



## Connecting research and practice: Perspectives on the role of manualised programmes in youth work

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## **Connecting research and practice: Perspectives on the role of manualised programmes in youth work**

While there is a strong movement in favour of the use of manual based programmes in the arena of social care, there is a view that such programmes are not applicable in the more fluid setting of youth work, which operates informally, using dynamic and organic methods. For example, Coburn (2011) argues that a critical pedagogical approach to youth work engages young people by encouraging them to become inquisitive, to question why things are the way they are and to pose problems through which they can learn. For some, manualised or evidence based programmes are not seen as having a role in such contexts. However, to date, the international debate in relation to this issue has been limited by an absence of published studies focusing specifically on strategies to implement evidence informed practice in youth work contexts. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature. The Irish national youth organisation Foróige, which works with over 56,000 young people in Ireland on an annual basis, has developed a range of manualised evidence informed resources to support its youth work over recent years. Drawing on research findings from a range of studies conducted with youth workers focusing on implementation of these resources, the paper explores the benefits and tensions associated with the use of programme manuals in a youth work context. The findings suggest that such resources have a valuable role to play in youth work if designed in collaboration with youth workers, showing respect for core youth work values and allowing for flexibility and adaptability in implementation.

*Key words:* youth work, evidence, programmes.

Youth work has emerged as a central approach in responding to the needs of disadvantaged young people in society over recent decades. A type of non-formal education founded on the principles of voluntary participation, accessibility, empowerment and equality (Furlong, 2013; Lalor, de Róiste & Devlin, 2007), youth work interventions typically involve both structured (e.g. recreational, sporting and personal development programmes) and unstructured educational and developmental activities (e.g. street work, relationship building). Coburn (2011) highlights how youth work values are rooted in the work of Freire, aiming to develop a critical consciousness and focusing on the possibilities for transformation in the lives of young people. For Coburn (2011), Jeffs and Smith (2005) and others, youth work should be grounded in education that is informal, critical and conversational, relying on the twists and turns of conversation rather than following a prescribed, formal curriculum.

In common with all aspects of government funded policy provision, youth work has come under pressure to justify its worth and to work in a way that is evidence-based or evidence-informed (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2012). Evidence-based practice has been described as the explicit and judicious use of the best available scientific evidence in making professional decisions about the care of individuals (Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg & Haynes, 1997), while evidence-informed practice acknowledges the need for research to inform practice but places more emphasis on the role of the practitioner in judging what is appropriate in a given situation. Evidence-informed practice is defined by Nevo & Slonim-Nevo (2011, p. 18) as a process whereby,

practitioners are encouraged to be knowledgeable about findings coming from all types of studies and to use them in their work in an integrative manner, taking into consideration clinical experience and judgement, clients preferences and values, and context of intervention.

Research evidence is seen as important in aiding our understanding of the nature of social problems and of providing evidence of the effectiveness of interventions to address them. However, in many settings, decisions about the direction and delivery of services are often made without reference to research findings (Nutley, Walter & Davies, 2007), with practitioners citing difficulties in accessing useful and usable research findings and of knowing how to apply the findings in the context of their field. Furthermore, the difficulties associated with the evaluation of non-standardised interventions, such as youth work, means that research evidence is often not available in relation to the efficacy of youth work interventions (Veerman & van Yperen, 2007).

Walter, Nutley, Percy-Smith, McNeish and Frost (2004) identify three models to illustrate how research can be used in social care organisations. Firstly, the *research-based practitioner* model is one where individuals take an active role in keeping up to date with research and using it to inform their practice. The barriers associated with this model relate to the capacity of individuals to access, interpret and translate the research into practice. Secondly, *the embedded research model* locates the responsibility for ensuring that research informs practice at the level of management and systems. Guidance from research is built into practice tools, policies and procedures and standards. The embedded research model can be particularly appropriate where there is strong evidence for a particular practice or where practice tools can be tailored to the local context. Walter et al (2004) warn, however, that this process must be carefully managed to ensure that innovation and creativity are not suppressed. Thirdly, the *organisational excellence model*, sees organisations adopting a ‘research minded culture’ whereby partnerships are formed with local universities and ongoing review and learning is encouraged within the organisation. While the organisational excellence models can be successful, they are often costly, small scale and time limited. Walter et al. (2004) argue that no single model is always better than another.

