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Contemporary Irish Youth Work Policy and Practice: a Governmental Analysis

Elizabeth Kiely and Rosie R. Meade

Introduction

In Ireland, as in other contexts, a set of progressive and commonly identifiable values have been widely understood as giving youth work its meaning and form, and as distinguishing it from other ways of engaging with young people (Davies[i], 2005; Kiely, 2009)[1]. Youth work's distinctive ethos is most discernible in practice that is young person led and young person centred; in activities that involve association with other young people; and where befriending and trusting relationships between youth worker and young people are built up incrementally. However, it is increasingly apparent that these values are marginal in the newly-prescribed policy based articulations of youth work that have taken hold in the Republic of Ireland in recent decades (Kiely, 2009). In Ireland, we have seen the bifurcation of youth work into 'targeted' and 'universal' youth services, a process that commenced in the early 1990s and is predicated on a number of significant distinctions. Universal services receive minimal state resources, are staffed largely by volunteers and offer open ended, generic activities. By contrast, targeted services, which are expected to prioritise the personal and social development of 'disadvantaged' groups of young people, are staffed by professionally qualified youth workers and allocated substantially greater resources from the state. As we show in this paper it is predominantly 'targeted' youth work, which is being reconfigured as a set of programmatic interventions for the articulation, application and expected delivery of pre-defined outputs and

[1] In making this assertion, the authors recognise that the terminology used to denote 'youth work', and the values and assumptions underpinning policy and practice, are themselves contested and that the trends outlined in this paper may not be reflective of those in non-European contexts.

desired outcomes. Following McGimpsey's (2017) analysis of the implications of late neo-liberal policy making for youth in the UK, we regard bifurcation as having facilitated the commodification of Irish youth work to the extent that it now exhibits some of the hallmarks of what Batsleer (2010: 160) dubs 'liquid youth work'. This refers to youth work that is promoted by policy makers because of its short-lived, project based, individualised forms of engagement and its privileging of demonstrable outcomes, quick 'successes' and capacity for replication and rebranding.

So great is the impact of such policy generated demands on contemporary practice in the UK that *In Defence of Youth Work* mobilised to uphold a democratic model whereby 'young people freely engage[d] in universal open-access facilities offering informal education opportunities, addressing issues based on their own perceived concerns and interests' (Hughes *et. al.*, 2014: 4). This paper contends that with each new government policy articulation, Irish youth work is in danger of becoming ever more 'liquid' and estranged from such a democratic model.

This paper analyses the governmental rationalities informing youth work policy in the contemporary Irish context. In so doing we clarify how we as authors are adopting and applying a governmentality perspective, and proceed to analyse what we see as the distinctly neoliberal rationalities at play in the current moment. Since 2008, the implementation of neoliberalised austerity has been hugely destructive in terms of the closure of young people's services and disruptions to youth work provision. However, we argue that the integrity of youth work *as youth work* is at risk of being eroded still further by policy makers' growing fetish for 'evidence based' practice, value for money approaches and the delivery of prescribed outcomes. While the accelerating influence of such rationalities over British youth work has been critiqued (e.g. Bradford and Cullen, 2014; Hughes et. al., 2014; De St. Croix, 2016, 2017; McGimpsey, 2017), in Ireland they have not been given commensurate academic attention. Additionally, governmentality approaches recognise that *multiple* actors across the polity, civil society and private sector seek to act upon and shape contemporary governmental practices. This article considers the emergence of high-profile research and evidence generating 'experts' in particular, with the Centre for Effective Services perhaps the most prominent in the Irish case, and how they seek to legitimise and embed these evolving youth work rationalities within the practice environment.

