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Listen to them! The challenge of capturing the true voice of young people within early intervention and prevention models; a youth work perspective

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the challenges to youth work in capturing the voices of young people in a meaningful way within Meitheal and the Child and Family Support Networks model (Meitheal). This is a prevention and early intervention model for statutory and non-statutory agencies working with children, young people and families. This paper, within the context of Meitheal, will explore how best to achieve positive outcomes for young people, and identify what are the barriers which inhibit their full participation in this model. A total of 16 youth workers completed semi-structured interviews that were transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The analysis identified three themes: 'Role of youth work in Meitheal', 'Barriers and facilitators of adolescent voices in Meitheal' and 'The young person'. The study found that youth workers recognise advocacy and support of young people as a key role for their profession within models of prevention and early intervention. Barriers to adolescents' active engagement in Meitheal were the formal structure and agenda, but also the need to achieve outcomes in exchange of professional validation. Youth workers are also concerned about the nature of young people's participation as being fully participatory and voluntary in the process, whilst questioning if their voices are truly being included in a meaningful way.

Introduction

Ireland is now recognised as a progressive country with regards to policies and strategies aimed at improving and achieving better out-comes for children, young people and families. From the early 1990s the Child Care Act (2001) has set the premise for placing children and young people at the forefront of policy, moreover placing emphasis on their protection and welfare. The National Children's Strategy (2000) set out the imperative need for early intervention and prevention to divert children and families away from harm and risk. Supporting this mind-set and discourse, the Agenda for Children's Services highlights that to build strong and healthy children and families' prevention and early intervention is key (2007). The formation of a specific Child and Family Agency in 2014 saw the state embedding their responsibility for the protection and welfare of all children and families firmly in the political foreground. With the core of the agencies mission placed within Prevention Partnership and Family support, embedded in a rights-based agenda the Agency aims to evoke and enable a holistic family, community and practice-based approach that is both supportive and preventative (Gillen, Landy, Devaney, & Canavan, 2014).

The Child and Family Agency Act (2013) set the premise for the model of work of Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) as the lead state agency focusing on the protection and welfare of children, young people and families. With the introduction of Tusla the focus and recognition of early intervention and prevention as an essential element in the protection and welfare of children and young people came to fruition at a national and state level. Current policy discourse within Ireland supports such a premise, placing emphasis on early intervention and prevention as a core element in achieving the best possible and most attainable outcomes for families (DCYA, 2014). Despite a current focus on the positive impact of family support, early intervention, prevention and partnership, Featherstone, White, and Morris (2014) raises concerns that these practices although

supportive, run the risk of being delivered ‘to families rather than with families’ (p. 6). In addition to this, Featherstone et al. (2014) also draws caution to the risk of as- suming that one size fits all within family support; focusing on the need for all practitioners to be reflective, assessing if the needs of children and families are being listened to and met. Even though this is in the content of the UK, the findings can be compared to the Irish context.

International evidence shows that prevention and early intervention achieve better outcomes for children than later intervention (Harvey, 2014). Early intervention is defined as ‘the provision of support and resources to families of young children from members of informal and formal social support networks, that both directly and indirectly influence child, parent and family functioning’ (Dunst, 2000: 99). Prevention and early interventions programmes have been appraised as relevant as they target children's formative period that will determine outcomes in later life (Harvey, 2014). Limitations to these programmes have also been identified; Kyle and Kellerman (1998) carried out a systematic evaluation of family resource programs in Canada and found that there was a lack of public awareness and practitioner consensus around appropriate terminology, target populations and the kinds of programmes that should be offered, limiting the access and effective- ness of services at this level. Even though there is a wide variety of international programmes targeted at prevention and early interven- tion, some seem to be targeted at very specific needs for example Kagitcibasi, Sunar, Bekman, Baydar, and Cemalcilar (2009) evaluated the Turkish Early Enrichment Project (TEEP) was targeted at improving cognitive skills and school adjustment, Healy, Harrison, Venables, and Bosly (2014) evaluated the Intervention with Parents Agreement (IPA) in Australia, which was targeted at reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect. Even though research reports positive outcomes, prevention and early intervention programmes have a variety of target audiences, numbers, intensity, duration and comprehensiveness, therefore evaluation of the impact of these programs can be challenging (Harvey, 2014).

