

Blending the Formal and Nonformal Educational Sectors: Creating a Shared Learning Initiative for Secondary School Teachers and Youth Workers

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It has been widely argued that existing educational inequality and inequity was exacerbated when schools closed due to Covid-19 (Tamil, 2020, Darmody 2020). In addition, it is disadvantaged young people that are most likely to experience the most negative long-term impacts. Many of these young people were successfully engaged in the non-formal sector (i.e. youth work services) before and during the pandemic. This paper introduces Bridging Worlds, a new initiative which brings together the formal and non-formal sectors in education to develop a new partnership and shared engagement framework to enhance educational outcomes and positive youth development. The project focuses on promoting knowledge, skills and awareness among teachers and youth workers of the formal and non-formal education sectors, using blended learning techniques and implementing a number of pro social youth programmes. It aims to create a strong sustaining connection across these sectors as a project legacy. This article describes the mixed methods approach used to track the implementation of the project across a six-month period, including pre and post survey data and from participating teachers and youth workers combined with qualitative interviews. Project feedback is discussed according to specific research questions. Recommendations are provided for the further development of the programme and for future research.

Keywords: Formal Education, Non-formal Education, Blended Learning, Disadvantaged Learners, Community of Practice

Introduction

In common with many countries across the world, there have been considerable restrictions in place impacting the day-to-day lives of all Irish citizens as part of the ongoing public health emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although deemed necessary to help mitigate the potential catastrophic impact of the virus on individuals' physical health, it has been accepted that these measures have had a

negative impact on young people's perceived mental wellbeing (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2020; Planet Youth 2021). In particular, young people were impacted by the unprecedented disruption in schooling, cancelling of formal examinations, curtailment of extra-curricular pursuits and most especially access to their social networks and peer supports. Following the imposition of strict 'lockdown' measures in Ireland, education and ancillary youth support services were required to pivot to online delivery on an emergency basis. This required teachers and youth workers to engage with online learning and digital technologies in an unprecedented way and without the normal lead-in time or support for such a transition. Both sectors were also concerned that some of the young people who were most at risk of disengaging from education were the hardest to reach impacted both by a digital use divide [lack of digital skill] and access divide [lack of access to either the device and/or broadband] (Hall et al. 2020; Mohan et al. 2020). This paper provides an account of an innovative programme implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, which aimed to engage both teachers and youth workers in a programme of training and support, designed to create a sustaining network across the sectors in order to enhance youth development, especially for those most at risk of marginalisation.

Context

While education and youth work services continued to provide supports to young people during the pandemic, it became increasingly clear that the pivot to online provision did not reflect a move to effective online education but more accurately 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges et al. 2020). Expanding online provision requires further strategic investment and development addressing technological, pedagogical and social factors (Hall et al. 2020). Overall, it can be stated that the adaption of education technology, while potentially very positive, is partial and incomplete both

internationally and nationally. It can also be concluded that blended learning offers a useful hybrid approach which is likely to remain part of future provision in some form (Reich 2020).

The specific service contexts where the initiative is located in Ireland, are the formal educational context of the Transition Year programme and the non-formal youth work supports provided by Foróige, the youth service provider central to this project. Transition Year (TY) is an optional programme available as the first year in the three-year senior cycle in Irish secondary schools. “It is intended to serve as a low-stakes year within secondary education during which students—typically about 15 years old—can focus on personal, social and vocational development in the absence of examination pressure” (Clerkin 2018, 1). Non-formal education is defined by the National Youth Strategy (2015) as “an organised educational process that is complementary to mainstream activities of education and training and does not typically lead to certification” (2015, 42) Youth services such as Foróige provide a range of educational programmes including personal development, leadership skills, community engagement and enterprise development.

There is synchronicity between the positive youth development focus of the Foróige youth programmes and the aims of the transition year programme (Coyne and Donohue 2013; Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015). It is however, the central focus of the project seeks to connect the formal education context of the secondary school and the non-formal education world of youth work. It does this by designing and delivering a new training programme aimed at both TY secondary school teachers and the youth workers in their area with the aim of fostering the developing of shared skills, relationships and stronger networks of support.

The Bridging Worlds Project

The Bridging Worlds initiative is an exploratory programme with the ambitious aim of creating a wraparound model linking the formal and non-formal education sectors.

