

Reflections from the Building a Community of Practice International Conference

The Residential Child Care Project and the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research at Cornell University recently sponsored its fourth international conference with the theme of “building a community of practice” at Lake George, New York, U.S.A. Approximately 250 conference attendees participated in a number of plenary and workshop sessions that included a variety of community of practice forums focusing on research, schools, organizational leadership, trauma informed practice, training innovations, and professional certification. Additional practice communities also formed during the conference based on common interests. This article is the result of an initial effort of the Write On: Writing Community of Practice facilitated by Michael Nunno, Raymond Taylor, Elliot Smith and Laura Steckley. Reflections on the conference and “take-aways” are summarized below by several members of the community.

Perceptions from Jack C Holden...

From the opening with voices of young people, a youth band, to the close with a parent and youth panel, participants were given an extraordinary opportunity to engage with peers in a community of practice and communities of practice throughout the conference. The open and peaceful setting, opportunities and places for discussions, the diverse voices, and variety of activities was conducive to engagement, reflection, and learning. The conference created conditions for the development of the conference’s focus, *“Building a Community of Practice”*.

Many inspirational & thought provoking messages, ideas, and challenges were presented in the keynote and workshop presentations. These messages led to further discussions held all over the grounds of the conference center. The keynote speakers and many of the workshop presenters were able to weave their talks with other keynote speakers and build on each other’s presentations. This set a congruent and consistent tone for the conference and allowed for lively discussions throughout the three days.

I was struck by the countless comments I heard and subsequently read in the conference evaluations such as, “a very collaborative experience”, “better than straight theory, much can be applied”, “I feel renewed, refreshed, and inspired”, “the clear message communicated throughout the conference was that of engagement”, “the setting provided a place to think, reflect, collaborate, and have fun all the while learning through a community of practice”, and “this was truly an international community of practice for working with traumatized and challenged children.”

I found the 3-day conference experience exceeded my expectations in every way possible and the impressions, conclusions, action points, and takeaways at the very least will be; “the importance of purpose in life”, “clarifying trauma”, “simple and deep simple interactions”, “understanding income vs outcome”, “the importance a child’s early life plays in development and not to give up on children”, “we as parents and caregivers have to be more dedicated to the outcome of the child than any gang”, and “our overall work is to create a psychologically safe space for children to try things they haven’t tried.

Finally, my hope is the community of practice process begun at the 2016 conference in Lake George, NY will provide attendees with a means for growing and developing as individuals and collective caregivers in the coming years.

Reflections from Michael Nunno....

This conference held my attention like few conferences have done in the past. The themes of purpose, developmental relationships, transformation as organizational purpose, trauma-informed care, and a stories of personal reflection resonated throughout. The themes were connected throughout the program and the connectedness brought me to new insights about our work. I was struck by the slope image that Tony Burrow conjured up when describing his research. When asked how steep a slope is while standing and viewing it alone, participants generally perceived the slope to be steeper than if they are viewed it with another person while holding their hand. Together all things are possible was my lesson!

On the practical side of things, I thought also of ways to use the sense of purpose experiment for the benefit of our TCI and CARE implementation. For example, would training participants who have gone through a purpose exercise perceive a child's behavior as less dangerous or threatening?

Another aspect of this conference was the initiation and development of communities of practice. The research community of practice attracted between 15 and 20 active and potential researchers, many of whom were based in agencies and who wanted to engage with more traditional academics in research driven by practice. I heard of at least four significant research ideas that may begin to take shape over the coming year. In order to commit to this type of practice-driven research many, both practitioners and researchers, will have to move out of their comfort zone and into new skills and learning.

But more than anything else Building Communities of Practice reminded me how essential trust and safety are in settings and relationships, and the need for purposeful work within a purposeful life.

A few thoughts/ramblings from Dale Curry....

In addition to the enlightening presentations, workshops, forums, activities and performances, I was appreciating the opportunity to connect with long-time colleagues and recognizing the varied practice settings and legacy of so many child and youth care practitioners who have contributed to the field and emerging profession of child and youth work-the broader community of practice. When Dr. Junlei Li, Professor and Co-Director of the Fred Rogers Center was making his amazing keynote presentation, I was reminded of my graduate program in Child Development and Child Care (currently Applied Developmental Psychology) at the University of Pittsburgh where Fred Rogers

also received graduate training. Faculty from the program served as consultants to the Mister Rogers Neighborhood television program. Notably the "Pitt" program was founded by Erik Erikson and Benjamin Spock. Life lessons from children's television pioneer Fred Rogers' and the Mister Rogers Neighborhood program are currently perpetuated through Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood program and other initiatives.

We have quite a heritage and our field continues to develop. Child and youth care practitioners contribute in a variety of roles and settings. These efforts are often in direct practice with children and youth but indirect practice as well such as the contributions of Fred Rogers. Training and development is another expanding area of indirect child and youth care practice. On my first day arriving I met a new colleague (a trainer and conference workshop presenter) who was carrying a carload of boxes of handouts from the parking lot to the second floor of the hotel (a section of the hotel that did not have an elevator) on a hot, humid summer day. While the presentation/platform skills of child and youth care trainers are frequently noticed and often admired, a significant amount of work typically occurs much prior to the formal training "show-time." Potential careers as child and youth care worker training and development professionals can now be considered legitimate options for many experienced practitioners.

The Certification Community of Practice session also reaffirmed the significant progress our field has achieved. The contributions of more than 100 volunteers helped the North American Certification Project develop a comprehensive professional certification system that is currently administered by the Child and Youth Care Certification Board www.cycCB.org. A substantial amount of research providing support for the validity of the various components of the certification program has been conducted and shared via articles and presentations to the larger child and youth care community. Still, I was reminded of the major amount of work that still needs to be done as several participants mentioned that they never heard of the certification program. That may be indicative of the broader field. As most child and youth care practitioners are not members of a professional association such as the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice www.acycp.org and many are unaware of the vast child and youth care knowledge base and available resources such as those included on the website of the International Child and Youth Care Network www.cyc-net.org. We should be proud of the many accomplishments of our field but also challenged to better connect our many colleagues to the rich resources and heritage of our international field of practice. Conferences are essential to promote the professional child and youth care culture and further develop the broader professional community and other pertinent communities of practice within child and youth care. I appreciate the contributions of the Residential Child Care Project personnel and all who participated in the conference for providing such meaningful learning and networking experiences and building communities of practice.