A Backdrop of Austerity

Ireland's economic collapse was quickly reconstructed as both a fiscal and public spending crisis, and as necessitating new forms of discipline in welfare delivery (Allen, 2012; Dukelow, 2015). Between 2008 and 2014, Irish Governments introduced a succession of budgets which reduced specific welfare payments, particularly those for young people, limited entitlement to 'universal' benefits, introduced new forms of taxation and social charges, and instituted payment regimes for services such as water that had been largely 'free' at the point of consumption. While it became commonplace for media commentators and political leaders to frame acquiescence to austerity as a moral imperative and to talk of the *entire* Irish population 'sharing the pain' (Meade, 2012), evidence suggests that the scale and consequences of retrenchment were differentially experienced across society, with class and age related factors significantly mediating impacts on quality of life (National Economic and Social Council, 2013; Watson et al., 2016; van Lanen, 2017). The National Economic and Social Council (2013: 17) observed that young people were 'hardest hit by the crisis' as rates of unemployment among this cohort were demonstrably higher than those for the wider population. The proportion of young people in Ireland not in education, employment or training rose sharply during the Recession from an average of 11% in 2006 to 22% in 2011 and, in 2014, Ireland had the highest rate of young people in receipt of unemployment and disability benefit in the OECD (OECD, 2016). Over one quarter of young people in Ireland was receiving one of these payments at some point during a twelve month period compared to less than 10% across the OECD (OECD, 2016).

Furthermore, as in Britain where funding cuts sent youth work into steep decline (Smith, 2013; Bradford and Cullen, 2014; Hughes *et. al*., 2014), Ireland's regime of austerity had profound implications for youth work organisations in terms of the sustainability of their resource base, staffing and ability to respond to growing demand. Harvey's (2014) research has revealed that comparatively speaking, reductions in public subsidy disproportionately impacted the Irish community and voluntary sectors. Funding for youth organisations and special youth projects combined fell from €90.5 million in 2008 to €50.53million in 2015, a reduction of 44.1% (Harvey, 2014: 11). Notably, 'overall government current spending fell -7.1% over 2008-2014 (€53.4bn to €49.6bn)' (Harvey, 2014: 10).

In Ireland, the 'crisis' did not only engender withdrawals of state funding, it signalled an intensification of concerns about the economies, performance, impacts and effectiveness of public, community and youth services. In 2009, amidst a fanfare of publicity and media speculation, a Special Group was appointed by Government to identify cutbacks of €5.3 billion (approx. within a year) and staff reductions of 17,300 across the public sector and state funded

programmes. The resulting *Report of Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* (McCarthy, 2009a, 2009b) legitimised and prescribed the roll-out of austerity, while rationalising Government's more general recasting of the crisis as primarily a problem of inefficiencies in the public sector. Significantly, the report's (McCarthy, 2009a: viii) terms of reference highlighted

> i. the need to identify and prioritise particular output targets and areas; ii. the achievement of greater efficiency and economy in the delivery of all services; iii. the scope for rationalising and streamlining delivery of public services in the consumers' interest.

Thus, it proposed a rational and quantifiable basis for the on-going delivery of services that would be premised on a top-down model of accountability. Such moves, as we show in later sections, were accentuated by parallel policy and programme developments in Irish youth work and the privileging of 'evidence based approaches'. Taken together we recognise the role of these developments in re-shaping the rationalities, judgments and assumptions informing the *government* of state funded youth work. Before looking more closely at their specific implications, we first clarify how we are using this concept of *government* and integrating a Foucaldian analysis of governmentality within our discussion.

Youth Work as Government

With his account of governmentality, Foucault draws upon and extends his conception of power, where power is understood as dispersed and relational; as neither the property nor possession of one or other actor but instead as assuming different forms within different social relationships. While acknowledging that society is marked by 'nonegalitarian' relationships, which may even be experienced as 'major dominations', he maintains nonetheless that 'there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations' (Foucault, 1978: 94). Crucially, Foucault understands power as productive – it produces distinctive ways of acting, thinking, being, relating, and understanding – rather than as exclusively prohibitive or repressive. For example, his analysis of sexuality does not seek to discern

> whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions that prompt people to speak about it, and which store and distribute the things that are said. (Foucault, 1978: 11)

There is a strong discursive turn in Foucault's analytical preoccupations, he is interested in what is said, but he also seeks to strike at what is behind what is said, the kinds of values, concerns and rationalities that motivate speakers, how they construct, problematise and proffer solutions to social 'issues'.

