



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

Critical Conversations. Narratives of youth work practice in austerity Ireland

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Article first published online

February 2015

HOW TO CITE

Melaugh, B. (2015). Critical Conversations. Narratives of youth work practice in austerity Ireland. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(1), 97-117.

Retrieved from <http://journals.padovauniversitypress.it/ijse/content/critical-conversations-narratives-youth-work-practice-austerity-ireland>



PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Critical Conversations. Narratives of youth work practice in austerity Ireland

*Brian Melaugh**

Abstract: This paper presents findings from an ongoing study into the impact of austerity on youth work Ireland. The paper discusses the impact of austerity on youth work identity, youth work practice, the relationship between youth work and the State and the emergence of the Irish Youth Workers Association. The findings highlight that austerity is having a significant and indeed detrimental impact on youth work identity and practice in Ireland. At a national level there is a tension between institutional recognition and the cumulative impact of disproportionate cuts which limit the ability of the sector to offer quality youth work practice. The findings offer an insight into the structural and psychological impact of austerity at the level of practice. This is a story of youth work trying to do more with less resources. Also the findings present grounds for optimism as youth work is shown to be resistant in the face of an austerity programme that is challenging its identity and legitimacy.

Keywords: Youth Work, Austerity, Organisational Change, Narrative Analysis

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Introduction

We have more young people coming to the project because of the recession but our hours are reduced because of funding cuts and it's really hard to offer a service to everyone

The above piece from an interview with an experienced youth work manager captures the dilemma faced by many youth projects in Ireland. At the heart of the dilemma is the challenge of endeavouring to offer quality youth work services to young people in a context of austerity. The purpose of this paper, is explore some of these challenges and tensions, through a discussion of research findings emerging from an ongoing qualitative study into the impact of austerity on youth work identity and practice in Ireland. The paper will open with a discussion on what is youth work, followed by a discussion on the legislative and policy context of youth work in Ireland. To provide a rationale as to why the study is necessary the paper will discuss the economic recession in Ireland, in particular the programme of austerity and its impact on youth work. The paper will also outline the research methodology used in the study. This will include a discussion on why a narrative approach to data gathering and analysis was considered appropriate, information on the sample and the analytical strategy used to analyse the data. Finally, the paper will outline the research findings under the themes: Youth work doing more with less, reshaping youth work, birth of the Irish youth work association and opportunities and challenges for the future.

What is youth work?

For Banks the question of 'What is youth work?' is a perennial question that is open to question and debate (Banks, 2010, p. 4). At its simplest youth work can be understood as a range of different activities focused on working with young people. For Banks (2010, p. 7) these activities can be understand in terms of a spectrum of work with young people, ranging from youth leisure activities, to specialised targeted interventions (e.g. youth counselling). The literature also highlights that Youth work can be understood as an occupation and a discipline (Bank, 2010, p. 5). The

construction of youth work in these terms moves it from a generic activity to a specialised form of practice carried out by professional workers (youth worker) and informed by a body of theory and practice. In many ways, it moves youth work into the realm of a profession and professionalisation. Questions as to what constitutes a profession, if youth work is a profession, and indeed, if youth work should engage with processes of professionalisation are contested and open to debate (Banks, 2004; Sercombe, 2004; Banks, 2010). Sarah Banks maintains that youth work is part of a group of professions called the 'social professions'. These professions which also include social work and community work, have their origin in British philanthropic organisations established in the late nineteenth century. For Banks the social professions share common key features including, for example, the calling to care, the commitment to change, ambivalence towards professionalisation (Banks, 2004, pp. 35-37). This reference to youth work emerging from a particular historical tradition is interesting because it allows for a discussion on what characteristics and values have developed over time to inform youth work practice. For Jeffs and Mark (2010, p 1-4) over the last 150 years core elements have emerged which define and distinguish youth work. These include:

