Building a Community of Practice - Highlights

The Residential Child Care Project (RCCP) hosted its fourth International RCCP conference on Tuesday, June 21, 2016 through Friday, June 24, 2016 at the Lake George Hotel and Conference Center in scenic Lake George, NY.

Traditionally, the RCCP conference is designed for professionals who work with vulnerable children and families, providing an environment for caregivers to explore ways to provide the best care for the populations they serve. That has never been more evident as experienced in the event in Lake George.

There were approximately 250 people in attendance from 13 countries, including Australia, Canada, England, Scotland, N. Ireland, Bermuda, Ireland, Burundi, Israel, Switzerland, Uganda, South Korea, as well as 18 different states within the United States.

The theme of the RCCP’s latest conference event was Building a Community of Practice. Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor (retrieved from http://wenger-trayner.com). The RCCP team’s goal of this conference was to begin the process of building such a community by providing a unique opportunity to meet with other professionals from around the globe to exchange ideas and experiences in a more casual “retreat-like” setting.

RCCP wanted to encourage professionals who share a passion for working with children and families to come together and learn how to do their work better through a variety of workshops, community of practice forums, and social events.

Opportunities to network, and gain insight into the complex issues that are challenging RCCP’s work and our attempts to serve the best interests of children and families, were built into all aspects of the conference program. This event was not the typical experience that we tend to think of when we envision a conference. In addition to the keynotes, workshops, and paper presentations composed of internationally recognized professionals, highlights of the conference included:

- **Community of Practice** forums where professionals had the opportunity to meet in facilitated CoP groups to share their experiences and learn from each other.

- **Children and Family Experiences** sessions where the attendees had the opportunity to hear the voices of children, families and adults who live or have
lived in care settings.

- **Stories of Practice** sessions where professionals were provided with a facilitated opportunity to record their stories of experiences with children and families in order to share them with other professionals. RCCP plans to release the stories of practice recordings in a series on their web site at http://rccp.cornell.edu.

- **Cornell University TCI instructors and CARE consultants** were available to answer questions about CARE and TCI implementation and training.

- **Networking Opportunities** where even the “down-time” was designed to give attendees the chance to collaborate and discuss what matters most to them in their work. Continental breakfasts, lunches, receptions, a barbeque, and a Lake George Dinner Cruise were all designed to be casual and interactive in an effort to give participants an opportunity to chat and share information in a relaxed atmosphere.

The conference began on Tuesday with the opportunity for TCI trainers and CARE educators to take the tests to apply for re-certification. Attendees provided an overwhelming amount of positive feedback on the decision to hold this aspect of the conference in the beginning of the week. This is important to note because it was a key component to the overall goal of creating a more “retreat-like setting”. Based on post-conference feedback, this effectively eliminated the anxiety that many would feel throughout the conference if they were to test for certification at the end of the event, as RCCP has done in previous conferences.

Opportunities for people to share their experiences through the Stories of Practice were available throughout the week.

The Community of Practice forums were scheduled at various times throughout the conference beginning on Tuesday afternoon. The topics covered were: Research, Schools, Organizational Leadership, Trauma informed Practice, and Training Innovations. These forums were facilitated by RCCP staff and consultants and were designed to allow attendees to discuss their points of view, concerns, and ideas on the topics that they were most interested in. It is important to note that the conversations were not confined to the forums, however. True to the theme of the conference, the discussions about the ideas generated in the community of practice groups continued during breaks, meals, and well into the night. Whether it was the spirit of the conference itself, the serene setting, or the desire for more ideas that can be used in their work, attendees seemed reluctant to even “pause” their discussions. The wine and cheese reception in the evening consisted of dozens of groups of attendees from all over the world talking about what interested them the most about their work, and just getting to know others with similar experiences.

