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Interfacing informal and formal help systems: Historical pathways to the Meitheal model

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Abstract

Meitheal is a national practice model which aims to ensure that the needs and strengths of children and their families are effectively identified, understood and responded to in a timely manner. The aim of this article is to consider some of the notable learning from the historical background and context in the development of children and family services. The discussion draws together four interrelated themes: the interaction between the voluntary and statutory

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systems, the interface of family and child oriented services, balancing formal and informal responses to child welfare, and early intervention and prevention services. The complexity of this endeavour is emphasised through identifying the core considerations required at the levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. The article concludes with a commentary on how the future of child welfare in Ireland may be influenced through this attempt at a reorientation of children and family services towards early intervention, prevention, partnership and participation.

Introduction

Since its inception, the Irish child welfare system has been built on informal and formal dimensions, which in combination are used to meet the needs of children, young people and their families. Recently a structured initiative has been developed that seeks to systematically link these components together, with the aim of creating a more coherent model of work based on these elements. Meitheal is a national practice model which aims to ensure that the needs and strengths of children and their families are effectively identified, understood and responded to in a timely manner (Gillen et al., 2013, p. 1). It typically involves a multidisciplinary team of practitioners coming together to work towards resolving unmet needs for the child, young person or their family, and is based on an ecological model.

The aim of this article is to inform the current attempt by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, the statutory child welfare and protection service, to develop Meitheal as a system that maximises informal capacity and relations through formal mechanisms, by considering what can be learned from past attempts to enhance family support in child welfare practices in Ireland. The paper argues for the need to use this contextual knowledge to consider how Meitheal can be implemented in a way that helps to maintain the balance between standardisation and homogenisation in the development of Meitheal while still valuing local and organic diversity. The importance of contextualising current developments within Tusla to expand and support an extensive family and community support network for families that embraces the informal and formal processes of help is also highlighted. Within this, it is necessary to ensure that the complex, and often politically charged, process of service development relating to children and families is recognised. The historical viewpoint is instructive in this regard (McGregor, 2014).

With this in mind, the paper begins with an explanation of the Meitheal model. This is followed by a review of the literature relating to family support, early intervention and prevention on which the principles of the model are based. The following two sections then refer to a number of key developments in the past that are relevant to the present context. The first is a concise overview of how the Irish statutory child welfare service has developed since its establishment under the Health Act, 1970. The second considers the learning that can be gained from more recent models that share similarities with Meitheal.

The discussion then centres around four themes: interaction between the voluntary and statutory systems, the interface of family and child oriented services, balancing formal and informal responses to child welfare issues, and the development of early intervention and prevention services. The article concludes with a commentary on how the future of child welfare in Ireland might be influenced through this explicit attempt at a reorientation of child and family support towards early intervention, prevention, partnership and participation.

Formal and informal support for the family and the child – The Meitheal model

As Meitheal is an example of a model that combines informal and formal support for children, young people and families, this section focuses on a detailed discussion of its underpinning principles. However, in order to fully understand the context in which Meitheal operates, it is essential to first briefly describe the overall programme within which it is embedded.

The Mainstreaming and Development Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) was developed by Tusla with the intention of placing greater emphasis on early intervention and the principles of family support when working with children, young people and their families. Central to this programme are five distinct but complementary and interwoven work streams. These are: parental support, public awareness (increasing awareness of where to access help among the general public), participation (enhancing child and youth participation at all levels of their engagement with Tusla), commissioning (focusing on the funding of services), and the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Network (CFSN) model.

Tusla is in the process of developing CFSNs as local multi-agency networks across their seventeen administrative areas. The goal of the

CFSNs is to work with families to ensure that services are available to support them at as local a level as possible and that there is 'no wrong door' (Tusla, 2015). 'No wrong door' refers to the idea that service providers are able to direct families to the appropriate agency even if they or the sector they operate within do not offer that service themselves (No Wrong Door, 2014). Membership is open to practitioners who have a role in providing support to children, young people and their families in a community. Tusla's intention is that Meitheal, along with the CFSN model, will act as a fulcrum for much of the development of the interface between formal and informal systems of help in the PPFS programme (Tusla, 2015).