With regard to the second of these models, the embedded approach, a key way in which organisations have sought to embed the use of research evidence in their organisations is through the development of manualised programmes that are evidence-based, uniform across different settings and measurable through evaluation. Manualised programmes have been defined as ‘discrete organised package of practices, spelled out in guidance ... that explains what should be delivered to whom, when, where and how’ (Axford & Morpeth, 2013, p. 268) and are seen to represent a concrete means of ‘bridging the gap between science and practice’ (Addis & Waltz, 2002, p. 423). It is argued that manualised programmes support the conceptualisation, planning and guiding of interventions, relieve the practitioner of the burden of finding relevant research, assembling that information and evaluating the validity of implementation (Mullen & Bacon, 2004). Research by Plath (2014) found benefits such as improved outcomes and staff satisfaction as a by-product of manualised programmes in social work, as well as the provision of a framework, rationale and credibility for the work undertaken by front line staff. Furthermore, the programmes were seen to provide a safeguard for staff from criticism and ensured their work was a step removed from their own personal values.

While the arguments in favour of programme approaches are many, the reticence of social care and education practitioners across a range of professions to embrace interventions that they see as prescriptive or appearing to minimise the role of practitioner judgement and creativity is well documented (Maher et al. 2009; Mazzucchelli & Sanders, 2010). Social care professionals and youth workers emphasise the importance of acknowledging and working with the individual strengths and needs of young people and their families. As a consequence, practitioners may feel that written programmes will not be sufficiently flexible or nuanced and there is a genuine concern that following a programme will interfere with the development of the therapeutic relationship – in the words of Addis, Wade and Hatgis (1999),

turning the workers into ‘technicians rather than genuine human beings’ (p. 432). These issues resonate with debates in youth work regarding whether the concept of curriculum, so central to formal education, is applicable to the more informal youth work context. The notion of ‘curriculum’ is rejected by some as being overly prescriptive and inflexible in a youth work context where the needs of young people should be paramount (Jeffs and Smith, 2005), while others believe that curriculum can provide a shared sense of purpose and direction, while allowing for flexibility (Devlin & Gunning, 2009; Ord, 2008;).

This paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the use of manualised programmes in youth work, through a case study of the approach taken by an Irish youth organisation, Foróige, in relation to the development and implementation of manualised programmes throughout its organisation. Foróige’s approach can be conceptualised as a strategy to embed research based practice resources in its work with young people (Walter et al., 2004). The approach is also consistent with the definition of evidence-informed practice, whereby the process of resource development drew extensively on collective practitioner experience and input from young people as well as on theory and research (Regehr, Stern & Shlonsky, 2007). Given the potential benefits and tensions associated with the use of programme based approaches in a youth work context, this paper draws on youth worker and volunteer perspectives from evaluation studies in relation to three programmes to address the following key questions: How do youth workers respond to opportunities for manualised programmes?; Did the resources enhance or constrain effective youth work practice? Once trained in the manualised programmes, how do youth workers use the supports?

## **Foróige and the development of programme manuals**

Founded in 1952, Foróige is Ireland's largest youth development organisation, reaching approximately 56,000 young people aged 10-20 years annually in a range of youth work services from local youth clubs to more specific youth projects (Foróige, 2015).

Foróige's purpose is 'to enable young people to involve themselves consciously and actively in their own development and in the development of society' (Dolan & Brennan, 2012). In 2009, the Atlantic Philanthropies funded Foróige to establish a Best Practice Unit (BPU) to support the organisation to grow an ethos of knowledge and resource sharing, promote greater consistency in practice and improve standards in training and support. Foróige's vision was that young people across Ireland would have access to a variety of high quality non-formal education programmes, developed on the basis of international evidence. The programmes were designed to complement and enhance the provision of the organisation, and were not seen as a substitute for relationship development or more organic forms of youth work.