The spirit of the conference, and the enthusiasm of the attendees, continued to be fueled in no small part by the powerful events and keynote speakers that took place on Wednesday. The day began with another Community of Practice forum session, which continued discussions from the day before and served to get people back into the conference and collaboration “mode”. It did not take much “prodding” to get people engaged…even at 8:00 in the morning!
The conferenced opened with The Hillside Youth Voice Band from the Varick Campus, which is part of the Hillside Family of Agencies in Rochester, NY, USA performing original songs that show us what some of our most vulnerable children go through each day, and what they are feeling while in out-of-home care. The Youth Voice Band performed songs entitled “I’m Gonna be Me”, “Can You See Who We Are”, “You Make a Difference” and the Neil Young song, “Helpless”. Though most of the band’s performances and recordings consist of original material, when the band first heard “Helpless” and read the lyrics one young man said, “This song is about wanting to go home and knowing the only way you can get there is in your heart. This song is about us.”

It was an emotional event for everyone in attendance, including the band members. The band’s lead singer asked to remain onstage after the songs were performed and told some of his story about how he has come to realize that there are adults who care about “kids like him”. His story was followed by his extremely heartfelt thanks to everyone in attendance at the conference for everything that they do for the children in their care. This was not only a powerful message for conference attendees, but that very special acknowledgement and affirmation seemed to give everyone a renewed sense of purpose as professionals in their respective fields of endeavor. No one in the room was unaffected, regardless of their roles as direct care staff, clinicians, researchers, or even those few RCCP staff who do not work directly with the professionals and youth in these settings.

The first keynote speaker of the conference was Dr. Anthony Burrow, PhD. Dr. Burrow is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Development at Cornell University, and the director of PRYDE (Program for Research on Youth Development and Engagement). Dr. Burrow’s talk, entitled Purpose in Life: Evidence of a Psychological Resource showed us that while the pursuit of purpose in life is common, we really do not always know how one finds his or her purpose. Which path should be taken in order to find purpose? Most of us may not fully understand the full benefit of having purpose.

- **Purpose** is a central, self-organizing life aim that stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning.
- promotes optimal resource allocation (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009)

- “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003)

Dr. Burrow presented the concept of purpose as a “psychological resource” that, when it is cultivated, nurtured and supported “dynamically influences how people perceive and behave within the world”. After experiencing Dr. Burrow’s presentation, it became clear that the concept of having purpose has a profound effect on how we are each perceived by others as well. In one of his slides, Dr. Burrow illustrated that “Purposeful people have greater interpersonal appeal” which consists of “attractiveness and likeability, potential for friendship, and an interest in conversation”. This overall concept is critical in life, but it seems especially fitting when working with youth in care. If the adults working with the youth in care have real purpose in what they do, the relationships and trust needed to reach the desired outcomes for each child can be realized.
Next up was a keynote presentation by Dr. Howard Bath, PhD. Dr. Bath, currently with Allambi Care in Australia, has many years of experience as a consultant in research, training, and program development. Dr. Bath’s keynote was entitled Translating Trauma: From Complexity to Clarity. The trauma framework has profoundly changed the way we understand the developmental experiences of our young clients, how these experiences have shaped their thinking and behavior, and how we should respond to their needs. The problem that we face is that there must be a way of using the wealth of information gained about the trauma-related needs of each of the youth in our care outside of the clinician’s office. As Dr. Bath put it, what about the “other 23 hours” of the day? We need a “coherent vision and a roadmap for those who interact daily with young people in the ‘other 23 hours’.” At first glance, this may appear simple to those who are outside of these situations. The clinicians just need to talk to staff and a plan needs to be made, right? As those who work in these settings know all too well, however, it is not so simple. Trauma is complex, even at the best of times, and working with traumatized children in the moment makes it very difficult to follow a “roadmap”.

Dr. Bath shared his experiences with Maria, a young person in his care some years ago when he was a direct care worker, and the challenges that she was facing. He also talked about the challenges that he faced when working with her, particularly when he did not necessarily recognize what was triggering certain feelings and behavior for her. Even if he had known, the question was: how does that knowledge help? How do we use the knowledge of her trauma to help her when she goes out, but is late getting home because she had been drinking? If we know that she behaved that way because she was upset about never having a birthday party (discovered later on, and triggered because another child had a party earlier in the day), how does that help us to help Maria?