The Meitheal model is a process-based system that revolves around developing an approach that can be applied by disparate organisations within both the community and voluntary sector and statutory services in their work with a family. It is grounded in a set of principles and structures which help to ensure that the type of support a family can expect to receive is similar across the country irrespective of the area they live in (Tusla, 2015).

The principles are comparable to those processes described by Gilbert et al. (2011) with reference to the reorientation of child welfare services away from a reactive child-protection focus and towards an ethos based on children's rights, prevention, participation and partnership with families. The principle of placing the child or young person's needs at the centre of the process is an important feature of the model and is, for example, reflected in the fact that it is the quality of the relationship developed by family members and practitioners that informs the choice of 'lead practitioner' for the family, rather than their specific role or responsibility.

To capture the strengths within the natural, informal system as well as the potential of formal services to assist, an ecological approach is adopted whereby a holistic perspective is taken of the child or young person's life and their needs that accounts for their environment, family circumstances, personal strengths and so on. Essentially, the Meitheal model serves as a means of bridging the gap between the formal help systems that have developed within the service sector and the informal methods of help provision that families have available to them. Parental agreement to the process is essential, which allows for a help-seeking system that places emphasis on relationships based on trust as opposed to any 'forced' arrangement.

Engagement with Meitheal provides opportunities to build relationships in a manner that Bruner (2006) argues is the real value

in the family support approach. These spaces are created through not only the specific worker's interaction with members of a family within a Meitheal process but also the opportunities it facilitates for relationship-building between workers from different parts of the system, such as the formal and informal, statutory and voluntary, public and private.

However, while it is grounded in elements of informal help-seeking, which build the capacity of the family in their own ecological context, the formal system also features significantly in the Meitheal model. Its formality can be seen through the embedding of key principles made explicit in the 'toolkit' (Tusla, 2015), such as the requirement that Meitheal review meetings cannot be held without the attendance of at least one parent or carer. Other examples include the need to complete certain documentation, such as the 'Strengths and Needs' forms, and the recording of all decisions and actions.

In sum, the Meitheal model is premised on the idea of formalising the informal help system through, for instance, drawing on pre-existing relationships that a family have developed with the person selected as the 'lead practitioner'. The Meitheal system also impacts on the nature of the formal system and, ideally, results in the informalising of formal systems by requiring practitioners and services to adapt to the needs of a child, young person or their family, rather than vice versa.

In widening the implementation of a practice model from a local to a national level, such as in the case of Meitheal, one significant risk that potentially emerges is that the effort to ensure a standardised experience for those who draw on it could result in a homogenised service that fails to take into account local institutional contours. Some of these local contexts include the availability of services, the socio-economic and cultural landscape of an area, and other factors such as the rural/urban composition of the area and the highly individualised nature of a child or young person's needs. The challenge seems to be that of achieving sound and harmonised principles of interfacing informal and formal helping systems as a means of intervening early.

For this reason, the research programme led by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (CFRC) at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in partnership with Tusla and funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, is timely and appropriate in its focus on formative evaluation during Meitheal's initial implementation. This offers an opportunity for 'real-time' research that can be used to inform future implementation of the model. A key feature of this is the development

by the CFRC of instruments that Tusla can use to monitor the implementation of Meitheal and technical support to help embed a culture of self and system evaluation into Tusla's short- and long-term strategic actions.

In addition, the research activities should help to ensure that the local experience of Meitheal is captured and relayed back to Tusla. This can help the system to evolve and allow space for local vagaries of circumstances, resources and so on to be taken into account while still ensuring fidelity to the core Meitheal principles. It will only be in the future, on the completion of such a research project, that comment can be made more specifically on the success and challenges of this model as a formal mechanism of garnering informal capacity and support alongside formal service provision. However, important discussion points can be drawn from a consideration of the interface between formal and informal help systems. Before this a brief overview of the literature relating to this model is presented.

