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# Exploring the Role of Practitioner Confidence in Prevention and Early Intervention in Child Welfare: A Case Study of Irish Youth Workers in Meitheal

Maria Healy and Leonor Rodriguez

## ABSTRACT

This study analyses the role of youth workers' confidence in Meitheal: an Irish model of prevention and early intervention in child welfare.

This study had an exploratory mixed methods design. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with youth workers to analyse their knowledge of prevention, early intervention, Meitheal and partnerships in child welfare. These were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Additionally, youth workers completed a questionnaire to explore the levels of confidence in their role. Due to the small sample only descriptive and non-parametric statistics were used to analyse the data obtained.

Youth workers see support and advocacy of young people as their primary role in Meitheal, despite this, participants described explaining what they do with other child welfare agencies as a challenge which was understood as a possible insecurity on the part of youth workers, alongside a presumption that their role and profession is not understood. Overall, this study found the need for youth workers to be more confident when engaging in Meitheal to facilitate their role and ensure that young people and their families are appropriately supported by the discipline of Youth Work specifically but also as part of the overall Meitheal model.

## Introduction

The aim of this manuscript is to analyse the role of youth workers' confidence in Meitheal: an Irish model of prevention and early intervention in child welfare. This study is part of a larger research which was targeted at exploring the perceived value and role of youth workers within Meitheal and 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 (Healy & Rodriguez, 2019). The definition of Meitheal and the policy and legislative context of this programme in Ireland will be thoroughly discussed in this introductory section. Youth Work as a discipline and its contribution within prevention, early intervention and partnerships in child welfare are also analysed.

The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People of the Republic of Ireland (2014–2020) is targeted at making Ireland *'the best small country in the world for children to grow, where their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled; and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and, in the future,'* (Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, 2014, p. 2). The Agenda for Children's Services (2007) defined the role of Family Support in prevention and early intervention in Ireland. Since this policy document, the focus of Family

Support services in Ireland changed from an interventionist approach to one of prevention focused on achieving better outcomes for children, young people and families. This more preventive approach resulted in the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in 2015. Early intervention and prevention are a key practice principle that enables and ensures the protection and welfare of children, young people and families (Devaney & Dolan, 2014). Pinkerton et al. (2004) placed early intervention at the forefront of not only family support but as a means of protecting children, young people and families, their rights, health and wellbeing; with a focus on those most vulnerable and at risk. 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 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2014).

### *Meitheal*

The Meitheal Model is currently being implemented across Ireland by Tusla, the Irish Child and Family Agency. This model aims to act as a common approach for agencies to work with children, young people and families to respond to unmet needs at a community level, with the aim to prevent escalation into child protection services (Crawley et al., 2014). According to Crawley et al. (2014) children, young people and families engaging in Meitheal should have needs based within level one and two of the Hardiker model, with level two needs only being addressed where there is no presence of abuse or neglect. Pauline Hardiker designed this model to understand different levels of need in children in young people. It consists of four levels. Level One consist of universal needs such as education and health. Level Two includes children experiencing some additional needs and in need of specialised services. Level Three entails serious and chronic difficulties for children and families. Level Four is an intense intervention of services which happens when a family has broken down and the State may have to remove the child into its care (Morgan et al., 2016).

Meitheal is a process-based system, which is not linked to a physical infrastructure but can instead be applied by the community and voluntary sectors. Meitheal is underpinned by a set of principles. It is a voluntary process led by the expert voice of the child and parent/carer. Parents/carers are informed at the outset that mandatory reporting will apply if child protection concerns emerge in the process. Meitheal is holistic and strengths based, considering the needs and strengths of the child, family and environment. Meitheal is outcome focused and delivered through the figure of a Lead Practitioner (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Meitheal is an Irish word for teamwork which is based on a cooperative and community-based styles of farming where all neighbours contributed to carrying out the labour such as harvesting crops in partnership. Following its name, one of the aims of Meitheal

was to create a community focused wraparound approach to child welfare underpinned by partnership and collaboration of all stakeholders and agencies that work with children and families to provide an integrated response to their needs in a timely manner. (Cassidy et al., 2016b).