Such concerns are replicated in governmentality studies, but here the focus is more specifically on 'government' and the forms it takes within liberal and neo-liberal contexts. Government is understood as the 'conduct of conduct': as the multifarious interventions, exhortations, pledges, discourses and actions that seek to *direct* behaviour in desirable ways (Rose and Miller, 1992; Rose, 2000). 'Conduct' simultaneously implies 'the activity of conducting', how 'one conducts oneself', how one 'lets

oneself be conducted' or 'is conducted' and the way one 'behaves' as a consequence of being conducted (Foucault, 2009: 193). Against the backdrop of neoliberalisation, where much of the responsibility for the management and delivery of social goods has been outsourced, government is not solely the occupation of *the* Government (or its proxy the state apparatus): across society and the economy a range of actors, operating at diverse scales, and sometimes in competition with each other, address themselves to the problems of

government. Therefore, as Rose (2000: 323) explains, government occurs in 'different spaces', stretching from the nation to the office, the global polity to the family home, from the individual to the institution. It also occurs through 'different technologies' 'linking together forms of judgment, modes of perception, practices of calculation, types of authority, architectural forms, machinery and all manner of technical devices with the aspiration of producing certain outcomes in terms of the conduct of the governed' (Rose, 2000: 323).

In essence, governmentality studies interrogate the rationalities (or *mentalities*) that inform specific efforts at government. Who is seeking to conduct conduct and how is government justified and enacted? What ways of acting and being (subjectivities) are validated and, by implication, what ways are denied? What (troublesome) behaviours or actors are being targeted, for what purposes and through what technologies? Which regimes of truth – sources of authority, expertise, knowledge, measurement – are called upon to justify and operationalise

government? What forms of accountability are demanded from the subjects of government? Governmentality studies also recognise 'the historical variability and situational contingency of the *problems* that have seemed appropriate to be governed' (Rose, 2000: 322, emphasis in original). Therefore this paper asks, what new governmental rationalities, technologies and experts are emerging in fields such as youth work, given the dominance of neoliberalisation and managerialism? Are previously acceptable forms of conduct - among

youth organisations, young people or youth workers - now being problematised or even negated?

Foucault's (2009) discussion of governmentality paralleled his analysis of 'security', reflecting his concern with if and how liberal institutions could govern populations in ways that rendered freedom compatible with security. Policy makers' privileging of 'security' constrains the scope of freedom so that subjects are exhorted to act 'according to the standards of civility, orderliness and reason required for the proper functioning of state

agencies, markets, households and other aspects of social life' (Hindess. 1997: 268). Today, neoliberal discourses prioritise the expansion of market based competition above other social and economic goals. While there is much associated talk of 'freedom' in the market economy/society, an excess of or the 'wrong' kinds of liberty as expressed by citizens such as young people might disrupt the practices of self-discipline and restraint upon which the economic system is parasitic. Consequently, across the social and welfare spheres, neoliberal

governmentalities typically seek to activate entrepreneurial, responsible, individualised expressions of self among clients and service users (Pyykkönen, 2015: 18; Larner, 2000: 13).

We are particularly interested in the kinds of expertise, knowledge claims and technologies being mobilised in Irish youth work policy at the current historical juncture: how they seek to act upon and shape the conduct of youth organisations, youth workers and, ultimately, young people. The analysis presented here primarily attends to government as it has

been articulated in recent policy *documents*; namely, the National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work, Youthwork: A Systematic Map of the Literature, The Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures and the National Youth Strategy. A focus on documents, while rich in its evocations of the discourses and rationalities of government, is necessarily partial and incomplete: we acknowledge the value of and scope for ethnographic research that illuminates the quotidian, localised, and

messy applications of governmental technologies and techniques in real-life contexts (e.g. St Croix, 2017). Additionally, we want to identify some important caveats with respect to our adoption of a governmentality approach.

