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Research Presentation

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Introduction

The research is concerned with the potential of the youth service/youth projects to assist young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in successfully progressing into the labour market. The project, which is titled YOYO (due to the back and forth nature of young people's transitions), is being coordinated by the Iris Institute in Tubingen, Germany. There are 10 partner institutions from across Europe.

My interests lie in the related fields of youth work theory and practice, the Irish youth services and young people's lives in Ireland today.

Three fold task;

1. Find good practice examples
2. Turn such examples into a coherent praxis model
3. Train workers
4. Go forth and deliver to the multitudes

Methodology

Generally, semi structured interviews with three sample groups;

1. Young People. A significant amount of interviews have been conducted with young people, both in groups and individually. 38 young people were characterized as disengaged (see below) and 10 young people were trendsetters. Two rounds of interviews were conducted with the disengaged young people. In addition, a video was produced with the Youghal Youthreach group of respondents. The data collected from the young people can be taken as the central source for this research, other sources serve to support, augment or contextually frame this material.
2. Project Workers. The workers in the projects were interviewed to ascertain their views on the research issues.
3. Externals. A number of external experts were also interviewed. (i) Project management at local, regional and national level, (ii) state funding representative, (iii) a hard sector (local Employment Services) worker, (iv) academic/theoretical persons.

Documentary analysis was also undertaken. The analysis of the data was analyzed by myself and edited by Paul Burgess.

Problems in the research;

1. Group interviews. Inhibitions/waffle/noise.
2. Poor environment for interviewing. Fellows running around/noise/phones.

Concepts.

Young Person; Aged from 14 to 35.

Disengaged; Early school leaver as primary identifiable factor.

Trend setter; Not conforming to typical/projected transitional pathway. (Nurse or guard/factory op). ESL, cause or symptom? Labour exchange view on what is work and when it's carried out is not post modern.

Youth Service; Broad based sweep.

Case Study Agencies

The case study agencies were selected in order to provide a wide-ranging sample of potential or actual disengaged young people.

Agency 1; **Cork Simon Community Youth Homelessness and Drug Prevention Project.**

The project is a homeless assistance measure with a particular emphasis on young people's chaotic substance use. It is a social care/youth work intervention located in the center of Cork City. This agency represents arguably the single most disengaged group of young people in Ireland, young, homeless drug users (female and male).

Agency 2; **Glen Young Adults Project (Glen Foroige)**

This project is a community youth work intervention located in a disadvantaged housing estate on the North side Cork City. Foroige is a national youth work organization. The community youth work model has become the primary method employed in youth work with disadvantaged young people in Ireland over the last 20 years.

Agency 3; **Youghal Youthreach**

The final project is located in a coastal town 30 miles East of Cork City. This intervention is specifically targeted at early school leavers and is concerned with vocational training. The Youthreach programme (and related programmes such as the community training workshops) is the core national response to early school leaving.

Theoretical Approach. Systems theory.

Findings

Macro core finding; '*Dominant trajectory theory*'. Ideological hegemony?

The Irish transition system for young people centers upon a standard transitional trajectory. This traditional model presupposes that the vast majority of young people will remain in the formal school system until they reach leaving certificate standard (at c18 years of age). At this juncture young people will either;

- 1 enter third level education if they have crossed a specified educational obtainment threshold in the leaving certificate examination,
- 2 enter vocational education (such as apprenticeships),
- 3 enter directly into the labour market.

Disengagement continuum.

Interview process as a reflective experience.

Life Theories

The 'life theories' of the young people located around the upper reaches of the 'disengagement continuum' tend to mirror the theories held by the trendsetter group. Therefore, this section focuses on the life theories of those located at the more extreme, most disengaged level of this continuum. These young people's perception on their general position in society reflected their viewpoints on unemployment. Lacking any political awareness or policy analysis skills, they believe that it is largely the fault/responsibility of the individual. That one find's oneself in a disadvantaged life

situation due to one's own apathy, laziness or inability. There is an acceptance of the status quo and a resignation emanating from low self-esteem and feelings of disempowerment.