- Voluntary participation. The acceptance that youth work is voluntary and young people have the freedom to choose if they want to be involved.
- Education and welfare of young people. The focus of youth work is on the personal and social development of young people. It is primarily concerned with education. What makes it different from formal education (school) is the emphasis on education as an "informal process". Informal education, is really about using conversations to explore everyday activities, in a way that encourages young people to use experience for learning and development.
- Youth work is collective and associative in nature. Youth work practice is concerned not only with the individual but also with the development of community and society. It achieves this by encouraging young people to work together in groups, using group learning to respond to individual need. It also utilises group work to promote political and social awareness, thereby empowering young people to participate in their communities and wider society.

- Youth work practice is ethical in nature. Youth workers have an obligation to practice with integrity ensuring that their practice reflects the ethical principles of respect for young people, their right to make decisions about their lives and a commitment to work for social justice and equality for all young people (Banks, 2010, pp. 10-11).

These core elements of youth work are reflected in this definition of youth work from the British National Youth Agency: “Youth work is an educational process that engages with young people in a curriculum built from their lived experience and their personal beliefs and aspirations. This process extends and deepens a young person’s understanding of themselves, their community and the world in which they live and supports them to proactively bring about positive changes” (National Youth Agency, 2014, p. 2).

Youth work practice itself is diverse in nature and includes centre based work (e.g. youth centres) and engaging with young people in their own environments (outreach and detached youth work). In terms of activities and programmes, these can be universal (e.g. working with young people to build confidence and self-esteem) or specific (programmes targeted at the needs of young gay and lesbian bisexual and transgender young people). Youth justice and youth health initiatives may also use a youth work approach to inform practice.

Youth work In Ireland

In Ireland, youth work is defined in the Youth Work Act (2001) as “A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations. (Youth Work Act, 2001, Part 1, Section 3).

The remit of the act was to define youth work and outline structures for the development and implementation of youth work in Ireland. For Devlin (2009, pp. 366-367) the definition enshrines a number of core principles that are central to the development of youth work in Ireland. These include

the notion that youth work is primarily educational in nature with a focus on 'non-formal' or 'informal' education. Youth work is based on the voluntary participation of young people and youth work provision is provided primarily by the voluntary or 'non-governmental' sector. Devlin (2009, p. 367) accepts that although youth work provision and activity is diverse in nature, the principles encapsulated in the definition "would command widespread agreement among people involved in youth work in Ireland today". Jenkinson (2013, p. 9) reinforces this view and maintains that having an agreed definition "lends strength and credibility to the vision and work of the sector". The Youth Work Act also created the legislative basis for the establishment of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC). NYWAC is responsible for advising the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on youth work policy and service provision. A key element of NYWAC work was the creation and implementation the National Youth Work Development Plan-2003-2007. Both Devlin (2009) and Jenkinson (2013) attest to the importance of the plan as a mechanism for development of Irish youth work in the areas of the contribution of youth work to social inclusion, improved infrastructure, and the development of professionalism and quality standards. The latter element, quality standards, lead to the launch of the National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (NQSF) in 2010. Irish youth work policy also reflects policy perspectives developed at an EU level. The 'EU Youth Strategy: Investing an Empowering (2010-18)' with its focus on initiatives to promote youth inclusion (through education and employment) and participation is reflected in the Irish government's commitment to the 'Youth Guarantee'¹. The EU Youth Strategy names youth work as one of the drivers for building youth participation and for strategic implementation. Again, this perspective on the role of youth work in fostering youth participation is reflected in Irish policy. Specifically, the 'Dublin Declaration on contribution of youth work to youth employment' calls for actions to enhance the visibility of youth works potential and for actions to promote the delivery of quality based innovative youth work (DCYA, 2013).

¹ The Youth Guarantee is a new EU Initiative that offers 18-24 year olds the opportunity to access career guidance, education, training programmes & work experience within a short time of becoming unemployed.