Firstly, we appreciate that neither state agencies nor Government Departments solely and arbitrarily determine the forms practice takes; they interact, collaborate, conflict and negotiate with a range of NGOs, voluntary youth organisations, academics, advocacy groups, practitioners and committed actors who assert varying

visions of what youth work is and should be (Devlin, 2010; Kiely, 2009; McMahon, 2009; Swirak, 2015). For instance, the embedding of professionalisation and professionalism within Irish youth work, following the establishment of the North South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work (NSETS) in 2006,[2] has seen an expansion in the number of accredited programmes being offered by Irish Third Level Institutions. Educators, like the authors of this paper, are also imbricated in the government of

[2] NSETS' membership is itself composed of Government appointees for both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland alongside representatives of the voluntary youth sector. Its own structure thus reflects a more general 'partnership approach' that claims to support the 'representation of all the key stakeholders in youth work' (NSETS, 2013: 4).

professional subjectivities as we provide students ‘with suitable opportunities to develop further towards the goal of professionalism’ (NSETS, 2013: 13). Secondly, we accept that efforts at government may incite resistance from subjects who ‘struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others’ and selves (Foucault, 2009: 201, also Davidson, 2011; Death, 2010). Young people, youth workers, and youth organisations accommodate, but they may also refuse, subvert and in rarer instances revolt against the forms of government

that act upon them. For example, When Anti-Social Behaviour Order legislation was proposed in Ireland in 2005, it was strongly supported by Government political parties but opposed by groups and organisations in civil society including key youth organisations (Garrett, 2007). Some of those organisations came together to establish an unofficial ASBO watchdog website to monitor the use of these orders. A much-diluted version of the measure was subsequently legally instituted and only a handful of ASBOs have been issued since their introduction. Thus, when

critiquing the implications of policy or the rationalities informing it, we cannot and do not presume that policy 'outcomes' are guaranteed by intentions.

Thirdly, we propose that with respect to youth policy, and as with other social policy fields (McKee, 2009; Meade, 2017), the state remains a site where there is a concentration of power. Because it is the primary source of funding for the Irish youth work sector, and is thus positioned to exert significant influence over youth work agendas in this jurisdiction, it features prominently in this analysis of the

Irish context. The approach to governmentality being adopted is, therefore, generally sympathetic to Foucault's 'method of decentering the state' with its attentiveness to the micro politics or practices of civil society, while still rejecting an analytical approach that drifts too far '*beyond* the state' or that ignores the remaining vestiges and forms of 'state-centred power' (Dean and Villadsen, 2016: 11 emphasis in original).

Fourthly, there is the question of the 'novelty' of the developments described. Arguably over its long history, youth work

practice has consistently sought to shape the conduct of young people, by facilitating, supporting and promoting desired forms of personal development, critical awakening or social education. From a governmentality perspective, it can appear that youth work is always and inevitably concerned with the government of young people, with the regulation or modification of their conduct in what can be very divergent ways. Thompson (2003: 114) suggests that while Foucault sought to 'understand how we come to want our own subjection', and accede to

constraining forms of government, his ultimate goal was to ‘identify the resources that might enable us to effectively contest this disposition’. Accordingly, we contend that there is scope to make normative judgements about and propose ethical commitments for youth work; to propose that some models and approaches contribute more to human freedom and are more open to the expression of alternative subjectivities than others. For example, it is worth remembering that for a brief period over thirty years ago, a more expansive

understanding of youth work was promulgated in the Report of the National Youth Policy Committee, [commonly called the Costello Report] than that which came to dominate policy making subsequently. It was one that potentially valued a critical social education for young people and their democratic participation in structural change. It asserted that youth work

> must be addressed to the developmental needs of the individual: through social education, it must be concerned with enabling the individual to develop *his/her own vision* of the future and the social skills needed to play an active role in society. If youth work is to have any impact on the problems facing young people today then it must concern *itself with social change*. This implies that youth work must have a key role both in enabling young people *to analyse society and in motivating and helping them to develop the skills and capacities to become involved in effecting change.* (Department of Labour, 1984: 116, emphasis added)

