



Short Report on the Evidence of Impact of the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care

Laura Steckley, PhD
School of Social Work & Social Policy
University of Strathclyde

Introduction & Background



Scotland’s ambition to be the best place in the world to grow up includes an explicit commitment to give children in care the childhood they deserve (Amos, 2022). This report offers a corollary: for Scotland to be the best place in the world for all children to grow up, including those in residential child care, then the personal and professional development of the adults who care for them must also be a part of Scotland’s ambition. The MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care, a vital pillar in the support for residential child care workers’ development, plays a key role in Scotland achieving this ambition.

This report provides compelling evidence of the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care’s significant impact on the lives of children and young people, those who work with and care for them, the cultures of particular residential services, as well as the culture of the sector more widely. It will be referred to here forward as ‘the course’. Much of what respondents say in this report is strongly aligned with the core messages of The Promise, the report of the Independent Care Review (2020). Much of what follows reflects a strong alignment with the core messages of the Independent Care Review (2020), demonstrating the course’s vital contribution to keeping The Promise.

The course commenced in 2001 in order to support the development of leadership, practice and research in residential child care. It has been funded via the Scottish Government grant first to SIRCC (the Scottish Institute of Residential Child Care), and then to CELCIS (the Centre of Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland, now the Centre of Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection). It has consistently delivered outstanding teaching (with top Post Graduate Taught Experience Survey results year on year) and has developed a national and international reputation for excellence. Over the last several years, significantly more applications have been submitted than places on the course. More information about the curriculum can be found in Appendix A of the full version of this report. This report offers a distillation of the full report.

Evidence of Impact: Questionnaire

An online, anonymous questionnaire comprised of 24 questions was co-produced with a small group of graduates, second-year students and educators on the course. It was then made available to graduates and current students who have been on the course for at least a full year. **104 responded.**

This information was collected in 2019 when the course became the subject of possible closure.

The results strongly indicate significant impact across a range of areas, including the way carers think about and develop: relationships, cultures of children’s rights and participation, advocacy for and with children, evidence-based decision-making and practice, and changes in their services. For example, **99% strongly agreed or agreed that the course had significantly contributed to the development of their practice.** (The results of the Likert-type and demographic questions can be viewed in full in the full report.)

In the open questions, respondents provided rich and compelling evidence of these impacts, including discernible impacts on the children, young people and families they work with. The following sections summarise key themes from their responses. In order to keep this short report short, the inclusion of quotations has been limited. The full report contains numerous detailed and sometime moving accounts of practitioners’ experiences of the course’s impact.

◊◊◊◊◊◊◊◊

Respondents wrote repeatedly and at length about the impact of the course on their relationships

◊◊◊◊◊◊

Relationships and Love

95% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their learning on the course significantly influenced the way they think about and form close relationships with the children and young people they care for. In the open questions, respondents wrote repeatedly and at length about the impact of the course on their relationships. There were repeated references to the course helping respondents see that if relationships are of central importance to ameliorative care, then policies and practices that compromise relationships warrant critical scrutiny and challenge. This is also a key (if not the key) message of The Promise (Independent Care Review, 2020).

*The learning that I gained from the course allowed me to have **a language to explain** and argue to work with young people in a way that had felt right previously but I just didn't know how to put into words. It **allowed me to recognise the value of relationships and the theory behind why this is so important** especially for a young person who has experienced trauma and is distressed. It **gave me the power to confidently advocate** the unique impact that a residential setting can have on the experiences of a young person and on the staff. It **made me proud to be a residential child care worker and gave me the belief that the work I did was important.***

Love was repeatedly cited and an understanding of related complexities, especially in regards to the effects of abuse, neglect, adversity and trauma on children's ability to form and maintain relationships, was strongly present in respondents' accounts. Respondents made links to how this informed their leadership, their ability to remain in the field (thus contributing to retention of trained staff) and their capacity to reflect and bring their 'selves' to the caring endeavour. Responses also reflected a greater awareness of the whole network of relationships as important in children and young people's lives, including sibling relationships, other potential attachment figures and the need for enduring relationships with carers (former and current).

Rights, Participation and Thinking Differently About Risk

97% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their learning on the course has contributed to the way they think about and support children's rights in their practice. Responses to the open questions incorporated the importance of working alongside children and young people, listening to them, respecting their rights and meaningfully involving their participation in decisions in the houses and homes they live and work in. Some respondents shared concrete examples of practices developed in their services as a result of this learning, for example:

I have introduced a project called 'voices within' [which] 'employs' young people to encourage and represent the voices of young people in my services. Young people inform that this has made them feel listened [to], loved and cared for and they say they feel a part of the service and not simply placed with the service [...] Research carried out during my studies gave me the creativity and the confidence to introduce this in my service.

Respondents also wrote of shifts in their thinking about risk which was intertwined with a deepening understanding of children's rights. A grounding in related research, theory and practice guidance was evident in supporting them to challenge risk-averse practice with more confidence.