### *Inter-agency partnership*

Alongside early intervention and prevention is the need for inter-agency partnership, a key principle of supporting children and families (Devaney, 2011). Children First (2011) outlines that no one agency or professional has the skills, knowledge, relationships or resources necessary to meet the needs of families, advocating for and highlighting the importance of interagency work. The National Youth Strategy 2015–2020 focuses on the youth aged 10–24 years. In doing so it recognises the importance of collaboration of all statutory and non-statutory organisations in the pursuit of better outcomes for all young people (DCYA, 2015). Furthermore, it acknowledges that young people benefit the most when agencies work together with a common approach (DCYA, 2015). Tusla’s guidance on Prevention, Partnership and Family Support highlights the need to marry both early intervention and partnership of families and agencies to achieve the best possible out-comes (2014). Munro (2011) identifies that if undertaken well, partnership can act as a key tool in empowering and strengthening outcomes for families and children. Although promoted and viewed as a positive and essential component in achieving outcomes for children and families, partnership does not come without its own challenges at both a local and national level. External and internal organisational structures, remits and existing working relationships can impact negatively on partnerships (Landy, 2015). Cassidy et al. (2016a) highlighted that partnership in practice can often rely on individual practitioners, thus resulting in it being directly impacted by staff turnover. Further to this where there is competition for funding and a variation in the pace organisations get involved, partnerships can be viewed negatively within both statutory and voluntary agencies (Cassidy et al., 2016a). Another potential limitation of partnerships has been described by Devlin (2013) as a ‘*proliferation of services*’. This can happen when agencies are grouped together under the same umbrella of a partnership, without a clear definition of the roles and boundaries of what each service will contribute to the partnership and in what terms. Therefore, clarity of role is an important part of effective partnerships.

### *Youth work*

Youth Work is 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, p. 7). According to this definition, Youth Work is aimed at enhancing all aspects of a young person's development through their childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Young (2006) binds the definition above with a set of principles, grounding youth work within respect, honesty, acceptance, trust and reciprocity between the worker and young person. Further to this Youth Work has also been described as a process, one which is led by the needs of the young person and always strives to understand a young person's point of view (Kiely, 2009). Youth Work in Ireland has been developing and evolving over time. Jenkinson (2013) highlighted the emergence of a stronger, united and more confident sector; however, significant challenges are still affecting the sector. These challenges include a lack of resources to appropriately respond to the increasing needs of children and young people. In this economic climate, youth work has to demonstrate its efficacy within a context of partnership and collaboration with policy makers, funders, government and the voluntary sector. Although this study was carried out in 2013 and there is a lack of current findings, the evolving role of youth work has continued. For example, Youth Work was recognised by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA] (2014) as playing a crucial role in achieving better outcomes for young people. Following this acknowledgement, Youth Work was invited to participate as an active stakeholder in Meitheal. Meitheal, however, can be described as a new professional space for youth workers and services; one which many would not be privy to, and which may in turn pose challenges for the sector.

### *Professional confidence in child welfare and family support*

Within social work, a case has been presented which concludes that when dealing with issues pertaining to the welfare and wellbeing of children and young people, practitioners need to be confident and competent in their role (Skehill, 2003) and be aware of their socio-legal practices whilst engaging in this arena (McGregor, 2015; Munro, 2011). Bell (2001) attempting to convey what works within the child protection and welfare arena, paints a picture of children's need for a component and confident support worker that has the capacity and skills to listen, empathise and represent the needs presented to them. Skehill (2003) states that the confident and competent practitioners have the '*potential to exercise positive power*' (p. 153) identifying risk, offering support, encouraging participation and improving/achieving outcomes for

families. Bell (2001) supports such potential stating that practitioners can help manage risk by being clear and honest about what is achievable for the child, parent and family.

## Methodology

This study had an exploratory mixed methods research design using both qualitative and quantitative research methods that can provide answers for more complex research questions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Muncey, 2009). 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 emerging fields, whilst providing a picture of the developing situation within practice (Cuthill, 2002). Meitheal is a relatively new model implemented by the Child and Family Agency in Ireland, therefore exploratory research was deemed suitable for this study.

The mixed methods strategy followed was concurrent; where both qualitative and quantitative phase of the research study happened simultaneously. It also had a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) which involved concurrent timing to implement the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study, prioritising both methods equally in the findings. The mixing phase occurred at the overall interpretation of results, where findings complement each other (Muncey, 2009).