Research commissioned by the National Youth Council of Ireland presents a snapshot on the value of youth work to Irish society. The research report: 'Assessment of the Economic Value of Youth Work' (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2012) maintains that the economic value of youth work is in the region of €1 billion. The report also provides interesting material on the State of youth work in Ireland. With regard to youth participation, the report estimates that 43.3% of the total youth population (between ages of 10 and 24) engage with a youth work organisation. The report estimates the number of youth workers employed in the sector to be in the region of 1400. While the number of volunteers engaging in youth work is estimated to be in the region of 40,000. The research presents interesting information on the level of youth work funding. In 2011, the level of public funding was in the region of €79 million. The main funding source was the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (€61.5 million). This is not surprising as this department has the lead role for youth work policy and provision. The remainder of the funding came from the Irish Youth Justice Service (€8.8 million) and the Health Service Executive (€8.3 million) (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2012, p. 12). However, an analysis of the 'Comprehensive Review of Expenditure' published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, 2011) highlights a pattern of cumulative reduction in funding to the youth work sector. During the period, 2008 to 2011 funding to the youth sector reduced by €13.703 million from €73 million to €61 million (DYCA, 2011, p. 43). The review also outlined plans to reduce funding by a further €3 million for the period 2012 to 2014. By 2013, the funding allocation from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to the youth sector was €51.4 million. This figure reflects a 30% reduction in funding since 2008 (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2013a, p. 5). The National Youth Work Council of Ireland outlines the impact of the cuts on youth work and their potential consequences for young people: "These cuts have had a significant impact on youth work around the country and have led to the reduction in activities and services to young people and the closure of some youth initiatives and projects. The withdrawal of services and supports for young people are not without consequences and policy makers must be aware that cuts now could lead to greater economic and social costs in future years". (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2011, p. 7).

This reduction in funding is driven by government responses to manage the impact of the economic recession that resulted from the collapse of the global banking system in 2008 (Krugman, 2014). At the core of this response was the imposition of a programme of austerity focused on reducing debt by cutting public spending.

Austerity: the road from Celtic tiger to the ‘Bail out’

From the 1990s, Ireland experienced an unprecedented level of economic growth. Referred to as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ and named as a model of economic development, an example of how the free market policies of deregulation and economic openness could transform an economy. Writing in the *New York Times*, Friedman (2005) declared: “It is obvious to me that the Irish-British model is the way of the future, and the only question is when Germany and France will face reality: either they become Ireland or they become museums. That is their real choice over the next few years - it's either the leprechaun way or the Louvre”.

During the boom years it is accepted that there was expansion of youth work services and provision, particularly towards the goal of implementing recommendations outlined in the National Youth Work Development Plan (Devlin, 2008, p.378; Jenkinson, 2013, p.10). However in 2008 the situation changed, faced with a world economic downturn and the collapse of an internal property bubble, GDP declined by 12.4% and unemployment rose from an average rate of 4.6% in 2007, to 11.6% in 2009 (Considine & Dukelow, 2010; Dukelow & Considine, 2014). To manage an internal banking crisis Ireland issued a blanket guarantee for the liabilities of the Irish banking system. This decision was taken in the belief that the liabilities could be managed and in giving the guarantee Ireland ‘transformed private debt into public debt’ (Blyth, 2013, p. 68). However, after the passing of the guarantee it became apparent that the actual level of banking debt was significantly higher, for example Anglo Irish Bank alone had liabilities of €67 billion (Blyth, 2013, p. 65). The Irish State did not have the resources to manage this debt and to prevent insolvency Ireland entered into a €67.5 billion bail-out programme, which led to the ceding of Irish fiscal autonomy to the European Union, International Monetary Fund, and European Central Bank (commonly known as ‘the troika’). The bailout came with a package of reforms, which included mandatory reductions in

public spending by 26% (Blyth, 2013, p. 71). To implement the demands of “bailout” programme the Irish government agreed to a programme of fiscal consolidation that in reality meant the implementation of “austerity” budgets to reduce expenditure on social and health services by 15 billion by the end of 2014 (Government of Ireland, 2011).