Grounding youth work activities in exciting the passions, interests, concerns and views of young people as they experience or express them, may serve as an important corrective to the excesses of neoliberalised government across society. We are especially critical of the 'economization of freedom' that characterises contemporary neoliberalisation, and its marketised, competitive and prescriptive 'formulation of winners and losers' (Brown, 2015: 41). Furthermore, a reassertion of the principle of voluntary participation in all youth

work activities, such as is discussed by Bernard Davies (2015) and De St Croix (2017), could empower young people to know that they have the freedom to engage with or disengage from processes and projects according to their own judgements. It permits ‘a personally committed participation’ on young people’s part rather than a merely ‘compliant attendance’ (Davies[i], 2015:102), thus rebalancing the power between young people and workers, mitigating the more controlling and objectivising aspects of government. This

is a more democratic vision of ‘freedom’ than that which informs neoliberal conceptions of consumer choice or individualised market freedom.

Against the prevailing currents of our times, we contend that a rejection of rigidifying agendas and prescribed outcomes, allows young people to imagine and explore ways of thinking, being and acting at a pace of their own making. However, we are concerned that youth work in Ireland is being steered away from such open-ended possibilities as policy

priorities are increasingly directed by what 'the evidence' permits.

Evidence Based / Informed Practice and Youth Work: Some Challenges

Philanthropic funding of youth, community and voluntary sector activity has been less 'developed', in Ireland than in other EU contexts or in the USA. Perhaps unsurprisingly, during Ireland's era of austerity Government began to actively proselytise the benefits of enhanced private sector, philanthropic and corporate funding for these fields (Forum on Philanthropy and Fundraising, 2012)[3]. Of those philanthropic organisations present in Ireland, The Atlantic Philanthropies became a particularly influential policy actor during the 2000s. One aspect of its work and mission was to provide grant aid to children and youth programmes[4], funding which was contingent on the delivery of evidence of outcomes and effectiveness. Arguably, its example has provided an additional impetus for Government to enthusiastically pursue the evidence 'agenda'. Consequently, we have witnessed the emergence of an expansive service infrastructure[5], offering the required supports to help organisations deliver desired outcomes for children and young people. A prominent actor within this infrastructure is The Centre for Effective Services (CES), which was founded in 2008. As already noted, coinciding with the global and national economic collapse, preoccupations with effectiveness and value for money in the public and welfare fields were becoming live political issues at that time, and they would intensify as austerity became entrenched. Since 2008 the CES has worked as 'an implementation partner with Government on a number of policy initiatives' (The CES, n.d.). Its website outlines its commitment to 'working closely with the Youth Affairs Unit to improve the quality of, and outcomes from, youth work through the use of evidence informed practice' and how it 'collaborates closely with national and local organisations in the sector to support

[3] A Government established 'Forum on Philanthropy and Fundraising' (2012: 10) asserted that the 'not-for-profit sector itself also needs to adapt to new economic realities, and to operate more efficiently and more innovatively. The sector is expected to become better at targeting a more diverse range of supports, including partnerships within the corporate sector'.

[4] In the Republic of Ireland, between 1987 and 2015, The Atlantic Philanthropies provided grants in the region of $1.2billion to organisations working in range of social and human rights fields, including those active on issues impacting LGBT people, children and young people, older people, migrants and refugees, among others (The Atlantic Philanthropies, 2017).

[5] It includes The Centre for Effective Services, The Child and Family Research Centre at National University of Ireland Galway, Foróige Best Practice Unit, the Prevention and Early Intervention Network.

them to develop their practice'(The CES, n.da). The organisation's emphasis on practical outcomes, is reflected in its self-identification as a 'think and do tank', rather than a think tank, that provides 'relevant and usable evidence' to policy makers, service commissioners, providers and practitioners (The CES, n.d.). From a governmentality perspective such emphases on practices are critical: governmental actors seek to mobilise conduct in ways that are constructed as productive for and of benefit to society (Rose, 2000). In that regard, the CES has been highly productive and has become an important source of expertise, evidence and documentation for the Irish youth work sector. Among its achievements to date are; the route map and training infrastructure for the implementation of the National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) in youth work[6]; the literature review which contributed to a value for money and policy review of youth programmes commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2015; an 'evidence review' to inform the 2015 National Youth Strategy; and the CES's subsequent involvement in the strategy's implementation (The CES, n.da). Indeed the CES has become central to the designation of 'what works', in a range of social fields including, early years provision, community development and social work. In 2015 it established a new phase of work with the Northern Irish and Irish governments in the area of policy implementation and 'public service reform' (The CES, n.d.), facilitated by funding from Government and Atlantic Philanthropies.