1.1. Meitheal and child and family support networks

The Meitheal model is currently being implemented across Ireland as part of The Child and Family Agency's, Prevention Partnership and Family Support Programme. This programme aims to act as a common approach for agencies to work with children, young people and families to identify and meet needs at a community level and before they progress into child protection services (Crawley, Simring, Harrison, Landy, & Gillen, 2014). The Meitheal process is underpinned by the principles of family support; voluntary participation needs led, strengths based, and inclusive (Cassidy, Devaney, & Mc Gregor, 2016). Youth Work as a sector providing services to young people aged 10–24 years has been named in recent government policies as playing a vital role in achieving better outcomes for young people (DCYA, 2014). Through this re- cognition at policy level, Youth Work has been invited to participate in and is currently an active stakeholder in Meitheal.

Meitheal is a child-centred model which considers the needs and strengths of a child or young person to build a team (Meitheal Group) around a child that will respond to the specific needs of each child. The needs of the child will indicate who is best placed to take part in the Meitheal Group (Tusla, 2018). Youth workers will contribute to a Meitheal if the needs of the young person can be responded to by a professional youth worker. These needs for example can include ad- vocacy, support, and engagement in interest based/needs led develop- mental youth work programmes. Further to this youth work can pro- vide the opportunity for a young person to engage in a safe, fun and supportive environment with their peers outside of the home or formal education setting.

Seeking the voice of children and young people is a principle of the model and therefore it is not only ethical but an essential requirement of a Meitheal process. Participation of Children and young people is now included in the Corporate Plan of The Child and Family Agency as part of a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making. Participation of children and young people is therefore part of national policy and Meitheal is in line with child and family services nationally (Tusla, 2018).

1.2. The role of youth work

Youth work as a means of engaging and working with and for young people is defined as;

A planned programme of education designed for the purposes of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of a young person through their voluntary participation and which is complimentary to their formal academic or vocational education and training; and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations (Youth Work Act 2001, pg.7).

This has been criticised as a limited and technical definition, however it encapsulates three core elements of youth work that are widely agreeable; educational, non-formal and non-statutory (Devlin, 2013). Lauritzen (2006) further depicted youth work as a set of objectives that enlist provide opportunities for young people to shape their own future, their integration and inclusion in society. Youth work furthermore has been described as a process; one which is led by the needs of the young person at all times and strives to understand a young person's point of view (Kiely, 2009).

In summary, youth workers are key actors in empowering young people and giving them a voice; ensuring social justice and inclusion; safeguarding their welfare; involving and valuing peers, family and community (Devlin & Gunning, 2009; Kiely, 2009; Trucker, 2004). Meitheal has a set of underpinning principles based on national and international best practice in prevention early intervention and family support. One of these principles states that Meitheal 'privileges the voice of the parent/ carer and child, recognising them as experts in their own situations and assisting them to identify their own needs and ways of meeting them' (Tusla, 2018, p. 11). Furthermore, Meitheal, with a focus on better outcomes and more hopeful futures for young people and their families' acts as an ideal system of support for young people, placing the role of youth workers and youth work services as described as crucial to their participation and support. As Meitheal is a new model, literature is limited and the role of youth workers in such forums, although vital, is quiet a new concept which this study was set out to explore.

1.3. Aim

This paper is based on a wider research study aimed at exploring and establishing the perceived value and role of youth workers within Meitheal. Further to this, the challenges youth workers faced regarding implementation of Meitheal, alongside their own perceived experiences within a Meitheal process. This paper specifically aims to explore the research questions;

1. What are the barriers which inhibit full participation of young people in the Meitheal process?
2. What are the challenges of youth workers in Meitheal to capture and listen to the voices of youth in a meaningful way to achieve positive outcomes for young people?

It is envisaged this paper will inform practice and gain insight into current experiences of youth workers involved in supporting young people as a current shift in practice and policy focus evolves within the Irish context.