Specifically, in the context of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experiences of young people, the project aims to bring together the formal and non-formal education sectors in a shared learning initiative. It aims to develop capacity in the teaching and youth work community to deliver blended and online education and support the scaffolding of student engagement, in a way that integrates learning both outside and inside the regular classroom. The key project activities include training for 40 teachers and 20 youth workers in online teaching and blended learning, the creation of local hubs linking teachers and youth workers to identify how non-formal and formal education can be better integrated to support marginalised young people and the provision of innovative youth work programmes in schools and youth services. This initiative was a partnership between Foróige¹, the largest youth organisation in Ireland and faculty based in two departments in the University, their School of Education and a research institute.

A series of project phases were agreed by the project team and these were set out as follows:

Phase 1: The “Bridging the Gap” training programme was a half-day (four-hour) online training event provided by project coordinators to Transition Year teachers and youth

¹ Foróige works with over 50,000 young people annually, aged between 10 and 20 years and in 26 counties. It combines a universal provision of community youth engagement in over 600 volunteer led youth groups with targeted supports for more at-risk youth through 150 staff led youth projects (Foróige, 2021). The targeted services provide specific interventions to young people at risk of marginalisation due to a range of issues.

workers in the Galway, Mayo and Roscommon areas. The training aimed to create a shared community where both groups learn together and it focused on the following topics:

- The role of the formal education sector
- The role of the non-formal education sector
- Blended learning strategies
- Creating online learning environments.

Phase 2: Both groups were then offered the opportunity to attend follow-up online training, delivered by the project coordinators, to enable participants to facilitate at least one of four of Foróige's Positive Youth Development Programmes and deliver it online.

Phase 3: Transition Year teachers and youth workers were to facilitate one of the Foróige programmes to a group of young people they are involved with in their respective areas of responsibility.

Phase 4: Teachers and youth workers were then to attend two follow-up online sessions with a Project Coordinator to review their experiences and receive further advice and support.

Theoretical Framework

Strengthening and enhancing positive youth engagement and support is the focus of the Bridging Worlds project. The theoretical concept of relevance is the project's efforts to support the development of networks of teachers and youth workers who participate.

The aim of the programme is to utilise the provision of joint training as a vehicle to create a social learning space to link these two community-based professions. We were informed in our approach by Wenger's community of practice concept, defined as "a social learning system. Arising out of learning, it exhibits many characteristics of systems more generally: emergent structure, complex relationships, self-organisation,

dynamic boundaries, ongoing negotiation of identity and cultural meaning, to mention a few. In a sense it is the simplest social unit that has the characteristics of a social learning system” (2010, 179).

By linking the formal and non-formal education sectors in the project, Bridging Worlds aims to facilitate interested parties to work together in both spheres in a more effective way. Wenger (2010, 184) sets out how participants themselves, by participating in this network, will develop their relationships with each other through engagement, imagination and alignment (2010, 184). Engagement is concerned with taking part in new activities, learning new skills together; Imagination, the creation of new mental maps and constructions of how members of the community’s role and expertise overlap; and Alignment, constructing new connections across the community as a result of participation.

Wenger et al. (2011, 20) describe the various types of knowledge capital that can be shared and transacted through a community of practice. These include human capital, social capital, tangible capital, reputational capital and learning capital. They go on to state “The act of participating in a facilitated network or a community as a valuable way of learning can be enlightening for people for whom formal teaching or training methods have always been seen as the only way to learn. When members have experienced significant learning in networks or communities they can transfer this experience to other contexts”.

A related concept which is also relevant in this context given the focus on ICT skills is the Conversational Framework (Laurillard 2002). Within this approach, both teachers and youth workers will be engaging in learning together focusing on theory and the process of putting it into operation. Through this shared experience, they will have a

joint frame of reference from which to build both a knowledge base and a shared understanding of each other's role in the support of youth people.

Method

This evaluation of the Bridging Worlds initiative used a mixed methods approach.

According to Cresswell (2017, 233) "this approach is typically used in program evaluation where quantitative and qualitative approaches are used over time to support the development, adaptation, and evaluation of programmes, experiments, or policies".

The evaluator worked with the project team to identify a research question and data collection methodology to match each of the project's aims. A convergent mixed methods design was used, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected as required by each research question. These data were analysed separately and then integrated to provide a full account of the key learning from the project (Creswell, 2017). The core research questions for this evaluation were:

- (1) How favourably did participants react to the project?
- (2) Did participants acquire the knowledge and skills that were intended?
- (3) Did participants apply their learning from the project in their day-to-day work practices?

The data collection process to meet the other research questions on participant feedback was embedded into the project phases as follows: During Phase 1, Project coordinators worked to recruit teachers and youth workers into the Bridging Worlds project across Transition Year coordinators and youth groups in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. A pre-participation survey was developed to establish participant's knowledge, skills and attitudes to online learning, blended learning and the formal/non-

formal education sectors. This online survey was completed by teachers and youth workers prior to attending the Bridging the Gap training. This online survey was then retaken after participation in the training so that specific changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes could be tracked. Participants were also asked at this point to indicate their suggestions for further training and support. Overall, across both the pre- and post-training surveys, there were 67 participants.

