Transforming Orphanage Care:  
A Case Example in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT: The author presents the voices of boys from an orphanage in Zimbabwe that he himself grew up in over a period of 10 years. After gaining professional child and youth care training in Canada, he has returned to the orphanage seeking to be an advocate and a catalyst for change in order to assist the Director and Board of Governors in the transformation of the residence.

KEY WORDS: orphanage; residential care; transformation; voices of youth.

I grew up in an orphanage that I shall refer to as the House for Boys in Zimbabwe. In the summer of 2003, with the support and funding of Langara College and the University of Victoria’s School of Child and Youth Care, I was able to go back to the orphanage that I grew up in. I was in care from 1982 (10 years old) to 1990 (18 years old) and my experiences in the orphanage had a profound impact on my career, and later educational pursuits. I was therefore interested in documenting my experience in the orphanage, and have been doing so in a written manuscript which I hope to publish. However, my main reason for spending time at the orphanage that summer was to give back some of what I have learned since leaving the House.

The House for Boys was started in 1936, from a resolution of the Synod of the Anglican Church. The idea was to start a non-denominational orphanage which provided a safe and happy home for destitute, abandoned and abused boys. The orphanage is located in Harare which is the capital of Zimbabwe and is currently home to 55 boys. All the boys attend local primary and secondary schools.

The home functions by way of 8 permanent resident staff, two cooks, one laundry matron and First Aider, one laundry washer, one driver, one cleaner, one gardener, and the Superintendent who is responsible for running the team of workers and providing direct care for the
welfare of the boys. The guidelines of how to set discipline and run the house are controlled by a voluntary Board of Governors while the Board of Trustees is responsible for managing the orphanage’s financial needs.

As the House for Boys is a non-governmental welfare organization, it receives a social welfare grant for some of the boys from the government. This grant is inadequate to meet the needs of the boys and the upkeep of the house, especially in the current inflationary environment of Zimbabwe. The orphanage is therefore very dependent on generous donors, benefactors, legacies, bequests and fund raising activities to maintain it in running order. The Board of Trustees also takes some of the funds that have been donated and invests prudently to ensure regular income to deal with the house expenditure. At the present moment, most of the boys are wards of the state mainly due to the AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe.

An important part of my motive for returning to the orphanage was to help my brothers, orphans like myself, by promoting a new innovative international partnership between the House for Boys, the University of Victoria’s School of Child and Youth Care and Langara College in British Columbia, Canada. This partnership was based on developing cross-cultural professional training for youth in residential care. The objectives of the project were as follows:

- Promoting the respect and protection of my brother’s rights.
- Finding ways to promote sustainability in primary needs (water, food, shelter, health care, emotional and spiritual needs).
- Educating the residents, using multidimensional and holistic interventions for youth in orphanages.
- Promoting youth participation at all levels of residential intervention care.
- Educating the care providers on how to help prepare youth for the transition to life beyond the orphanage (encouraging and teaching my brothers the skills for goal setting and future direct planning).
- Educating the staff on up-to-date Child and Youth Work practice.

There is so much I could say about my experience, but instead I want you to hear the voices of my brothers in the orphanage. I believe what they say makes it clear why holistic child and youth care is important to our practice. Listen to what my brothers say when I ask, “What are the problems that you face?” This is how my brothers respond:

- “People are not united, we should be united so that we can live as a happy family.”
- “If we are too young to walk to work, why do we walk to school?”
“Are form two’s too young to go to church?”
“I did not use the bus fare money for transport because I bought bread.”
“I want to speak for myself.”
“Could we please have medical attention?”
“More interaction with the opposite sex.”
“The food is not enough.”
“We have little exposure to the outside world.”
“People in form four have the right to work and not be chased away from the home because they have failed form four.”
“After school we are hungry, but we get four slices of bread. Can you change this and give us something better. For example, rice, 2 slices of bread and fruit.”
“Staff do not care about us and are not thinking about our future.”
“Not enough love is shown.”
“There is a Bible shortage and there is no-one who wants to lead other in church.”
“During break (at school) our friends run away from us scared that we will beg for their food.”
“We need to be given love because some of us have never experienced life with a mother and father and we also need books to study because the schools we go to do not provide us with books.”

