

Creating a Place for Us: An Overview of the FICE Young People's Conference 2004

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Introduction

Conferences like this allow us to get together, to share information, experiences and more importantly, it gives us an excellent opportunity to make friends. Throughout the last three days I've laughed, danced, played sport and, most importantly, learnt so much about different cultures and nationalities. Not all of us speak the same language and yet we have managed to communicate and laugh together.

(Delegate to the FICE Young Person's Conference at the end of the FICE International Congress)

During the 46th International FICE Congress, a parallel event ran in Largs, Scotland. This event was called *Creating a Place for Us* and it was a three day conference which brought together a group of young people from around the world who were experiencing out-of-home care. It is safe to say that this conference was a life-affirming event for all who took part, including the adults. I will attempt to give a flavor of those few precious days and will hopefully emphasise the importance of hearing the voice of the children and young people who should be at the core of our work.

Planning an international conference for young people

The idea of having a young person's conference was suggested during the early stages of planning the International FICE Congress. The planning group was fortunate to include a representative from Who Cares? Scotland, the national advocacy group for children and young people in care. Young people are central to their work, both in spirit and in fact. They are experts at running consultation events and residential conferences involving young people in care. As such they were happy to take the lead in turning the idea into reality.

A separate planning group was convened, consisting of representatives from Who Cares? Scotland, Save the Children and staff from the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care based at both the University of Strathclyde and The Robert Gordon University. The planning group was set up 18 months before the event and every moment of this time was needed to organize the event.

Meetings took place once a month up until the last month, when meetings took place on a weekly basis.

The initial planning focused on ideas for the content and themes of the conference. Later, planning was taken up with much more practical issues such as materials for facilitators, arrangements to meet young people and their supporting adults, and ensuring that supplies of emergency toiletries were available. Anyone planning such an event should never underestimate the amount of time needed to ensure its success.

Each young person had to have a supporting adult with them, who acted as their personal support and also as their interpreter. The planning group also made sure that child protection issues remained at the forefront of any activities and discussion. They drew up a child protection briefing for all participants. This was given out to participants and re-iterated with the whole conference on the morning of the first day. Protocols were agreed with the local social services department in the event that a child protection issue should arise. The planning group became the management group while attending the actual conference. Four of this group became designated as child protection staff, so that participants knew that they had someone they could go to if a child protection issue came up. Finally, the management group at the conference worked a shift system; two of the group were on duty throughout the nights of the conference and patrolled the venue to ensure the safety of the young people involved.

Before the conference

The best place for a child is a place of love and care...

Children always long to know their roots and where they come from...

The best place for children is a place where there is no abuse...

(Comments from the Voices of Youth website made by children and young people in Nigeria)

Young people are tired of just talking, we want to take action and we can make our voice heard and determine a change.

(Comment from a young person from Romania on the Voices of Youth website)

In a way, the conference started before the 8th September in Largs. This was because UNICEF hosted a webchat for four weeks before the start of the conference. The webchat was held on the *Voices of Youth* page on the UNICEF website, and encouraged young people who would be unable to attend the conference to voice their opinions. These views were then put on to card and posted around the conference venue. Many of the views informed the work of the young people who attended the conference. So in many ways, a wider community of young people took part in the conference, and they were certainly there in spirit, if not in body.

The programme

From Heaven to hell my thoughts prevail

From the age of Three everything went down the drain

My parents hated each other

and I was brought to a children's home

There I was alone

(Extract from rap song performed at the adult Congress by one of the delegates to the young people's conference)

From the very early stages, the planning group had wanted the young people to have a positive experience but also to produce something that would be a tangible expression of their views and desires. An additional challenge was presented by the diversity of cultures and languages of the young participants. Who Cares? Scotland had a great deal of experience in finding novel ways for young people to present their views. They suggested that the conference should have a series of activity-based workshops: drama, graffiti art, rap music, newsletter and video. Each of the workshops would have, as its aim, to produce a piece of work representing the views of the young people. These would then be presented as part of the last session of the adult congress. The workshops would also give the young people the opportunity to get to know each other in smaller groups.

Although the workshops provided the focus of the conference, a range of other activities was organized to ensure that young people had an enjoyable experience. Each night, there were opportunities to take part in leisure and sports activities. A trip to Loch Lomond was arranged for everyone, and a disco was arranged for the last night.