Formal family support

The family support approach to practice has developed considerably in recent decades and accordingly is now regarded as a valued and accepted orientation within the mainstream of service delivery (Canavan et al., 2016; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015; Devaney & Dolan, 2014). Family support is underpinned by the social science theories of social support, social ecology, attachment, resilience and social capital. As a practice, family support is a style of work that emphasises prevention, early intervention and a focus on the strengths of family members. It also aims to reinforce positive informal social networks and to build on individual resilience. In doing so, children and young people are placed at the centre of all interventions and decisions.

The main influences on a child or young person's well-being include parenting style, the parent–child relationship and their home environment (Chan & Koo, 2011), with family support well placed to work in a focused manner to address all three identified areas. A key goal of family support is to intervene early where there are difficulties, in order to prevent problems escalating and to strengthen families' capacity to cope with and manage adversity. This includes intervening early in the genesis of a difficulty and also early in the life of a child or young person where necessary (Allen, 2011; Barlow & Schrader McMillan, 2010; Devaney, 2011).

The role of prevention serves not only to combat risk factors but also to enhance and promote protective factors and processes (Allen, 2011; Frost & Parton, 2009). An intrinsic feature of family support is represented in its delivery. Family support can be provided by a range of practitioners working with families with varying levels of need in an effort to respond in a timely and considered manner (Devaney, 2011; Devaney & Dolan, 2014; Pinkerton et al., 2004). A partnership approach to working with children, young people, families and partner agencies is also advocated within the family support approach. However, to build partnerships, workers need to be highly skilled in, and cognisant of, relationship-building processes appropriate to a child welfare context. Platt (2008, p. 304) identified that these competences include therapeutic engagement skills, such as good listening skills, as well as the capacity to demonstrate fairness, openness and respect in managing the 'often very serious and confrontational aspects of the work'.

Family support is firmly positioned within an ecological framework, which proposes that there is an interdependent relationship between the individual and the environment with a clear recognition of the influence of the immediate and wider context within which children, young people and families live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Jack, 2000). The family is also recognised as a system within itself, where the care, protection and development of children and young people, among other functions, are facilitated.

Communities as local environments provide a set of risk and protective factors, which have an influence on the well-being of community members (Chaskin, 2008). As Gilligan (2000) points out, family support is about mobilising support 'in all the contexts in which children live their lives' and 'counteracting the corrosive potential of poverty and other harm that can befall children in disadvantaged communities' (p. 13). In describing the relationship between family support and community, Weiss et al. (2009, p. 139) noted: 'in addition to working with the family members, family support now increasingly recognises the importance of creating and reinforcing links between families and external sources of support, both formal (local social and health services) and informal (opportunities to meet neighbours and utilisation of natural helpers)'.

Aligned with the aforementioned partnership approach, there is an increasing recognition of the importance attached to the style that practitioners adopt in their day-to-day interactions with children, young people and families. The creation of an effective working

relationship is a critical ingredient in effective family support services. This is where the work takes place, and where change can be attempted and the helping alliance which is critical in the change process is forged (Munford & Sanders, 2003). Dolan et al. (2006) describe the interpersonal skills that the practitioner uses to connect with and work alongside families as essential to good-quality professional practice, while Henderson et al. (1999) emphasise that the way in which a programme is conducted matters less than the environment within which relationships are developed, as these sustain and support people.

This concern with relationships must also transcend the interpersonal relations between families and practitioners, inter-practitioner and interdisciplinary relations, inter-organisation and sector relations (e.g. statutory/voluntary/private and third sector) and managerial–staff relations. In other words, it transcends all levels of the ecological model and is pivotal to the success, or otherwise, of interventions with children, young people and families.