Dr. Bath talked about the importance of connection. We know that having a connection with the children that we care for is critical in order to help them cope. The better we know the children in our care, the more help and support we can give them. Timing is another factor. Is the child ready to deal with what is bothering them? What about our own knowledge and ability, and are we ourselves prepared enough to help the child face their trauma and deal with it in a positive way? Dr. Bath said that our children “feel a shameful difference to the world around them” and must “strive for the badge of normality” and it is our purpose to work together to figure out how to use every tool at our disposal to help them do so.

The conference continued with a Table Topics lunch session, which provided opportunities for facilitated lunch discussions with others in similar roles and interests.

The third keynote, Simple and Deep Right Before Our Eyes – Simple Interactions as the Active Ingredient for Human Development was presented by Dr. Junelei Li, PhD. Dr. Li is the Rita M. McGinley Endowed Chair in Early Learning and Children’s Media, Professor of Psychological Science, and Co-Director of the Fred Rogers Center at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, PA, USA.

Positive adult-child relationships are primary in all of human development. Across cultures, ages, or social settings, developmental human interactions take diverse forms, but share four essential characteristics — connection, reciprocity, progression, and
participation. Simple and ordinary interactions embodying one or more of these characteristics are the powerful active ingredients for children’s learning and development. They can also become beautiful raw materials for adult staff’s own noticing, wondering, and growing. This two-part session featured both a presentation and an “eyes-on” workshop to examine and appreciate the role of simple interactions in child and youth work. Dr. Li used several recorded scenarios to delve into what he means by “simple and deep”. A video of the day that Dr. Li and his wife adopted their daughter, where her reaction to him was vastly different to her interaction with his wife, led Dr. Li to really look at the reason behind the behavior. Dr. Li realized that the majority of workers in the orphanage who cared for his daughter were women, and that any men that the children came in contact with were doctors. They were there to give the children their medications, and immunizations, which was undoubtedly a less than pleasant experience for the children. That’s why she reacted so strongly to Dr. Li in the beginning. It was a simple observation that led Dr. Li to a deeper understanding of what was happening with his daughter.

Another scenario showed workers in an orphanage in China who work with young children with Cerebral Palsy and the vast differences in the way the different workers interacted with the children. One worker, while feeding the child in her care, assisted the child with eating and using utensils and not simply feeding the child. She allowed the children to feed themselves. The physical act of using a spoon or fork was difficult for the children, but the worker knew that if she did everything for the children then they would not learn to do things for themselves. In contrast, another worker in the same scene was basically “shoveling” the food in the children’s mouths so that she could move on to the next child and get through meal time. One worker, with no training at all, was actually helping the child while another simply wanted to get all the children fed as efficiently as possible. The simple act of allowing the children to “do for themselves” while being with them in a supportive way, led to a deeper interaction between the staff and the children. Both develop a sense of accomplishment and purpose in this way, and it was clear that the staff person saw the children as people, as well as the reason that they are there.

These powerful examples showed us that it is all about the interactions in life, and that it is often the simplest ones that have the most impact on us and those we care for in our work.

The core concepts of Dr. Li’s work directly connect with all of the RCCP programs. His work can be best summarized with a few quotes from Dr. Li himself:

“Fred Rogers often said to his colleagues and friends, ‘I feel so strongly that deep and simple is far more essential than shallow and complex.’ This core conviction guided Fred Rogers and his colleagues to develop television programs, books, speeches, and curricula that reached out to millions of children, parents, and professionals for nearly half a century.”

“Today, as so many of us are striving to serve more children, work with less resources, and comply with an increasingly complex and demanding system of standards and regulations, the need to focus on “deep and simple” is ever more important. I believe at the core of Fred Rogers’ work with parents and educators is this essential message – Enriching interactions with another
human being is the most important ingredient in a child’s development. Real and lasting change can start with finding what ordinary people do well with children in everyday moments.”

