

## TRANSATLANTIC LEARNINGS

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**ABSTRACT:** This article recounts the two-week international study visit arranged between the National Children's Homes of Great Britain and a Professor of Education at Florida International University (Dr. Dimidjian was there at the time of writing this article) enabling a young social service worker to compare children's services and institutions in South Florida with those she works with in central England. This model of professional development for young workers' expanding cross-cultural understanding highlights the mutual benefits that can be derived for both the beginning and the experienced professional as they exchange "trans-Atlantic learnings" about child care, social policy and cultural realities.

### I. Introduction: Victoria Dimidjian

It's not unusual to hear music playing in child care centers, and one of the songs most often sung is the familiar "It's A Small World After All." Children today are growing up in a global environment that is more often, and they gain greater experience about the rest of the globe through media and education than most of their parents, teachers, or caregivers ever did.

Educators, human service professionals and their administrators are increasingly aware that global education, multicultural awareness and cross-cultural learnings are valuable at any stage of development. Whether such experiences occur in educational institutions, work settings or professional development training at special seminars or conferences, professionals and their administrators recognize the need for every worker to have empathy, knowledge and skill in issues raised by contrasting cultural beliefs and practices. This is increasingly true in the 1990s as the movement of immigrant populations from nonindustrialized, often poverty-stricken areas to Western Europe and the U.S. has heightened tensions between cultural groups. The just-released 1993 United Nations report, *The State of World Population*, states that 2% of the world's population is currently migrating, making migration "the visible face of social change" and, according to the Miami Herald of July 7, 1993, potentially "the human crisis

of our age." Regular reports of violence between ethnic groups has emerged in communities in Germany, France, England and across the United States; teachers and child care workers report heightened hostility and sporadic violence in the high schools, youth institutions and intervention programs.

Specialized educational courses of study, international professional conferences and exchange programs all can address this important issue facing each human service worker's professional development. This article recounts the "Trans-Atlantic Learning" that occurred for a young case-worker from England and for an America academic during the two week study-visit the young woman made to South Florida. Because it resulted in an ongoing duet between the two authors, the article is structured as a four part song which, we hope, you will find pleasing to the ear and significant to the heart as well as the mind.

### **11. First Verse: The Miami Voice ( Victoria Dimidjian)**

In August 1990, an international organization concerned with the well-being of the world's children held its bi-annual International Congress in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The organization is known by the initials FICE (for Federation Internationale des Communautés Educatives) which translates into English as "International Federation of Educative Communities." Founded in 1948 under UNESCO auspices to initially address the plight of uprooted, homeless child refugees in war-devastated Europe, FICE has grown over the past decades, both geographically and functionally. Today the organization reaches across four continents, and FICE members work in schools, child welfare agencies, day care centers, residential institutions and other facilities dedicated to the well-being of children. In the late 80s FICE reached across the Atlantic to North America to university and child care agency personnel and a delegation of 15 participants from the U.S. and Canada were part of the 1990 gathering in Prague.

During the 1990 Prague conference, interaction among the participants was energized by the new openness between Eastern and Western block nations that had occurred during the past year. The whole of Prague was vibrating with hope, a spirit of dynamism and evolving innovations that reflected the political and social changes underway throughout the country and the rest of Eastern Europe. Child care workers, agency administrators, university faculties and others at the conference from the old "East" and "West" divisions of the world talked over coffee and during structured seminars. Participants left Prague that August glad for the new beginnings that had occurred but all too aware of the enormous amount of learning about each other's countries and child caring situations that remained to be done.

The month after the conference I was contacted by Roger Stephens, an administrator for National Children's Homes in Great Britain who had participated in the FICE meeting. He had told me in Prague that his agency had a program for their younger workers to be awarded an "international study visit" with the goal of 'developing an awareness of child care policy and practice beyond the United Kingdom for the benefit of self and of national Children's Homes,' as their contract with the young worker who was scheduled to come to Miami, Angelina Bartoli, exactly read. Angelina was the fourth agency worker to win the competitive award to travel to "The States." Three previous young workers had gone to Southern California; now a new site had been selected, Miami. Roger wondered if I might like to assist Angelina in meeting this goal. With this rather formal beginning, I found a new pathway opening for "Trans Atlantic Learning."

Over the next months Angie, as I soon came to know her and I exchanged letters; she provided a photo and a vita, and she detailed what her hopes were for a two week study visit to South Florida. The areas she wanted particularly to investigate were:

- Legal child protection statutes and issues as well as provision of protective services, particularly in regard to child sexual abuse
- Services and methods of art therapy in individual and group work with children and their families
- General information on social work policy and practices in the U.S., exploring contrasts between that country and her home, "the U.K.."

