

## **Ms Elaine Grech**

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It is an honour to be here today in the presence of many dedicated fellow graduands, families, friends, academics and distinguished guests. I believe that within our distinct yet complementary roles, one aspect that unites us all, is our desire to make a difference. We share a passion to make a contribution in our families, in our learning and working contexts, and amongst the people and systems we give our services to.

Significant people in my life inspired me to be creative and open to learning, to appreciate the value of constructing knowledge and most important of all, to answer my call. I feel grateful for having followed my heart and chosen a care-giving profession: that of a family therapist. If we take a moment to reflect on what has motivated us to choose our profession and area of study, we might discover that like many care workers who participated in my doctoral study, significant positive and adverse personal and family experiences might have had a pivotal role. These care workers who work with children in residential care in Malta, also highlighted how such meaningful experiences also supported their understanding of the complex and painful experiences of children in residential care and their families. The love for the children and the desire to help were prominent characteristics that spurred care workers to enter this profession. Many of them, like me experienced a lot of satisfaction when they saw an improvement in the children's well-being. When the job we do has meaning, when we feel passionate about the service we are giving, when we are dedicated to keep growing and learning, then our job becomes a vocation. A vocation that genuinely makes a difference in people's lives.

As James Anglin, a researcher in residential care once wrote “child and youth care is not rocket science: it’s *far* more complex than that!” (2014, p. 61). Making sense of, containing and processing the children’s painful feelings requires a well-developed ability to be attuned and reflexive. Such complexity requires spaces where professionals can develop their reflexivity. Training, ongoing personal and professional development and supervision are crucial. Therefore, I would like to invite all of us to reflect on the responsibility we have as professionals to meet the demands and the changing needs of society, to keep learning and base our interventions on research evidence.

With the purpose of striving for excellence in our professions, besides focusing on achievement, it is important that we invest in our wellbeing. This doctoral study journey has taught me a precious lesson: that in order to prevent burnout, we need to start by taking care of our ourselves, so we can be fit to take care of others. If we want to make a difference, I urge all of us to invest in enhancing the quality of relationships: both in our own lives and also in the lives of the people we mentor or support. These relationships include those with our families and friends, the multi-disciplinary professional teams, and the people we provide a service to. Secure, supportive relationships enhance resilience and are thus fundamental for wellbeing.

In fact, the care workers in my study were very appreciative of the support they experienced within their teams, from their leaders and from significant relationships in their lives. This also included the relationships they fostered with the children themselves. Spirituality was also a meaningful source of support for many.

I would like to share few of the care workers' ideas on what they considered best practice when working with children in residential care and their families. I hope these insights can be inspirational for all of us here today irrespective of our role or specialisation: They advised to: "Be perseverant" "dedicated" and "highly motivated": "be there for the children!"; "listen emphatically"; "love them unconditionally"; "safeguard their best interests"; "adopt a non-judgemental position"; "be self-reflexive" and "manage the feelings that are triggered".

I encourage all professionals present here today to keep a positive attitude and to continuously appraise our work while also being mindful of the need to keep developing personally and professionally. We are privileged with knowledge and positions of influence and thus we have the opportunity to be transformational and to lead by example.

Working as a team is paramount and this was in fact the most frequently mentioned source of support for the care workers who participated in my study. Thus, to enhance our practices and our well-being, I urge collaboration between academics, educators, practitioners, mentors, leaders and policy makers. We need to keep working together towards shared visions in our work. I believe you would agree with me that a compassionate and collaborative disposition towards the people we work with and give a service to, is key. This shared vision can support us to keep going and thrive despite challenging moments in our journey.

The fact that we graduands here today managed to complete our studies is a testimony of our resilience. Our resilience is sustained and enhanced by all the significant people who help us along the way. In my case, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Professor Angela Abela, my co-supervisor Professor Arlene Vetere; Professor Frank

Bezzina for his statistics consultancy; the Dean of the Faculty of Social Wellbeing, Professor Andrew Azzopardi and the examiners: Dr Maureen Cole, Dr Clarissa Sammut Scerri and Professor Jane Aldgate. Thank you to the University of Malta for supporting this research and to the Malta Government Scholarship Scheme for sponsoring it.

I will conclude by thanking our families, friends, lecturers, mentors, colleagues, our research participants and the families we work with. Your dedication has inspired us, supported us and accompanied us during this journey. We are here today thanks to all of you. We all have the capacity within us to be beacons of light. May we experience and bring joy in our families and in our work, let us be the light, spread it and shine wherever our paths may take us.

Thank you