

## INTRODUCTION TO THE 35TH FICE WORLD CONGRESS SPECIAL ISSUE

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**Guest Editors**

**Abstract:** The 35th World Congress of FICE-International, “Shaping Tomorrow’s Care for Children and Youth: Quality and Innovation in Alternative Care”, was held in Split, Croatia on October 23 to 25, 2024. The aim of this congress was to explore and promote innovative approaches to elevate child well-being in alternative care and child protection through collaborative efforts. This special issue of the International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies (IJCYS) includes 14 articles based on presentations and discussions in Split. The authors represent 12 countries, thereby offering truly international perspectives, programs, and policies related to the conference themes.

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The 35th World Congress of FICE-International, “Shaping Tomorrow’s Care for Children and Youth: Quality and Innovation in Alternative Care”, was held in Split, Croatia on October 23 to 25, 2024. The aim of this congress was to explore and promote innovative approaches to elevate child well-being in alternative care and child protection through collaborative efforts.

This special issue of the International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies (IJCYFS) includes 15 articles based on presentations and discussions in Split. The authors represent 13 countries, thereby offering truly international perspectives, programs, and policies related to the conference themes. In addition, a recent FICE International public statement on appropriate and quality alternative care is included in Section 1. The statement is intended to add a positive perspective on alternative care, including residential group care, to the current international dialogue and debate on out-of-home (extra-familial) care.

On behalf of the entire FICE-International membership, the guest editors want to express our gratitude to the IJCYFS Editor, Dr. Doris Kakuru, for accepting these contributions as a special issue of this important open-access journal, ensuring availability of the articles to a wide international audience free of charge. The guest editors also want to thank Susan Scott, editorial associate of the IJCYFS journal, for her dedication, precise editing, and patience throughout the process. This special issue could not have been published without Susan.

The tradition of publishing articles from FICE-International congresses in special issues of the IJCYFS began in 2015 with papers from presentations at the 2013 congress in Bern (Grupper, Anglin, & Schmid, 2015). It was followed in 2018 by a special double issue featuring articles from FICE’s 34th Congress in Vienna (Anglin, Gahleitner, & Grupper, 2018), and another in 2020 with articles from the congress in Tel Aviv (Grupper, Schneider, & Peters, 2020).

### ***A Brief History of FICE-International***

In English, FICE (pronounced “feet-say”, “feech-ay”, or “fees-ay” depending on linguistic preference), stands for the International Federation of Educative Communities; the term FICE itself is the abbreviation of the French version of this name: *Fédération Internationale des Communautés Éducatives*.

When FICE-International was founded in 1948, a major focus was to provide an international forum for sharing the information, knowledge, and skills necessary for the provision of quality group care. It also served as a sounding board for program directors, administrators, and policymakers charged with developing programs and services to address the needs of traumatized children who lacked families or adequate family resources in the post-World War II period. A common response to these needs was to develop “children’s villages”, bringing together large groups of young people on campuses with cottages, a school, recreation facilities, and a range of specialized services. In other cases, large facilities with dormitories were created. Either way, staff

needed to be selected and trained to respond to the variety of needs presented by the young people; FICE was therefore also engaged in supporting training efforts and the development of suitable curricula.

FICE-International was developed with national sections, primarily from eastern and western Europe, each with its own structure and scope of services. Representatives from different countries were elected to serve on the FICE-International executive and board. Congresses were held every 3 years, bringing together practitioners, social educators, clinical specialists, policymakers, and researchers. Over the decades, the national sections of FICE-International each evolved in accordance with the needs and priorities within their jurisdictions. Today, FICE encompasses a wide range of services — primarily related to the care, education, and well-being of young people — for children, adolescents, families, and communities.

During the post-war period, a new profession emerged, with different formal titles in different countries (e.g., social pedagogues, *éducateurs/éducateurs spécialisés*) that were equivalent to child and youth workers. In addition, post-secondary education programs were developed in many countries in Europe and beyond that focused on the preparation of child and youth work staff. FICE now has more than two dozen member sections<sup>1</sup>.

### ***The FICE35 International Congress***

FICE-Croatia, a relatively new section, courageously offered to hold the 35th FICE Congress in the ancient and beautiful Mediterranean seaside city of Split. Throughout 3 days in late October, 2024, more than 250 participants joined in a wide variety of sessions, including keynotes, panels, paper presentations, and workshops. A highlight was the active participation of seven care leavers from different countries, who demonstrated that they were in fact “experts by experience”.

The co-editors also want to acknowledge the immense contributions of the organizers and sponsors of the FICE35 Congress. While there are too many to mention by name here, we want to thank those who filled key roles in all the planning and hosting, namely Drs. Lucija Vejmelka, Marijana Majdak, Petra Hrvoj, and Roberta Matković. Without their leadership, there would have been no congress in Croatia, and thus no FICE35 special issue. Thank you.

