes to your door.') It surely is in the intimacies of family life that we experience and learn the terrible beauty of missing a loved one, a life partner, lover, friend, mentor, father and foster carer, with such a pain that we cannot but realise the depth of love we are actually living with. Yet, the gentle words of the Irish philosopher, John O'Donohue reminds us that, "The dead are not far away, they are very near us. The dead are our nearest neighbours," (O'Donohue 1997).

Jill sees clearly the intimacies inherent in caring and sharing and loving, and for all of this she still, 'believes.'

The Challenge to Develop a Collaborative Practice

The contributions from Mary Payne, Elizabeth Murphy, Thom Garfat and Pol Nacha O'Marthini offer some creative and definite suggestions and examples of foster care systems, which have developed, centrally through collaboration, in order to improve the care provided.

Mary Payne and Elizabeth Murphy offer a questions and answers approach in order to introduce the "Lisdeel Family Placement Initiative." A most recent development of the Daughters of Charity, Child and Family Service, this project radically re-positions the type of practice and availability of 'professionals' to carers and birth families involved in the child's lives. Based on collaboration, inclusion and concrete supports this project is making a real difference in relation to recruitment, training, placement and support for children and families. Reading their approach, I am reminded of one of my grandfather's favourite sayings, 'the best ideas often seem the most simple ones, once they have been put into practice!' The project is still in the early stages of working and is under external review through the 'Children's Research Centre' in Trinity College Dublin, but already this project has something we could all learn from.

Thom Garfat, continues to offer his voice of support to this journal writing from Canada. His paper offers a helpful theoretical outline of some of the core issues involved in the 'meaning making' process or the social construction of the multi-perspectives of all parties involved in the foster care system. Thom also offers some clear case examples, which highlight the usefulness of his approach to helping each of us place ourselves in the position of the 'other.' The case examples seem to echo experiences of different occasions that I am sure many of us can remember!

Likewise the Paper "Foster Caring: Through Care and After Care," by Pol Nacha O'Mairtini offers some really stimulating reading and ideas for the future development of our foster caring system. Nacha writes specifically on the key issue of caring for youth and developing after care systems which can help bridge the transition for children who are leaving care and moving into independent living. Nacha writes freely, offering stories of connection with his own personal life and childhood, and in reading these personal reflections one can begin to sense just how well Nacha can connect with the youth he cares for. Like Frank, Nacha is another of 'those people' who bridge the worlds of being both a foster carer and a social worker; they may not be as rare a species of people as I had once thought. Yet I truly believe that the wisdom of experience that these people can bring to the development of the caring system is immense.

Nacha's paper makes a number of real contributions to this journal. In his sharing of his own personal reflections on being a 'single male foster carer,' we the audience can begin to reflect again on our own sense of the role men can, and do bring to the lives of children, their own and other people's, through the care we have to give. Nacha recognises the importance of political and media work involved in highlighting the need for safe foster care. And most importantly he speaks clearly of the need to develop foster care systems by consulting the 'real experts,' the children.

Caring for Children Throughout the World

This issue of the Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies is honoured to be able to include three International papers in relation to childcare and fostering systems throughout the world. This inclusion of international contributions continues this Journal's development as a major voice in the field of Applied Social Studies. These papers in themselves offer a critical sociological and community development perspective to the debate in relation to our global responsibilities to care for the next generation, while also being open to recognising how we have treated our past generations of children. The inclusion of these 'comparative' papers offers us, a real

opportunity to pay attention to the needs of culture and identity when we try to care for children. Issues which, until relatively recently in Irish child care were really only mentioned in relation to the needs of Traveller Children who came into care. However globalisation and multiculturalism will have a definite impact on the way we practice our own Irish childcare services.

David Ssedyabule, a Ugandan social worker has taken time to write for the journal. His paper "The impact of HIV and AIDS on informal Foster care systems," highlights the devastating consequences of the pandemic of HIV and Aids, which has wiped out a full generation of adult carers in Uganda. In Ireland, drug use and HIV and Aids have already had a significant impact on the need to provide care for a large number of children; Often the care of grandchildren falling to elderly grandparents. However David's paper talks about the movement of care for children in Uganda from family, to community and onto occasions that he terms as 'no care,' which has come about quite simply due to the fact that families have been left without adults to care for the next generation of children. His research has focused on what he terms 'Child Headed Households,' and the work of his organisation is in part concerned with offering a range of practical supports to these Child Headed Households; a type of foster care from a distance. The other part of his work is involved in the training, education and community counselling in relation to the effects of HIV and Aids. The most recent research from Uganda shows that it is the only central African country with a statistical downturn in the numbers of people reporting HIV Infection. Reading some parts of his paper feels like reading a story from another time and world, while at other times the similarities in the needs of children for care and safety ring true throughout the world we know.