The way in which family support developments in general, and specific models of practice in particular, evolved over the past fifty years is now considered, to illuminate some of the important historical pathways that have influenced the development of Meitheal.

Fifty years in the making: A brief snapshot of the development of family support within statutory child welfare services in Ireland

Historically, support for children and young people has come from organic sources of care within the family itself, and this continues to be the case (McGregor & Nic Gabhainn, 2016). The primary relationships formed within the family unit provide the platform for children and young people to grow and develop (Churchill & Fawcett, 2016; Parton, 2014; Richardson, 2005). Support is provided throughout the life cycle by family members from adult to adult and crucially from adult to child. The majority of families mostly rely on their own informal network of resources to support their family, with other help mainly drawn from universal generic 'formal' services. This is a historically continuous process. But also continuous is the fact that some children and families, for a range of complex reasons, require additional supports due to certain unmet needs or risks within the family (Devaney, 2011; Dolan et al., 2006; Richardson, 2005). In fact, examination of the history of family support in Ireland reveals a

complex fabric of services for children, young people and families that crosses both formal and informal boundaries (Devaney, 2011), as outlined below.

The wider governance context within which the Meitheal model operates has been largely shaped by what has preceded it and is key to our current understanding of it. 1970 is a useful year to consider for a few reasons. Firstly, the Health Act, 1970, shaped by the McKinsey report, was the earliest attempt by the Irish Government to deliver what might be described as a comprehensive welfare state system. This led to the establishment of a framework of statutory community-based services for families, which originally had six specific community services. These were public health nursing, social work, community welfare officers, medical officers, dentists and health inspectors (McKinsey Consultancy Group, 1970). Before this, statutory services were residual and minimal, limited broadly to the provision for children and families within the workhouse and county home system (Skehill, 2004; 2011) and subsidisation of large institutions run by voluntary, religious orders (O'Sullivan, 2009).

The nature and orientation of services that developed from 1970 had two major influences. The first came from a think tank of interested individuals known as Tuairim, which published a report entitled *Some of Our Children: A Report on the Residential Care of Deprived Children in Ireland* in 1966. This report called for the replacement of the 1908 Children Act in order to take greater account of the present needs of Irish society and contemporary theories and methods of child care and protection. It also advocated for all child care services to be administered through the Department of Health (O'Sullivan, 2009; Raftery & O'Sullivan, 1999).

Secondly, the report of the Committee to Inquire into Industrial Schools (Kennedy & Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools, 1970), known as the Kennedy report, made strong recommendations for a move away from the use of large-scale institutions for the care of children, and was influential in the drive to shift the child welfare system towards a community-based service (Devaney & Dolan, 2014). To develop supports for children and families, a strong emphasis was placed on the principle of subsidiarity whereby existing formal and informal voluntary services would be supplemented with a community care child-protection service. The complex and sometimes contradictory development of these relationships is pertinent to the four interrelated themes that emerge in this paper.

As a result of the recommendations contained in the Kennedy report, the government established the Task Force on Child Care Services in 1974 to look at all aspects of children's services with the intention of preparing a new Children's Bill. The report noted the absence of coordinated planning across departments with responsibility for children, which was mirrored at the service-delivery level (The Task Force on Child Care Services, 1980). The report was instrumental in advancing long-awaited legislation on children's care and protection, and in informing and shaping associated service developments. Child welfare services developed under the assumption that while the state was to take on more responsibility, especially regarding the child-protection aspect and to some extent prevention and family support (see Devaney, 2011), it was presumed that this would be done in partnership with and through 'contracting out' to the voluntary services.