The expectation that policy and practice must/will be evidence based has become hegemonic in Ireland. In 2016 Minster for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, asserted that, 'I am completely convinced that evidence has to be at the heart of policy; and that we should not shy away from changing policy where evidence shows that what we're doing is not working' (Zappone, 2016). While such commitments are ostensibly reasonable and commonsensical, they do not reflect the growing uncertainty about the plausibility, merit or practicability of the selected 'evidence'. Critics of evidence based practice internationally, many of whom regard it as a product of New Managerialism, argue that it is in effect a 'slogan' (Hammersley, 2013: 15) or 'a truism' (Davies[ii], 2003: 98), the rhetorical effect of which is to discredit oppositional or dissenting approaches. Indeed, we contend, that the very claim that youth work can or should be evidence based runs counter to the values that render work with young people *youth work*. It assumes that there is universal agreement about the ends youth work is expected to achieve and that it is appropriate to peg practice to prescribed ends in the

[6] The NQSF was introduced in 2010 by the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and it is a condition for funding that all youth work organisations participate in this quality assurance process.

first instance. The desire to designate 'what works' privileges a technocratic view of practice (Biesta, 2007, 2010; also Hammersley, 2013) that belies its cultural, relational, contested and even political potential.

Brownyn Davies (2005) raises foundational questions about what is selected to provide the evaluative base for evidence, how it is selected, who selects it, and how it is then translated into practical ways of working with deliverable outcomes. Interestingly, in Ireland when the 'objective' evidence base - such as randomised control trials, systematic reviews or quasi-experimental study results - has been found wanting, the language deployed has been softened to 'evidence-informed practice' or an 'evidence matrix' (Bamber, *et. al.*, 2012; Dickson *et. al.*, 2013: 1). While Biesta (2012) concedes that the term 'evidence informed' is marginally more modest in its claims-making, evoking some recognition of the challenges inherent in designating 'what works', it is still encumbered by flawed assumptions as to what evidence is, what it can do and what it can achieve. Clearly, organisations such as the CES are not unaware of the limits and contradictions associated with the pursuit of evidence or a 'gold standard' in a practice field 'that is essentially fluid and responsive' (Bamber, 2013:11), but it still holds to the plausibility of 'a more nuanced evidence-informed approach' that is 'based on the integration of experience, judgement and expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research' (Bamber, 2013: 13). While, potentially, there is some accommodation of practice wisdom and dilution of claims-making in the discursive shift from 'evidence based' to 'evidence informed', we maintain that the primary rationale remains the same; ensuring that youth work delivers predictable results in line with competitive, and increasingly neoliberalised, modes of resource allocation and top-down instrumentalist conceptions of accountability. For example, the CES posits that the roll-out of the National Quality Standards Framework in youth work reflects a concern 'to improve rather than prove practice', but additionally that it will 'help to substantiate the work at a time when the need to defend youth work has never been greater' and where an obligation 'to maximise the impact of the resources to hand' looms large (Bamber, et. al., 2012: 54).

Furthermore, by making 'evidence' accessible and usable through the development of practice supports and resources, the CES plays a significant part in familiarising and engaging practitioners with the governmental technologies associated with an 'improved' youth work practice. John Bamber (2011), project specialist with the CES, identifies as someone whose own biography stands as testament to the value of youth work. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that 'impact stories' like his own regarding youth work's successes, however powerful they

might be, are just not sufficient for a contemporary reality where results of a different kind must be demonstrated.