The funding reductions to achieve these savings are having a radical impact on the shape of public and community services in Ireland (Harvey, 2012). As discussed earlier in the paper youth work is not immune from the impact of the austerity programme with current expenditure dropping by 30% since 2008 (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2013a, p. 5). A review of the literature highlights that Ireland is not unique, as the majority of EU countries have experienced cuts in public funds to youth work (European Commission, 2014; Jeffs & Smith, 2010, p. 11). However, there are factors that make the Irish experience of youth work in austerity unique. The EU report: ‘Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union’, accepts that Ireland has experienced budget cuts in the area of youth work but also maintains that the economic crisis has not impacted adversely on the development of youth policy: “Ireland, has experienced some budget cuts in the area of youth work, however, the economic crisis does not appear to have affected policy developments there with an increased in importance in the form of a new youth work strategy in development alongside the introduction of quality standards for youth work. Therefore, it appears that the economic crisis has not only resulted in budget cuts in the worst affected countries, but it has impeded the development of youth policies with the exception of Ireland”. (European Commission 2014, p. 108).

While this commitment to the development of youth policy is welcome, it needs to be balanced with the fact that the cuts to youth services are disproportionate: “Youth Services have taken a disproportionate cut since the onset of the crisis and within the funding allocation in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. In the 2013, Budget the cut to youth services represented 33% of the total cuts, despite the fact that the youth services budget only represents 14% of the Departmental budget (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2013a, p. 2).

In many ways, there is a paradox at the heart of Irish youth work. On the one hand, it enjoys a legal definition, institutional recognition and an ambitious policy agenda. While on the other hand, the cuts in funding are disproportionate and militate against the ability of youth work practitioners

to offer high quality youth work (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2011, p. 7; Jenkinson, 2013, p. 110). For the author this tension of providing youth work provision in a context of significant funding reductions was something that merited further research.

Research methodology

As stated in the introduction, this paper reflects some preliminary findings from a small ongoing study into the impact of austerity on youth work in Ireland. The aim of the study is to explore the following questions:

- What is the impact of austerity on youth projects and on youth workers?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for youth work operating in a context of austerity?
- What impact is austerity having on the identity of the youth work profession?

The study was qualitative in nature and adopted a narrative analysis approach to data gathering and data analysis. The purpose of the study was to explore how youth workers made sense of the experience of austerity on themselves, on the projects where they worked and on the wider field of youth work. This focus on understanding experience meant that a qualitative approach was an appropriate choice for the research because 'qualitative research allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 12). Steinar Kvale (1996, p. 80) maintains that the researcher is similar to a 'traveller' on a journey, who 'wanders' along with people having conversations and asking questions that lead people to tell stories about their worlds. This focus on 'conversation' and 'story' is interesting because the reason for the study emerged from conversations with youth workers about their experience of austerity. When listening to conversations I noticed similar patterns that reflected the structure of a story (Robinson and Hawke, 1986). These similarities included a focus on a central plot (the impact of austerity), its impact on actors/characters (e.g. youth workers), how these actors responded to the predicament they faced (e.g. how to survive in difficult circumstances) and evaluation/resolution (concerns for the future and possibilities presented by

austerity). This interest in stories offered an opportunity to use narrative approaches to make sense of the data, because ‘narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself’ (Riessman, 1993, p.1).

Sample and data sources

The study used the research methods of interviews and participant-observation to gather data for the study.