In order to meet these aims, I set up a program of visits to social service agencies, schools and child care institutions. I asked many of the agencies if I could come along too, explaining that I'd only recently moved to South Florida from the Northeast and was finding striking differences between the two parts of the country. Responses were unvaryingly affirmative, and I anticipated Angie's arrival in March 1991 with lots of enthusiasm. But let me give her a chance to speak about that part.

### **111. Second Verse: Sung in that Lilting English Accent -Angie Bartoli**

When I realised that I'd been selected to represent National Children's Homes in America, I was initially overwhelmed with the exciting prospect. And then plans didn't run smoothly. The date of the trip changed twice and then ten days before I was finally to go I got the chicken pox! But on March 1, I passed through the stringent security at Gatwick Airport with my spots almost dried up. Sitting on the plane I glanced down at the newspaper I had carried along. The Gulf War had just ended the day before and President Bush splashed across the headlines saying "We're number 1." Now, seats upright, cigarettes all extinguished, I was off to "Number 1" America.

Half a day later I landed in Miami. Just as the Floridians seem attuned to the possibility of their gentle breezes mounting to hurricane force winds bringing potential devastation, the same can be said of the social complexity of the city. Amidst the clear blue skies come the thundering clouds, bringing downpours, physical storms accompanied by tornadoes of problems and social difficulties. We in England are all too familiar with the same issues: rising crime, drug addictions, murders, child abuse, poverty, rape, struggling one-parent families, racial tensions, homelessness, incest—the list goes on. But I saw these problems in a new light in Miami's sub-tropic sunshine where the diversity of cultures and generations gives a casual feeling to life, where it does not matter if you do not conform since, after all, the so-called norm varies so much.

Thousands of U.S. residents pass into and out of the state of Florida every year, adding a feeling of transience on top of the ever-changing tourist dimension. In a *Miami Herald* story I read during my stay columnist Kathleen Krog responded to the statistics that 700,000 immigrated to Florida each year, while 350,000 emigrated, asking, "Will growing Florida emerge as a community or a crowd?" (a question I found more and more relevant).

I wondered as I spent my days talking with social workers and child care professionals how the always-changing intensity of life impacted on them. And in the institutions I visited, I met many dedicated, caring and warm people but I also met others who appeared damaged, sad, helpless victims of Miami's growth and acceleration. I wondered sometimes if the citizens of the metropolis really saw the complexities surrounding me. If they did, I thought, they would crash into one big heap. Instead, like their driving techniques, they never stop, they just change lanes and accelerate. Every lane is the fast lane.

I'd like to tell you about the five most memorable visits and what I gained from each as I sped through my two weeks of study-stay in South Florida. What I describe are the impressions of a visitor, coming to learn in such a short time, but deeply impressed by all I saw.

### **Public Social Services**

In Britain I work as a "key worker" in Greenleys Family Centre located in Milton Keynes, a large city about an hour north of London. I have a case load of ten families, all of whom have young children and histories of social dysfunction. Although my agency is private, each worker must coordinate plans closely with the government's Social Services Department. In Britain, this department is divided into teams consisting of Families and children team, hospital team, mental health team, and the "duty team" who deal with emergencies. Within the different counties of Britain (as with the states in the U.S.) the names and divisions of these teams vary according to local resources and the nature of the community, but coordination between public and private resources is critical. Therefore, looking at Florida's social

service system, which is called "Health and Rehabilitative Service," was essential.

The first thing that struck me as difference between our two systems was health care. In the U.K. our national health care system insures medical care; in the Florida HRS system provisions for health care are part of the complex burden which must be provided. Additionally I learned that this agency which employs more than 40,000 and spends more than \$6 billion/year (20% of the state's whole budget) must handle: intake and investigation of abuse/neglect complaints; protective services of dependent children; foster care; adoptions and related services; and "community control" care and monitoring of delinquent youth.

I heard widespread criticism of HRS during my stay, and I was particularly impressed with concern about HRS's ability to provide adequate child protection. I learned about the recent death of a two-year-old, a child drowned in a toilet by his stepfather and the subsequent conviction of the HRS social worker for failing to report information that might have prevented this tragedy. I was moved by a special 22 page *Ledger Magazine* issue titled "Florida's Shame: How Many Children Must Die." When I learned that caseworkers typically have 60 families in a caseload, the lack of resources was clear. I understood the frustrations I heard from workers; I understood the *Ledger's* words, "The experts say it (state funded social services) is a paper facade because the legislators who wrote the enlightened laws have a history of not providing enough money to put the words into practice."