However, not all participants completed both the pre and post surveys. There were 64 respondents to the first survey and 61 to the second, with the number completing all items varying slightly across the surveys. The project coordinators then delivered phase 2 of the project, where participants were offered an opportunity to attend follow-up online training delivered by the project coordinators to enable them to facilitate at least one of Foróige's four Positive Youth Development Programmes. This was followed by Phase 3, where Transition Year teachers and youth workers were asked to facilitate one of Foróige's programmes with a group of young people they are involved with. Finally, in Phase 4 Teachers and youth workers were invited to avail of two follow-up support sessions to review their experiences and receive further advice and support.

Once the support sessions were delivered, the project coordinators asked participants to complete the final survey. This repeated some key quantitative items on knowledge, skills and attitudes to online learning, blended learning and the formal/non-formal education sectors to track learning across all aspects of the project. It also included open-ended items to seek feedback on each of the project components and the participants' further training needs. Finally, it included a number of items in relation to the use of digital technologies as recommended by the Department of Education and Skills (2020).

By this stage in the project, there had been some attrition. The number of participants who completed the final survey was (n=22). The final data collection activities of the project were then undertaken. As participants completed their final project activity, they were asked by project coordinators if they would take part in an online interview with the evaluator to review their experiences. Out of this recruitment process, 12 people were recruited, five teachers and seven youth workers. The timing of interviews with the programme participants was scheduled so that it took place after all project activities were completed and the final follow-up survey completed. In this way, it was hoped that the interviewees would be able to reflect on their full experience of the programme and their perspectives on future initiatives of this type.

Analysis

As a mixed methods study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse the data. All the survey data were transferred to SPSS where descriptive statistical analysis was carried out. Where possible, mean scores were compared to track changes over time. Qualitative data analysis was carried out using the QSR NVivo software package. This enabled an iterative analysis to be carried out exploring the various data sources for trends and patterns using the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). For example, data were first coded separately using auto code by survey or interview question. All auto codes were then reviewed by the lead author to ensure a suitable descriptive code was assigned to the data. After this initial coding, a series of categories was developed in order to link the findings from both data sources into one narrative account. Finally, the categories were inter-related to the corresponding research question. In keeping with Creswell's (2017) convergent mixed

methods design, the outcomes from each data analysis were inter-related so that each of the research questions could be addressed and provide a holistic evaluation of the project.

Ethics

This project was subject to the oversight and approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Galway. All data collection instruments, information leaflets and consent forms were submitted and reviewed by this group in advance. All data collection activities upheld participant rights for privacy and confidentiality. Project data was securely stored. This study took place during unprecedented disruption to everyday life for individuals due to the pandemic. While any undertaking of this nature must be subject to additional consideration in terms of the potential risks and appropriateness of continuing, it did conform to the provisions as set out by World Health Organization (2020) for conducting research during a pandemic. In particular, it was justified under the seven standards set out of “Scientific validity, Social value, Collaborative partnership, Reasonable risk-benefit ratio, Fair and voluntary participation, Independent review, Equal moral respect for participants and affected communities” (WHO 2020, 1). While the conduct of the research during the pandemic was appropriate, all data collection activities could be facilitated using online methodologies.

Findings

The research findings, and sub-themes emerging from the data analysis, are structured around the study’s three research questions.

RQ1: How favourably did participants react to the project?

The project was successfully implemented despite the ongoing disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It exceeded the aim of recruiting 60 participants, although patterns of engagement varied over the programme, in particular when on-site school returned in the latter half of the project. The participant rates and survey completion rates are set out below.

Insert Table 1

Table 1. Participation Levels and Survey Completion

Bridging the Gap Training

This part of the initiative aimed to bring participants from both sectors together to jointly explore their roles in youth development with a view to fostering and developing the connections between them. It also specifically set out to explore with both groups their understanding and experiences of blended learning and creating online learning environments. It aimed to build on these experiences; share current best practice guidelines and facilitate participants to work together in supporting each other to build their knowledge and confidence in the area. The session was delivered online over a four hour period on a five separate dates in January and February 2021. A detailed programme manual was developed by the project coordinators and School of Education staff to underpin this training. Handouts and resource materials were prepared and circulated to participants following the training. Participants completed evaluations following the session.