Interviews

The sampling method used was that of purposive sampling, because it allows a researcher to use their judgement, to select participants who satisfy the needs of the study (Robson, 2002, p. 265). The sample was a mix of youth workers and youth work managers. The author employed a semi structured interview template to explore the impact of austerity on the participant, on their work environment and on the wider field of youth work. Eight participants agreed to participate in the study (representing eight different youth projects). A rationale for choosing the participants was because of their experience of working in community based youth projects. The purpose of a community based youth project is to provide a quality youth service to young people from a specific geographical area. A common aim of the projects is to work with young people to meet identified need and to empower them to become active participants in society. To achieve this aim the projects offer a variety of services including centre based activities, outreach and detached work and tailored programmes responding to the specific needs of young people (e.g. sexual health, alcohol and drug awareness, educational support). The projects which formed part of the study are located in Dublin and provide a service to young people between the ages 10 to 21. The numbers of young people who engaged with the projects varied and is based on factors such as the population of young people in the catchment area, staff complement and type of service offered. However, the number of individual young people who engaged with the youth projects ranged from 450 to 1050 per year. A theme that connects all eight projects is that they are located in areas of social disadvantage and are primarily offering a youth work service to young people at risk of social exclusion. Also all have experienced

reductions in their overall funding budgets and the experience of this reduction on participants was of interest to the author.

Participant- Observation

The author is an active member of the Irish Youth Workers Association (IYWA). The association is engaging with the Trade Union movement to support youth workers to develop a collective response to austerity. Engagement with the association includes attending and engaging in meetings with youth workers. This engagement offered an opportunity to gather data about youth workers experience of austerity. This duality of active participation while also gathering data is akin to participant-observation (Yin, 2009). After each event (two large meetings with over 50 youth workers), a summary of the event was recoded in a research diary. In terms of a structure, the summary made links between observed events and the main aims of the study.

Data analysis

The author made the decision to use the software package NVivo to support data analysis. For Welsh (2002) NVivo is named as an excellent resource for organising and managing data. However, Welsh (2002, p. 4) also makes it clear that purpose of NVivo is not to do data analysis, rather it is a tool that supports the process of analysis. Therefore it is essential to have a strategy for analysing and making sense of the raw data that is imported into NVivo. Thematic analysis because of its flexibility and ability to search for patterns and themes emerging from the data was used as strategy for analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). When analysing the data credence was given to Kvale's (1996, p. 201) advice that during analysis a researcher can alternate between the roles of a 'narrative finder' (look for common themes in the data) and a 'narrative creator' (moulding the themes into a coherent story). Analysis followed the conventional steps of immersion, categorisation and interpretation (McLeod, 1994; Kvale, 1996). Immersion was achieved by reading and transcribing research data into NVivo. The purpose was to achieve a rich understanding of the data. Categorisation was achieved by systematically working through interview transcripts and observation notes assigning codes (e.g. reduction in funding, increase in young people attending) and categories (youth work doing more with less).

Interpretation focused on building ‘analytical memos’ that told a story about a theme, linking the material to the study aims and literature about youth work and austerity (e.g. Austerity- story of youth work doing more with less).

The story of youth work in austerity: doing more with less

A recurrent theme emerging from the research is that the reductions in funding are having an impact on front line youth work services. This experience is summarised in the following piece from a youth worker:

Because of the funding cuts, we have lost a post and this means a change in practice for the young people. In an effort not to let young people go we have amalgamated groups. The dynamics do not always work and this causes stress for young people and the staff.

Alongside these cuts in youth work provision there is clear evidence that young people in Ireland are the hardest hit by the financial crisis. A report by the National Economic and Social Council: ‘The Social Dimensions of the Crisis’ (NESC, 2013) highlights that young people have especially high unemployment rates (33% for 15-9 year olds). Youth workers discussed with the concern the impact of the recession on young people, the reality of emigration, and the insecurity that comes from the challenge of trying to gain meaningful and dignified employment. In addition, the recession is increasing the demand for youth work services (Jenkinson, 2013, p. 11). This is a challenge because with greater demand there is the pressure to do more with less funding:

It is a real struggle to accommodate the number of young people attending. Our numbers are up but because of the cuts, we are down to four days a week. To be honest the team are doing voluntary hours but it does have an impact on morale (Youth Work Manager).