The principal researcher applied a purposive approach of *'intentionally selecting participants who have experience with the central phenomenon or key concept being explored'* (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 112), to the sampling. 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. To provide a more comprehensive perspective and contrasts the researcher interviewed youth workers based within various youth projects. 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). A potential forty-five participants from nine youth projects received email invitations to take part. An expression of interest to participate in the study was initially obtained from seventeen youth workers. These youth workers were then contacted directly and provided with an information sheet on the study. Upon an expression of interest to be involved, and in line with ethical best practice in research, all participants were provided with a consent form. Due to the nature of this research as a Master's level study, ethical approval was not required, however strict ethical guidelines were followed to ensure the safety of participants and researchers. Interviews were held at times and locations convenient to each participant. A total of 16 participants were included in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of qualitative data collection for this research, as these types of interviews are focused yet flexible therefore allowing for the emergence of new themes (Silverman & Patterson, 2015). Participants were asked a set of seventeen questions based on three themes: Knowledge of Prevention and Early Intervention; Meitheal and Partnership. In the same session, participants were then asked to complete a 'fit for purpose' self-evaluation scale on levels of confidence using a 10- point Likert-Like Scale. Questions were piloted by two youth workers prior to commencement of data collection. Data collection was conducted face to face and lasted approximately forty-five minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### *Qualitative data analysis*

The analysis framework applied was that of an inductive thematic analysis, utilising a process of identifying and drawing upon semantic themes from a realist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis sought to identify repeated patterns of meaning from across the data set establishing and discovering themes based on the research aim that initially framed the coding process (Braun & 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 & Clarke, 2006). Phase three entailed codes being sorted into potential themes, alongside data extracts 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 coherent account of each theme (Braun & 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.

### *Quantitative data analysis*

Quantitative data from the self-reported confidence scale was included in the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS, version 24) for analysis. Due to the small sample only descriptive (frequencies) and non-parametric statistics (Mann-Whitney U Tests and Kruskal-Wallis Tests) were applied to determine if there were significant differences between levels of confidence in youth workers per area, gender, role and Meitheal experience (Field, 2018).

### **Findings**

This study consisted of semi structured interviews that were conducted with 16 practitioners from the Youth Work field. The analysis yielded three themes that describe participants' level of confidence in their role, their view of Youth Work as an undervalued profession and its role in partnership but also the positive influences that improve their professional value and confidence. Following this, quantitative findings are reported.

#### *Confidence in their role*

Youth workers described their role in Meitheal as acting as a support, voice, and advocate for the young person, whilst recognising the young person's needs;

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)

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 influence on youth workers being able to identify if a young person would benefit from a Meitheal, allow them to analyse and explain what the Meitheal process would involve, provide families and young people with someone who they can ask questions of, 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. (Youth Worker 10)

Although there was an evident role of youth workers within Meitheal, participants appeared to emphasise the need to explain their role to other stakeholders as an essential element of the process so as they were not taken for granted or on the contrary presumed inadequate to the process;

Not meaning to be forceful, but you know, being outspoken about it, maybe at a Meitheal meeting and maybe sometimes I felt it was a little like, you know, 'you just do the nice things' they kind of 'maybe you could bring them out and you could do something' or those kind of, that understanding of it, rather than actually (. . .) there's so much more to youth work. And that a lot of the work that we do with the young people is really, really important. (Youth Worker 4)

When youth workers spoke of feeling undervalued, they said it was up to them, to be confident to say that what they could do for the young person was meaningful and worthwhile; '*It is about how we communicate across about the power of youth work*' (Youth Worker 4).

Participants appeared homogenous in the findings that this role of identifying and explaining what youth work is within Meitheal was essential. Youth workers described how often they lacked skills to adequately promote what they do, which can result in a lack of understanding from other agencies and practitioners. Youth workers acknowledged that their profession required similar training and experience as others around the table but the need to be confident in its articulation was core to this process to ensure the best possible outcomes for the young person.