Any governmental programme can only work if key actors adopt their required roles, responsibilities and behaviours. Across the social field a rich panoply of 'governmental technologies' (Rose and Miller, 1992: 175) or, more specifically, 'technologies of performance' (Dean, 2010: 197) are deployed to inform, convince and up-skill practitioners. 'Technologies of performance', are projected, implicitly but often explicitly, as 'techniques of restoring trust' in the practices of 'service providers, public services and professionals' (Dean, 2010: 197). In youth work, they include, in-service training, conferences, symposia, user friendly practice advice, audit and evaluative tools as well as workers' evidence informed success stories[7]. Together these technologies help to activate the self-governing conduct of freely choosing subjects, i.e. youth work practitioners. However, we are concerned that the evidence industry which promotes their deployment in the social policy and practice fields does not comprehensively engage with thorny questions of value conflicts, political economy, power, freedom or democracy that these technologies engender.

During Ireland's period of austerity, and coinciding with the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs [2011], policy making in youth work intensified. In keeping with a governmentality perspective, the following sections open up this expanding policy domain to interrogation. As we look more closely at how the above developments are shaping and taking shape in Ireland, we do not want to mis-represent the relevant policy discourses and documents as suddenly, uniquely or coherently neoliberal. Nor do we want to exaggerate their 'force and scope' (Youdell and McGimpsey, 2015: 116). Rather, we wish to use youth work policy as the terrain for analysing (and critiquing) how neoliberalised governmentalities have become more familiar and more compelling over time. A governmentality lens allows us to identify some of the ways through which recent policy discourses, and allied processes and practices of subjectification, seek to conduct young people towards desired behaviours and ways of being, *and crucially*, how they simultaneously seek to re-position and discipline the services and workers that are engaging with young people.

Youth Work Policy-Making in Ireland: Setting the Scene

[7] On September 20, 2016 Youth Work Ireland in conjunction with the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs hosted a youth work symposium on generating evidence from practice. Also in 2016, the NYCI launched its '8 Steps to inclusive Youth Work' toolkit for organisations. In publicising the resource, organisations were assured that it would help them to report within the NQSF, to write their continuous improvement pans and to develop a logic model towards realising the outcomes of the National Youth Strategy.

Prior to the 1960s the voluntary youth work sector (and its practice) was largely ignored by the state to meet the needs of young people as it saw fit, albeit with limited financial resources. By the 1990s youth work was increasingly aligned with governmental objectives, as evidenced by state funding arrangements which bifurcated youth work practice provision into universal and special projects, as outlined in the beginning of this paper. It is this alignment, consolidated and advanced from the 2000s onwards, which as we argue, bears significant hallmarks of neoliberal processes of governmentality at work. For example, it was not until the introduction of the Youth Work Act 2001 (which provided for the creation of an assessor of youth work post and the appointment of statutory youth work officers at regional level) and the introduction of the National Quality Standards Framework in 2011, that the state had at its disposal the required infrastructure to assess the value of youth work and to propagate outcomes driven evidence based youth work.

The Youth Work Act of 2001 laid out the functions and responsibilities of key policy actors with respect to the resourcing, oversight and delivery of youth work in Ireland. Significantly those actors would come from both the state and non-state sectors, and include; the relevant government Minister; Vocational Educational Committees (later reconstituted as Education and Training Boards/ ETBs) responsible for co-ordinating and assisting local provision; a specially established National Youth Work Advisory Committee, the membership of which comprised a mix of Government appointees and nominees from the voluntary youth sector; and the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI)[8], which was designated as *the* Prescribed National Representative Youth Work Organisation (Government of Ireland, 2001).

Such developments reflected and accentuated the focus on 'partnership' that had become dominant within the Irish policy making sphere from the 1990s onwards. 'Partnership' was simultaneously a discourse and practice, serving as means and end for achieving consensus among diverse interest groups: a range of consultative processes and forums, operating at local and national levels, were created to respond to issues such as drug misuse, homelessness, unemployment and social exclusion. The National Youth Council of Ireland sought and secured Social Partner status in 1996 when it became a constituent member of the newly established Community and Voluntary Pillar that, along with the pre-existing Trade Union, Farming and Business/Employer Pillars, negotiated successive national agreements. While