2. Material and methods

The main study had an exploratory mixed methods design using both qualitative and quantitative research methods as the process of exploring and analysing data, however this paper is only focused on the qualitative findings that are relevant to the aim. Exploratory research is used when conducting a study on new fields of practice, where limited or no research has been carried out previously (Cuthill, 2002). Furthermore, exploratory research allows for familiarisation of such emerging fields,

generation new ideas and assumptions, whilst providing a picture of the developing situation within practice (Cuthill, 2002).

2.1. Sampling

A purposive approach was applied to the sampling. This consists of having an intentional selection of participants that have experience in the phenomenon or concept under investigation (Creswell, 2007). It was essential to this research piece that participants were youth workers actively working in a youth project that had trained in Meitheal and/or had participated in a Meitheal. The criteria used to determine sample size was data saturation. The point of saturation was achieved when no new data, coding or themes were identifiable across the data set (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

2.2. Recruitment

A potential forty-five participants from nine Youth Projects in the East of Ireland received email invitations to take part in the study. An expression of interest to participate in the study was initially obtained from sixteen youth workers. These youth workers were then contacted directly and provided with an Information Sheet on the study its proposed aims, objectives and an outline of the interview process. Upon an expression of interest to participate all participants were provided with a consent form. Times and dates to conduct interviews were arranged. Interviews were held at times and locations convenient to each participant.

2.3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of qualitative data collection for this research, as interviews enable the researcher to actively engage with the participant listening to their views, gaining a greater understanding of how they perceive and understand an issue (Silverman & Patterson, 2015). A draft interview schedule was devised based on a comprehensive literature review. A pilot study was carried out with two youth workers that provided feedback on the content, language and appropriateness of the interview schedule. Minor changes in sentence structure and grouping were carried out for the interview questions. Interviews were conducted face to face and lasted approximately 45 min. All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed into a word document for the purposes of data analysis.

2.4. Data analysis

Once interviews were transcribed the analysis process began by reading the transcripts, becoming familiar with the data set, whilst making notes and identifying common themes within the data collected. The qualitative analysis was carried out by the principle researcher. The second author provided a supportive and auditing role to reduce bias in the analysis. The principle researcher held a management role in a youth work setting and therefore carried out a systematic self-reflection process to identify potential bias that could impact on the analysis and findings (Healy, 2017).

The analysis framework applied to this research study was that of an inductive thematic analysis, utilising a process of identifying and drawing upon semantic themes from a realist approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis sought to identify repeated patterns of meaning from across the data set establishing and discovering themes based on the research question, questions asked within interviews, and questions that initially framed the coding process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A five-step process of data analysis was applied ranging from familiarisation of data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing and redefining themes to producing findings.

At the initial phase of analysis, familiarisation, the entire data set was read twice before coding commenced. During this phase

notes and ideas for coding were taken. Phase two, the process of coding entailed codes being generated from the data. Codes were identified from the data through 'the most basic element' of the data that had the ability to be 'assessed in a meaningful way' regarding the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Phase three entailed codes being sorted into potential themes, alongside extract from the data set to support themes. Within this phase themes and sub themes were identified. Phase four began the process of reviewing and refinement of themes ensuring data supporting them was meaningful, and there was a clear distinction between each theme. The next phase of analysis involved the defining and naming of themes, where the real essence of themes was identified. Collated extracts from the data were organised to provide a consistent and coherent account of each theme from the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The final phase of analysis produced an account of the themes identified across the data set, supported by extracts from the data alongside a narrative; presenting a clear and concise account of the story told from the knowledge, experience and interpretation of the research question by participants in this study.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Following the guidelines of the Masters programme under which this evaluation was carried out, the study was not submitted for ethical approval; however the ethical guidelines established by the National University of Ireland Galway Research Ethics Committee were carefully adhered to.