### Community Based Family and Child Care

One bright morning Victoria and I set out for Belle Glade, a town 80 miles northwest of Miami and the center of the \$1.5 billion sugar industry. Driving the littered streets it seemed we had entered the third world. I saw evidence of recent riots, boarded up windows downtown, garbage piled on street corners. I learned the community has the highest rate of teen pregnancy and of AIDS in the country.

Yet within the stressed community is "Building Blocks," a nonprofit family service and drop in care center for children from birth to age two. My Family Centre in Britain also has a Drop In unit which, like Building Blocks, hopes to prevent isolation, loneliness and potential abuse. The staff at Building Blocks reaches out to women whilst pregnant through the voluntary program called First Friends offering practical and emotional support. For teen mothers the program offers day care to enable the mother to complete secondary school, and they work closely with deans and teachers in the local schools.

Finally Building Blocks has a strong policy of involving men in family life, something I now feel my agency should be working towards. This program had evening "rap sessions" for fathers, giving a forum for them to

come and talk and to help them find ways to be involved and valued in their families through interaction with male and female co-workers who led the sessions. I know my agency which has a mission of being 'family focused' must do more in this regard.

### **Public Schools Programs for Exceptional Children**

Art therapy is a particular interest of mine. Having recently obtained a certificate in person centered art therapy, I was eager to see how Americans were using this creative method. When I visited the Dade County schools, the fourth largest district in the nation, I found that the system had in-school art therapy for emotionally children since 1978. This surprised me since I was used to seeing the modality in hospitals and mental health institutions.

I spent a day in the unit for 40 emotionally disturbed children located in an annex building to a 500 pupil public school. Most of the 40 there were boys (active, volatile, restless and seemingly fascinated with my English accent). The staff were friendly and warm, showing great patience and understanding of their exceptional children who come from multi-problem, dysfunctional family systems. There are two teachers for each class of 8 children as well as an art therapist, a family therapist, a visiting psychiatric nurse, a coordinator and two administration workers who, apart from the mounting paperwork, also administer necessary medications. The art therapist showed me her work area and described her goals, mostly centering on self-image and self-esteem. Coming from a country where art therapy continuously needs to be explained and justified, I enjoyed seeing the leaps made in Miami in the field of art therapy in public education. If the tendency I see in British life is true, that we eventually follow the lead of our across-the-Atlantic friends, then I can only live in hope as far as art therapy is concerned.

### **Hospital Treatment for Emotionally Disturbed Children**

I was also able to visit a hospital setting for severely emotionally disturbed children where art therapists worked on an interdisciplinary team. Only short-term care is provided currently since most American insurances and public funds do not cover long term treatment (as, I was told, had been the case) and each child entering the unit is given a behavior modification personal contract. He or she earns points for good behavior, eventually gaining rewards such as being accompanied to the movies by a staff member.

During my visit I talked with children on the unit and participated in one evening's art therapy session with ten children between eleven and fifteen years old. After small group work with individual therapists the evening ended with a group sharing time. Each child spoke, one haltingly and disjointedly; another so fast others had to keep asking her to slow

down. She finally said how hard it was not to have her ideas taken seriously. The therapist asked her if she'd ever felt like this before. She curled up into a ball, rocked, stayed silent. Then in whispers she bravely told the group how her mother never listened to her and how she felt. When she finished a lanky fifteen-year-old said how he felt sad and angry tonight too. Just before the evening session, he'd talked to his "wife." The others laughed at him, insisting he was too young to have a wife. He assured them that since his girl friend has given birth to his baby she was his wife. But on the phone she'd broken off with him. She was thirteen years old and in a secure unit in another part of Florida.

I left the hospital exhausted and stunned. This had been my last visit before coming back home. That night I cried. I had met some of America's next generation and saw no hope for many of them. That night there was a heavy storm and hours of rain. Nature's way of reminding me that everything was not as it seems in sunny Miami.

### **Legal Representation: Florida's Guardian ad Litem**

The final visit I had made me aware of differences in the legal treatment of children in the U.S. and in the U.K. Miami's branch of the state's Guardian ad Litem program is at the HRS Juvenile Justice Center where there is tight security, similar to that of an airport. Victoria and I met with Joni Goodman, director of Dade's GAL office, who described the program's function in ways that reminded me of Britain: providing legal representation for the best interests of the child brought before the courts. However, the main difference is that in Florida the GAL appointed by the court is a community volunteer whereas in Britain a GAL is typically professionally qualified in law and is a paid employee for this service. Florida Statute 415.5031 (6) defines a GAL as "a responsible adult who is appointed by the court to represent the best interests of a child in a proceeding as provided for by law...and who shall serve until discharged by the court". Florida boasts of being the only state where a GAL program exists in every county. Each county selects and trains its volunteer GAL staff and there is an HRS funded back up staff of attorneys, supervisors and administrators to support each GAL's efforts. Each GAL is asked for at least a year's commitment and they may carry one or several cases depending on their availability and the case's complexity.