The life theories of the trendsetter group on the Meta level are characterised by the following general features;

1. Learning, and openness to learning, is vital foundations for success. In the main, learning is not something you do in school.
2. Activity in the present, even if one is unemployed, is another precursor for progress. (If only to stave off boredom and keep one's mind occupied.) Opportunities will arise at some point; one must be ready to avail of them.
3. One's success or failure is to a large degree an individualistic issue. People are responsible for their own trajectories. Self-confidence and self-reliance are crucial to success.
4. Work is not solely a financial issue; other considerations are perhaps even more important.
5. Notwithstanding the above (4), any job is better than no job.
6. Risk is an inherent and unavoidable element in life; therefore, one must be prepared to take risks in order to progress.
7. One must be willing to try new ideas, and to change career orientation (trajectory?) if such a change is in one's future or immediate interest.

Ability to operate in a strategic manner, sometimes by instinct alone.

Q? Can we train youth workers to deliver this to young people?

Participation

Motivation

Learning

Success

Relationship of adults and young people.

Disengaged Clusters (*I'm not convinced 100% about this method*)

The criteria for transition clusters are based upon the notion of disengaged young people's own degree of agency within their personal trajectory. We have decided upon a system that relegates personal and familial circumstances to a secondary position; in effect, these circumstances can act as constraints or limits on options available. These individual issues certainly limit choices for some individuals; however they do not completely restrict an individual's degree of agency. The clusters therefore reflect the biographical decisions taken by the young people rather than the life circumstances that may have contributed to these decisions. Of particular interest in this matter is of course the influence of the case study agency projects in facilitating young peoples agency. It should be borne in mind that the dominant version of transition tends to construct early school leaving as a fatal life choice, a decision from which there is no return. This notion is a patent falsehood yet it retains a strong degree of currency in Irish society, and we may postulate fairly accurately that overcoming the fatalistic sense of failure associated with early school leaving is in itself evidence of personal agency in relation to youth transitions.

The criteria for inclusion in any cluster is not rigid, most of the young people's interview responses suggest that movement across the cluster criteria occurs; we are therefore clustering the young people on their position at the time of interview.

The young people represented in the clusters were interviewed in the second round (work package 5).

1 Young People who appear to be maintaining a progressive linear trajectory

These young people appear to be using the relevant case study agency to assist, maintain or re-orientate themselves on a more or less traditional Irish transitional trajectory. The evidence suggests that they have engaged with the particular project in order to maximize the benefits (social, personal and educational) accruing from participation in a project. These young people might best be perceived as attempting to structure their lives in a manner that allows them to best slot into the dominant transitional pathway. These young people tend to have a short to medium to term plan of action regarding transition, and the majority of the WP5 sample is located within this cluster.

Young People who appear to be dictating their own transitional trajectory

This cluster represent a minority of the sample who displayed the characteristics of 'trendsetting'. They have a propensity to be well-motivated young woman and men who have left school early but aggressively engage in opportunities for advancement. They are likely to engage with educational and training systems that offer 'hard currency'; credits, qualifications and skills that hold a market value. This cluster networks across different systems in a proactive manner; to a large degree their circumstances are broadly similar to the young people in the other clusters yet they appear to actively engage in determining their own biographies. Planning for this cluster can be short, medium, or long term.

3 Young People who appear to be on a 'dead end' trajectory

The final cluster represents young people who appear to be passive accepters of their life circumstances. These young people tend to be resigned and fatalistic; they interact within a restricted number of social systems and do not possess valued skills or qualifications. Planning tends to be extremely short term in nature, there is very little evidence of goal visualization within this cluster. The majority of the young people from the Simon project feature in this cluster, which is not surprising given their generally demotivating biographies. It should also be borne in mind that circumstances can change dramatically for this cluster; the attainment of relatively secure employment would change the context of their lives to a successful transition overnight. A positive aspect regarding this group is of course their engagement at some level with a case study group; we may therefore postulate that a fourth cluster exists; young people who do not, or have not, engaged with a youth intervention. This hypothetical cluster also includes young people who engage with a measure but do not participate in a meaningful way.