3. Findings

Semi structured interviews were conducted with 16 practitioners from the Youth Work field. Participants were from six of the nine projects originally contacted. The age range of participants was from 28 to 55 years. Participant's number of years' experience, working within a youth work setting, ranged from 2 to 25 years. The gender breakdown of participants was nine females and seven males. The 16 participants represented the following roles within the youth work setting - youth worker (11), youth justice worker (3), service manager (1), and area coordinator (1). The 29 potential participants who did not engage in this study were all Youth Workers.

This study had two main objectives. This paper is focused on the first objective. The second objective will be explored in a future publication. Data analysis and discussion were carried out and structured separately, therefore the analysis and evidence for both objectives is separate. An explanation was added at the beginning of the paper. This study is part of a larger research study that aimed to explore and establish the perceived value and role of youth workers within Meitheal (Healy, 2017). To achieve this, two research objectives were explored:

(i) Identify the challenges youth workers face regarding implementation of Meitheal will be explored, alongside their own perceived experiences as a Meitheal practitioner and (ii) ascertain youth workers knowledge of Meitheal, thresholds of need, principles of family support and their confidence when working in partnership with families and other agencies. This paper reports solely on the evidence found for objective one.

3.1. The role of youth work within Meitheal

3.1.1. Support and advocacy

Youth Work is based upon a set of core principles and values that youth workers hold central to their work with young people at all levels of engagement, context and environment. When asked to identify what they understood to be their role within Meitheal participants enlisted advocacy and support of the young person as core to the process;

'My role is to advocate for the young person in those meetings as well, because I would feel that they could be quite

intense for a young person while it's supposed to be encompassing the young person, to have all those agencies around the table would be quite intense' (Youth Worker 12).

It was found that the role of advocacy and support as displayed in the extract above lay in the realisation that Meitheal might be a daunting experience for a young person. This realisation and attempt to understand or imagine how the young person was feeling within the Meitheal process further presented as a key role of youth workers within Meitheal. Youth workers discussed in depth how the young person must feel within a Meitheal and considering this spoke about how they would acknowledge this and support them through the process;

'I just explain a bit more to them, I'm actually there to support you, to help you, and speak on your behalf if you need that, and saying to the young person beforehand, is there anything you want me to bring up for you and say? And then reflecting on it afterwards with them, how you found that' (Youth Worker 14).

This role as described was found to resonate amongst most interviewees. A strong sense of empathy towards the young person and how they must feel within a Meitheal was evident from the youth workers. Although presented as a holistic, strengths based, needs led approach to achieving better outcomes for young people, the youth workers very much highlighted that a young person might not view the process in this way, particularly if sitting around a table with organisations of which they might have a barrier against, for example schools. Within the context of this reoccurring dialogue amongst participants, this study found that the youth workers role, as they perceived it, was very much dependant on the young person and what their needs were. It was found that responding to young people's needs is really the essence of what they do;

'You are focussed on the young person and what you can do. It really depends on what the case is, if that makes sense, and what the needs are presenting...Identifying you as a youth worker or how your team or project could fit in to meet the needs of this young person' (Youth Worker 9).

3.1.2. Role and relationships with young people

The further exploration of the role of youth workers in acting as a support, voice, and advocate whilst recognising the young person's needs identified having a relationship with the young person as key to this process. The presence of a relationship with the young person involved in a Meitheal and also their families was described by participants as having a positive impact on youth workers being able to identify if a young person would benefit from a Meitheal, allow them to explore and explain what the Meitheal process would involve, provide families and young people with someone who they can ask questions of, get information from and as one youth worker named it as 'acting as a bridge between the family, young person and other agencies'(Youth Worker 14). Further to this it was found that youth workers confidence within a Meitheal was increased when they had a pre-existing relationship with the young person as they felt they were better placed to give an opinion or offer advice, and considering the young person, once again it would not appear they were presuming what their needs were; 'I felt more confident and comfortable in the meetings when I knew the young people. It felt right to say what I was saying because I knew them, I wasn't guessing, I wasn't assuming. It just felt normal' (Youth Worker 10).