### *Youth work – the undervalued profession*

The findings of this study convey that in general there is a feeling amongst youth workers that their role is not valued within Meitheal or as a profession in general due to a lack of understanding;

I think maybe it goes back to the professionalization of youth workers. They were talking about that when I was in college, and that was a good few years ago. I think it's come on a bit, but it's almost like, this patronising approach 'aren't you great what you do', I do get paid for what I do. It is my profession, my job, my career. (Youth Worker 11)

Acknowledging this lack of understanding and value the youth workers participating in this study furthermore added that often this lack of understanding is down to the individual youth workers and their inability to explain who they are and what they do;

Youth work as a sector isn't really understood anyway . . . we also let ourselves down in this as well. So I think it's up to ourselves to push on to explain what we do,

what we can do and what we can offer. But as I said, that's what the sector struggles with. It's an ongoing thing, with the sector. (Youth Worker 6)

Participants were asked that if given the opportunity to explain and elaborate to other stakeholder as to what the role of youth work is and what they can do as a youth worker in Meitheal would they then feel valued. The findings show mixed views on this. Some participants reported that yes they feel it would, however findings show that this value would be based upon the realisation that the youth worker had a previous relationship with the young person and how that might aid their engagement in the Meitheal process: *'I think if we began a Meitheal and we explained our relationship with the young person, they would see us as significant . . . . But initially probably not'* (Youth Worker 7).

Of those participants who highlighted that they felt no, their role would still be undervalued a reoccurring theme of not viewing what youth work can do as important as other services was evident. Many youth workers remarked that the possible outcomes young people can achieve through their engagement in a youth work process were not viewed as important within Meitheal. Youth work and its effect takes time, and cannot provide an 'instant fix' whereas it is presumed other services can;

Some agencies wouldn't think that we would be as valued, or that support for a young person is of importance because it's not fulfilling a very evident need. So, we are not fixing their house, or we are not dealing with a mental health or drug issue, but we are developing them and their person, so sometimes I think that that's lost and I think that that isn't understood at a table with other professionals. (Youth Worker 12)

Such findings convey a dilemma for youth workers within Meitheal. Although expressing that their role is misunderstood and undervalued, they recognise what it is they can offer to young people. What was evident within findings was that this recognition of role amongst the youth workers was viewed as important and having a part to play in the lives of young people. Furthermore, youth workers said they would disengage in a Meitheal due to a lack of understanding or value of their role by other stakeholders. Their disengagement or stepping away only occurred when they felt, or it was expressed directly to them that it was no longer appropriate to be there for the young person.

### *Positive influencing factors on value*

Exploring further the value of youth work in Meitheal, youth workers identified some key elements that assisted other stakeholders understanding and valuing their role. The three main elements were named as the Meitheal Coordinator, pre-existing working relationships and achieving outcomes

The Meitheal Coordinator was named as having a key role in supporting youth work. One youth worker commented that the Coordinator in their area

had a previous working knowledge of youth work so considered its role as important. Another participant remarked that the Coordinator was ‘*very aware of the youth service, and they wanted the youth service to have quite a large part in the process*’ (Youth Worker 3). This finding suggests that a youth worker’s value within Meitheal is not owned by them, but is externally provided, with the Meitheal Coordinator providing a sense of validation in this instance.

Youth workers participating in this study also highlighted that having pre-existing working relationships with organisations enabled the understanding of what youth work was and what could be provided within a Meitheal process;

Sometimes there is a lack of understanding of what youth work is anyway. Now we didn’t have that difficulty with the school because staff run programmes within the school through- out the year. (Youth Worker 2)

Furthermore, it was found that many of these pre-existing relationships were with com- munity-based organisations or individuals working within more formal structures but who had a had a similar role and remit to that of youth workers, for example, Home School Liaison Officers;

The likes of Home School liaison officers are very engaged with youth workers, because I think they understand the different ways in how young people learn, and stuff like that, so we are kind of going off the same remit. (Youth Worker 6)

Talking about 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. Youth workers felt a shift in attitudes and opinions of other stakeholders involved towards their value;

I think around the table it was seen the input from the youth work team, the transition of that 6<sup>th</sup> 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 embed further the inherent feeling that Youth Work is undervalued and must strive to prove its worth and justify its role. Further to this, these findings display once again that youth workers seek and achieve validation from external sources, such as other professionals and agencies, and not from within their own profession.

### *Levels of confidence: quantitative data analysis*

Recognising confidence and the case for the confident practitioner as an essential

tool for youth workers engagement in Meitheal, this study looked to explore and ascertain the levels of confidence present amongst youth workers when engaging in all aspects of Meitheal. Youth workers were asked to complete a short self-evaluation questionnaire at the end of each interview.