Subsequent evaluations of the programme by the young people showed that they enjoyed all of the activities, the venue and, most importantly, the opportunity to get to know other young people from different countries and to make friends. The workshops would not have been so successful if the planning group had not identified such talented and committed facilitators. They worked tirelessly with the young people, developing their ideas and encouraging them to express themselves in every way.

The Conference

The conference was attended by representatives from all over the world: Albania, Bosnia, Burundi, China, England, Eritrea, Finland, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Israel, Macedonia, Romania, Scotland, Serbia, Sierra Leone, United States of America and Wales...In total, 18 countries took part. Some only traveled for 45 minutes, while others took hours, even days, to turn up and represent their country.

(Extract from the introduction to the newsletter, written by delegates to the young person's conference)

Young people started arriving on Monday, 6th September, even though the conference did not officially begin until the morning of Wednesday, 8th September. Most of the young people had arrived for the start of the conference, which began with an interactive drumming session. This was chosen as an activity because it did not depend on language, it did not involve any pressure on the young people and, most importantly, it was fun! The weather was glorious (a rare event in Scotland!) and as the conference progressed, more and more of the work and the activities took place outside in the gardens of the SportScotland National Centre, which hosted the event.

Young people were allocated to workshops depending on their choices and started to work in the first afternoon, drafting the ideas for their presentation

and thinking about how they could help the adults at the congress to understand the experiences of young people in care. Almost immediately, friendships started to develop in spite of language barriers. Young people started learning words and phrases of other languages, and began to make their own suggestions for some of the activities.

The drama workshop

Boys, boys, boys...you don't have to fight to sort out your differences...now let's see if we can do this in a better way.

(Line spoken by one of the delegates who took part in the drama performance)

The young people who took part in the drama workshop were assisted by a drama facilitator and an art facilitator. The drama facilitator worked with the young people to formulate their ideas about what they wanted to present, while the art facilitator helped them to come up with ideas for the backdrop to the drama sketches. Many of the young people had never taken part in a drama workshop before, so the facilitator spent much of the first day helping the young people to relax and become aware of what they could do with their voice and body. Seeing the whole group perform their exercises in the gardens was a joy to all the observers, and helped the young people to build their confidence. Some of the young people felt confident enough to take centre stage in the drama sketches, while others were content to interpret the ideas and paint the backdrops for the performance. In the end, the group came up with the idea for a sketch based on the idea that people can transcend their differences and do not have to fight to resolve their problems. This idea was clearly influenced by the horrific experiences of some young people who had been sent away from their country because of war, and had arrived as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in a strange country. The backdrops were stark images of dark buildings, but also a peace sign, which was held up at the end of the performance. It was a truly inspiring message of hope and optimism.

The video workshop

That was stunning...all of those ideas in a short piece of film...amazing!

(Comment from one of the planning group after viewing the video film made by the delegates)

The video workshop was facilitated by two talented and committed people who worked tirelessly with their group in trying to transfer the complex experiences of the young people into a short video film. Evidence of this came on the second day, when one of the facilitators tried to work on in spite of having sustained an injury received the previous evening. The injury turned out to be a broken wrist!

The young people had many different experiences. In the end, the video consisted of a number of short sketches, conveying striking images of isolation followed by hope. One of the most unforgettable images was of the young people with the same hats passing a ball to each other. Other young people from different backgrounds, signified by different hats, tried to join the game

and were initially excluded. Then, eventually, they were allowed to join the game. It is difficult to explain the impact of this simple sketch in writing. It conveyed within 30 seconds something which would have taken much longer to say, with nowhere near the eloquence of the visual message. One of the most uplifting images was of a young woman from China who had suffered burns as a child. She was very shy at the beginning of the conference but, once she was part of the video group, she emerged from her shell and was pleased to appear in several of the video sketches. Her tenacity was inspirational and the whole conference took her to their hearts.

The graffiti art workshop

Don't forget it's our lives!
(The words which formed the centerpiece of the graffiti art tableau)

The young people working in the graffiti art group spent the first session discussing their ideas with an experienced graffiti artist. They spent their next session completing the preparatory work for the tableau, which was 32 feet long by 4 feet high. Due to the beautiful weather, the group were able to work outside for the three days. The gradually developing tableau became a focal point for meetings at break times, as young people and adults alike came to watch its development. The stunning blues, greens, purples and yellows were breathtaking in their vibrancy. Around the central message of *Don't forget it's our lives!*, the young people started to write words of meaning and significance for them. Words like *love, equality, individuality* and *safety* were added. The completed tableau was signed by the young people and it formed the front piece to the stage when the young people presented their work to the final session of the adult congress.