Maintaining the young person as central to the process, the youth workers described their role in this instance as one of more information providing and explaining to the young person and their families what it is the youth service can provide to them. As one participant described there is a need to be very 'open minded' and allow for an 'organic process' to occur (Youth Worker 2). Further to this it was found that

'I think if you didn't know the young person that well it could jeopardise future work, because you'd be taking a different approach than we would be taking as a youth worker – I thought it was more of a school authoritarian approach, authority, you do this, and you've to do this, in that case' (Youth Worker 15).

3.2. Barriers and facilitators of adolescent voices in Meitheal

3.2.1. Formal structure and agenda

Regarding the barriers to meaningful participation of young people in Meitheal, youth workers commented on the formal structure of Meitheal and how this is more often than not, unfamiliar to youth work. Although posed as an informal and supportive way of working with young people, the youth workers who participated in this study named that having so many services around the table creates a formal setting for Meitheal. This setting it was explained is one that youth work is not privy to on a regular basis and therefore can at times pose as a challenge to practitioners;

‘I think just as well, the set up and structure of it is so alien to youth workers. If you think about how you work with young people, it's in a very informal basis, how you sit, how you communicate with your team members, everything is a different structure, we obviously have meetings, but it's not sitting at a table and being so formal, and it can be outside of sometimes, what everyday youth work is too’ (Youth Worker 4).

A further challenge to youth work within Meitheal was found within the agenda of services around the table. Youth workers expressed that their agenda was to work with the young person and identify their needs and see what, if anything the youth service could do with them to meet those needs. Findings show that the opinion of youth workers who had participated in Meitheal was that other organisations from statutory agencies or who had legal requirements to fulfil, for example school attendance tended to shape the agenda of Meitheal meetings. This agenda posed as a challenge for youth workers and their role as they felt the process was dictated by the statutory agenda and became a more formal than non-formal space for the young person.

‘A service might have their own agenda, more so, the ones with legal requirements, might come in and say, well he's not coming to school so they're dictating where this meeting is going to go. They come at you with a directive, what are you going to do to get him to school, while the young person is sitting there saying, ‘well I don't want to go to school, I can't deal in classroom environment, its wrecking my head, I'm not able to cope’. They are not thinking of alternative ways, so that can be a huge stumbling block’ (Youth Worker 8).

3.2.2. Achieving outcomes

Talking of their experiences of Meitheal youth workers remarked that where their role was not understood or valued during the initial stages of a Meitheal, achieving outcomes for the young person within the process helped this. Where the input of a youth worker or youth service was shown to achieve an outcome for the young person, the youth workers felt a shift in attitudes and opinions of other stakeholders involved towards their value and appreciation for their role and meaningful contribution to a Meitheal process.

‘I think around the table it was seen the input from the youth work team, the transition of that 6th class to First year happened with the support that was put in place for her by the youth project... And that's the part that I did feel valued in’ (Youth Worker 13).

Although viewed as a positive factor that allows for a greater understanding of youth work as a profession and within Meitheal, these findings embeds further the inherent feeling that Youth Work is undervalued and must at all times strive to prove its worth and justify its role.

3.3. The young person

A key finding in this study which presented throughout interviews but most notably when youth workers spoke of the challenges they faced when engaging in the Meitheal process was that of ‘*What about the young person?*’. Youth workers, in their exploration of this challenge questioned if in the pursuit to have young people at the table, having their voices heard, were

young people actually being asked to engage in a process that would have a more negative than positive impact on them? This finding brought into question for the youth workers what it really means to have the voice of a young person heard, and whether it can truly happen in a safe way within Meitheal due to the complexities of needs that are often addressed within the process;

‘I found I was very uncomfortable for the young person... the reality and the practicality of a young person, who obviously has got a lot of stuff going on, and that's why they're there, to sit in a room and have all these agencies speak about him and his behaviours, and what might happen – I'm not sure the participation level of the young person is really there from what is on paper or in theory from the Meitheal itself, they're saying that this is brilliant, they're there, they're at the table, to the point that I think in some cases, I'm sure it could be a traumatising experience for the young person’ (Youth Worker 9).