Research Sample in Clusters

Cluster	Simon		Glen		Youghal		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1	1	1	4	4	2	11	23
2	1	1	2	1	1	0	6
3	0	0	2	3	1	3	9
Total	2	2	8	8	4	14	38

The data collected suggests that the sample as a whole consists mainly of young people who 'take two steps forward and one step back'. These youngsters appear to be stuck in various projects and interventions, they move into and out of employment without seeming to actually advance their prospects in any meaningful way; i.e., most continue to trade in a devalued currency, as they do not gain any valued qualification or credit from the activities that they engage in. Not surprisingly, the responses of the case study agencies and the young people themselves appear to be rooted in the notion of transitional re-alignment back into a standard trajectory.

6.2 Success in Projects

As discussed above (preceding sub-section) evaluation of success is a notoriously imprecise activity in regard to youth projects. Our research does however lead us to conclude that all three projects are successful to a degree from all perspectives. Young people have used the various measures and been assisted greatly in moving through transition. At a most basic level they provide young people with a non-threatening and respectful environment. For some of the respondents, such an environment was unknown before project entry. A most striking fact was the almost universal high regard and esteem in which the workforce was held in by the young people. Evidence of genuine warmth, empathy and respect for the young people was readily visible in each measure.

Within the limits of the projects resources and mandate they do indeed enable young people to negotiate entry into social systems from which they were previously excluded due to non-possession of valued currencies; hard marketable skills currency and soft social skills currency. The young people who participate on a meaningful level in the case study agencies invariably benefit as a direct result of this engagement.

The point must also be made however that not all young people engage or remain engaged with the projects. Some of the young people questioned the relevance of the projects as they grew older (Glen Foroige), others felt persecuted within the measure (Youghal Youthreach). These facts might be best explained in terms of the young people's needs; the projects cater for an enormous range of young peoples needs. They do not, and cannot, cater for each and every need of all young people.

A quintet of interconnected core factors are now seen to dictate success in the case study agencies;

1. The workforce
2. The temporal element
3. Effective response to the needs of the young people
4. Resourcing of the project
5. Theoretical Framework and Clarity of purpose

Conclusions and Recommendations

The main conclusion on a societal level extrapolated from this research is the overwhelming dominance of the standard transitional trajectory in Ireland today. The attainment of the Leaving Certificate upon completion of formal education has come to be taken as the key determinant in a young person's future prospects. Very few young people who do not reach this academic threshold can look forward to secure employment and the lifestyle benefits this brings. Yet a significant minority of young people exit the formal education system prior to this examination, some with and some without the lesser formal school qualification, the Junior Certificate.

The reasons for this state of affairs are many, complex and interrelated; one cannot however escape the conclusion that Irish society and social policies are inherently unequal in the creation and maintenance of wealth and privilege. The overwhelming majority of those who leave school early are the daughters and sons of persons who do not themselves possess valued skills and the cultural capital required to prosper in Irish society. The achievement of full adulthood and attainment of independent status for these young people requires them to adapt different strategies than their peers.

One such strategy is the use of projects such as the Case Study Agencies to re-orientate towards something approaching the standard trajectory. The motivations for engagement are multiple, an agency such as the Simon project holds an obvious attraction for the homeless young person. The Glen Foroige project is usually accessed initially for recreation and leisure purposes, thereafter the service users may participate to a greater level and reap dividends in the form of access to 'hard sector' training and education. The Youthreach programme is the most obvious example of a compensatory mechanism, yet at least some engage purely for the financial benefit attached to attendance.

The inter-related concepts of motivation and participation come into play at this juncture, our studies strongly indicate that motivation, or its antithesis demotivation, is the crucial factor pertaining to each individual young person. No two will carry the same biographical life history, experiences or life ambitions. The professional challenge for the agencies involved at this point center on their ability to overcome de-motivating forces and foster motivation. The voluntary nature of all three case agencies (young people engage voluntarily) assists this process as the young people concerned tended to have negative and coercive memories of formal schooling that act as a de-motivating force.

The factor of participation through one's own personal choice in these agencies serves as an introduction to personal decision making; leaving aside the decision to leave school this for some of the young people may well be their first experience of self control over their own transition biography.

A most welcome development is the focus on quality of service rather than quantity of service users in the management and funding sector's evaluation of services. The former preoccupation with what was known as the 'numbers game' in the Youthwork field appears to be in decline in favour of more qualitative assessment instruments.