Following Dr. Li’s presentation was a barbeque and some outdoor fun and games. The conversations, exchange of ideas, and enthusiasm continued well into the evening. In spite of a long and intense day, people were energized and eager for more.

Thursday morning began with a keynote presentation by Dr. John Lyons, PhD, Senior Policy Fellow, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago in Chicago, IL, USA. This keynote was entitled Managing the Business of Personal Change: Transformation Collaborative Outcomes Management. Transformational Collaboration Outcomes Management offers a conceptual framework to address three key underlying factors that have prevented the system from realizing the vision of effective systems. By shifting away from service system management to transformational management we can build collaborative relationships with families (engagement) among providers (teaming) and across sectors (system integration) to provide the information we need to make decisions based on the best interests of children and families at all levels of the system.

Dr. Lyons began by cautioning those in attendance about the dangers of viewing the field they are in as a “service industry”. He sees our work with children and families as transformative or, more to the point, part of a transformation industry. In other words, we are not just there to “watch” the children in our care or to simply make sure that they get to school, eat their meals, and get to bed on time. Our business is to transform children’s lives for the better. Again, it is all about the interactions, the needs of the child, the connections made, and the staff having an investment (beyond just going to work in the morning) in order to facilitate the transformation in the children so that the desired outcomes can be realized.

Dr. Lyons stated that you can’t successfully manage any business without having a way to measure what you are doing. Dr. Lyons discussed the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) tool which, per their web site, is a “multi-purpose tool developed for children’s services to support decision making, including level of care and service planning, to facilitate quality improvement initiatives, and to allow for the monitoring of outcomes of services”. More information can be found at: http://praedfoundation.org/tools/the-child-and-adolescent-needs-and-strengths-cans/

The workshops delivered by a variety of presenters presented topics that supported, and were intertwined with, what we learned from our keynote presentations and Communities of Practice forums. Workshops topics included understanding self-injury, research, proposal writing, trauma and healing, CARE principles and implementation, TCI implementation, threshold concepts, TCI training innovations using modern media, and many others. The bulk of the individual feedback that RCCP received about the workshops was extremely positive. The only suggestion was that the workshops were not long enough. People wanted more time to be able to discuss the various topics with the presenters.

The desire to keep working was present in both the written feedback as well as during the dinner cruise on Lake George. Everyone wanted more time. Despite the relaxing
environment during the glorious cruise on Lake George, the intense conversations continued throughout the dinner cruise, and again into the late hours that evening.

The final day of the event began with time for the Community of Practice Forums. In this “final” session facilitators and participants continued their discussions and arrived at the conclusion that these Community of Practice groups have real value and should continue. The groups will be kept alive by RCCP posting links to the blog pages on the RCCP web site, as well as letting those who could not attend the conference have access to the pages so that they can contribute as well. RCCP’s goal is to keep these very important conversations going as much as possible.

Our final keynote speaker was Xavier McElrath-Bey, MA, a Youth Justice Advocate at the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth in Chicago, IL, USA, presented No Child Is Born Bad. Those in attendance were extremely fortunate to hear Xavier share his intense and traumatic personal story, all the while talking about the paramount importance of age appropriate and trauma-informed treatment of children who are involved in juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

"I am a firm believer that NO CHILD IS BORN BAD...and that all children deserve another chance for positive change." Xavier McElrath-Bey

“My childhood traumas of living in poverty, having a mother diagnosed with mental illness, living in fear of an abusive step-father, and being placed in and out of foster care made me ripe for the occasions of impulsive and destructive behavior -- especially gang involvement which gave me the sense of having a new family.” Xavier McElrath-Bey

Xavier’s childhood, as shown in his quotes above and on his web site at http://www.thexlife.org, was not an easy one by any definition or imagination. The trauma he endured, and the subsequent “escape” into his new gang family, sent Xavier down a path of poor life choices that culminated in a prison sentence. However, as Xavier states, something happened to him while in prison. He grew up. As a child he was not able to understand that there are consequences to his actions. There was nobody in his life to show him a better way.
He began to make positive choices in his life, and went on to achieve remarkable things: college degrees, writing articles supporting Restorative Justice initiatives, speaking at conferences, schools, and universities and becoming a strong advocate for troubled youth.