Nicole Breeze and her colleagues Marge Campbell and Zeena Elton present their paper "Stolen Generations: Lessons from Australia." This is a powerfully critical contribution, which weaves the personal with the political drawing the central attention to the fact that (good) intentions in relation to child care must also be

reviewed in relation to their impact and consequences. Drawing from the analysis of the Australian experience of "Stolen Generations," the term now used to describe the wide scale, forced removal of indigenous children and placing them with white families, the paper raises timely debates about the role of history, reconciliation, apologies and measures of restitution and compensation. Again while Australia may seem like the other side of the world we too, here in Ireland we are beginning to face up to our own failings and abuse of children.

The underlying warning throughout this paper in relation to the difference between the intentions of offering alternative forms of child care and the consequent impact of some of these decisions must not be glossed over but critically reflected upon by all of us who are engaged in this common work. Through the witnessing of the powerfully personal narratives of the authors Marge Campbell and Zeena Elton, we are invited to see 'up close and personal' the terrifying effects of children being separated from their culture, roots and connections. But more than this, one feels in reading these memories that the real trauma has been caused by the years of secrecy, deceit and denial.

However these women in their paper hold out their optimism for the 'Healing of the Future.' For me one of the most powerful lines in this whole journal are found in the words of Marge Campbell, when she re-claims the possibility of her future, reinforcing the power of finding one's voice she claims, " The healing process for me is being given the opportunity to tell my story." (Marge Campbell, this issue).

Personal Narratives on Growing up in Care

This Journal proudly opened with the words of a beautifully poetic speech written by Siobhan Cregan, who at twelve years of age represented most wonderfully herself, and also the Irish Foster Families at the closing ceremony of the 12th International Foster Care Organisation, in the Netherlands during July this year. It could not be an exaggeration to say that children and youth have a way of looking upon the world where they see the faults and pains but can also see and point to suggestions for

improving the world we share. (Edgar Allan Poe was wrong; youth is not wasted on the young!) Siobhan's ability to balance the two sides of caring and sharing, the difficulties and the joys are truly an inspiration to all of us. And if we ever needed an advertisement for the value of foster caring we have it in the beautiful words of this twelve year old.

Tommy Turner, a 'care leaver' himself now works with 'Barnardos' and 'National Voice' in England. Tommy is a advisor on child care to the English Government. Tommy has worked as a friend and a Mentor for some considerable time with many of the Irish youth groups and children living and leaving care in Ireland. Here Tommy uses poetry and metaphor to give 'voice' to the concerns of care.

While I want to thank all of the contributors who gave of their time and creative ideas to this volume, those I am most proud to include in this edition are the young people who have shared their lives with us. Nacha, in his work of supporting and developing foster care systems, strongly recognises that the 'real experts' are the children and youth. These experts, Jean Kennedy a 'youth carer,' Linda Doherty a young woman who spent her teenage years living 'between homes' in a girls' group home and Christine Deady who grew up in a foster home are the real celebration of this collection. Not only do these experts offer crucial learning to all of us but more than this, I believe that they have shared an intimacy with us in opening a part of their lives to us, the readers.

I met with Linda first when she had recently left home to live in a children's home and the conversation that she has chosen to include in this issue was one that we recorded on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday to celebrate and honour her independence and permission to speak with her own voice on the shortcomings and the successes of the care service she was provided with. Linda who lives in Dublin continues to act as an advisor and teacher to student social workers and social care workers on placement and in college settings. Her honest and open reflections in the conversation reveal

some very subtle and important pointers for the improvement of the emergency, out-of-hours social work service.

Jean Kennedy and Christine Deady are two of the founding members of the group 'Youth Etc,' a peer support group for children who foster and children who live in foster care. As the elder lemons in this group! Jean and Christine work as mentors to the newer and younger members of this group. They have represented themselves as youth carers in national and international conferences on foster care. They have also both been involved in teaching social workers and foster carers in various settings throughout Ireland.

Their words are included here unedited, the courageous beauty of their wisdom and their choice to share in such a personal way is truly inspiring. I believe that their words appropriately bring together the cacophony of concerned voices, which have spoken throughout this collection. I feel honoured to have been part of bringing together this collection. I am truly appreciative to each of the authors for their wonderful contribution. And most especially I wish to pay my respects to those writers who shared their lives in a personal way. I have been deeply touched by their strength and courage.

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