Insert Figure 1

Figure 1. Participant Review of Training

Figure 1 illustrates the mean scores across the total group when asked a series of items seeking feedback on the Bridging the Gap training. The mean score was based on a minimum of 1 to a maximum range of 7. The bar chart illustrates very positive feedback and high scores across all the feedback items.

Additionally, the coordinators sought feedback on the training overall and what additional training and supports needs the participants would identify. Overall feedback was very positive “I really enjoyed this training. The facilitators were excellent and very professional. The variety of resources used and break out rooms added great interaction and engagement for everyone” (Youth Worker 774). Similarly, teachers were enthused “The breakout rooms were great as it allowed both teachers and youth workers to talk to one another and learn from each other. Mixing the breakout rooms up each time was nice as we got to communicate with everybody in the training session at one point or another.” (Teacher 1756).

Where participants indicated further training needs, these in the main concerned seeking additional guidance on the use of learning platforms and tools “More resources for all types of blended learning not just online so we can have them for after lockdown and Covid” (Youth Worker 3075) and this argument was also supported by teachers “How to use different platforms effectively in a blended learning environment” (Teacher 3963.)

Given the iterative nature of the project, the coordinators were able to incorporate this feedback into the planning and delivery of the support sessions. As a result of this phase of the project, there are a set of resources available as a Bridging the Gap training module developed with the expertise and experience of both academic educationalists and programme specialists which has been field tested and approved.

Foróige Programme Training

Once participants had completed the initial Bridging the Gap training, they could self-nominate to attend one or more of the Foróige training programmes available through this project. The four training programmes were (1) Activating Social Empathy, (2) Leadership for Life, (3) Sound Surfers and (4) Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) (Foróige 2021).

As documented in Table 1 above, 72 training places were provided at this part of the initiative. In particular, the Activating Social Empathy was the most subscribed course and as a result the coordinators had to arrange additional dates to provide this training. Of particular note is that to deliver this part of the project, the project team worked with Foróige programme leads to ensure that each programme had an online version and updated e manual. Some of this work had been initiated prior to the pandemic. However, during the course of the Bridging Worlds project, it was possible to complete this conversion. This work was particularly enhanced by the engagement of a web technician to complete the conversion of the NFTE and Activating Social Empathy programmes to online resources. As with the Bridging the Gap programme training, these resources provide a valuable project legacy.

Support Sessions

The content of Session 1 focused on extending participant learning in relation to online learning tools and platforms. A range of tools were explored and participants had the opportunity to practice these and provide feedback to each other on their experiences. Session 2 focused on the interconnections between the two sectors. Throughout the entire project, the coordinators worked to arrange breakout activities with teachers and project workers from the same geographic area as an effort to create an informal local

network across both sectors that would establish as a project legacy. In addition, with the support of the School of Education staff, this session focused on exploring with participants how could develop these connections locally. Following each session, project participants completed evaluations. These indicating that high levels of satisfaction with these sessions.

Follow up Survey Feedback on the Programme

Figure 2 illustrates participant feedback on the usefulness of various project components. While the feedback indicates that participants found the various aspects useful, the Foróige programmes are the most highly rated. However, it should also be noted that this group of respondents represents only those that responded to the follow up survey (n=22).

Insert Figure 2

Figure 2. Most Useful Project Component

Insert Figure 3

Figure 3. Knowledge Increase

Figure 3 illustrates participant feedback on whether their knowledge increased following participant in the project. The data indicates a positive trend in knowledge increase, across this group of respondents in terms of knowledge of the formal / non-formal sector, knowledge of online culture and blended learning (n=22). Similarly, as illustrated in Figure 4 participants also reported increased confidence in these areas (n=22).

Insert Figure 4

Figure 4. Confidence Increase

Participant Feedback: Open-ended Survey Items and Interview

The largest category of comments in this analysis were those linked to positive feedback by participants on the project itself, the opportunity to learn new skills and make connections across the sector, and the timeliness of the programme. Across all the feedback from teachers and youth workers, whether through the interviews or the open-ended survey items, there was a strong sense that Bridging Worlds was the right project at the right time delivered by the right people.

“I think the training is really well developed. It is going really well. I think the timing was perfect because we were really in need of that. But what I think is really well done in a way, that is, pulling all our thoughts together... So I think it’s really good, and I think it’s really the best moment to start implementing this kind of work.” (Youth Worker 6)

Interviewees commented on the quality of the training received and the professional delivery and support provided by the project coordinators. They valued that it was possible to continue with the programme online during the school closures. By experiencing the programme online, participants were able to observe how project coordinators used the various tools and platforms to promote participation and this was a valued outcome. Interviewees were also appreciative of the opportunity to learn how to deliver a Foróige programme and most plan to deliver this programme in the new school year to the young people they support. Interviewees also provided feedback on how their participation in the programme will lead to positive impacts on the young people they support.