The process of programme development aimed to ensure participation at all levels by representatives of those who would be involved in delivering the programme (i.e. staff and volunteers) and young people who would be future programme participants. It was hoped that this inclusive process would ensure that the content was needs-led, creative, fun and engaging. The approach to the development of its programmes included; 1) identifying a practice 'need' through consultation and needs assessment with young people, staff and volunteers; 2) establishing a programme development team which included young people, staff, volunteers, BPU staff and external experts; 3) carrying out an extensive literature review in the particular topic area; 4) development of the programme logic model, learning outcomes and curriculum; 5) pilot testing of the draft resource; 6) programme adjustment based on feedback; 7) implementation (training & support); 8) evaluation. The programmes

developed were in the areas of youth leadership, youth citizenship, youth entrepreneurship, offending behaviour, relationships and sexuality, youth politics, anti-bullying, drugs and alcohol and health and well-being. Programmes were implemented by staff and volunteers in Foróige clubs and projects throughout Ireland. Following the initial training in the delivery of each programme (approx 2 days each), ongoing implementation support was available from the Best Practice Unit where required, as well as through the line management structure of the organisation. As research studies have not been completed in relation to all programmes, this paper focuses on three of the eight programmes developed by the Best Practice Unit for which research evidence is available. These three programmes are described next (see also Table 1).

The purpose of the *Youth Citizenship Programme* is to promote community awareness and connection for young people. The core model underpinning the programme is one of ‘awareness, action, evaluation’ whereby young people undertake a three phased approach to identifying and responding to a community or social issue. The programme is run through youth clubs and projects throughout Ireland and entry into the programme is voluntary. Over 2,000 young people take part in the programme each year. Projects are exhibited at regional conferences held throughout Ireland each year and ten projects are selected to take part in a national event. The programme has been operating in Foróige since 1968 but through the work of the Foróige Best Practice Unit, a programme manual was developed to support leaders in facilitating the programme.

The *REAL U: Relationships Explored and Life Uncovered* programme was developed in 2011 for delivery to young people aged 12-18 years in youth work settings. The programme was developed in response to a need identified both in research (Crisis Pregnancy Programme, 2012) and among Foróige staff for new models of relationships and sexuality education for young people to enable the provision of factual information and opportunities



to discuss the moral, social and emotional issues associated with sex and relationships. Many of the young people involved with Foróige's services are socially and economically disadvantaged, a group that has been identified as at greater risk of missing out on adequate relationships and sexuality education (Fullerton, 2006).

Garda Youth Development Projects (GYDPs) are community based youth justice projects that target young people who have been identified as offending or at risk of offending. The *A Life of Choices* programme was designed to facilitate young people participating in these projects to explore issues in relation to crime, including pro-social behaviour, motivation, life choices and offending behaviour. The programme was developed in response to a request from staff working in Garda Youth Development Projects for outcomes focused programmes to support work with young people.

In the case of the three programmes under study in this paper, there was variation in the degree to which fidelity was expected. The Youth Citizenship Programme was designed to be a flexible resource, whereas REAL U and A Life of Choices are more structured programmes with clearly delineated core and elective modules (see Table 1). With regard to the latter two resources, the programme guidance acknowledges that there are occasions when adjustments must be made to ensure responsiveness to the needs of young people and encourages staff and volunteers to exercise judgement in this regard. The types of adaptation envisaged by Foróige include adjusting session format (for example, discussing an issue rather than using the recommended pen and paper) for smaller group sizes or changing language to make it more easily understood by specific groups (for example young people with poorer literacy levels).

<b>Programmes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Guidelines for implementation</b>
<b>Youth Citizenship Programme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims to facilitate young people to become actively involved in the development of their own communities.</li> <li>• Open to entries from groups of young people attending youth clubs and projects throughout Ireland.</li> <li>• Generally facilitated by volunteers with groups of up to 15 young people aged 12-18 years.</li> <li>• Programme manual developed to support leaders in the implementation of three core actions: <i>Awareness, action and evaluation.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A compendium of activities that can be ‘dipped into’ to support implementation of the action, awareness, evaluation strands of the programme.</li> </ul>
<b>REAL U</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newly designed programme</li> <li>• Aims to engage young people aged 12-18 years in developing and building positive relationships.</li> <li>• Designed for use with groups of 10-15 participants aged 12-18 years.</li> <li>• Delivered over 12 weeks for 90 minutes every week, drawing on modules appropriate for younger and older age groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core modules should be implemented in given sequence.</li> <li>• Choice of elective modules on completion of core modules.</li> <li>• Minor adaptations encouraged (e.g. language, format of sessions).</li> </ul>
<b>A Life of Choices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New programme, designed to enable young people in Youth Justice Projects to explore issues including pro-social behaviour, motivation, life choices and offending behaviour.</li> <li>• Used with groups of up to 12 young people aged 12-17 years.</li> <li>• Implementation of the 12 core modules take approx. 6 months (at a rate of 1-2 hours per week).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core modules should be implemented in given sequence.</li> <li>• Choice of 16 elective modules on completion of core modules.</li> <li>• Minor adaptations encouraged (e.g. language, format of sessions).</li> </ul>