Descriptive analyses were applied to establish if a variation in the total level of confidence was evident amongst participants in the 15 areas identified in the questionnaire. A frequencies analysis was also carried out for individual items in the scale. The greatest standard deviation was found amongst participants scoring their levels of confidence when expressing if they were unable to participate in a Meitheal due to lack of time (standard deviation 2.217) and due to a lack of resources (standard deviation 2.139). Although this needs to be explored further with larger samples, these results suggest the widest variety in levels of confidence, that being some participants being highly confident but others having very low levels of confidence, regarding their participation in a Meitheal due to time and resources constraints (Table 1).

Findings show that 43.75% of participants felt completely confident participating in Meitheal whilst 56.25% of participants noted they would feel completely confident expressing a task assigned to them was beyond the remit of their role. These findings suggest that higher levels of confidence are evident amongst youth workers when considering their role within Meitheal in an overall capacity and when specifically related to their role as a youth worker. These findings show a positive reflection on the value

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and frequency analysis of levels of confidence.

	N	Min	Max	Std.	
				Mean	Deviation
I am confident in participating in Meitheal	16	4	7	6.13	0.957
I am confident in acting out as a Lead Practitioner	16	2	7	3.94	1.769
I am confident expressing that I am unable to engage in a Meitheal due to lack of time.	16	1	7	4.88	2.217
I am confident expressing that I am unable to engage in a Meitheal due to lack of resources.	16	2	7	4.19	2.136
I am confident expressing that I am unable to engage in a Meitheal due to lack of capacity.	16	1	7	5.00	2.098
I am confident that I understand what my role is as a youth worker within Meitheal.	16	3	7	5.81	1.276
I feel confident explaining to a young person what my role is within a Meitheal.	16	1	7	5.75	1.528
I feel confident explaining to a parent what my role is within a Meitheal.	16	1	7	5.50	1.673
I feel confident expressing to a fellow practitioner what my role is within Meitheal.	16	3	7	5.50	1.592
I am confident that I would be able to express if a task assigned to me within a Meitheal was beyond the remit of my role as a youth worker.	16	5	7	6.31	.873
I feel confident challenging a fellow practitioner within a Meitheal meeting.	16	3	7	6.00	1.265
I feel confident challenging a fellow practitioner within a Meitheal meeting.	16	2	7	5.13	1.544
I feel confident challenging the Lead Practitioner within a Meitheal meeting.	16	2	7	4.94	1.526
I feel confident challenging a Meitheal Coordinator within a Meitheal Meeting.	16	2	7	5.00	1.414
I feel confident expressing that in my opinion the issues arising within a Meitheal are above the appropriate threshold of need.	16	3	7	5.38	1.586

**Table 2.** Levels of Confidence \*Significant at <0.05.

Dependant Variable	Independent Variable	Test	Sig.
Confidence	Gender	Mann-Whitney U	.279
Confidence	Area	Kruskal-Wallis	.235
Confidence	Role	Kruskal-Wallis	.420
Confidence	Trained in Meitheal	Mann-Whitney U	1.0
Confidence	Participated in Meitheal	Mann-Whitney U	1.0

youth workers place on their role within Meitheal and their understanding of what are the boundaries of that role are.

The analysis revealed a difference in levels of confidence amongst participants when considering acting out as a lead practitioner. Whilst 37.5% of participants stated they would mostly not feel confident acting out in this role, 25% stated they would mostly feel confident. These findings suggest that possibly the role of Lead Practitioner is one of contention for youth workers and their levels of confidence.

Nonparametric statistical analysis was used to compare overall levels of confidence based on area, gender and those who have trained and who have participated in Meitheal; the findings of which are presented in Table 2. No significant findings by gender, location and Meitheal experience were identified, however these differences need to be evaluated in future research as these findings are subject to a small sample size.

## Discussion

This study analysed the role of youth workers' confidence in Meitheal: an Irish model of prevention and early intervention in child welfare to further inform and improve practice. This study found that youth workers see themselves as an important profession in Meitheal, as they have a role providing support and advocacy of young people, in line with what has been described as the underpinning principles of Youth Work, establishing what are the needs of young people first and then working with them to support these needs (Kiely, 2009). However, findings would also suggest that despite this professional realisation youth workers at times lack the confidence to actively participate in partnerships with other agencies and this limits the significance of their meaningful contribution as partners in Meitheal. This can become a limit to the potential capacity that Youth Work can have in supporting children, young people and families, in the context of Meitheal specifically.