“It was helpful to hear about other people’s experiences, what worked well and not so well for them and why. Understanding how the different platforms are used

by other people helps to build up how I use the platforms helping to shape how I use them in the future” (Survey Reference 22)

While the overall feedback was highly positive, some suggestions for amending the programme further were made by interviewees. Most significant of these was a strong recommendation that consideration be given to securing accreditation for the course so that schools could release staff officially to attend and arrange for substitute cover for attending teachers. The lack of staffing cover was more of an issue once teachers returned to school after April 2021. The second main amendment suggested by participants was that consideration be given to arranging for the networking activities to be provided in a face-to-face session.

“Obviously if it was in person, it would be a million times more effective, because you’ve got to meet people in the flesh and you know, “where are you based” and all that chitter chatter that goes on. That’s all gone in these kind of formal online things.” (Teacher 3)

A related issue was the timing difficulty that arose in trying to complete their own training and run a youth programme within the constraints of a Covid-disrupted school year. This was also an issue for youth workers, who reported a lack of interest from young people as they were tired of online provision. One interviewee suggested narrowing the focus of the programme offer to make it clearer to participating staff what the specific requirements would be and this may attract more staff into participating.

“So it’s not to be critical but I was thinking there were a lot of different strands to it, there was the blended learning, the Bridging Worlds in terms of the school and the youth work, and for me there was the activating empathy, so at times maybe it felt a little

confusing, in terms especially what are we going at today and how do the various parts all tie in.” (Teacher 2)

Survey respondents also described further support needs in their feedback. Across the replies, there was a sense that further practical support would be appreciated when participants implemented the youth programme in the new school year. In particular, a number of respondents noted that a further support session would be a benefit at that point.

To continue going on training courses that will build up their skills. Also for teachers and youth workers to have a platform where they can communicate with one another when not engaging in courses, to seek help, support and guidance off one another. (Survey Reference 11)

RQ2: Did participants acquire the knowledge and skills that were intended?

The project did deliver useful and timely resources to support participants in developing their online skills. The first training session, Bridging the Gap, had a specific focus on online and blended learning, and this was particularly welcomed as interviewees reported that they had in the main pivoted online the previous March to emergency online teaching and support. This programme provided a welcome opportunity to acquire learning tools and techniques and to share ideas with peers. Yet most interviews indicated that this was the first-time participants had focused in this way with online and blended pedagogy.

“Yeah, it’s funny because, like you know we had obviously been doing it since last March and obviously a lot of the online work and it was something that I suppose every lockdown we got better at. But it was so interesting to learn about all the different blended learning, and the you know the face to face in all the different types, you know”
(Youth Worker 2)

Based on participant feedback from the first training sessions, the coordinators identified a specific training need in the area of online platforms. They worked with NUI Galway School of Education staff to develop a specific support session that would focus directly with participants on this area. Interview feedback indicates this support was well received by participants and especially welcomed was the practical way the session was facilitated so that participants could try out the platform themselves.

“..the follow-up sessions I know we were looking at different platforms and, you know, this was like the stage with maybe we thought we’d used them all but there’s a few different ones that we got to learn about that we can use. I know they work in other areas of our work, or different programmes and groups as well. So that’s helpful too.” (Youth Worker 3)

A key component of the project was the introduction of participants to at least one of four Foróige programmes using online platforms and resources. The objective was that these resources could then be available to teachers to implement with young people either online, face to face or in a blended way. Notwithstanding the disruptions that prevented most participants from implementing a programme this school year, most indicated that they would be doing so in the coming year and planned in some way at least to use blended approaches in that implementation.

“I would like to use the blended. Because if we don’t, then we are not using what we were shown to its full effect. You know, that was the whole purpose of doing that, you know and to try to be as creative with blended. And also it’s good for students to see that we’re able to do it, you know, yeah. They get more enjoyment out of it as well if we can do it. You know.” (Teacher 5)

When the interviews were conducted, the school year was drawing to a close and the concept of Zoom fatigue was widely discussed. By then, most schools had just returned for the final month of school for face-to-face teaching after spending most of the first and second term online. This undoubtedly led to reports of individuals' lack of interest in online provision. It was also reported in the youth worker sector and felt by some to impact any plans to run online groups over the summer.