These structural changes carry personal and psychological implications for workers. A clear theme emerging from this study is that changes in pay and conditions are having an impact on staff wellbeing and morale. For Kanter (1992) ‘too much uncertainty’ and ‘real threats’ are reasons why

people find change emotionally challenging. The following quotation from a youth work manager clearly reflects the elements of threat and uncertainty:

We do not know what the budget will be this year and we are waiting to see what the final cut will be. This creates a lot of stress and an environment of not knowing because nobody knows if they still will have a job in February.

This study also confirms the findings of Jenkinson (2013) study that a significant challenge for youth work in a time of austerity is survival. The majority of participants expressed concerns for the survival of youth work going forward. This concern is experienced at both a personal (lack of job security) and an organisational level (youth work as an informal process will not survive).

However, this is not the complete story and in the face of reduced resources, the study presents evidence that youth work is responding to the crisis in creative and innovative ways. In an environment of scarcity, projects are still trying to develop new initiatives to respond to the needs of young people. One example centred on the development of a 'Bike project' to meet the needs of young people not engaging in formal youth groups or who were disengaged from the youth project. During the interview, the youth worker talked passionately about the project and outlined the demands of maintaining the project:

The idea for the 'Bike project' sprung out of a young person asking an outreach worker to help fix a puncture because he could not do it himself. Speaking to young people it became clear that some of the young people who did not engage with the project were mad about bikes. The project started when these young people brought bikes into the youth project to be fixed. Youth workers also started to gather old bikes and young people are supported to strip down these bikes and build them up. When they are finished, they can keep the bike. We also use the bike project to do bike health and safety with young people. The project is growing and it is hard to manage the demands. My hours have been cut and to be honest I am doing work on the project outside my hours. It is a big success and we need to hold on to it.

The Story of Youth Work in Austerity: reshaping Youth Work

Jeff's and Smith (2010, p.11) writing on the British experience comment on how changes in government policy are reshaping youth work in the UK. Elements that are driving this change include a move away from association to individualised work and a move towards outcomes based work. The findings of this study strongly reflect a concern that Irish youth work is being reshaped, similar to the British experience there are concerns that a focus on outcomes is really a tool for saving money.

The outcomes and logic model came about at the same time as the economic slowdown and austerity. The economic climate allows for the reinforcement of the outcomes approach and I think it is really about saving money (Youth worker).

Participants accept that there is a need to produce evidence to demonstrate how youth work is beneficial for young people. The National Quality Standards Frame Work is an important element in this process of building a body of evidence to support youth work efficacy. However, there is a debate as to what constitutes evidence and what evidence is considered essential to meet the requirements of funding agencies. The majority of participants expressed concern that youth work as a political and an educational practice is under threat. The basis of this threat is a perception that funding agencies demand that funding is targeted at youth at risk initiatives: e.g. crime, youth unemployment, child protection. In term of reporting youth projects must provide evidence of efficacy in these areas. In essence, this moves youth work from a process focused on responding to the needs of young people to a practice that responds to defined targets. This tension between needs and target-focused practice is highlighted in the following quote from a youth worker:

The funding is pushing youth work into casework and family work. One project was asked about moving youth workers into a residential care home that needed staff...It is hard keep a focus on youth work as a collective process because casework really means working with young people at an individual level. I mean if we do this is, how youth work is different from social work or social care.

The majority of participants expressed the view that that youth work is being treated unfairly as the cuts to youth work budgets are excessive. The research suggests two perspectives as to how government policy is reshaping youth work. The first is that youth work is not valued or fully understood. In a climate of austerity this lack of recognition means, there is a real risk of having its budget reduced. This perspective is summarised in the following quote from a youth worker manager:

The cuts in funding have unnerved the sector. The funding was just whipped away and there was little resistance at a policy level. I think at a policy level there is little recognition about the value of youth work and non-formal education.