“Restorative approaches within the educational system, group homes, police stations, juvenile courts and other institutions and agencies can serve as a positive tools of socialization for at-risk youth; to combat already existing negative influences that may impinge upon a youth’s development.” Retrieved from http://www.thexlife.org.

Through his tears, Xavier said that none of his transformation would have been possible if not for the few positive connections that he was able to make, the feelings of remorse for what he had done, and the fact that he matured while in prison. As we know from our own work, and other parts of this conference, it is these connections that make all of the difference in our lives. Looking around the room during and following Xavier’s presentation, it was more than slightly jarring to realize that there was nobody that remained unaffected. The sheer power of the emotions behind Xavier’s life experiences, and the realizations that accompanied them, seemed almost overwhelming for everyone in the room. It was an amazing experience to be a part of, and a real highlight of the conference in that it helped tie together what many of the conversations throughout the week were all about.

The final event of the conference, in the last but absolutely not least category, was the Panel Presentation: Children and Families Speak Out On “What Works”. The panel was moderated by Dr. James Anglin, PhD, Professor at the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria B.C. in Canada.

- “What does this child need to be successful?”
- “How should the child’s parents and other family members be involved in their treatment?”
- “What do I need to do to assist this child and family in achieving their goals?”

These are questions that service providers frequently ask themselves and are often best answered by the children and families being served. This presentation included a panel of children and family members who have participated in residential and other types of treatment services. They generously agreed to share their thoughts and insights about their experiences, including what they needed from service providers, and what really helped.

Dr. Anglin facilitated a very open and honest discussion keeping with the theme of the conference, but keeping it safe for those on the panel who were a little nervous about speaking in front of so many people. One of the panel speakers spoke of his experiences in care, and how staff saw his potential and encouraged him to use his inclination toward humor to help himself, and others. His parents also spoke about what it was like before he was at the agency, and the transformation that he went through. They spoke about how the agency involved them at every step, and how they felt like they were healing along with their son.

Another young woman talked about her experiences in care and, while not all positive every day, she was grateful for the staff and what they accomplished together. She spoke
of getting through school and her goals of going to college and her desire to find a purpose helping others.

A third set of parents, tearfully spoke about how grateful they were for the staff at the agency where their daughter stayed and that without them they would have been lost. This was followed by an equally emotional agreement from another parent who said, “My wife and I are teachers…we’re great with other people’s kids…we couldn’t figure it out, but I suppose we just needed help with our own.” That can often be the case for many parents. The key is recognizing that fact and seeking the help that our children need.

Another panel presenter, who now works in residential care and is a TCI instructor, spoke of growing up in the foster care and residential systems. He spoke of so many disparities like going into a nice home for the first time and seeing toys that he never had, but then being told that those toys are not to be played with by him. He talked about the pain of being separated from his siblings. He spoke of having a favorite toy taken away and how much that meant because it was basically his only connection to his family and home. Ultimately these experiences, and later meeting his wife, were the influences that saved him. Those experiences are what drive him to help children in care today.

This brings the story of this extraordinary event to a close. The question remains, however, did RCCP succeed in their desire to build a community of practice?

That question can be answered when we look at the closing remarks of the conference. Following the panel, Dr. James Anglin bravely created a rap-style poem that tied many of the speaker presentations, workshops, messages from the kids’ band, panel presentation, and community of practice forums together. It was amusing, obviously, but it was also clear that every aspect of this conference was interconnected in such a way that all who were there left with something they could take back to their lives and improve their work. They also left feeling like they were a part of something. That is the beginning of a true community of practice.