The rap workshop

Cheer up!
And look behind you... there are beautiful people and things around you.
The sun is shining, people are smiling.
All your life you thought you were alone.
Nobody cares, you're right and they're wrong!
But today my friend...I'm asking you to open your mind open your heart...
...and let the people get inside.
(Extract from rap song, written and performed by delegates at the final session of the adult congress)

The young people in the rap workshop immediately struck up strong friendships and were brimming over with ideas. The challenge for the rap music facilitator was in trying to help the young people to distill the ideas into a thematic rap performance. An additional challenge was presented because the young rappers wrote and performed in their own languages, ranging from Hebrew to German. The messages in the rap songs were powerful, dealing with loss of home and

parents, war and genocide, drug misuse and isolation; however, among these messages were strong themes of optimism and hope for the future, as illustrated by the short extract above. It was important that these messages were not lost on the audience, so it was decided that although the young rappers would perform in their own language, translations would be shown on a screen behind them so that everyone in the audience could understand.

The newsletter workshop

Based on our experiences we are in the best position to say what still needs to be done for children and young people in out of home care all around the world. We need people and governments to care, to treat us equally and support us both economically and emotionally. We have the right to be heard and to be listened to, we need our opinions to be appreciated and have our privacy respected. There is still much that has to be done regarding our education facilities and health care. We also need to be provided with a home, love, care and support, we need to be taught how to live independently, thus preparing us to be adults in a world where we can cook for ourselves, manage our finances and take care of ourselves so that one day we can have a home of our own to look after and also make a positive difference in the world.

(Extract from the FICE Young People's Conference newsletter)

The facilitator for the newsletter workshop had perhaps one of the biggest challenges faced by any of the workshop facilitators. This was because it was clear that not every young person would get their first choice of workshop. As a result, the newsletter group were mostly young people who had not been allocated to their first choice of workshop; however, thanks to the experience of the facilitator and the commitment of the young people in the group, it turned out that the newsletter was a great success. The group worked hard gathering information about each other, compiling their ideas for layout, and deciding on the most important messages to get across. They had the challenge of producing a four page newsletter for distribution to the adult congress within three days. They had also set themselves the task of gathering information for a follow-up insert to the newsletter, which would be sent to participants after the congress was over. The newsletter outlined the difficulties they had faced as young people in out-of-home care, and their wishes for the future. They were without a doubt one of the hardest working groups at the conference and left a lasting legacy which every participant, both adult and young person, could take away with them as a reminder of the event.

After the conference

Before, during and immediately after the presentation to the adult congress, many of the young people had to leave to return to their homes or countries of origin. This leaving was very painful for many of the young people and the adults. New friendships had been made, participants had had a wonderful experience and everyone was unsure about whether they would see some of the participants again. Although this was expected before the conference started, the impact of these feelings took everyone by surprise.

Subsequently, the planning group met to discuss how the conference had gone.

There were some key messages that future conference planners could take into account. Planners should ensure that full information about delegates is received at least a month in advance. If information is not forthcoming, this should be chased up rigorously. To allow this information to be received, application forms should be sent out at least six months in advance. Planners should make sure that each young person has a supportive adult who is clear that their only role is to support their young person. This role should be re-emphasised at the start of the conference. Consent for publication and pictures should be obtained as part of the application process. During the conference, the management team (i.e. the planning group) should have at least one point in the day where they all get together to give each other an overview of how things are going. Finally, time should be given over at the end of the conference for young people to say their goodbyes. Perhaps such a conference should be extended by an extra day to allow the partings to take place in a more sensitive way than happened at the Scottish FICE Congress.

Conclusion

The young people's conference was a truly special event. It meant a great deal to the young people. It was a genuine privilege for the adults who took part. At the end of the day, all participants knew they had been a part of something magical. It is hoped that the adults at the FICE congress heard the voices of the young people and will ensure that they organize another young person's conference as part of the next FICE Congress in Sarajevo.

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