“I think our young people are just so dying to get back into our project but I will definitely, think we've got a few grants for different ICT equipment with new iPads and computers. So I'll definitely use blended but within the face-to-face space if that makes sense” (Youth Worker 4)

A number of specific open-ended items were included in the follow-up survey to explore participants' opinions on whether there was a digital divide or access divide for the young people they supported. Opportunity to comment on this issue was also provided in the interviews. While one teacher reported that the government funding had ensured that those who needed access would avail, most respondents noted concern that there was a gap for young people in access to both technology and Wi-Fi that needed to be addressed.

Finally, when asked about their own further training needs in this area, most interviewees were keen to put what they had learnt into operation and to practice their new skills first to consolidate the learning. Where they did indicate a support need, it was in relation to keeping up to date with changing technology and issues of data security.

RQ3: Did participants apply their learning from the project in their day-to-day work practices?

Throughout the interviews, there was a recognition that it makes intuitive sense for the formal and non-formal sectors to develop closer links and that the main beneficiary of this would be young people themselves. Despite the recognition that this connection is of value, there was a strong sense that these connections had happened incidentally where specific initiatives had taken place and that in the main there was considerable lack of connection across the sectors in the region.

“..we never get the chance to get involved in, I suppose, in a wider aspect of what’s going on with others, like, with social workers, social care, youth workers, all of that, where an awful high percentage of kids are on a daily basis involved in. You know, so, it is like building the bridge between the two, you know, definitely.” (Teacher 5)

A second area of feedback focused on interviewee recognition that young people themselves would be happy to have these connections more lined up in their lives and that it would help their sense of social support.

“..and it’s often that it’s a talking point then for me with the young people and they might see that, you know, he does care like he knows what we’re doing at school.” (Youth Worker 2)

Other benefits for developing closer relationships highlighted by interviewees included sharing resources and learning new techniques from each other.

“And when I remember there was great conversation on that session when we were learning about each other in the breakout rooms, I’d be asking, you know, how would you deal with challenging behaviour, or, you know, is there something you have to follow and then I’d be

telling them about our different policies and the way we work”

(Youth Worker 3)

Some participants, while open to developing closer relationships across the sectors, referenced a range of experiences in the past.

“We had a lot better relationship with the two other secondary schools in the area so to kind of just to go into them. And to get that relationship kind of built up with that school, and like, they hadn’t, to be honest with you, they hadn’t a clue what we did, even the after-school groups.” (Youth Worker 2)

During the training, due to attendance patterns it was not possible to link up youth workers and teachers in the same area. This resulted in a lack of connection and respondents indicating that they were not sure how to progress the hub idea in their area. This can be contrasted with where it was possible to link attendees, which in turn led to increased communication following attendance at project events. This uneven pattern of establishing connections will need further follow-up.

“We were discussing how could we potentially get the two sectors to work better together and I know there was a bit of a feeling that it’s not always the easiest thing in the world to do, to get the Foróige staff into the school or vice versa, there seem to be obstacles to that. They clearly do a lot of very good work, very positive stuff, but in terms of how to properly tie in together I didn’t feel there was any very clear pathway.” (Teacher 2)

While youth workers were positive about the opportunities that closer connections with formal education provided them, a number raised concerns about how that might work in practice. One issue related to the need to ensure these closer connections could be

established within funding constraints that require youth workers to work alongside schools rather than within the school itself. Secondly, one interviewee wanted to ensure that clear space was maintained so that the youth worker identity remained separate and recognisable as a separate space for young people who may be disengaging from other supports.

“I suppose the one thing, and it has been raised, or was raised in the training was from a youth work perspective, our funding is always changing in terms of how much we’re allowed to work with schools and not work in schools.” (Youth Worker 1)

Finally, across the data sources, respondents indicated that not only should this type of cross-sectoral engagement continue but a range of other topics or areas could be jointly explored in order to enhance the support both sides could offer to young people.

“I was actually just chatting to a parent about yesterday about consent,. And so that would be just one thing I think that, you know, if you could join up on something like that would be really really great.” (Youth Worker 1)

Findings Summary

The project developed a suite of training materials and resources to support the implementation of the Bridging Worlds model. These included the Bridging the Gap training resources, online training resources and support sessions, which were curated, collated and delivered to participants. Across the range of data sources, findings indicate that this programme was very well received. It provided timely and valued support to the participants. Both teachers and youth workers engaged actively in the programme and reported high levels of satisfaction with the support received. The expertise of project staff and the high quality of the training materials were recognised

and they contributed to the project's success. The topics focused on were of particular interest given the emphasis on online learning due to the Covid pandemic and concerns about individuals' wellbeing during this time.

