Meet the Author: Kathy Grant

Hello, and welcome to SIRCC online’s Meet the Authors 2021. The theme of this year's online conference is workforce, and we have a special edition of the Scottish Journal of Residential Childcare on this theme being released today. We're delighted to be holding a series of conversations with some of the authors who have contributed to this special edition to hear a bit more about their writing and get to know the people behind the papers. I'm joined here by Kathy Grant author of ‘Reflections on Life Space Intervention in Social Work’. Kathy, hello. Can you tell us a bit about yourself in your connection with residential childcare?

At the minute I’m a children and families social worker within an area team in Falkirk, I have been in that post for about seven years. Prior to that, and prior to qualifying as a social worker, I had worked for a number of years in a few different residential childcare settings. I think during the pandemic and helping back in these services made me really miss it.

And your article talks a bit about that - missing working in residential childcare. Can you tell us what your article was about?

It was just kind of my reflections this year on helping in residential childcare services during the pandemic, and how it made me miss the

opportunities, I guess, of working everyday with young people and building. I think we build relationships as social workers, but as residential workers, they're really different. It’s a special kind of relationship. And I just think I really miss that.

And what was your motivation for writing the article? And was it any key messages that you're hoping to share?

I guess it should be written down on paper showing my thoughts, of working back in Residential care services. And, it just got me thinking a bit about the bits that I missed, and how we can maybe kind of get some of that into front line social work.

So, the title was ‘Reflections and Life Space Intervention in social work’. Can you tell us about the role of critical reflection, and how that may impact on practice?

I think being able to reflect critically on your practice is really important, probably essential. People don't like being criticized, but I think if it can be reframed as a learning opportunity, critical reflection can only be a good thing. We don't get things right all the time. And I think especially with young people, it's sometimes about owning and saying I am sorry I got that wrong. And I think in terms of the power shift or the dynamic of that relationship, that can be really important for people, not just the professionals but the young people that you're working with, and for sometimes, I think that's really important. For me, I think supervision is really important in terms of support and critically reflective practice rather than the act of practice sometimes. I think, a social workers aren’t like residential workers. It can be quite scary sometimes working with a lot of risk. So I think having the space and time to talk about that with your supervisor and in your teams is really important. And I think, within the bigger picture, positive change and shifts, can usually only happen if people are able to critically reflect and not to dwell on the catastrophe – if you like – but think about how are we going to avoid that happening again, or how are we going to make things better or different. So I think it’s essential

that we continue to do things like that.

We are in a global pandemic, just now, and that's part of the reason that you did experience working in residential childcare and you write about that in your article.

 And, and you wrote about the challenge of balancing the protection of self and others from the virus, but also still doing the job of protecting the needs of children, young people and families. What has that been like, what is that like? Because it's still ongoing.

Oh, it’s really tough. I suppose, as a group, social workers like residential workers, they respond to crises on daily basis so you just kind of roll up your sleeves and get on with it, and we continue to do that. The massive challenge has been the lack access to services for a long, long time, like the services, we would usually refer to to support us with our task, have either been closed, been operating virtually or working with reduced staffing. So agencies like CAMHS, GPs, Family Support, and other community based resources, you would usually tap into. I have got to say it has been difficult to fill the gap, but it has been impossible, I think, and that has been tough.

It's also been quite tricky, I guess, to meet with the more difficult to reach young people who we would see far more often because I suppose Covid-19 has created a legitimate reason for people to keep us more at arms length, and we can’t really challenge that.

 So that's been really tough I think because we do still really worry and want to help, but if people are saying no, then there is only so much that we have been able to do about that.

Absolutely.

You must feel very torn, trying to reach children, young people and their families. I can't imagine how difficult that must have been. And I suppose one of the ways that you can reach out to children and young people is through relationships. And that is a theme that runs right through your paper, that power and importance of relationships.

And there is a quote here, Kathy, if you'll indulge me, I just want to read it out, “Relationships that perhaps we didn't know we needed until the effects of the pandemic took away these valuable moments of being near each other.” Can you tell us a bit about that quote? And what was what you were thinking about when you wrote that?

I guess I just miss my team. I think we all do. In terms of moving forward and what the future looks like. I guess there are pros and cons in the way we are working at the minute. I think use of technology has been helpful in terms of kind of meetings and getting everybody together, sometimes at really short notice from different parts of the country. My local authority is keen to keep home working for part of the week and that will be helpful when you've got reports and stuff to do, but it's a challenge, I guess when you don't know the spaces to be with your teams, but also the spaces to meet the families and young people we work with. People can’t just drop in to see us if they need to, or just if they feel like they want to at certain times for whatever reason. And again, just it's been hard for me – I can only talk about my experience - but not having a physical team round about me all the time. I really do miss that and I have had a few chats, and my colleagues feel the same.

And I suppose it’s the informal supervision like the brainstorming and problem solving, sometimes just having a laugh or like the times a cup of tea will just appear on your desk when you have a really long call or a difficult chat with somebody, and I think Mark Smith has written a lot about caring for the carers, so I suppose I'm going to back and look at some of that stuff because, especially now it's really topical at the moment.

Absolutely. It just really highlights how important the workforce is to us all when it's relationship based practice that you are operating. Another theme that came out for me, Kathy, in your paper was when you talk about life space, and the potential of the residential milieu and you talk about the work of Laura Steckley, who's based at Strathclyde University, where CELCIS is. Can you tell us a wee bit about the key messages and in this bit of the article?