The second perspective is that austerity offers an opportunity to implement policies that have the potential to redefine youth work. The main concern is that policies (e.g. competitive tendering) will lead to the privatisation and deprofessionalisation of youth work. The following piece from the author's observation diary reflects this view:

The meeting was organised by the unions and the Irish Youth Workers Association to discuss the impact of funding cuts on youth work and devise a plan to challenge the cuts going forward. The impact of the cuts on worker conditions and morale was evident. A major concern was the plan to give budgets for services to the local authority under the alignment process. Central to the process is that the delivery of community services will be open to competitive tendering. The real fear expressed by attendees is that youth work will be privatised and in such a scenario, profit would become the main driving force in youth work provision.

Dickens (2010) maintains that a tension between government policy and the expectations of the social professions is something that is to be expected. Dickens writes in the area of social work and to make sense of the tensions and dilemmas that social work experiences in the task of carrying out its remit, he outlines a model, referred to as the 'social work diamond'. The diamond is composed of four elements: the State, the profession, organisations and service users. Also for Dickens (2010, p. 11), the model is not exclusive to social work and is applicable to the other social professions, including youth work. Central to the model is the premise that the four points are continually interacting with each other and

bring about change in a dynamic, ongoing manner (Dickens, 2011, p. 13). Applying the diamond to Irish youth work, the decision by the State to reduce youth work funding promoted a debate as to how the needs of youth workers was being represented. The National Youth Council of Ireland, as the representative body for youth work organisations in Ireland, plays a key role in lobbying government and presenting an argument for the value of youth work. In addition, the trade unions play a role in protecting youth work pay and conditions. However, for many youth workers there was a feeling that something was missing. Compared to social work (represented by the Irish Association of Social Work) and community work (Irish Community Workers Co-op) there was no body that represented youth workers in a collective manner. A number of youth workers felt that the lack of a professional body weakened the ability of the profession to engage with other key actors e.g. the State. In 2013 youth workers organised a number of meetings towards the goal of establishing the Irish Youth Workers Association (IYWA). The next section of the paper will explore the birth of the association and its implications for the youth work profession in Ireland.

Birth of the Irish Youth Workers Association

In popular debate, there is a belief that the Chinese word for crisis, when translated into English, means an opportunity in a time of danger. In many ways, the sentiment of this translation is applicable to the position of the Irish Youth Workers Association (IYWA) established in 2013. In the face of significant cuts to youth work budgets, a decision was taken to establish an association with the goal of promoting the rights of youth workers and defending the role of youth work in Irish society. This piece taken from membership information outlines the purpose of the association:

The Irish Youth Workers Association (IYWA) was formed in 2013 by youth workers, for youth workers. We are an organisation who understand the uniqueness of youth work practice and are determined to protect youth work across the island of Ireland in these times of change. The IYWA believes that that youth workers should be the driving force and voice for the benefit of the sector holistically. Now is the time to come together in solidarity and fight for the future of the youth sector.

An analysis of the statement highlights that the IYWA perceives its role as one of promoting and protecting youth work. Evidence suggests that this role of promoting and protecting has already produced tangible benefits for youth work. After a concerted public campaign to raise the issue about the impact of funding cuts on youth work the government made a decision to reduce funding to the youth services by €2 million instead of €3 million in budget 2014 (National Youth Council of Ireland , 2013b). Going forward the IYWA has set out an ambiguous plan which includes drafting a constitution for the association, adoption of code of ethics, devise a strategy to link with trade unions and other national organisations to ensure that the voice of the youth work profession is heard at a national level.