Table 1: Brief description of each programme under focus and guidelines for implementation

## Methods

The data presented is drawn from evaluation studies undertaken by the lead author in relation to the three programmes. The second author was employed as manager of the Foróige Best Practice Unit and thus had responsibility for the development and implementation of the resources. All three studies were evaluated using mixed-methods approaches, whereby surveys were combined with qualitative interviews and focus groups (for the full studies, see; Brady, Canavan & Redmond, 2016; Brady, Conway, Canavan & Koviak, 2012; Brady, NicGabhainn, Canavan & Gaweski, 2014). Ethical approval for all three studies was secured from the University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were required to give their informed consent and were reassured that their responses would be treated anonymously. Participants consented to the data being used for the purposes of the evaluation report and academic publications.

For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on staff and volunteer perspectives regarding the programmes. The data on which this paper is based is derived from youth workers and volunteers participating in either one-to-one semi-structured interviews or one of six focus groups. A total of 46 people took part in focus groups, with an average group size of 8. In addition, 35 participants took part in one-to-one interviews. The focus groups and interviews explored participants initial responses to the programmes, their experiences of its' implementation and their assessment of the benefits and challenges associated with the programme. Each participant was asked to give their views in relation to one specific programme. Seventeen youth workers and volunteers took part with regard to the Citizenship programme, 13 in relation to REAL U and 31 with regard to A Life of Choices.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed in full. While the data for each study was analysed separately, a new phase of analysis was undertaken for the purposes of this paper. Qualitative findings in relation to each of these three programmes

were read through several times. Both inductive and deductive analyses were used whereby a set of themes in relation to youth workers responses to the programmes was identified inductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the initial themes then grouped into categories relating to the three core questions addressed in this paper; youth workers responses to opportunities for manualised programmes, perspectives on whether the resources enhance or constrain effective youth work practice and how youth workers use the supports.

### **Limitations of the study**

This paper draws on data collected as part of three evaluation studies and thus includes only staff and volunteers who had used the particular programmes or resources. In future studies, it would be valuable to undertake research with a representative sample of staff and volunteers across the organisation to capture their perspectives on the role of manuals in youth work.

### **Findings**

Findings from the three studies are brought together to address the questions posed at the outset of this paper; how do youth workers respond to opportunities for manualised programmes?; did the resources enhance or constrain effective youth work practice? and; once trained in the manualised programmes, how do youth workers use the supports?

#### **How do youth workers respond to opportunities for manualised programmes?**

Mazzucchelli and Sanders (2010) point out that practitioners may feel that their work is already effective and don't see the need to implement new practices. The findings from this study is that, on the contrary, the resources were, on the whole, warmly received by youth workers. Previous research has indicated that one of the primary rationales for the use of programme manuals is that they avoid situations whereby practitioners across an organisation are sourcing and developing their own programmes on an isolated basis (Mullen & Bacon,

2004; Rosen & Proctor, 2002). In this study, there was widespread support for the availability of manuals as a resource for youth workers and volunteers for this reason. Respondents emphasised the fact that they would previously have had to gather materials to design their own interventions and that having a comprehensive programme that has been specifically developed for an Irish youth work context is very valuable to them. Furthermore, the resources were generally seen as attractive, relevant and engaging for young people which has meant that they are popular with staff, volunteers and young people. The following comments reflected the consensus expressed regarding the programmes.

Before the manual, it was really just pulling all the different resources and putting them together... but it's much easier now that you can just take out your manual and I think it's very comprehensive. It kind of covers everything that you need to cover in a group. (REAL U – YW5)

The programme is great for us as youth workers as there is a manual to follow. This saves us a lot of time. It also provides information that we might not have known. (A Life of Choices – YW14)

The fact that the resources were designed and produced in Ireland for an Irish youth work setting was also highlighted as important by respondents. For example, in the REAL U programme, references to legislation, policy and service providers in terms of consent to sex, sexual assault and other matters featured in many of the modules, which made it valuable to have a resource tailored for the Irish context. Furthermore, case vignettes and exercises were seen to resonate with the local cultural context.

It was found in the youth citizenship evaluation study that a minority of volunteers felt that their work was already effective and didn't see the need to implement new practices. There was a view that some people embrace the manual and use it extensively while others continue to work without it.