I was glad to learn of the GAL program yet I wondered how effective volunteers could be in representing children who faced the multiple stresses I saw in South Florida. I carried "David's face" along with my baggage to the airport. I'd met him on my last day, during the hospital visit. He was emotionally disturbed, but did not really belong on the secure unit, workers told me. He was caught within the care system. HRS could not find anyone to adopt or foster him. He was black, he had behavioral difficulties, he was one of many children in Florida who see little of the sunshine. Where was

his GAL? Where would he end up when the short-term hospital stay was over?

The five visits I have described were only part of my two-week study, but they provide examples of the contrasts and the issues I was gaining information and insight into as the days passed. Most nights Victoria and I talked long hours, processing the events and the notes I'd made.

I saw many danger signs in America. We have the same problems here in Britain, only on a much smaller scale. Sometimes I looked at Miami and held up a mirror. Many a time I ducked as I saw Britain creeping into that reflection. But we must not duck or shy away; we must face the difficulties before they get worse. We only have to look across the Atlantic to see how horrific it can get.

Therapy can provide the healing that hurt humankind needs. In every establishment I visited, therapy was available for children and adults alike. I feel that this is what I really learned from my visits. We need to start training people in the caring professions to recognize the importance of, and to use the process of, therapy. I knew of therapy's importance before I set off to Florida. Now I think, having seen a nation so advanced in some ways and so limited in others, now I think that surely therapy is the only fulfilling way forward in our work. If we are really to enable change in the lives and dynamics of families we work with, more emphasis and resources and training need to go into the statutory and voluntary agencies and schools which can provide therapeutic help.

It is more than a year now since my visit to America. Now I am readying to leave my current post and begin graduate school in social work. I will miss "my" families and my colleagues acutely, but I know that they, like the children and agencies and workers I came to know in Florida, will be forever part of my professional identity. I look forward now to the next step in my learning process as I get nearer my goal of becoming a therapist. And continuing my trans-Atlantic learning is, of course, part of the path that lies ahead too. I hope next time to focus more specifically on therapy and intervention for child abuse. I anticipate my graduate studies will prepare me for focusing on this issue, and I look forward to seeing what new trans-Atlantic learnings will be possible on my next voyage into new territory. I know it will be part of my personal and professional life from this point on!

#### **IV. A Final Refrain: Victoria Dimidjian in Miami**

Angie's account of some of the visits and some of her thoughts and responses conveys the enduring benefit that cross-cultural professional development can provide. She gained insight into professional issues and methods in a contrasting context of her own, and she learned to weigh different problems and different solutions in a thoughtful, reflective fashion that avoided the "right versus wrong" thinking trap that often besets us when we see familiar issues in a new cultural light. This step of professional perspective-taking is particularly important for young workers who are



gaining intellectual and personal identity skills, those attributes that make progressing and contributing in ever-increasing ways to the field of child and youth care possible.

Working with Angie as her host and mentor was my first experience in such trans-Atlantic learning, too. Having supervised student teachers, interns, practicum students, graduate students and others in the process of professional development, I felt sure I could help her in this undertaking. But I did not anticipate quite how much it would mean to me, and the linkage that we now have as older / younger professionals as well as friends remains bright or, as Angie likes to term things, "brilliant." My commitment to global connections, which was always strong is firmer than ever.

In May, 1992, I participated in the FICE Congress in Luxembourg. Like my experience in Prague, this conference again presented the opportunity for cross-cultural exploration and education that seemed enormously productive to the 400-plus child care workers, administrators and faculty like myself from all over the world who attended and exchanged information. While I was in Luxembourg Angie was engaged in another cross-cultural giving / growing experience that I want to applaud. She went with other child care workers to Romania where she aided in the multinational effort to assist the Romanians caring for the large numbers of homeless and disabled children in this struggling nation. She spent many nights during those weeks impacted by the stresses and pain she witnessed. I know, yet I also like to think that perhaps her first experience in trans-Atlantic learning in South Florida affirmed her capacity to see, feel and analyze stresses without being overwhelmed by them. Upon her return to England she began making plans for going on to graduate work in social work and is currently midway through an M.S.W. program. It is my hope that her graduation in 1994 may coincide with her participation in the first-ever FICE Congress in the US that same spring, but both of us on opposite sides of the Atlantic will have to see if such a dream can become a reality!

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