A final conclusion from our research concerns the diversity of measures working with young people. The case study agencies respond to a variety of young peoples requirements in a range of different ways; this diversity allows for a comprehensive

selection of measures to intervene with disengaged Youth and therefore avoids the dangers inherent in pursuing a 'one size fits all' approach to youth provision.

Recommendations with regard to success factors

- Youth provision in Ireland has developed a haphazard and piecemeal fashion. The statutory instrument now exists (Youth Work Act 2001) to commence a consolidated and rational development of Youth Services. These services cannot compensate for inadequacies in other areas of social policy, nor can they themselves address the unequal nature of Irish society. They have however proven themselves to be competent and effective in working with disadvantaged young people by assisting these young people in accessing opportunities. Resources must therefore be provided for the relevant organizations to continue and enhance their work..
- Youth work and related activities should be considered a valuable asset in its own right, not as an auxiliary to the formal education sector or as a crime prevention/risk reduction programme.
- The ring-fencing of dedicated funding for existing and future Youth Provisions through the Department of Education. The 'problem' focus on young people in Ireland need to be addressed, therefore it is recommended that Youth Work provisions should be overseen by this particular department.
- Adequate provision needs to be provided for ancillary services such as psychologists, counselors and substance mis-use treatment. Effective liaison between the various profession and agencies is a prerequisite of professional service delivery in this area.
- Current employment factors in the Youthwork sector require attention. In order for the agencies to recruit and retain a high caliber of personal posts in these agencies should be made permanent with the attendant benefits, as is the case in other caring professions. The value of workers who have a long term involvement with a project, community or intervention has become evident from this research.
- With particular regard to the Simon Project; resources must be made available immediately to end the appalling situation whereby young people (and older people) are living on the streets.
- The central features of good practice highlighted from this research project (see below under transferable recommendations) should be drawn to the attention of all persons involved in work in this area. Current and future training programmes need to give due cognizance to these findings and incorporate same into training programme.
- Barrier to participation require removal, the issue of ethnicity will undoubtedly come to prominence in Ireland over the next decade. The workforce and management must therefore gain competences in anti-oppressive work practices. Other barriers such as deficiencies in the transport infrastructure and access for disabled persons require the infusion of adequate resources to overcome such deficiencies.
- More research is required into the area of certification for young people who participate in youth projects. A danger exists in this area however, as the introduction of such certification might well lead to new and different pressures

for the projects. The risk of the projects becoming more like formal schooling cannot be allowed to materialize, as such a development would negate their ability to engage and work with disengaged young people.

Internationally Transferable Recommendations

- The unique and central role of the worker in an intervention with disengaged youth needs to be identified, validated and fostered. Agencies should do their utmost to retain persons of proven ability, workers who have the professional capacity to build effective professional relationships with the young people concerned.
- The inter-related concepts of transition, participation, motivation, and learning should be perceived as vital components in working with individual young people. Measures that aim to conduct fruitful work with young people should conceptualize these notions into agreed if negotiable practice indicators and techniques. Youthwork praxis needs to further investigate and develop these areas.
- The positioning of the young person and not the agency's curriculum at the central point in an intervention is a positive aspect of the three case study agencies practice codes. We believe that this particular point is an essential feature of good practice in these agencies that is eminently transferable to other national and cultural sites.

In conclusion, we are reminded that youth work and personal transitions do not take place within a vacuum, but rather against the backdrop of powerful ideological, cultural and socio-economic realities that act as determinants in effecting the nature and type of everything from interventions and expectations to evaluations and concepts of success and failure.

In the Ireland of the 21st century (as in most other European countries) the importance of youth transitions is still determined by the labour market and the need for access to formal qualifications. This has the effect of undervaluing those aspects of agency intervention that feature personal development as an end in itself, whilst rewarding or encouraging programmes which directly or indirectly fuel the labour market.

In this current social and economic climate - where some citizens may perceive interventions which do not lead to jobs or formal qualifications as "*as a waste of taxpayers money*" - it is incumbent upon agencies to be able to prove their effectiveness in regard to those criteria. This then undoubtedly influences the nature of agency work, the service provided, the relationship between young person and agency and the very concepts of success and failure for service user and service provider alike.