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**Some Reflections on the Irish Association of Social Care Educators**

**Keynote Address to the Irish Association of Social Care Educators  
Annual Conference, Athlone, October 2004**

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**Abstract**

This paper is an abridged version of one presented at the annual conference of the Irish Association of Social Care Educators held in Athlone in October 2004. It comments on some of the challenges we face as educators.

**Key Words:** Association, challenges, membership, social care, IASCE

**Introduction**

Groucho Marx once famously said that he didn't want to be a member of a club that he was let into and yet Irish social care educators were all delighted to join this particular club. It is worth remembering that this Association had its genesis with some six member colleges. We now have thirteen with each college permitted to bring along three members from its academic course board. Thus, there could be as many as 39 persons with very diverse backgrounds at each of our IASCE meetings! We have now to amend our Constitution following deliberations in October 2004 where we have opened up the Association to membership from the Post Leaving Certificate sector (subject to individual college representation) which could result in very significantly increased membership.

It looks likely that our Association will continue to grow. We are the only Association in social care/child and youth care in Ireland that has 100% of potential membership and we should be delighted with this. We are uniquely positioned to act as a strong advocate for our undergraduate and postgraduate students and for how *we* want the

field to develop. We should be able to exert considerable pressure on influential persons/agencies/politicians and we must be unafraid in this.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Future for Social Care?**

But, social care/child and youth care training and education in the colleges does not exist in a vacuum. Changes are afoot internationally and we must keep looking to the field itself. The literature of social care often refers to social care as a *form of practice*. At various times, writers have described the uniqueness of the field and even its 'magic' (Garfat & McElwee, 2004). But, what is social care and is there really anything unique about it at all? Well, I think there is. For a number of reasons, though, social care has been quite difficult to define (McElwee & Garfat, 2003; McElwee & Share, 2005). Indeed, it is only very recently that our own Association has put together an explanatory manual for interested careers guidance personnel.

Let me return to the issue of uniqueness of social care for a time. The International Child & Youth Care Consortium extolled over a decade ago. What marks social care out from the other ways of professional 'helping' or 'intervening' (psychiatric nursing and social work as examples) is the use of 'self' as an everyday tool with our service users in their own life space (Garfat & McElwee, 2004). In my residential practicum staff both, male and female, bring to their work unique skills and traits which belong only to themselves. As educators, we can highlight certain areas of study and research and even 'ways of doing', but we cannot teach what the individual knows to be true – self is all, self is everything. What we can do is to work on 'self' through the lens of theory and practice whilst being imaginative with, and for, our students. Readers need hardly be reminded that students can now stay at home and spend hours usefully surfing sites such as CYC-Net, so educators will, increasingly, need to entice students to come to their classes. Herein, will be a major challenge for the future.

### **A Challenging Environment**

Social care provision is more and more complex and the training and education we provide should be both visionary and practical. It is my belief that social care will soon come to be regarded as a profession (no longer a discipline) that is a genuine and valued part of a larger field, direct care human services across the life span and across

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<sup>1</sup> The recently formed Irish Association of Social Care Workers has, at the time of writing,

practice settings. At the same time, specializations within social care will continue to develop at an unprecedented rate. Perhaps the most important thing for us, as an Association to remember, is that we exist only so long as we have programmes of study and students/practitioners/supervisors willing to embark on these programmes. It is already clear to us that the traditional base of eighteen year olds is dwindling and those in practice without formal qualifications and mature students will increasingly be our students of the next decade as they create and sustain portfolios of learning. We must produce effective practitioners who can work at different levels and in diverse environments – ones who have, at least, some sense of ‘doing’ social care when they graduate. Whilst it remains the primary task of employers to train graduates in specific environments when in a job, a continual theme from the field is that the colleges must work harder at getting a better balance between training and education. I have heard this so many times in the field that we, as educators, need to accept its legitimacy as a comment.

In a very recent column on the CYC-Net, Heather Modlin, noted that over a period of fifteen years in the field she had worked with hundreds of social practitioners and she comments; “I have observed what works, and what doesn’t work. From my experience, I have determined that those youth care workers who are most effective, who promote the most learning, develop the strongest relationships, and facilitate the best outcomes, are those who understand that child and youth care work is about balance. It’s about balancing firmness with flexibility; caring and support with accountability; praise and encouragement with honest, respectful, challenging feedback, and empathy and understanding with realistic, growth-oriented expectations” (Modlin, 2004; 1). Therefore, we have it from the floor, so to speak. An experienced manager is telling us what works. These are the areas we must concentrate on as we refine and develop our course content and delivery styles.

#### **Choosing Areas of Discourse**

I intend to randomly choose a couple of areas that have particularly exercised me over my time as President (an exhausting but interesting time) and after spending over a decade in this field. I have been part of the shift in consciousness amongst colleagues from seeing our students as ‘care bears’ in the early 1990’s to more evolved practitioners. I have seen first year classes grow from twenty-five students to over one

hundred students. I have seen practitioners and supervisors join our academic course boards. I have seen placements move to practica and social care being redesignated child and youth care (I accept my Canadian influences in this!). I have seen practica being shortened, lengthened, cut and pasted into different years. I have sat and wondered!

I would like to see a similar situation in Ireland to that of our near neighbours in Scotland where the Scottish Executive has provided substantial funding to establish The Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care (SIRCC). SIRCC has a range of objectives aimed at improving education and training in the discipline. So, too, could IASCE be given such a role, but it is not going to be handed to us. As President of this Association, I smarted at us being brought to speak to the Expert group only as an afterthought. And it seems now that education will have two places on the registration panels. This is insufficient and the baton must be taken by the incoming President of our Association.

