

Report on the Quality in Alternative Care Conference

By Clinton Osbourn



I was really fortunate to be able to attend the “Quality in Alternative Care Conference”, organized by the SOS Children’s Villages in Prague at the beginning of April.

Youth participation was a major theme of the conference – not only with reference to youth participating in decisions about their own futures but also in the development of the organizations that are working with them. Thus, young people’s voices were really important at the conference and I was lucky to be part of a team that worked for three days prior to the conference with a group of 36 young people from all over the world, who have experienced alternative care, preparing them to participate in the conference.

Most of the youth were from Eastern Europe, with one young woman from Japan, three women from Western Europe and five Africans. ‘De-institutionalisation’, ‘leaving care’ and ‘youth networks’ were the themes that they explored. There was also a group of young people who worked on communications, doing interviews, creating podcasts and producing a daily newspaper.

I worked predominantly with a group of young people who prepared a workshop on leaving care. I was amazed by their creativity and their deep insight into the issue, which is hardly surprising as they have all had first hand experience of the alternative care. After the first day,

when they were brainstorming their ideas about ‘leaving care’, it was obvious that they didn’t need any extra information from so-called experts, as was planned (and quickly cancelled) as they truly were the experts. They really understood what was needed during the preparation phase as well as what was needed once they had left care. They had a range of interesting thoughts on how the process should look. It made me aware of how often we underestimate the people that we are working with by turning to experts for information about what they need, rather than just finding out from them. What a great privilege it was to work with these young men and women who could articulate their ideas really well, and had such innovative ideas that they were able to create one of the most interesting and engaging workshops at the conference!

I attended the workshop as a participant and they really got us talking about the issue - comparing the situation in various places around the world; understanding how young people experience leaving care; discussing what the ideal is that we should all be aiming for and thinking about the actions that we need to take

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to move the situation in our countries closer to the ideal. They also had such natural facilitation skills and delivered the workshop with confidence despite some of them not speaking English very well.

During the preconference, there were also presentations on the UN guidelines and the “I” Matter Campaign, as well as a really remarkable talk on Resilience by Michael Ungar. He is a Canadian researcher who believes that resilience refers not only an individual’s capacity to solve their problems but also the communities’ capability to give the individual what they need. He mentioned seven factors that need to be in place in order for resilience to develop: relationships, identity, sense of power, social justice, access to the things we need to survive, cohesion and culture. Despite these factors being common across cultures, he told us that resilience looks very different in different places. There was a lot of discussion with the young people about how they know if they are “doing well” and what they need to “do well”.

The conference was attended by over 400 delegates from around the world. Some of the main themes of the paper presentations and workshops included de-institutionalisation, child and youth participation, special needs, leaving



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care, quality management and quality care standards.

I got to hear Michael Ungar speak again when he gave the first key note address entitled "Nurturing the resilience of children with complex needs". He went into further detail about how important the external environment is in building resilience. He also talked about hidden resilience, which he discovered with the help of a control group. This is when children or youth are not obviously dealing with their situation in the most effective way, yet are coping better than they would have if there had not been an intervention. He emphasized that it doesn't matter how many services we are providing for youth, it is the quality of the services that really makes the difference. He claimed that safe and secure housing is one of the key factors in young people successfully negotiating their challenges. The context the youth find themselves in is most important and we as service providers are creating that context. It is important that youth are able to trust us and that we are providing culturally meaningful resources for them.

Stein and Lerch began their presentations by emphasizing the huge influence of the quality of the entire care experience on the process of transition to adulthood from care. They shared that no matter how good the preparation for leaving care is, without further support there is little chance of success. The process of transition out of care and to adulthood is a very delicate one and should

not be rushed, though it usually is. They once again emphasized the importance of safe and secure accommodation as a key factor in a successful transition, along with meaningful relationships.

I attended some workshops discussing semi-independent living programmes, which is a common form of post care accommodation in many countries. In one of the workshops we compared what really works as well as the challenges in various places. The situation is so extremely distinct in different places with young people in different countries, facing vastly different challenges. While young people in Albania are expected to leave care at the age of 14, without any additional accommodation support available from the state, Austrian youth who leave care at the age of 16 are given their own flat, an allowance and regular visits from a care worker.