While the Task Force on Child Care in 1980 did lead to some reforms, the reorientation of the service from reactive protective to proactive preventive did not feature until after the 1991 Act (Skehill, 2004). Even then, space for more emphasis on early intervention and prevention continued to be limited during the following few decades. The reasons for this are complex and elucidated extensively elsewhere (see, for example, Buckley, 2003; Burns, 2012; Ferguson, 1996; Gilligan, 1995; McGregor, 2014). One major factor was the impact of a range of inquiries into different dimensions of the service. These ranged from inquiries into child welfare system responses to individual cases of neglect and abuse (for example, the Kilkenny Incest case (McGuinness, 1993), the Roscommon case (Gibbons, 2010)) and child death (for example, the Kelly Fitzgerald case (Joint Committee on the Family, 1996)), systematic cases of abuse and neglect such as historical abuse of children in Industrial Schools (see, for example, Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009) and abuse of children by clerics and priests in local communities (Commission of Investigation, 2010).

Instead of the 1991 Act resulting in a determined shift to a more holistic and preventive service, the child-protection system in Ireland, which had gradually evolved from 1970 onwards, has struggled, in a context of moral panic, resource constraint and increasing awareness of the extent and impact of abuse and harm on children, to maintain adequate resources, training and staffing to deliver effective services (Buckley & Burns, 2015). Amongst the predominant and under-standable focus on child protection, pockets of excellent practice in the field of family support have also developed. In this context, some

very significant projects in local areas emerged, which sowed the foundations for what was to become the Meitheal model and which demonstrated the value and potential of working with children and families in a way that maximised the value of informal support systems and facilitated relationships with the traditionally more formal systems of child welfare (Devaney & Dolan, 2014; Dolan et al., 2006).

Limerick Assessment of Need System (LANS) and Identification of Need (ION) as models of coordinating formal and informal support systems

The LANS model (Limerick) and the ION model (Sligo) are recent models responding to the welfare needs of children and families, which share many principles with and have informed the current Meitheal model. Both provided preventive support and were delivered in an integrated manner by a lead practitioner in response to identified need. The models provided support to families who had additional or complex needs in relation to child welfare but who did not require a child-protection social work intervention.

Building on the experience of North Lincolnshire's Common Assessment Framework and on international research, the objective of the ION process was to develop a culture of and a framework for early intervention, focused on meeting the needs and maximising the strengths of families. Crucially, needs-led service demands the integration of a wide range of agencies dealing with the whole spectrum of social provision (Davies & Ward, 2012). ION was a process of multi-agency support for families focused on parents as well as children and young people. Practitioners in any agency were capable of undertaking an ION. The essential quality was not professional training but a helpful and respectful relationship with the family.

As a new way of engaging families, 'pre-child-protection social work', the ION model provided a vital element in the continuum of support available to children and families (Forkan & Landy, 2011). A key aim in the development of the ION model as a distinctive model of support was to move away from a predominantly forensic, risk-based way of working with families (often perceived as the dominant modus operandi for current social work practice) to a predominantly enabling and assisting model, with parents and children as active agents of change. The ION was a process of gathering and interpreting the information needed to decide what help a child or young person

(and/or their parent/caregiver) needed. It provided a structure to help practitioners undertake and record this process with the parent/caregiver and child or young person, and decide with them what to do next (Forkan & Landy, 2011).

An evaluation of the ION model, carried out by the National University of Ireland, Galway, highlighted key indicators of success, which included extensive levels of engagement by a wide range of agencies in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors; high levels of uptake of ION training; a receptive response from parents; and an increase in the delivery of support services to families (Forkan & Landy, 2011). Features of the ION model, such as parental control over the process, an informal approach, multi-agency support and an emphasis on trusting relationships and practical support, were found to be warmly welcomed by both parents and practitioners. A common experience for parents was that they had tried to get help from several agencies prior to coming to ION, but nothing was effective or seemed to work. However, it was the experience of the vast majority of parents interviewed that their situations began to change for the better when they approached ION for help (Forkan & Landy, 2011).