The project succeeding in recruiting 65 teachers and youth workers in very challenging times. However, with the Covid restrictions, it was not possible for participating teachers and youth workers to roll out the programmes they received to young people in their areas of responsibility. This rollout was subsequently to be delivered in the next academic year. The most significant feedback across all the participants in relation to this project goal was widespread agreement that the development of connections across the formal and non-formal sectors made intuitive sense and was welcomed. Both teachers and youth workers reported that they benefited from learning about each other's roles and sectors. While there was strong interest in fostering and developing better connections across the sectors, there was a recognition that further support is needed in this area.

Discussion

The Bridging World initiative used training on blended learning to strategically connect two sectors seeking to support positive youth development. To successfully adapt blended learning, there is a need for institutional changes that will sustain the initiative into the long term (Philipsen et al. 2019). For Bates (2019), the choice of blended learning methodology should match the course, the student and the context. In addition, he recommends that in moving to blended learning, a slow deliberate process is followed so that student gains experience and confidence in how to learn independently. It is noteworthy that in the pre COVID-19 literature that the adaption of technology by educational settings is a mixed and nuanced picture. In normal times, most authors

recommend a detailed resourced transition to using these approaches. Yet, the emergency pivot online during COVID-19 did not allow for such an approach and therefore this lack of planning and strategic approach is likely to impact the outcome.

This initiative serves as a case study to how a longer term, strategic and sustainable approach could be taken to promote the use of technologies to enhance youth participation and development while also scaffolding the environments in which that development takes place. Reich (2020) recommended an approach that utilizes peer networks to advance the adaptation of these technologies in education settings. The Bridging Worlds demonstrate the considerable potential of this type of network led approach.

Feedback across the various data sources indicated that respondents were very supportive of creating networks of support across both formal and non-formal educational contexts. Yet, it must be accepted that those newly created connections within Bridging Worlds are wholly reliant on the informal contacts that were made between youth worker and teacher on the training events, especially if they were from the same area or had an existing connection, thus facilitating participants to create some levels of value in their shared social space. Further support will be needed to support participants to develop these connections to create stronger and sustaining connections where participants take control of their shared space and create their own self-sustaining networks.

This initiative serves as an exemplar as to how a longer-term, strategic and sustainable approach could be taken to promote the use of technologies to enhance youth participation and development while also scaffolding the environments in which that development takes place. The Bridging Worlds project demonstrates the

considerable potential of this type of network-led approach even in such disrupted times.

Feedback across the various data sources indicated that respondents were very supportive of creating networks of support across both formal and non-formal educational contexts. The ecological orientation of the project demonstrates the theoretical underpinnings of this approach and the rationale for creating mesosystem links, especially for those whose support networks are more fragmented. Throughout the interview feedback in particular, both teachers and youth workers highlighted the importance of these mesosystem connections and reflected that these connections were especially valued by the young people concerned.

Yet, it must also be accepted that newly created connections within Bridging Worlds are reliant on the informal contacts that were made between youth workers and teachers on the training events. Further support will be needed to create stronger and sustainable connections where participants take control of their shared space and create their own self-sustaining networks. This support should focus on equipping participants to develop their network focusing on their shared learning needs. As Wenger (2010, 193) states

The concept of community of practice is a good place to start exploring a social discipline of learning. From an analytical perspective, it is the simplest social learning system. From an instrumental perspective, a community of practice can be viewed as a learning partnership. Its learning capability is anchored in a mutual recognition as potential learning partners.

Limitations

While the conduct of the research during the pandemic was appropriate and all data collection activities could be facilitated using online methodologies, some additional

considerations need to be noted.

Participation Rates: The initial recruitment of participants took place during the worst month in terms of Covid-19 rates in Ireland. In January 2021, schools did not open as planned following the Christmas break and there was widespread uncertainty regarding what the implications of the rising case numbers might be. Ultimately, schools were to remain closed for three months for Transition Year students, and youth workers were also unable to provide face-to-face youth group activities. While these developments may have re-focused teachers and youth workers towards the use of online and blended approaches, the stress and uncertainty faced by individuals undoubtedly impacted the ability of participants to both get involved and remain involved with the project through its various stages. As such, difficulties in achieving participation must be seen in the light of coping with Covid-19 rather than particularly due to the project.

Zoom Fatigue: Early in 2020, “Zoom” became a buzz word as individuals began to “pivot” to using online tools to promote communication and engagement. However, by mid-2021, “Zoom fatigue” became the more common term as following a year of online life, the lack of face-to-face communication took its toll (Cutter, 2021). As both project and data collection activities took place online, the potential that individuals’ attitudes to online learning in general may have impacted their attitude to the project in particular should be borne in mind.