Congress participants were invited to submit papers based upon their presentations, and 16 chose to do so. Two of the submissions were deemed better suited to professional publications and were referred to other journals, while the remaining 14 went through a peer review process, were revised according to feedback, and are included in this issue. As a truly international special edition of IJCYFS, readers will notice writing using colloquialisms and presenting perspectives from authors’ local geographies and cultural contexts. The editors believe it important to honour this diversity of understandings.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information about FICE International is available at <https://www.ficeinter.net/about>

Finally, the editors wish to express their deep appreciation to members of the FICE-International Editorial Board who volunteered to review the submissions for content, style, and suitability for this issue. Peer review is an important part of ensuring the quality of research-oriented journal publications.

### ***The Structure of This Issue***

All the articles included in this issue address themes of quality, innovation, and directions for the future. In order to provide some structure for the issue, they have been clustered into four sections by key themes, as follows:

- Section I – A Framework for Thinking About Quality in Alternative Care (1 article)
- Section II – Learning from the Voices of Young People, Families, and Practitioners (6 articles)
- Section III – Innovative Approaches to Addressing Young People’s Needs (5 articles)
- Section IV – Developing Competent Practitioners and Carers (2 articles)

### ***Section I – A Framework for Thinking About Quality in Alternative Care***

The article “Towards a Statement on Residential Group Care for Children and Youth: A Suggested Framework” by James Anglin (Canada) and Bruce Henderson (United States) has been placed first for two reasons. First, it addresses quality issues and principles that permeate all the other contributions, implicitly or explicitly, and are relevant to all forms of alternative care. The article may also serve as an introduction for those less familiar with residential care. Second, the article articulates elements, values, and principles that underpin a positive perspective on residential extrafamilial care for young people. The importance of out-of-home group care has been at the heart of FICE-International’s work and purpose since its inception in 1948, when the organization was formed at a meeting held at the Pestalozzi Children’s Village in Trogen, Switzerland. At that time, thousands of young people who were orphaned or in other ways victims of the violence of the Second World War needed safe places where they could be cared for and nurtured back to health, able to return to their everyday lives in their communities.

Issues of quality have always been central to the work and aims of FICE, and this article also seeks to outline some of the key elements, principles, and propositions central to the provision of quality out-of-home group care. Some of the material in this article was developed in discussions of a working group (“Quality in Care”) of FICE-International, and some emerged from the research and collaborative discussions undertaken by the two authors. It is titled “Towards a Statement” because it is intended to serve as a resource for agencies and organizations seeking to reshape the narrative surrounding residential care from a negative and dismissive perspective to one that builds on many decades of experience and research and demonstrates the positive aspects of group care.

In discussions since the FICE35 Congress, it has become evident that the most effective way to shift a societal or professional narrative is not to attack the “conventional wisdom”, but rather

to articulate an alternative perspective grounded in convincing evidence and compelling examples that illustrate the importance and potential positive impact of the reframed understandings. At the meetings of the FICE General Assembly in Vienna in September, 2025, the statement “Promoting Appropriate Quality Alternative Care Options for Children and Youth” was adopted, based in part on the principles and propositions highlighted in this Anglin and Henderson article. The guest editors are pleased that this Statement on Appropriate and Quality Alternative Care, which was approved in final form in October, 2025, is published for the first time in this special issue. FICE hopes that this document, based on a thorough review of relevant research as well as extensive practice experience, will be widely read by those in a position to influence the delivery of quality alternative care.

## ***Section II – Learning From the Voices of Young People, Families, and Practitioners***

The co-editors of this special issue were struck by the fact that almost every article submitted and included here addresses the key issue of *voice*, with most studies using qualitative or mixed methods to gather the voices and experiences of participants in the programs and systems being studied. These methods include interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and surveys. As well, the principle of child and youth *participation* in decision-making is highlighted in a number of the studies and programs described, inspired by principles in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Claudia Equit and Elisabeth Thomas lead off Section II with a call for “Honouring the Voices of Youth in Out-of-Home Care”. They emphasize that true listening to young people requires an attitude of respectful honouring of their experiences, insights, and suggestions for change. Their article also reminds us of the many lessons learned over the period of COVID-19 restrictions, many of which need to be carried forward as improved features of child care.

The article by Ivana Đurek Setinšek and Marijana Majdak shifts the focus to the voices of experts in the implementation of new models and practices. Sometimes, amidst the overdue push to attend to the voices of young people, the opinions and experiences of those working in the child care sector can be overlooked, or appear to be devalued. It is important that the perspectives and expertise of all those involved in this complex work be attended to and honoured.