LANS was an inter-agency project which worked to ensure that the needs of children and young people were assessed accurately, and that appropriate and integrated supports were put in place to meet those needs. The guiding principle of LANS was 'one child, one plan', and this extended across the following three elements: a common assessment framework (CAF), which provided a shared tool for assessing need and developing coordinated packages of support; an information-sharing system to allow key agencies to pool information to ensure that agencies were responding to children with a particular level of need; and resource panels, which would then provide the capacity to facilitate the provision of integrated packages of support. Ideally the three elements should work together to provide a seamless, integrated service for children and families. The goal of the common assessment approach was to develop a shared language among all who worked with children and families and to support them to develop and deliver on integrated plans. The CAF was a partnership approach and parents were a key partner. A CAF could only be carried out with parental consent, and the participation of the parent in identifying need and developing an action plan was essential (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, n.d.).

Key learning from the ION and LANS models included the need for high levels of awareness of and engagement in such initiatives from all

relevant agencies. Critically, the evaluation of ION highlighted the need for clear connections and protocols between the model itself and the child-protection system. This was emphasised as central to efforts at preventive work with children, young people and their families (Forkan & Landy, 2011). As stated previously, the Meitheal model has been informed by the development of and learning from both the ION and LANS models, with shared learning arising across the two models.

Discussion

The question of how best to intervene with families where children or young people are in need or potentially at risk is one which has a long reach outwards and backwards in that it is a matter of global (see, for instance, Gilbert et al., 2011) and local historical concern (see, for example, McGregor, 2014). Most often this question is constructed in terms of how best to balance child protection and family support services and, indeed, this important consideration is ongoing (see, for example, Buckley & Burns, 2015; Parton, 2014).

A comprehensive review of a reform of child welfare towards an early intervention orientation in New South Wales (Churchill & Fawcett, 2016) demonstrates the range of challenges involved in the implementation of such an approach. The overview highlights the limitations of translating a vision of change into practice by not addressing systemic problems such as the lack of public engagement with the reform, the need for professional training, inadequate attention to the social and material needs of families, and wider socio-political influences. This article contends that another important consideration must be to develop a sound understanding of what can be learned from history, and this is the focus of the discussion.

The starting point for this discussion is a recognition that the process of practice development is not neutral and requires consideration at a number of levels, taking into account the micro, mezzo, exo and macro contexts using, for example, Bronfenbrenner's original model. These levels cannot be viewed as separate domains but rather as mutually interdependent and complex. As Roets et al. (2016) emphasise, functional approaches to 'joined-up thinking' are insufficient without attention to the complexities at both an intra-organisational and inter-organisational level.

In considering learning from the past, constant attention needs to be paid to the four core themes that seem to frame the context well. Firstly, delivery of services relies on a high degree of cooperation and

negotiation between voluntary and statutory systems, which are mutually interdependent. Secondly, when delivering services to families, there is a constant push–pull tension between the support needs and interests of the family and the protection responsibilities and needs in some instances alongside this. Over time, the focus has shifted between child protection/risk management and family support and community development. It seems that, until fairly recently, the capacity of the statutory system was such that the protection and risk management dimension heavily outweighed the emergence of a wider support remit. The establishment of Tusla with a strong PPFS strand is a macro attempt to rebalance services.

The third intertwining theme is the relationship between the informal and formal responses to child welfare and family support. Meitheal appears to be attempting to simultaneously formalise an 'informal' style of help and to informalise relations with more formal systems at the same time (for example, the designation of lead practitioner is based on the relationship with the family, not their role or qualifications).

Embedded within these themes is the fourth dimension, which is the intention to try, as far as possible, to prevent serious problems emerging in the first instance. Certainly, it seems that the present context shows much greater potential for this service emphasis to emerge strongly within Irish child welfare from macro to micro levels. However, as shown in studies elsewhere (e.g. Churchill & Fawcett, 2016), there are many challenges present that may constrain developments and it would seem that learning from history may help inform how to respond to these challenges.

