

CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL FUTURES – SUSTAINABILITY, RESPONSIBILITY AND POWER

We are sincerely grateful for the support we received from Foundation for PSA which enabled to travel to this conference in Finland. We attended as two social workers who both work in statutory social work. This was a two-day conference in which we delivered a 90-minute workshop on mitigating "risk monster" professional culture and finding ways to work relationally with children, young people and families.

Statutory social work is often found intervening in the lives of those in the most vulnerable of situations throughout a range of life stages. From unborn babies, young children and young people in unsafe situations; to those with complex support needs due to disability or mental health issues; to elderly people in need of care; statutory social work is involved. When applying a social or relational lens to such situations it becomes evident that social work is a profession that is multi-layered and operates in a range of cross-threads including politics, law, social hierarchies and economics (Allen, 2001). A thorough assessment of the support needs of people coming into contact with statutory social work needs to explore these factors and the impact they have on people's wellbeing.

At our workshop we played films and told stories and were able to present the lived experiences of people. One story that particularly resonates is:

A young person, we will call him Matt, shared his experiences of being a care leaver experiencing mental health issues. Through a spoken word poem, he was able to express some of the trauma he experienced while being in care. He spoke about struggling to reconcile how some of the actions of his social workers aligned with what he thought social work was meant to be. To Matt it was obvious that to his social worker he had just become a part of the job that they could leave at the end of the day. Yet to Matt it was his life, his day to day lived reality. Matt described a positive experience he had with a social care professional. Matt had become overwhelmed and distressed. The professional came and found him in a heightened state. Rather than trying to engage Matt in any type of therapeutic conversation they just sat with him. Matt explained that just having someone there, who was not expecting anything of him, gave him the support he needed to calm down and regain control of the anxieties.

Presenting this workshop enabled us to bring the lived experiences of young people and their families to the centre of social work practice. We were able to facilitate a group discussion on how statutory services can move beyond seeing young people as 'at risk' to seeing them as people living real lives, having real experiences and connections. As individuals working in this profession it has encouraged us to further work relationally with young people and their families rather than regulate and 'risk manage' them.