An example of our Association taking ownership is where individual colleges would facilitate training days for field practicum supervisors and issue Certificates with joint logo accreditation i.e. Dublin Institute of Technology & Irish Association of Social Care Educators or Athlone Institute of Technology & Irish Association of Social Care Educators. Participants could begin to build a portfolio that has national currency. I would like to see a partnership approach in this. We have long been interested in working closely with the Resident Managers' Association (indeed we invite each organisation's President to our mutual conferences), work on and sponsor publications and attend government offices together. Partnership is the key to our mutual success. It would be very disappointing if educators or practitioners/managers got into a culture of mutually exclusive development.

#### **An Indigenous Body of Social Care Knowledge**

I am not seeking for social care to ignore other professions and disciplines, rather we should take ownership of what we can do as a co-ordinating Association. We can contribute to the growth of an indigenous body of knowledge as with the forthcoming textbook on social care (Share & McElwee, 2005). College lecturers are still relatively free to write from an experiential perspective as we have less than forty years experience providing structured programmes for our students. In the greater scheme

of things, this is not a long time. It takes courage to share our experiences but share them we must. I would argue that there is, in fact, a moral obligation on us to show leadership to our students. If they can write a good essay, we should equally be able to write a good paper.

#### **Respecting them where they're At**

There is a growing international awareness that services for children and youth should reflect the cultural experience of the recipients of that service. My wife, Susan, who is a Child Care Services Manager has commented on the names of children in her care. Increasingly, it is the norm to have children of refugee and asylum seeking populations with names such as Bridget Ommaji, Bernadette Onglong and the like. Although such children are in care throughout the country, each child remains unique. Our courses will have to develop an international focus that explores aspects of identity in far away places as these cultures will surely come to our shores in greater numbers.

Thus, whilst I think it is important to explore other cultural ways of educating, training and 'doing' social care, I also believe that we should strive to generate our own body of knowledge around this in a specifically Irish context (see Garfat & McElwee, 2004). This has already happened to a degree. Thom Garfat and I, to take but one example, have developed a model of training and practice we are calling the EirCan approach. Whilst it is informative and interesting to hear how social care or child and youth care or social pedagogy is explored and 'done' in other systems, we need to hear how and why it is done in our own system. Our students deserve that educators and academics lead by example.

#### **Subject Choices on Course Programmes**

I am aware that is a contentious area and that not all of my colleagues in this Association, and indeed practice, will agree with me. Nonetheless, I feel compelled to urge that we develop more competency-based college programmes and move away from the traditional provision of wholly generic courses such as 'sociology', 'social policy' and 'social history' in vacuums. These courses should, instead, feed into professional social care modules and inform, rather than isolate, social care and child and youth care modules. An interesting subject is a wonder in itself, but as we

constantly encouraged to reduce class contact hours there is always a threat that the 'softer' material may fall by the wayside as validation panels as Registrars and Directors sign off on our schedules.

**Concluding Commentary: Provide Nutrients and it will Grow**

I have been resident in rural locations these past six years and have taken to the odd bit of gardening (or to be truthful, I have taken to watching my wife and son gardening) and remain the true optimist. "If we plant it in the ground, it will grow". Whilst we have much to feel positive about in our Association, there really is much to do. We have yet to travel to Blanchardstown or Dundalk for our meetings and look forward to the journey.

It is not enough to consistently mention and, even agree, areas of action. We must follow through on these. We must be courageous in challenging College Registrars who want more students, but do not give adequate resources. We must question each other at our Association table. We must only use practica where there are appropriately qualified supervisors. All students must be visited on practica by staff who are using measurable outcomes that are clear and agreed by all concerned. The content of our programmes must be visionary, but practical. The focus must always remain with the service user.

One of my heroes has always been Muhammad Ali, the African-American boxer. I well remember my brother and I being pulled out of our beds bog-eyed by our father about 2.00am or 3.00am in the morning to watch Ali's epic fights (mainly because my father didn't like to watch TV by himself). Ali once said that his fights were not won on the canvas in front of flashing lights or dizzy crowds but out on the road and in the gym away from the glare. And so with our Association. Like Ali, the work we do may well engage generations to come after us. Let's get the training right.

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**Chasing a Rainbow? Victimisation and the Gay and Lesbian Community in Ireland.**

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**Abstract**

In recent years it has become widely recognised that the gay, lesbian and bisexual community in Ireland experiences a disturbing amount of anti-gay crime. This said, with the exception of a few largely exploratory studies, there is a complete absence of high quality research that examines these experiences in Ireland and we have been forced to formulate our response on a vague notion that "it is a problem" rather than a truly informed appreciation of its extent. This paper argues in favour of such research, and suggests the form it might take based on a review of findings from international studies and the methodological barriers they have encountered.

**Key Words:** Hate crimes, homophobia, policing.

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**Introduction**

Since the 1980s a plethora of studies conducted in the US (Herek, 1989), Australia (Cox, 1990 & 1994), and the UK (Mason and Palmer, 1996) have been published that examine the extent and nature of victimisation experienced by the gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) community. In the main the research focused on crimes perpetrated in response to the victim's perceived sexuality (i.e. hate or bias crimes) and found that more than seventy percent of gay men and lesbians experience verbal harassment and a quarter physical violence (Herek, 1992; Berrill, 1992; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995).

Also emerging from the research is the concept that the GLB community require a specialised policing response even when the victimisation experienced is unrelated to their perceived sexuality. Fear of being 'outed' or of suffering further victimisation or prejudice, either at the hands of investigating officers or the perpetrator, means that they require a particularly sensitive approach by police officers (Richardson, 1995).