For newer [volunteer] leaders it's fantastic, absolutely love it. For some of the older leaders they kind of looked at it and went, why are we getting this training? They just felt, ah here, hold on a minute, we know Citizenship, we've been doing Citizenship for years, longer than you've been in the organisation. (Youth Citizenship, YW5)

**Did the resources enhance or constrain effective youth work practice?**

Ultimately, the goal of evidence-informed practice is to enhance the effectiveness and quality of interventions. A theme that emerged across the studies was the perceived benefit of programmes in enhancing the quality of work undertaken, whereby the subject areas of the programmes were addressed in a more comprehensive manner than they may otherwise have been. Youth workers and volunteers expressed the view that young people benefited from the structured and comprehensive nature of the programmes, while they as workers had the skills and resources to engage in better quality work. With regard to the Youth Citizenship programme which requires participants to work through the steps of 'awareness', 'action' and 'evaluation' in developing and implementing a community project, the point was made by both professional youth workers and volunteers that the manual helped them to facilitate the group to engage with the topic on a deeper level than they would have done previously.

I found that they...did a lot of detailed work that they wouldn't normally have done in previous years. ... The project was about water safety and they would have gone into more detail and did up leaflets and stuff. I don't think they would have done it before. (Youth Citizenship, YW7)

It just gave me more of a guideline about how to do it because like they'd be asking you and you'd be kind of thinking, 'oh God I don't know' whereas at least if you had the manual it was like, well this, and I'd often show them the book like, photocopy pages for them out of it. One night we were doing 'awareness' and we did the case studies and like I had them in little groups, it was just amazing. The debates that

came up like, it was fascinating like on how to be a good citizen. (Youth Citizenship – V3)

With regard to the REAL U programme, a number of staff members said that they felt more confident and better equipped to address sexual health issues which can be complex and ‘fraught with minefields regarding what you can or cannot say’. For example, some said that they found it useful that the REAL U programme covered issues such as pornography and legal issues (such as age of consent) which would have previously arisen in discussions with young people but for which they did not have a specific resource or guidance.

It has given me the skills to tackle subjects such as pornography which I never thought I would be able to facilitate a group on. (REAL U – YW5)

The young people are provided with a safe environment to discuss and share stories.

Young people are given many opportunities to ask questions and have information clarified during group times. Delivering the programme gives young people assertiveness skills and is a great way of increasing confidence and self-esteem. The programme sets out facts from myths. The manual and training also equips youth workers with the confidence to deliver a good programme in Teenage Health. (REAL U – YW13)

The A Life of Choices programme was described by staff as encompassing the elements that were viewed as important for trying to divert a young person from offending behaviour. The activities were seen as helping staff to understand young people’s thoughts and behaviour and to ‘get to the crux of the problem’ concerning the reasons for the young person’s offending. The content was also felt to be effective in challenging young people’s thinking and perceptions.

There are good activities to try and facilitate young people to reflect on what's going on for them and the choices they're making and why they're doing it or other options that are available. (A Life of Choices – YW24)

Some of the sections are excellent and really help the young people to think about their actions. It really opens up the space for deep thinking and conversations. (A Life of Choices – YW6)

Both the REAL U and A Life of Choices programmes include core modules, which are recommended for all participants as well as elective modules which focus in detail on specific issues. With regard to the REAL U programme, staff said that if particular issues arose in a group, they could offer the option of doing an elective module to delve into it in greater detail. Thus, the programmes were seen to offer a 'structured flexibility' in responding to particular needs or issues within groups. For example, this youth worker who had implemented A Life of Choices spoke of the value of an elective module on drug dealing, which gave him the skills to tackle this issue with a group he was working with.

I run the drug dealing section for the young people who would be known to be connected to drug dealing ... and they found it very beneficial to them to understand how the gangs work and how to get out of it because if it's a young person who has been in that kind of an environment all their life; they don't know any better. It's so hard and it was a challenge for me to try to think of it.... How are you going to pitch it? That module at least opened the question. (A Life of Choices – YW18)

Youth workers also spoke of feeling reassured that practice was somewhat standardised across the organisation. Another point that was made is that the programmes are valuable in the induction and training of new staff, by providing a structure and framework



for work with young people. For example, the Youth Citizenship manual was seen as being of particular value to new staff who are not familiar with the programme.