From the brief commentary on the past, it has been made clear that rather than focusing on individual or community intervention, statutory or voluntary services, all dimensions are required to deliver a comprehensive child welfare and family support service. Although Meitheal is designed to exist specifically outside of the formal child welfare and protection referral process, it remains an inherent and essential part of the overall system and must be understood in this context.

Following on from this, it can be learned from the history of family support and child welfare that services have not emerged from one unified linear path. Tensions have beset developments at various points between type of service (e.g. generic or specialist), orientation (e.g. support or risk), source of delivery (e.g. statutory or voluntary) and roles (e.g. social worker or social care or community

development). Messages cannot be ignored from inquiries in the past and recent research (e.g. Devaney & McGregor, 2016) that emphasise the existing challenges in child welfare services of agencies and disciplines working together more generally. It would be naive to assume that these will not also influence Meitheal processes as they develop at a micro local level as well as macro national levels.

It is well established that managing power and power relations in services, especially where work happens across disciplines and agencies, is a significant challenge and requires explicit consideration in the implementation and review of the practice model as it progresses forward (Davies & Ward, 2012). If this is framed within an ecological model, the nature of interactions between systems can be addressed across all levels from micro (e.g. family relations, individual interventions) to meso (local agencies); exo (wider services such as schools) and macro (policy across departments) can be simultaneously addressed in training, evaluation and further service planning relating to Meitheal. This model aims to harness these dimensions in such a way that the focal point is firmly oriented towards working with families where the child or young person and their needs are central. The Meitheal model is also highly dependent on recognising the importance of relationships, given that it is built on the underpinning assumption that relationship-based practice is essential to ensure better outcomes for children and families (Devaney, 2011; Munro, 2011).

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson that can be learned from history is that to ensure the best interests of children and young people are met, those charged with their care and welfare, from micro through to macro levels, must reshift their focus to place the 'child as centre' in their work. This is a momentous challenge at all levels as it requires the reorienting of individual, professional and political imperatives as well as power dynamics and resource competition towards a genuine commitment to cross-sectoral partnership to achieve the overall aim of Meitheal specifically and Tusla in general, to improve overall outcomes for children and families in Ireland.

Conclusion

This paper has delivered three important general messages. Firstly, child welfare in Ireland has always had elements of formal and informal support systems working in parallel on different levels and orientations, so the current conditions should be viewed as a new

formulation of existing processes, albeit with a particular and explicit emphasis and purpose. Secondly, certain common 'ingredients' that have worked to maximise the potential for formal and informal systems can be harnessed by reviewing past models, especially those of ION and LANS. Finally, a major challenge for the future is how the Meitheal model is implemented in a way that helps to maintain the balance between standardisation and homogenisation in its development while valuing local and organic diversity.

Given the early stage of Meitheal implementation, the many challenges, potential barriers and opportunities as to how to achieve balance between formal and informal pathways must be recognised. It is important to be mindful of the fact that, similar to what has preceded it, the actions of this foreseeable present will inform the history of the future of child welfare in Ireland. At a future point in time, researchers can look back to assess the extent to which this explicit attempt at a reorientation of child and family supports towards early intervention, prevention, partnership and participation has been achieved. In order to maximise the potential of achieving better outcomes for children, there are a number of important questions to pose in light of our historical context. For example, has learning from the particularly dark moments of the past where the child was far from the centre of concern been maximised? Is enough being done to foster effective working relationships across the sector? Do professionals, agencies and organisations have the capacity to interrogate the patterns of power and power relations that can enable and obstruct partnership and power-sharing practice? How can this be improved?

The ethos and principles of Meitheal are based on best practice as it is currently understood. The achievement of better outcomes for children and families will depend to a large extent on the capacities across the levels of intervention but, no more than in the case of an individual family, the potential success of the reoriented system will certainly be influenced by a shared capacity to learn from the past and take on board this learning to inform the present and future.

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