When I asked my brothers, “What can you do about the situation?”
This is how they responded:

“We must encourage each other not to do wrong.”
“We must listen to each other’s ideas.”
“There is nothing we can do about it because the staff do not listen to us and we are also scared to talk about things.”
“Appeal to the international community.”
“Socialize with people outside the home.”
“I have been stealing maize over the durawall.”
“We need a staff member in the dinning room at meal times.”
“We also need to talk about how we got here, our background.”

When I asked my brothers, “What in your opinion is the job of the Board of Directors?” this is how they responded:

“The job of the board is to run the house and raise funds, and not chasing us away.”
“Visit the home regularly, hold meeting with the boys to understand our problems.”
• “I believe the board should hear our problems but we must also help ourselves because God helps those who help themselves.”
• “They should make sure we are being treated fairly by the staff members.”

Listening to my brothers’ voices, we do not have to be academic or professional to understand that they are talking about experiencing a lack of emotional and spiritual support, a lack of primary basic needs, experiencing violations of their rights, and not being allowed to have a voice in their own care.

After listening to my brothers’ voices, I made the following recommendations to the Board of Directors around the standard of care for my brothers.

• The House needs policies and regulations, which are guided by the principle: “in the best interest of the boys at the House for Boys.”
• Staff need to have a code of ethical practices around the care they provide for the boys, and this care should be informed by the guiding principle of acting in the boys’ best interest.
• Staff need to have a clear recording and reporting system for creating accountability.
• The basic needs (food, shelter, health care and fair pay for work) of the staff need to be addressed if we hope for the staff to be effective in their care of the boys.
• The Board needs to respect that staff need time off to avoid burnout, and when staff work during time off they need to be compensated.
• The Board needs to find creative ways to help the boys maintain and find positive kinship ties.
• Staff need a workshop on ways to prepare the boys for life beyond the orphanage.
• The board needs to encourage youth participation in the decision making of the orphanage by allowing the boys to have representation in Board meetings.
• Encourage more community partnership through youth-led community projects. Make a contract between Child and Family Social Services and the House for Boys. The House’s position would be to only accept boys from social services on the condition that the admitting social workers or probation officers agree to visit the boy at least once every 3 months. In so doing, this is creating responsibility for the maintenance and protection of the rights of the boys in their care at the House for Boys.
• Create external opportunities with other orphanages in Zimbabwe to improve the standard of care for children in care.
• The House needs major repairs as there was real danger posed to-
wards the boys from broken windows, exposed electrical wires and rusty nails.

- Based on the annual House budget, the lack of food issue will be a food crisis by the end of the year 2003; something needs to be done.

In addition to making these recommendations, I started the following activities at the House for Boys.

- Training staff to offer vocational career training and counselling.
- Modeling to staff how to offer individual counselling, group counselling and making referrals to other professional.
- Offering limited financial support.
- Teaching and supporting the Board members and staff members to be inclusive and supportive of the boys participation in decision-making by asking for their input, and in so doing, giving the boys a voice in their care.
- Making sure the boys represent themselves at Board meeting when appropriate.
- Addressed the Board members about their responsibility in regards to the boys in their care, and also pointed out some legal ramifications around their actions.
- Gave the Board a point-form list of the issues that they had requested from me.
- Getting boys back into school that had been expelled and arranging transfers through the Education Ministry for the boys who had been asked to find other schools.
- Supporting boys to lead projects like gardening, community service and forming a marimba band.
- Role modeling care and appropriate intervention.

Only a beginning has been made to transform the care for my brothers at the House for Boys, and I plan to return in the summer of 2004 to assist in continuing the process.