One question I am not even close to being an expert on this, but it's something that I'm really interested in. And I think I would describe this as basically when done properly with the right people and the right environment. I think residential childcare has massive potential to help children and young people to begin to, I guess, start to understand, think about, talk about and hopefully begin to recover from some of their past trauma and adversity they have experienced, and I've seen settings that absolutely nail it and I've seen some that for whatever reason, don't just quite hit the mark. So you know yourself, if you walk in somewhere, and you think this feels nice and you like it here, but you don’t really know why. I think creating a therapeutic milieu is a real skill and maybe it just feels nice, but people don't necessarily know the hard work that has gone into achieving that. So again, I think the concepts of life space work and therapeutic milieus run parallel. And a residential setting that I think successfully creates a residential milieu is one that meets the social and emotional needs of a young people by purposely creating somewhere that uses the everyday opportunities that are available in a therapeutic way.

I have had the privilege of being taught by Laura Steckley at Strathclyde University and I just really really like her work and her discussions around that. I think it just brings it to life, that she’s done it, I suppose.

Somethng you were saying there jumped out at me. You were saying that it seems quite simplistic, but it's actually really complicated. Can you tell us a bit about the complexities involved and making something skillful, appear simplistic?

Well, I guess maybe some of Laura’s work talks about that quite a lot as well. I really connect with her writing and research, I guess maybe because she has done it and it comes from the heart. Laura has written quite a lot about using activities and how tapping into opportunities that exist within that. It does seem really simplistic, but it’s really skillful because you need to be able to know the young people and the dynamics within certain groups really well to know the right opportunity – when this is going to help here or this could make thing not go so great. So I think it does take practice and skill and it doesn’t always work. But I think within the cultures in residential units that’s what you do and you learn from each other. But I think does take time to learn. Sometimes it can come naturally, but I think it is investing in those relationships that can make those scenarios work and I think sometimes it can be complex because for people who work in that environment it can be really challenging and I think it is important sometimes to think of the unsettled shifts, not as a bad shift.

It’s hard because you are in the moment and thinking this is a nightmare again, but for me, once kids start to communicate about difficult and hard to talk about stuff, it usually comes out in behavior first of all. So I think using my critical reflective part in thinking about re-framing that and think, well they obviously feel safe enough to begin to, first of all think about that difficult stuff and then they start trying to communicate that. I think that for them it must feel safe enough within the environment or the therapeutic milieu that you have created, and safe enough with the people around about to start to do some of that. So I thank that when you are working with people in their home – their life space- it can sometimes be difficult to remember that. So it is going to be challenging because you are taking this environment that is going to help them get through their challenging times. So I would say that remembering that is really important.

So, it’s 2021 in Scotland and we're talking about residential child care. We can't do that without asking a question about The Promise. What do you think will change or needs to change for residential childcare and can I ask your views on the role of The Promise are in relation to that?

I'm glad to see workforce support is one of the priority areas but – I don’t want to get too controversial - I hope they actually spend the time speaking to the frontline workers, and not the people into strategic roles so that the workforce, get what they feel that they need or what can they see that they want. I suppose another priority I feel passionate about is the right to education. Children and young people that live in residential settings that don't, perhaps have specialists on site provision are, in my experience, still excluded from education. Again I can only talk from my experience, but the kids I have worked with in residential settings that do attend mainstream schools are often on part time timetables, excluded and spending most of their day in learning support, not doing very much at times or accessing much of the curriculum. So I think that rather about going on about that kind of stuff, this is an opportunity, how do we work together, be more creative and inclusive, get young people involved. We have seen during the pandemic the use of technology, we could tap into some of that – it’s got massive potential to help young people in education and that is what is going to give them opportunities to achieve in the future and achieve their dreams and all of that sometimes cheesy sounding stuff, but I really hope that for us and the young people, that The Promise does actually that kind of difference and it is not just another…. You know education is right, so let’s do something about it.

That’s really helpful, and so clearly linked to your own experience. And when you wrote your article Kathy, you wrote it from dual perspectives, of a residential worker, and a social worker. And in the introduction, you reframe slightly what you consider your job to be. What advice would you give to any of our viewers and listeners who might be considering a career in the social care sector just now?

Just do it. I love my job, I really do. It’s often very demanding both of time and emotion. The financial rewards aren’t great, but that is not why anyone of us would come into this line of work. If you want to help people, you will definitely get lots of opportunity to do that. I guess you can’t be needy in terms of wanting compliments, because that doesn’t happen very often. But when someone says, Oh I think your quite sound, I think well I have nailed that one. I am getting somewhere here.

But then you'll get sometimes – and it happens in residential as well – kids will say, Oh I want to do a job like this when I am older. That does make you think it is worthwhile and we are doing something right.

And any advice to our viewers or listeners who might be thinking about submitting an article to this Scottish Journal of Residential Chldcare?

Yes, I was really nervous about putting myself out there, but I enjoyed the writing part, probably more than the thinking part before, but I think anybody with direct experience, regardless of what qualifications, has definitely got something to contribute. So I think if you've got an idea or something that you want to say, just get in touch with one of the editors, there is loads of support there for the people that want to do that. So I would say right go for it.

Thank you, so much. It's been an absolute pleasure to chat with you today, to hear a bit more about you and about your article, ‘Reflections on Life Space Intervention in Social Work’ is free to read or download from today on the Journal section of the CELCIS website. And there are other recordings available in this series. Thank you so much for joining us.