There's definitely bits and pieces in it that I wouldn't have thought of before. So even as a relatively experienced staff member it was definitely a benefit but it's more probably beneficial for inexperienced staff that are just getting going and they're kind of looking for some support structures. (Youth worker, Youth Citizenship)

A number of respondents also felt that their work was more transparent and was being taken more seriously by funding agencies as a result of implementing a comprehensive, attractive programme. This reflects the argument of Ord (2008) that having an articulated curriculum helps youth work to promote and sustain its unique practice in the face of competition for scarce resources from other forms of policy provision.

Furthermore, offering popular and dynamic programmes was highlighted by respondents as a means by which more young people were brought into youth projects and clubs. For example, youth workers in Dublin referred to the fact that some young people came to the project initially to take part in REAL U but subsequently came back to the project for other activities and now attend on a regular basis. The view was also expressed that structured programmes such as the Youth Citizenship programme provided variety in youth clubs, which helped to retain older teenagers in the projects for longer periods than they may otherwise have engaged.

### **Once trained in the manualised programmes, how do youth workers use the supports?**

As noted earlier, a key issue in a youth work context is the risk that having manualised programmes will detract from the spontaneity and responsiveness that should characterise a youth work approach. Mazzucchelli and Sanders (2010) agree that rigid adherence to a programme may interfere with the therapeutic relationship and argue that to deliver a programme effectively, practitioners must adapt and tailor treatments to meet the

diverse needs and circumstances of consumers. According to the evidence-informed practice model, practitioners should be encouraged to incorporate their own experience and judgement, client preferences and values and the context of the intervention into their approach (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011, p.18). A key tension in the development of manualised programmes, however, is to ensure that adaptation is done in a way that does not undermine the quality and coherence of the overall programme.

Four broad ways were identified to describe how three manualised programmes under focus were used by youth workers. These were; implementation according to guidance; adaptation in the face of resource constraints; adaptation to meet the needs of the target group and use of programme resources for purposes other than original design.

***Implementation according to guidance.*** There was evidence across all three studies that the programmes were implemented with fidelity to the guidance provided. For example, many respondents said that they have run A Life of Choices with groups of up to 12 young people, working systematically through the core and elective modules.

Yes we use it [A Life of Choices] a lot. We always have a group during the year that's going to be taking part in it ... it's probably the main source we go to when we're working in groups. (A Life of Choices – YW5)

We've always used the core and some of them have carried through on the elective modules. (A Life of Choices – YW31)

Based on the perspectives of youth workers, it appears that fidelity to the REAL U programme was particularly strong. The majority of staff said that they generally delivered all core modules of REAL U in the expected sequence but referred to minor adaptations made in line with the guidance provided. For example, a number of respondents indicated that they adapted the content for groups where comprehension or literacy was low, to use 'less paperwork and more discussion or visual techniques'. Where the content was perceived to be

too simplistic or too complicated for some groups, exercises were adapted to make them more suitable.

***Adaptation in the face of resource constraints.*** While widely implemented with fidelity, some respondents highlighted that, due to cutbacks in the youth sector, their working hours had been reduced or they had lost a staff member, which meant that the REAL U programme length had to be reduced. However, apart from the challenge of implementation in the context of resource constraints, there was no evidence that staff felt that they needed to make significant changes to the content of the REAL U programme.

***Adaptation to meet the needs of the target group.*** The level of programme adaptation to meet the needs of the target group was much greater in relation to *A Life of Choices* than with REAL U. The target group for this programme is young people attending youth justice projects, many of whom have very challenging lives. Staff spoke of challenges they encountered in engaging some very vulnerable young people on an ongoing basis, as many were unwilling to participate, became bored with the programme and failed to ‘turn up’ for sessions. One youth worker interviewed described the challenges associated with delivering the programme in a group setting in a rural area as follows:

A lot of young people we work with, their school attendance would be really poor...they never do homework.. they don't bring a school bag home...some of them would be on reduced timetables in school... they would struggle to sit down at school and sit through a class... when we have a group on, it's not that we would have regular people turning up all the time, every time... it was a struggle to get them to work as a group ... you know if someone felt in the mood to disrupt this, the other guys didn't want to be seen focusing'. (A Life of Choices – YW15)

As a result of these issues, there appeared to be a greater tendency among staff to use the A Life of Choices programme in a flexible way, drawing on particular modules which were relevant to the young people and the nature of the crime they had committed. Where conditions were optimal, the programme was seen to work very well as a ‘discrete package’ but in other contexts, youth workers felt that adaptation is required. As reflected in the following quote, they highlighted that they may have had a short time-frame on which to work on an issue and tended to prioritise a particular approach to maximise outcomes for the young people involved.