Responding to Pain and Distress

The impact of the course on the way respondents think about and respond to children and young people's behaviour – behaviour historically labelled bad, negative or 'challenging' – was written about repeatedly and compellingly:

*Understanding that trauma is the basis for many of the behaviours that challenge helps change the way that staff approach the young people and **has led to a significant reduction in confrontations and violent incidents** within the house. The idea of the relationship with the young person being the most important tool in working with him/her has allowed for the **focus to become the creation of strong relationships, rather than the adherence to set rules.***

The only impact commented upon more than responding to behaviour was the impact of the course on relationships with young people, though often the two were clearly linked and in a way that integrated many components of the course, including developmental theory and the impacts of trauma and other adversities on that development.

Working in the Life-space and the Power of the Everyday

A life-space approach to caring practices is a core part of the course curriculum. **It is significant because it locates the processes of healing and development in the relationships, activities and places where the *child's* life unfolds.** A life-space approach is invested in the restorative, cumulative power of the everyday – as the intervention. **98% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their involvement in the course has bolstered their understanding of the healing power of high quality, everyday care.**

In the qualitative part of the questionnaire, there were repeated references to working in children's life-spaces and the importance of the everyday. For some, exposure to life-space theory and its related concepts transformed their thinking and practice.

Children and young people are better supported to communicate their feelings. This is a direct result of workers becoming more skilful in using daily living in a therapeutic way to help children communicate their feelings/ views and address difficulties they face.



Rather than remove children from their day-to-day for the purposes of therapeutic intervention, a life-space approach is invested in the restorative, cumulative power of the everyday – as the intervention.



Leadership, Professional Development and Culture Change

Dedicated content on leadership and management is a significant part of the curriculum, with a clear message that leadership can be (and often is) exercised by those not in explicitly specified leadership roles. **96% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their involvement in the course positively contributed to their development of leadership.** While there was no qualitative question addressed to leadership, **close to a third of respondents wrote about the ways in which the course influenced their practice of leadership in their organisation.**

Respondents repeatedly referred to an improved capacity to fulfil their formal leadership roles as a result of the course, with knowledge being the most frequently-cited efficacious component. Knowledge acquired on the course was reported as: boosting confidence, supporting specific work with particular children, enabling more effect support of staff teams, informing positive changes in house cultures, helping to reduce punitive thinking and practices, and strengthening the impact of their advocacy. Several wrote of improvements in integrating theory with practice, for themselves and their teams. **Links were made between these enhancements and positive outcomes for children and young people, including improved educational attainment and more positive experiences of care:**

*My role as a leader in my organization has been enriched by not only the theoretical knowledge but by the sharing of practice experience and the validity that this offers when discussing complex relationships. In turn this has allowed me to develop my skills as a leader in supporting others to reflect & develop meaningful relationships with young people. **The culture within my service has changed significantly because of this and this has been reflected in feedback received for the last two years from young people, parents/carers & stakeholders.***

58% of respondents indicated that they had been promoted during or subsequent to commencing the course and the same number of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they believe their related learning and development contributed to that promotion. **92% strongly agreed or agreed that their involvement on the course has strengthened their professional identity.**

Reductions in Restraints and Moving Children On

Two of the most potentially damaging things that can happen to children and young people in residential child care are physical restraint, and multiple moves within the care system – both of which have been highlighted by the Promise as priority areas for change. Each was addressed by respondents explicitly. Both are significantly affected by whether children enjoy good relationships in care, how well practitioners are supported to provide that care, and how this affects their ability to respond helpfully to distressed or pain-based behaviour:

*I wanted to be creative in coming up with 'something' that conveyed to staff that they were cared for and respected. I developed a staff outcome framework [...] **the framework has contributed to the reduction in restraints** as staff feel more competent and confident in using self in all interventions. I have also seen **staff absence go down to an all-time low**.*

In regards to multiple moves, responses reflect a resistance to moving individual children and instead a greater capacity to support them through difficult periods in their care and development. Some respondents also reflected this resistance as a general trend in their service.

◊◊◊◊◊◊◊◊

In terms of specific knowledge acquisition, trauma was the most frequently cited when respondents wrote of their development of leadership. Several wrote of improvements in integrating theory with practice, for themselves and their teams.

◊◊◊◊◊◊◊◊



Evidence of Impact:

Case Studies and Testimonials

The current students and graduates who co-produced the questionnaire felt that a drilling down at organisational level, not just in care settings but in forms of indirect practice (i.e. those settings that do not provide care but nevertheless impact on their care), would provide important information about the impact of the course. Towards that end, three organisations collected more detailed information about the course's impact on their services. In addition, three contributors – a Manager of Children's Services in one local authority, a member of the Care Inspectorate, and a Placement Commissioner – wrote more in-depth testimonials about the impacts of the course. Their full accounts are available in the appendices of the full report.

Common themes across these case studies and testimonials include **transformations in thinking and practice, and development of knowledge and skills**. Exposure to ideas, models, theories and knowledge generally was repeatedly and emphatically mentioned across all contributions, within which the transformations were rooted. Positive impacts on professional development, professional identity, cultures of houses/homes, and impacts on the culture of residential child care more widely were all represented as deriving from these skills, knowledge and transformations.