This brought into question for many youth workers the principle of voluntary participation which underlines youth work. The study found that youth workers, operating from a place of voluntary participation for all young people, faced moral professional dilemmas at times when they really questioned as a practitioner if the young person was engaging of their own free will or if pressure had been applied and they felt forced to engage;

‘They're saying that the young people have to be involved at the meetings and there's up roar if they're not. And they have to be here [...] they're not getting a choice. For me to hear that is a bit strange, coming from a youth work background where you would never force young people to do something that they don't want to do. So, knowing them to be up here on whatever given day and full of just being themselves, and then to be sitting at a meeting and they are absolutely fuming, they don't want to be there, crossing their arms, no, no I want to go. It's not a nice place to see them in’ (Youth Worker 14).

Conscious of the challenge to voluntary participation and how a young person might be feeling within Meitheal, the study showed that youth workers utilized their skills and the principles of youth work, speaking directly to the young person in an attempt to explain the process and what their role might be in it. Additionally, it was found that youth workers, where unsure if the young person had actually wanted them to be a part of the process, have asked the young person if they would like them to be there. In doing so it was found that youth workers felt they were giving some power back to the young person, that they were giving them a ‘voice’ in the Meitheal process; *‘To discuss that with young people and saying “do you want me to be there, if you don't, that's absolutely fine’ be completely honest with them”* (Youth Worker 14). This study has found that youth workers perceive their role in Meitheal to be one of support and advocacy of young people. This finding was based within the context of young people requiring this form of support as Meitheal can be perceived as a negative and daunting space.

Youth workers felt more confident in Meitheal when they had a pre-existing relationship with the young person. Where there were no pre-existing relationship youth workers took on the role of informing the young person of who they were and what they youth service could provide for them. This study found that youth workers question if young people are participating in Meitheal voluntarily and how this has an impact on their perception of the process.

4. Discussion

This paper aimed to explore two research questions; (i) What are the barriers which inhibit full participation of young people in the Meitheal process? and (ii) What are the challenges of youth workers in Meitheal to capture and listen to the voices of youth in a meaningful way to achieve positive outcomes for young people? The evidence yielded by the analysis of youth workers interviews will be provided based on these two objectives.

Regarding the role of youth workers in participation of young people in Meitheal, this study has found that youth workers see support and advocacy of young people as their primary role within Meitheal. Through data analysis it is established that the role and value of youth workers in Meitheal is dependent on and very much shaped by the young person; essentially the young person and their needs guide what will be youth workers input in Meitheal. These findings compliment what has been described as the underpinning principles of Youth Work based within the context of, establishing what are the needs of young people first

and then working with them to support these needs (Kiely, 2009). Conversely further exploration highlights that this role, whilst shaped by the principles of youth work also lies within the collective realisation that Meitheal, from the point of view of youth work, can be quite daunting for young people. This study found that youth workers have a strong sense of empathy towards young people engaging in Meitheal as they feel that such a process could be an unsettling and difficult experience; a need to be a support, advocate and voice for the young person in this process has been identified. Such findings conflict with what has been promoted as the ethos and principles of the Meitheal model as one which is; strengths based, needs led and inclusive (Cassidy, Devaney, & Mc Gregor, 2016), and poses as an issue for practice. Although presented as a model of support and a way of achieving positive outcomes for young people (Landy, 2015), this study has found that youth workers are questioning if Meitheal, as it currently stands, is achieving this from the young person's perspective.

Regarding the challenges of youth workers to capture and listen to the voices of youth in a meaningful way, it was found that the voluntary participation of young people or lack of, in Meitheal emerged as a challenge for youth workers and was considered a key barrier to the participation of young people. Considering the young person, doubt was exhibited when exploring if young people were actually participating on a voluntary basis. Youth workers questioned if young people felt pressured into being involved in Meitheal, identifying this as a key contributing factor to their lack of real participation. Further to this they raised concerns if young people truly understood what was going on for them within a Meitheal and if having them present was a more tokenistic process. Although providing examples of how they have attempted to regain some power for young people in the light of these concerns and challenges by talking directly to the young person, asking them if they wanted the youth worker present, asking them how they felt about the process; little evidence was found to convey that youth workers were actively trying to ensure young people were considered as partners in Meitheal by other agencies. Similar to the passive approach of asserting their role and value youth workers appeared to have a pre-existing negative perception that the young person was not a true partner in Meitheal.