I would use sections and pieces out of A Life of Choices depending on the needs of the young people. I haven’t actually delivered it as a programme from beginning to end ....but I have used significant parts of it or significant sections within it with different young people. (A Life of Choices – YW2)

We’re using it that way because that meets the need in our project. We’re not doing that because we want to you, know? Simply not use the way it’s recommended. It’s just with the young people that might be on the project at any particular time that flexibility to take the part that you need right now or for the next six weeks is what you can hope to do in that six week period when they’re ready to go then after that you know? You might need to take a break and go on to something else and then come back to another module but I think you do need that flexibility you know? (A Life of Choices – YW27)

***Use of programme resources for other youth work purposes.*** In addition to the use of the programme with the designated target group of young people, elements of the various programmes are also used for other youth work purposes within the organisation. For example, one respondent said that she used elements of the Youth Citizenship programme manual (for example committee training) for other training purposes. Youth workers spoke

of frequently adapting the REAL U and A Life of Choices programmes for use in one-to-one work with young people. For example, staff members said that they ‘dipped into’ the programme for relevant resources to use in one-to-one work with young people and for use with small groups.

I use it [A Life of Choices] loads but never properly. So I know you’re not supposed to take parts out of it, but I do so .. I’m always nearly doing an anger management all the time, school attachment and attainment, the drug one and then dealing I would incorporate that into a drug prevention programme. (A Life of Choices – YW10)

## **Discussion**

While youth work has traditionally been understood as an organic, relationship based process of informal learning for young people, it can be argued that there is also a need for good quality programmes, based on research evidence and practitioner expertise, to ensure that young people are empowered with the skills and knowledge to make healthy choices in relation to issues such as sexuality, crime and community engagement. While issues relating to programme approaches have been addressed in relation to social work and social care (see Plath, 2014), this tension between traditional youth work approaches and programmes has not been adequately addressed in the literature to date.

In contrast to the evidence based approach, which prioritises research knowledge over practice wisdom, Shera and Dill (2012) maintain that evidence-informed practice promotes an organisational culture that takes account of research evidence and encourages critical thinking, but is based in the realities of practice (Shlonsky & Mildon, 2014; Gambrill, 2008; Regehr et al, 2007). Literature in relation to strategies to embed research into practice has found that service provider attitudes are critical to successful implementation and that one of

the areas of resistance relates to the perceived capacity of the programme to respond flexibly to the specific and often unique needs of clients (Mitchell, 2011; Plath, 2014). We argue that this distinction between evidence based and evidence informed practice is critical to how manualised programmes were received by youth workers and also helps us to understand and find potential solutions to some of the tensions encountered in the implementation process.

The approach to programme development taken by Foróige described earlier in this paper was in keeping with the conceptualisation of evidence-informed practice, whereby youth workers expertise and young people's perspectives were central to the process of programme development, alongside research evidence. The findings of this study have shown that the three programmes under focus were positively received by youth workers across the organisation, arguably because the process of programme development was grounded in both research and the Irish practice context. Reflecting the findings of Mullen & Bacon (2004) and Plath (2014) in relation to social care contexts, the practice manuals were viewed as relieving the youth worker of the burden of finding and assembling relevant research and session plans. Critically, the youth workers welcomed that the resources were comprehensive and culturally appropriate for an Irish context. Having a variety of interesting programmes on offer was also seen by youth workers as attracting more young people into youth projects, facilitating retention of older teenagers and bringing a greater level of transparency to their work.

A concern frequently expressed in relation to manualised programmes in arenas such as social care (Mazzuchelli & Sanders, 2010) is that the therapeutic relationship between the worker and client will be negatively affected; a key concern in youth work where the relationship between the youth worker and the young person is considered to be the foundation for learning and development (Devlin & Gunning, 2009). Therefore, issues related to the tension between the needs of young people and the requirements for

implementation fidelity are of critical interest. It was clear from this research that the appropriateness of the resources to meet the needs of the young person they work with was a key factor in youth workers assessment of the value of the programme manuals. There was a majority view among youth workers that the programme manuals had facilitated them to enhance the effectiveness of their practice with young people. Youth workers and volunteers spoke of feeling more confident and skilled in their practice and gave examples of how use of the programme resources enabled them to engage more meaningfully with young people than they would have previously. Many articulated the view that their work was of a better quality, whereby young people's thinking and perceptions were challenged in new ways and issues were explored in greater depth and breadth than they had been prior to the introduction of the resources. Thus, in these cases, it could be argued that the programmes were viewed as enhancing rather than undermining youth worker-young person relationships.