Ben Alfasi, Anna Reznikovski-Kuras, and Tal Arazi provide an example of listening to young people’s voices in another type of crisis — war. FICE-International was born out of the devastation of war, and regrettably many FICE sections continue to struggle with ways of supporting children and families who are living with the traumatic impacts of violent conflicts. Sometimes we can be surprised by the feedback from children, underlining the importance of being open to listening to, and truly hearing, their voices.

Jolanta Privorienė adds yet another dimension to the exploration of voices and their messages. In addition to young people and professionals, we need to find ways to gather, listen to, and act upon the voices and experiences of foster carers, whether in family homes or care centres. When

large samples are required in order to draw valid conclusions about the perspectives and experiences of members of a population, questionnaires may need to be developed, distributed, and analyzed. Anyone who has undertaken such a project knows how difficult this process can be, and how many pitfalls one has to avoid in order to make the results valid, manageable, and useful, as Privorienė has striven to do.

Roberta Marcović, Lucija Vejmelka, and Tomislav Ramljak explore the important and puzzling world of parenting today — in the age of the internet, social media, and the accompanying dangers of “virtual” bullying and sexual harassment. The FICE35 Congress devoted a morning to exploring these issues. The voices of two young people were especially powerful in providing “experts by experience” perspectives to an adult audience, all of whom were trying both to make sense of the realities of young people and to determine how adults can mediate and monitor the use of social media to promote well-being and avoid potential negative effects.

Hadas Shapira, Anna Reznikovski-Kuras, and Tal Arazi round off the section with a fascinating project that reflects the true complexity of our child welfare and child care systems. How does an agency or department keep on top of the masses of data that are required for both good decision-making and accountability? Not surprisingly, the answer seems to lie in an effective use of computers and electronic analysis of data. However, human beings need to ensure that the data put into a system reflect the language and realities of those who will use it — a daunting task. The authors demonstrate how important it is to gather the perspectives of all groups involved in order to create a source of information that can usefully inform practice decisions as well as administrative and policy questions.

It is clear from the articles in this section, and across the entire issue, that the principle of encouraging the participation of young people in programs, and the importance of attending to the experiences of all involved in this work, are critical to any attempt to understand the realities of practice, undertake program (re-)design initiatives, and assess quality and effectiveness. The critically important engagement of those in care requires, as Vinătoru and Nițu state in their article in Section III, “that children are informed and encouraged to articulate their perspectives”, and that programs guarantee “that children’s views are acknowledged by decision makers” and ensure “that children’s perspectives are taken into account in decision-making processes”.

### ***Section III – Innovative Approaches to Addressing Young People’s Needs***

As has already been noted, a major theme of the FICE35 Congress was “innovation in alternative care”, and this journal issue presents many new program ideas and experiments. In this section, these range from addressing the needs of vulnerable young people in India, to an educational experiment in Romania attempting to understand how to eradicate poverty, to new ways of thinking about the impact of the incarceration of parents on their children in the Czech Republic, to effectively responding to youth homelessness in Croatia, to implementing innovative legislation affecting young people in Slovenia.



Gurmeet Kaur Kalra and Kiran Modi offer an overview of the societal and systemic challenges faced by young people in parts of India, especially girls. The Udayan Care society in Delhi offers innovative programs characterized by the key principles of individualized care and trauma-informed practices.

Nicoleta Golai Vinătoru and Anemi Helen Nițu address an issue of immense importance in the child welfare and child care sectors around the world. Even in countries with relatively strong economies, many families live in poverty and struggle to provide the resources their children need to survive, much less thrive. Healthy, happy, and successful young people require sufficient resources of all kinds — education, food, housing, medical care, and love, to name a few.

Alois Daněk explores a much neglected area of child development: the many young people in residential care whose parent (or close relative) has been incarcerated for criminal offences. This study from the Czech Republic documents that about one in ten young people in residential care is living with this significant challenge. The author articulates how the implications of this fact in relation to a child's functioning and development are many, and demonstrates the urgent need to understand this situation more fully in order to support those young people affected.

From Croatia, Marijana Kletečki Radović and Ela Rukavina Lapov tackle youth homelessness, another issue that is common in virtually all countries. Their study indicated that contributing factors to homelessness are multiple placements while in alternative care, and the lack of formal supports upon leaving care. As a result, ensuring stability while in care as well as targeting resources towards the transition from care in a multifaceted manner is critical to care-leaver success and fulfilment.

Matej Vukovič, Mitja Krajncan and Katja Vrhunc Pfeifer present a discussion of a new approach to legislation and the challenges of its implementation in Slovenia. While legislation cannot directly guarantee quality care and treatment for young people, it is vitally important in articulating and framing the system and processes necessary to create the conditions under which quality care can be provided.