This raises concerns, but also identifies clear recommendations for practice. Youth workers need to recognise their own power and the role they have in ensuring true participation and that both the young person and the youth worker are equal partners in Meitheal. As aptly described by Timor-Shlevin and Krumer-Nevo (2016) partnership requires professional responsibility. Therefore, it is youth workers responsibility to ensure both they and the young person are incorporated into the structure and process of Meitheal, enabling a sense of safety and willingness to participate in Meitheal and providing for true and meaningful voluntary participation (Timor-Shlevin & Krumer-Nevo, 2016).

Reflecting further on the challenges that youth workers face within Meitheal, and their perceived barriers to the participation, a distinct theme emerged within the data of 'what about the young person?'. Participants placed these challenges within the context of how Meitheal is perceived and experienced by the young person. Albeit Meitheal aims to ensure that the strengths and needs of young people and their families are understood and responded to in a timely way (Crawley et al., 2014), participants conveyed that by the nature of having various stakeholders around the table, some with a more formal agenda to youth work, a negative impact on the true participation of young people as a partner in Meitheal can occur. The challenge remains as to how best to include the voice of young people in a meaningful way and not a tokenistic way; Mason (2012) described that this requires careful thought, preparation and skill. Despite the Meitheal model being designed and implemented so as it can be applied across various agencies and sectors Cassidy, Devaney, Mc Gregor, and Landy (2016) and Lucas (2011) highlights that more formal and statutory agencies, for example schools, can represent power and authority to a young person, therefore impacting on their perception of the Meitheal process. Further to this Lucas identifies that often an agenda of a partnership process can be skewed towards the agenda of the more powerful agencies present (2011). This power imbalance has been identified by Timor-Shlevin and Krumer-Nevo (2016) as a challenge to partnership, one which is un-ambiguous amongst participants and findings of this study. Youth Work comes from a place which recognises and sees the value in reciprocity between youth workers and young people (Young, 2006). With young people impacted by formal agendas and structures, with an evident power imbalance at

times within Meitheal this study raises concerns of how reciprocity is possible, and can young people truly be partners, having their voices heard, in a safe and supportive way.

5. Conclusion

The value and role of Youth Work within Meitheal is supported by the findings. This study has placed a great emphasis on the young person and their role as a partner within Meitheal from a Youth Work perspective. Partnership and what it truly means for youth workers and young people has been highlighted as a concern and challenge within Meitheal. This finding as discussed is central to Meitheal and what it is attempting to achieve. If Meitheal and the Child and Family Support Networks as a collective group of statutory and voluntary agencies truly want to achieve better and brighter futures for young people a reflection on the participation of young people, having their voice heard in a safe and supportive way in this process must occur. It has also highlighted the potential value of Youth Work being involved in the process and how Meitheal and the CFSN can learn from their expertise. From their point of view Meitheal should make changes going forward to be more accessible to young people, to improve engagement, advocacy and participation with young people. These learnings coming from the professionals dedicated to the target group should really be listened to. A recommendation emerging from this study for both policy and practice is that of how to ensure young people are partners in Meitheal. There is an evident need for consultation with young people in this regard and acknowledgement of the challenges and barriers they face within this partnership and their experiences thus far. A suggestion for future research is therefore implied, with focus placed on establishing and exploring the experiences of young people in Meitheal to ascertain if they feel they are true partners in the Meitheal process and provide recommendations to improve their participation.

5.1. *Limitations of the study*

The limitations of this study were that of the small sample size not being representative of all youth workers in Meitheal. A further limitation was that Meitheal is a very new model of early intervention and prevention. More role clarity is required going forward to enable a full understanding of the long term role of youth work within this model of work. The final limitation was that youth workers at the time of this study also had limited experience in Meitheal. In the future it is expected that they will engage with young people through this model more frequently and this will improve the clarity of their role and the distinct contribution they can make to improve the lives of young people and their families.

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Conflict of interest

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