As described thoroughly in the literature review, national policies and current strategies pertaining to the welfare and wellbeing of children, enlist Youth Work as playing a key role in the delivery of services to young people. Despite this, participants expressed identifying and explaining who they are and what they do to other agencies, parents and young people as an essential element of their current involvement in Meitheal. The need to explain this to young people and parents is understandable from a practice point of view and was highlighted as particularly important when there was no pre-existing relationship with the family; however, identifying the need to explain who they are to other agencies presents as a possible insecurity on the part of youth workers, alongside a presumption that their role and profession is not understood. Perhaps an attempt here is being made by youth workers to avoid what is described by Devlin (2013) as a proliferation of services; where a blurring of role and boundaries can occur when agencies are grouped together under the umbrellas of a partnership structure. Youth Workers are naming the need to be clear on what they can and cannot do within their professional capacity as essential to this process to avoid such proliferation. These findings however convey a stronger argument for the fact that despite an increased professional identity within the Youth Work sector (Jenkinson, 2013) it would appear recognition of such a professional identity by external organisations has not yet happened nor been experienced by youth workers, particularly within the context of Meitheal. It is not clear from the findings however if this is due to Youth Work itself or is it because Meitheal is new as a model and other professions are trying to find their place and identity as well which only future research can confirm.

Despite the Meitheal model being designed and implemented so as it can be applied across various agencies and sectors (Cassidy, et al., 2016a), Lucas (2011) highlights that more formal and statutory agencies, for example, schools, can represent power and authority to a young person, therefore influencing 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 (Lucas, 2011). This power imbalance has been identified by Timor-Shlevin and Krumer-Nevo (2016) as a challenge to partnership, one which is unambiguous amongst participants and findings of this study.

This study has found confidence, and the need for youth workers to be confident when engaging in Meitheal to be a reoccurring theme amongst participants. While research conveys the need for a confident practitioner when engaging with families and young people in the child welfare arena (Skehill, 2003), confidence of practitioners in this study resonated primarily in the context of partnership. Youth workers recognised the need to be confident in Meitheal, to ensure role and remit was understood and valued. Further to this it was identified that youth workers needed to be confident so as their input in Meitheal was not taken for granted and an assumption made that they could 'fix every- thing 'that is 'wrong' with a young person.

Descriptive statistics and frequency analysis of levels of confidence found that most youth workers felt confident participating in Meitheal, while some felt completely confident. Further to this over half of youth workers scored that they would feel completely confident stating if a role assigned to them within Meitheal was beyond their remit. These findings shed a positive light on what has been found in this study to be a general sense that youth work is undervalued and misunderstood by other agencies within Meitheal. It conveys that youth workers despite feeling the true value and worth of their role is not recognised at times within Meitheal, youth workers are quiet a resilient cohort of professionals that are persistent in their pursuit of good outcomes for young people.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on Meitheal and the role of confidence in youth workers in this model of prevention and early intervention, this study has established that although vital within Meitheal, youth workers would appear to lack confidence. Notwithstanding the establishment of the role and value of Youth Work within this model, this study has found the presence of confidence to be based upon the strength of partnerships within Meitheal. Youth workers have reflected on the need for this assumed value and role to be understood and held by external organisations for youth workers to truly feel confident and as an active

relevant partners in this space and in the quest to improve the lives of children and young people. These findings create very important lessons for reflective practice. Meitheal Coordinators and Lead Practitioners need to be aware of the insecurities present and in the pursuit of successful partnerships and allow adequate time to establish an understanding of the role and remit of all partners. Furthermore, for the Youth Work sector and youth workers engaging in Meitheal there needs to be a realisation of worth and value and an ownership of this. If operating from a set of principles that seek to advocate for, empower, include and promote strengths of young people, youth workers must first and foremost be able to do this for their own profession. This study provides initial evidence for further exploration of the professionalisation and further development of youth work as a discipline. This can avoid inequality in power relations between disciplines in child welfare and contribute to more equal contribution between different disciplines in professional partnerships within and beyond Meitheal; however this study was carried out at early stages of the Meitheal model implementation and further longitudinal research may contribute to further understand the evolving role of youth work as a partner in this new model.

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