I have always been aware of how little safe and secure accommodation is available for care leavers in South Africa, but it became clear how this predicament can really have an adverse effect on the likelihood of young people leaving care to successfully transition to adulthood. Stein pointed out the importance of research in order to campaign for action to improve the lives of young people and I've realized that there is a need for more research to be done around this issue in South Africa in order for the huge gap in services to be made apparent to the

relevant government departments. The responsibility of supporting care leavers cannot lie with a few, under resourced NGOs, as all young people leaving care should have the right to their needs being met. All youth leaving care are entitled to adequate support for the duration of the transition, though unfortunately so few are currently receiving it. And in order for the young person to handle the transition successfully it needs to be gradual and over a long space of time.

I felt that rather than an isolated event, the conference was a catalyst, for many people to make new

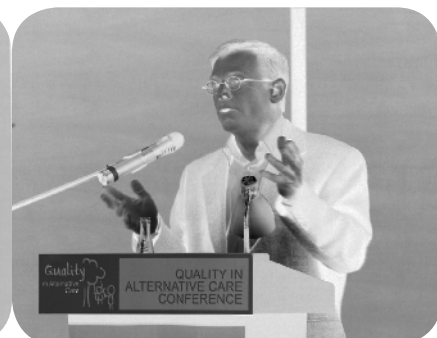
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connections, share their ideas and resources and ultimately ensure that better quality services are available to young people in and out of care all over the world. Despite the differences in our circumstances there are ideals that we should all be aspiring to. ●

Clinton Osbourn is the Youth Coordinator of Project Lungisela, an initiative of Mamelani Projects. Project Lungisela prepares young people leaving care and supports them once they have returned to their communities.

For more information on Mamelani please visit www.mamelani.org.za or contact Clinton on 021 448 2725 or contact@mamelani.org.za

For more information about the conference please see www.quality-care-conference.org



Mamelani Projects

PROJECT LUNGISELA

Youth Development Programme for Youth Leaving Care

By Carly Tanur



Organisational Background

Project Lungisela is an initiative of Mamelani Projects, a registered NPO based in Cape Town. Mamelani comes from the isiXhosa word for "listen" as we believe that by listening to the real felt needs of our beneficiaries, we will be able to create lasting change. Mamelani was launched in 2003 to help people in marginalized communities build healthier and more productive lives. Mamelani facilitates programmes that aim to address the needs of women, youth and children.

Our Context

According to the Children's Act, at the age of 18 years, youth are expected to leave the Children's Homes where they reside and return to their communities. There are some exceptions where state funding will allow for youth to remain in care after 18, but in many cases, they are expected to leave. At this stage it is hoped that these young men would have the education and life skills necessary to access tertiary education or find employment. The reality, however, is quite different. The youth we work with have all lived on the street at some point in their lives. As a result of this, their schooling is often incomplete and their education and job training options are extremely limited. With inadequate education and, therefore, very few job options, these young adults return to their

families, who, in some cases, have not resolved the problems that caused them to leave home in the first place. Aside from returning to a difficult environment, they are sometimes also expected to support both themselves and their families. It is for this reason that, even after years of stability at the Children's Home, some of these young adults return to life on the streets. Project Lungisela is our attempt to break this vicious cycle.

Programme Overview

The purpose of Project Lungisela is to offer support to young people leaving care so that they are equipped with the hard and soft skills to be able to sustain their livelihoods and ensure their well-being once they have left care. Project Lungisela works specifically with former "street children", who have grown up in the Homestead's Children's Home in Khayelitsha. The programme works with these young people for a whole year before they turn 18, which is when they need to leave the Children's Home. Afterwards it offers them on-going support once they have returned to the community.

Mamelani has worked in close partnership with the Homestead for the last five years, and our relationship with the Homestead and the youth who have grown up there, precedes the initiation of Project Lungisela. While most of the children who arrive at the

Homestead are reunited with their families, if they are still living at the Children's Home at age 18, it is usually an indication that family reunification was not a feasible option. In some cases, family members and caregivers are not traceable or are deceased. In others, family members are simply not able to care for these young men. In the past, when youth have returned to such homes, they have not been able to cope with the pressures at home, and have landed up back on the street. Since the inception of Project Lungisela, however, less than 5% of the youth have returned to the street.

Given that the programme supports youth who formerly lived on the street, and one of the biggest obstacles to overcoming their challenges, has been their poor sense of self and low self-esteem. A large portion of the programme focuses on improving their perception of themselves, so they are able to work towards achieving their dreams. The programme focuses on their strengths and builds on their resilience.

Programme Development Stage

Although the programme was initiated 5 years ago, for the first three years it ran on a minimal budget and only offered lifeskills sessions for the year that the youth were leaving the children's home. This proved to be inadequate and the need to offer