For example, from a case study carried out in one large provider, impacts across their organisation related outcomes for children and young people are linked:

*We have noted that programme participants are able to bring theory more centrally into focus in their work, and the learning from the curriculum allows them to bring **more systemic formulations to the complex behaviours presented by children and their families**. The care planning and interventions is therefore **more evidence based providing tangible outcomes for children and families** [...] Each of these model holders [i.e. those who lead the therapeutic, trauma-informed services] are graduates of the MSc programme and have reported that the learning from the MSc programme has been hugely important in informing their role.*

A transformation in professional identity rooted in knowledge is also reflected in the following testimonial:

*When entering residential child care, it was for me, a stepping stone; a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself [...] **When I graduated from the course, I left with a strong professional identity as a residential worker, a commitment to the sector, and a strong knowledge base that has transformed my practice fundamentally**, and enabled me to support change across the sector.*

Erica Barr, Manager

All of the accounts included concrete examples of the impacts of the course including:

- » **The removal of a behaviour-focused scheme,**
- » **The overhaul of a service's recruitment process,**
- » **A new, systematic approach to eliciting the participation of children and young people,**
- » **An inspection methodology to ensure that eliciting the voice of children and young people is embedded and sustained,**
- » **A playgroup for new parents,**
- » **A programme of psychological first aid for staff,**
- » **A system of reflective space for staff**

(please see the full report for the extended list)

Finally, some of the impacts involved a reduction of things, including:

- » **The use of physical restraint,**
- » **The use of time out,**
- » **Children going missing**

Knowing, Doing and Being

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

In developing a professional identity appropriate to residential child care, workers need a professional mantle that fits – one that reflects the serious responsibility of the role, but also one that reflects the context that surrounds it.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

The Promise is clear that those caring for children and young people should bring their whole selves to work and this reflects a long-held conviction that the self of the practitioner is the primary instrument of the work. **It isn't just about what students end up knowing from their time on the course that is important, but who and how they are with children and young people as a result.** Across all of the information we collected, **theory, language and professionalism** were strongly present. They reflect core aspects of knowing, doing and being that, when brought together, activate a special alchemy that enables students to transmute what they bring and what they learn into gold-standard practice.

Theory as a way of Knowing

Respondents linked their understanding of theory with their ability to understand behaviour differently and therefore respond more helpfully in **all of the open questions, as well as the case studies and testimonials.** Theory was also linked to an ability to challenge practice, whether in relation to rigid or punitive practices at team or organisational level, or decision-making around how children and young people are brought into or removed from residential homes. **Respondents' words ring with meaningful application of theory to their practice in concrete ways that are making a difference in the lives of children, young people and their families.** This robust and meaningful application of theory demonstrates the necessity of teaching content and processes that are embedded in the realities of residential child care settings and the experiences of those working there.

Language that Enables Doing

Respondents across the questionnaire, the case studies and the testimonials wrote that the course gave them a language to communicate things they already knew but didn't have the words for. While multiple forms of action are reflected across the report, this ability to communicate is a key mechanism for informed action. Language is necessary to be able to challenge, to advocate, to clarify or simply articulate why elements previously invisible or deemed unimportant are actually the stuff of magic and healing: the bedtime story, the shared song in the car, the tailor-made cup of tea to soften the hard edge of starting each new day. **A shared language collectivises these impacts, supporting a shared understanding of what children, young people and their families need, as well what staff need in order to be equal to the task of developmental care.**

Professionalism as a Way of Being

The accounts provided in this report reflect a professional identity grounded in caring – caring as a way of being and caring as doing – and oriented towards developmentally-enhancing relationships. They also challenge dominant ideas around what professional means in the context of residential child care. **Typical notions of professional distance and formality are contrary to the kinds of relationships essential to developmental care. Yet, it is clear that the complexity of the work and what is required of workers necessitates what can rightfully be called professionalism.**

Conclusion

The evidence provided in this report clearly reflects the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care's profound impact on practitioners' and managers' thinking, their practice, and their professional identities. These impacts extend far beyond student experience to care teams, house cultures, and, most importantly, the children, young people and families they serve.

Given the challenges faced by the field and the continued limited pay and conditions of residential child care staff, securing its ongoing funding is an urgent imperative. Training and education are vital if we are to develop a workforce that embodies developmental care. Scotland has seen wrong courses – wrong for the needs of practitioners and services to deliver what children and young people in residential child care need.

We cannot do without the right training. The MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care demonstrably and significantly contributes to the **development of a committed, competent, compassionate workforce.** It has demonstrated its efficacy in addressing the challenges faced by workers and their organisations. It has shown its ability to inspire commitment, aspiration and effective action in the provision of developmental care for children and young people. It is a version of the right training, with a long track record and sustained impact. Such training – properly resourced like other professional training – is required if Scotland is going to keep its promise to children, young people and their families.

References:

Amos, I. (2022). Insight: How can Scotland deliver on its promise of a better care system for young people? The Scotsman. *Retrieved from <https://www.scotsman.com/health/insight-how-can-scotland-deliver-on-its-promise-of-a-better-care-system-for-young-people-3648242>*

Independent Care Review. (2020). The Promise. *Retrieved from <https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf>*