Youth involvement: While the main subjects of this project are the teachers and youth workers who participated, it is usual in studies of this nature to ensure that space is provided for the voice of the intended beneficiary, in this case young people participating in Transition Year and local youth groups. However, the ongoing impact of Covid-19 restrictions severely curtailed the involvement of young people in the

project. It had been planned to conduct focus groups with young people both in school settings and youth groups once they had participated in a programme delivered as part of this initiative. When schools were unable to run the programmes within the constraints of the school year and youth groups struggled to recruit young people to online workshops during the summer, it was not possible to conduct the focus groups as planned. It is important that as the initiative is developed further, the direct experience of young people receiving these integrated supports is captured. Care should be taken to ensure that when capturing youth voice in this way the focus is on their feedback on the wrap-around model being delivered as opposed to general feedback on the programme of support being rolled out. One way to capture this feedback is to seek case vignettes from teachers and youth workers to explore how this integrated model may work in practice. This issue should be explored further with stakeholders including youth advocates to ensure this valuable feedback is obtained in the most effective way.

Future Directions

The following recommendations can be made both the development of the project in its next iteration and for further research.

1. **Extend the project:** The overwhelmingly positive feedback on the initiative indicates that there is a strong case to be made for further support to extend and embed the project to allow it to fully deliver positive outcomes for young people.
2. **Maintain the project culture:** This project had a number of built-in resources in terms of knowledgeable and experienced staff, strong communication and project management skills, access to evidence-based prosocial youth programmes and a joint practitioner–academic collation of resources. Any project extension should ensure that this positive proactive project culture is fostered and facilitated through strategic use of project management techniques.

3. Enhance the networks: Further development work is needed to extend the network development in the project area. It is recommended that strong exemplars be shared across the network illustrating how youth workers and teachers working within their own purview can share resources and foster positive youth engagement. These strong exemplars should serve to emphasise that this cooperative space can be developed without changing the roles of or obligations on either party but by linking the inter-connecting spaces.
4. Provide further support sessions: Given the fact that most participants have yet to implement the youth programme in their area of responsibility, consideration should be given to providing a further follow-up session to participants after they have implemented a programme. This aspect of the programme may be particularly effective conducted in a face-to-face environment to promote the development of informal connections across the participants.
5. Release teachers for training: Consideration should be given to applying for accreditation for the Bridging Worlds initiative with the relevant national bodies so that teachers can get sanction to be replaced by a substitute teacher when they attend training. Such accreditation would have made it much easier for teachers to attend and sustain their involvement over the course of the programme.
6. Manage timing and recruitment: In any programme extension, the timing should be managed so that participants can be recruited at the start of the school year. This would allow more time for the full implementation of the project components across the school year. In addition, recruitment could be further streamlined through the review and enhancement of school contact lists to maximise the publication of the project in advance and engagement of all relevant stakeholders, especially through creating links and connections with school principals.

7. Gather youth feedback: This initiative so far has focused on the teachers and youth workers as participants and aims, through their enactment of project resources, to have a positive impact on the young people they support. However, it is important that further research is conducted to collect youth perspective on this enhanced wrap-around model of support. It will be important that this feedback focuses on youth experience of the model as opposed to feedback on the programmes, which have a separate established evidence base. The use of case vignettes with anonymised accounts of this wrap-around model in action may be a useful methodology in this regard.
8. Measure participant learning outcomes: Further consideration should be given to using a more extensive measure of participant learning outcomes so that impact on specific learning outcomes of the Bridging the Gap programme component can be more easily tracked.

Conclusion

Covid-19 had a significant impact on young people in Ireland, particularly causing disruption to their education, social activities and peer relationships, and it also resulted in additional negative impacts on their wellbeing. The disruption of education was worldwide and unprecedented. Into this context, an innovative project was developed to connect formal and non-formal education supports using blended learning and prosocial youth development programmes as a bridge to create a strong and sustaining network. This initiative serves as an exemplar as to how a longer-term, strategic and sustainable approach could be taken to promote the use of technologies to enhance youth participation and development while also scaffolding the environments in which that development takes place. The Bridging Worlds project demonstrates the considerable potential of this type of network-led approach even in such disrupted times. Feedback

across the various data sources indicated that respondents were very supportive of creating networks of support across both formal and non-formal educational contexts. Both teachers and youth workers highlighted the importance of these connections and reflected that these connections were especially valued by the young people concerned. The network level approach taken by Bridging Worlds serves as an example of how two community groups can be engaged and supported to embark on a journey of creating strong and self-sustaining networks.

Statements on open data, ethics and conflict of interest

This research was carried out according to ethical guidelines.

There are no conflicts of interest to declare with this research.

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