Some challenges or tensions were evident in relation to fidelity, however. The findings highlighted that programmes are implemented with a high degree of fidelity in many cases, while workers also engage in adaptation and use the resources for youth work purposes other than those for which they were originally designed. The challenges associated with funding cutbacks in youth work also impacted negatively on programme delivery, whereby youth workers said that they could not deliver programmes in full because of short-term working. Adaptation was particularly evident in youth workers narratives regarding implementation of A Life of Choices which targets a more vulnerable group of young people. Mitchell (2011) draws attention to the challenges associated with the implementation of evidence based practice approaches with young people with complex needs, highlighting that young people can often present with multiple problems, such as socio-economic disadvantage, learning difficulties, disconnection from education and other systems, family breakdown and homelessness. There was evidence that some young people did not wish to

commit to a full programme, risking youth disengagement if the worker persisted in their attempts to run the programme according to official guidance. Youth workers recounted how they frequently adapted the programme to meet the needs of these young people, using the resources extensively but not in the way that had been intended in the original programme design. It could be argued that the response of youth workers to the challenges faced in implementation of A Life of Choices is in keeping with the core principles of evidence informed practice, in that youth workers drew on their own expertise to tailor the intervention to the young people's circumstances and preferences. In response to the issues associated with fidelity, Foróige is currently working on the provision of guidance for how the A Life of Choices programme can be shortened without compromising its quality. One possible solution is that specific combinations of modules will be recommended to address young people's assessed needs. The fact that Foróige are taking the learning from the implementation of A Life of Choices on board, highlights that practitioner expertise will continue to feed into resource development. Based on this experience and in keeping with the principles of evidence-informed practice, it could be argued that programmes in a youth work context should not be conceived as static or fixed entities, but as dynamic and evolving resources that facilitate youth workers to reflect on, innovate and improve practice.

The findings established that there is support for the availability of evidence informed practice resources among youth workers but the issues regarding both fidelity to and adaptation of the resources indicates that there may be a need for both full programmes and a compendium of resources that can be combined to support specific practice contexts. Given the complexities associated with ensuring fidelity to evidence based or informed programmes among young people with multiple needs, Mitchell (2011, p.214) makes the case for interventions being broken down into a series of practice elements 'that can be selected on the basis of an assessment of the relative importance of each process for a particular client'.



She believes that this ‘practice elements’ approach offers a high level of adaptability to the needs of young people and their context and may help to overcome many of the barriers to implementation of evidence based programmes. Officially sanctioning this approach would free youth workers to engage in evidence informed practice, ensuring that they could continue to trust their professional judgement regarding the most appropriate approach to meet the needs of young people, but facilitating them to draw on evidence informed resources in doing so.

The research has highlighted other issues that arose in terms of implementation. While the findings indicate that the majority of youth workers and volunteers approached the manualised programmes with an open mind, there were pockets of resistance, particularly among a small minority of volunteers involved with the citizenship programme. While organisational wide strategies to embed research in practice can risk stifling creativity (Watson et al, 2004), there are also risks that resistance to practice innovation can result in practice that is outdated and stale. Mitchell (2011) argues for strategies to overcome the tendency to place practice wisdom and evidence based approaches as binary opposites. Once again, it could be argued that the concept of evidence informed practice offers a middle ground by giving the worker the power to try out and evaluate new approaches and to integrate them into their practice in a way they see fit.

Ultimately, the goal of evidence-informed practice is bring together knowledge from research and practice to enhance the effectiveness of interventions. Based on the findings of this paper, it can be argued that systematic approaches to the embedding of evidence-informed practice in youth work can be viewed as valuable by youth workers. This research suggests that, to succeed in a youth work setting, programmes should be fun, relevant and flexible, drawing on relevant international research as well as practice wisdom from experienced youth workers in the field. However, the process should remain true to the

principles of evidence-informed practice at the stages of both development and implementation, to ensure that the practice wisdom of youth workers and the needs of young people remain central to the process.

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