The final article in this section is by Alexander Schneider, Marianna Bilyk, and Yelyzaveta Moroz, with the technical support of Sviatoslav Onufryk and Iryna Matviichuk. It offers a report on the unique Hand in Hand task force spearheaded by FICE International in partnership with the Ukrainian Educational Platform. A wide range of Ukrainian and international partners and activities were also involved. The origin of FICE International was in the aftermath of World War II, and it is tragic that there is still a desperate need for individuals and organizations to address the traumas of orphaned and displaced young people who are victims of war. The insights and examples provided in this report show how the coming together of organizations can enhance the care and well-being of children in precarious contexts.

All of these initiatives are very complex to conceive, and even more complex to implement, and these accounts remind us of the notion of “raplexity”. In recent decades, the increasing

complexity of our world has been combined with an unprecedented speed of change, thus the notion of raplexity. To those engaged as change agents, either in government or in the private sector, the metaphor of trying to change the wheels on a train while it is speeding down the tracks seems all too apt. The fact that the authors of these articles and their colleagues from various parts of the globe, despite such challenges, remain actively engaged in trying to shape a better future for children, youth, and families is a reason for much hope.

#### ***Section IV – Developing Competent Practitioners and Carers***

While this theme is the particular topic of these two articles, all contributions to this issue have implications for the education and training of carers, administrators, and legislators, whether their focus is on schools, clinics, foster homes, community services, or residential facilities for young people.

The article by Robert Kampe has echoes of the earliest days of FICE in the late 1940s and 1950s. It draws on the foundational work of the psychoanalysts, including Sigmund Freud and his colleagues. Kampe’s examination of this influential theory of practice reminds us how much the evolution of child and youth work owes to these early pioneers. In North America, the early work of August Aichhorn (1935), Fritz Redl and David Wineman (1952), and Bruno Bettelheim (1950) — all informed by psychoanalytic theory and practices — provided much of the groundwork for the profession and discipline of child and youth work across the continent.

The article by Judit Zeller, Beáta Korinek, Gabriella Kulcsár, Patricia Kovács, and Petra Kondora, “Fifteen Years of the ‘Students for Children’ Program”, offers excellent insights into the importance of formal education and training, and the power of supporting students to engage with young people as part of their professional development. This mentoring in practice settings has always been a hallmark of child and youth work, from the time of Janusz Korczak in his orphanage in Warsaw in the 1930s (Lifton, 1988) until today (Cragg, 2020).

In addition to these two stimulating explorations of education and training, many workshops and presentations at FICE35 from around the world addressed issues related to developing competent workers for this most demanding of tasks.

#### ***Reflections While Reviewing***

As the co-editors reviewed the articles, many wonderful internal conversations took place. We recognized the varied ways in which the contributions spoke to each of our practices, scholarship, and communities, sometimes aligning and at other times challenging. We appreciated the linguistic expressions used in each region and the evident cultural differences. The bringing together of expert voices, including those with lived experience, practice wisdom, and scholarly engagement — many with a combination of the three — represented a conscious choice to recognize and understand the multifaceted nature of systems at large, including identifying where gaps may exist and where innovative and unique perspectives are necessary.



For example, co-editor Shemine Gulamhusein considers her work to parallel that of alternative care, though it is not directly situated within that sector. Thus, her reflections on each article came from a keen interest in her own gaps of understanding and what implications there might be for her future work. After reading the articles in Section II, she was left wondering about alternative methods, such as arts-based approaches, to further the inclusion of voices, particularly those of young children and people with disabilities. A special edition such as this necessarily focuses on a particular set of responses to specific critical issues, but can also stimulate innovative thinking more broadly. As you review these articles, collectively or individually, we encourage reading through the lens of curiosity, allowing the writings to spark moments of passion, compassion, and excitement while also perhaps challenging existing understandings, norms, and practices.

### ***Summary and Conclusion***

A remark made by one of the co-editors, James Anglin, many years ago seems apropos here: “Child and youth care is not rocket science, it’s *far* more complex than that!” Children are far more complex than machines, even rockets. And the characteristics of interstellar space, as complex as they are, are no more complex than the characteristics of families, communities, cultures, and societies, and further, they are far more amenable to scientific measurement and prediction than our social systems.

Ever since Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) articulated his theory of “the ecology of human development”, the true complexity of child and family development has been more fully acknowledged and articulated. The task of understanding and addressing this complexity seems to be still in its infancy, however. This highlights the vital importance of gatherings such as FICE35, where we can collectively share our struggles, insights, and successes. We expect this will still be true of FICE50, FICE75, and FICE100.

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