One of the questions guiding the study was to consider the impact of austerity on the identity of the youth work profession. The emergence of the IYWA is a good case study to consider the theme of professionalism in the context of austerity. For Jenkinson (2013, p. 8) a key change in Irish youth work since 2000 is that youth work is more professionalised and the sector has a stronger sense of a professional identity. The birth of the IYWA could be viewed as another step in this process of ongoing professionalisation. However, the study also presents another perspective, for many youth workers austerity is challenging the very survival of youth work both at the level of a sector and as a profession. To adopt a term from Banks (2004, p. 37) austerity and its subsequent challenge to the identity of youth work is an event that is leading to 'deprofessionalisation'. It is possible that because of austerity both 'professionalisation' and 'deprofessionalisation' are happening simultaneously. Evetts (2011) perspective that professionalism is constructed through the interplay of two contrasting discourses (organisational and occupational) is interesting because it may help us understand what is happening to youth work as a profession in Ireland. In terms of explanation, organisational professionalism places importance on work accountability through the monitoring of targets and performance by managers and or an external authority. While occupational professionalism places importance on the discretion of practitioners to make decisions about work. In addition, associations are responsible for ensuring members adhere to codes of ethics and meet agreed standards for competent practice.

What is happening in Ireland is that youth work is trying to find a way of negotiating these competing discourses of professionalism. For example,

in regards to organisational professionalism, the study clearly highlights that the cost containment, external demands for accountability and working to predefined targets are a reality in Irish youth work. Challenging as these demands are, austerity has also acted as a catalyst for youth work to become organised and form a youth work association to protect and promote youth work going forward. The IYWA motto 'founded by youth workers for youth workers' and the belief that 'youth workers should be the driving force' in the development of youth work policy and practice are reflective of occupational professionalism. The ongoing development of Irish youth work will probably be dependent on the ability of the profession to manage the tensions presented by the discourses of organisational and occupational professionalism. As Devlin (2008, p.53) states: "A central challenge for youth work and youth workers will be to retain a core sense of vision and purpose regarding the relational, educational and associative mission of youth work in a climate of increasing managerialism and outcome focused accountability".

The Story of Youth Work in Austerity: Opportunities and Challenges for the Future

When asked if austerity offered any opportunities participants shared that the demand on resources meant that youth work needed to be more innovative. In the words of one participant: 'we need to beg, borrow and steal to survive and this means thinking outside the box.' Examples of thinking outside the box include youth projects coming together to implement joint outreach programmes to target at risk young people and getting help from a photography studio to run a group on photography. There is also an acknowledgement that in its efforts to challenge austerity youth work is more organised. The Irish Youth Workers Association is an example of this.

Looking to the future the recurring theme is a concern for the survival of youth work going forward. Expressed by one practitioner using the metaphor of a 'cliff' - 'we are on the edge and any more cuts will push us over.' This concern for youth work's survival is not without merit. In 2014, the government is committed to implementing the ninth 'austerity budget', which aims to reduce public expenditure to youth work by a further €2 billion. Nevertheless, there are also some grounds for optimism. The

‘National Policy Framework for Children and Young People: Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014-2020)’ includes the commitment to the development of a ‘National Youth Strategy’. The National Youth Work Advisory Committee will have a key role in developing the strategy and this allows for the case to be made for youth work and the need for a professional workforce.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discuss findings emerging as part of an ongoing qualitative study into the impact of austerity on youth work in Ireland. The findings highlight that austerity is having a significant and indeed detrimental impact on youth work identity and practice in Ireland. At a national level there is a tension between institutional recognition and the cumulative impact of disproportionate cuts which limit the ability of the sector to offer quality youth work practice. The findings offer an insight into the structural and psychological impact of austerity at the level of practice. This is a story of youth work trying to do more with less resources. Also the findings present grounds for optimism as youth work is shown not to be passive but is actively organising to promote and defend youth work. Finally, austerity is an event that is redefining Ireland and there is a need to produce literature on the social impact of the recession on the social and community sectors. This paper is part of this endeavour.

The author would like to thank youth workers and youth work managers who participated in the study for their time and for their honesty.

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