[8] The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI identifies itself as a 'membership-led umbrella organisation that represents and supports the interests of voluntary youth organisations' (NYCI, n.d.: http://www.youth.ie/about_nyci)

there has been much debate about the inclusivity of social partnership or the extent to which it effaced hierarchy and power relations (Larragy, 2014; McMahon, 2009), and even though the partnership model became a casualty of Ireland's economic collapse, it should be acknowledged that policy making processes and policy content in fields such as youth work have not been coercively imposed or unilaterally determined by the state. Indeed, as McMahon (2009; 112) has commented, key voices within the voluntary youth sector actively pursued greater 'state intervention in youth work', the ultimate objective being 'to establish a legal and statutory footing for youth work provision', thus gaining a status commensurate with that of comparable social services. The achievement of externally sanctioned recognition, legitimacy and secure resources were the sector's anticipated gains, as it welcomed the state's growing interest in and influence over youth work. A range of individual, business, academic and organisational actors from the youth work landscape positioned themselves in the consensual spaces created by Government in order to shape policy priorities and transmit them into the heretofore more autonomous domains of practice.

Accordingly, extensive consultations and engagement with key stakeholders have characterised the processes of development and implementation of the policies featured in this paper. For example, the National Quality Standards Framework, which is discussed in the following section, saw the creation of a working group and an implementation group comprised of central and intermediate state agents (Government Department Officials, youth officers employed by statutory organisations) as well as academics and personnel from youth organisations. A number of youth organisations contributed to the Framework's pilot phase. Similarly the National Youth Strategy was developed out of a collaborative endeavour that involved a wide range of individuals, business and civil society stakeholders, including young people. As Pyykkönen (2015; 24) explains, 'an important part of the recent development of the governmentalization of the state is the global trend where CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) and private actors become partners of administration and service production, and partially submit their actions to the control of public administration, market rules, and legislations. Similarly, we argue that the creation a multi-actor and plurivocal policy sphere does not diminish the operation or reach of government in Irish youth work, but rather that civil society organisation participation within that policy sphere ensures the reconstitution and more widespread embedding of governmental rationalities and practices.

Applying a Governmentality Approach to the Recent Policy Making Infrastructure

National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (NQSF)

Prepared in 2010 and introduced in 2011, the National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (OMCYA, 2010) was developed by the then Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, predecessor to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. In its aftermath, participation in this quality assurance process became a condition for receipt of DCYA funding for all youth work services and programmes. The Framework sought to establish the standards that would determine 'quality youth work' practice, provide 'an evidence base' for youth work, enable 'whole-organisational assessment' and ensure effective use of state funding within the sector (OMCYA, 2010: 2). From the outset, it was clear that the Framework emerged out of a perceived need for youth work both to prove – through the normalisation of common discourses about what youth work is - *and* improve itself - through the on-going and cost-effective development of practice to respond to young people's developmental needs. Employing a governmentality analytic enables us to appreciate how the Framework and its accompanying rationalities and techniques served to make youth work more knowable and more governable. This was to be accomplished through the standardisation of practice, the promotion of a shared lexis for talking about practice and the obligation put on services to prove their worth in terms of defined outcomes (see OMCYA, 2010: 5-17). A panoply of resources were developed to support implementation of the Framework and a Task Group was appointed to provide training and supports to effect its roll-out. The Framework required organisations to show evidence of their outcomes-directed planning and to gather data that would demonstrate outcome attainment (OMCYA, 2010). The National Youth Council of Ireland in co-operation with Youthnet (a strategic network of voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland) convened a conference in 2011 entitled 'How Do We Know its Working?' which provided an opportunity for organisations and youth workers across the island of Ireland to become much better acquainted with the selected toolkits for impact measurement. Consequently, we identify the introduction of the NQSF, following the Youth Work Act 2001, as the next most important step towards making the discourses of outcomes and evidence central to Irish youth work policy and practice.

Youth Work: A Systematic Map of the Research Literature

To compile a systematic map of studies of youth work, research was commissioned by the CES on behalf of the DCYA and 'outsourced' to the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre in London in 2013. The starting point for the subsequent report was an acknowledgement that the literature offering 'high-end' research evidence about youth work impacts is very limited, due to the lack of control groups in studies of youth work activities,

and that most of what is available focuses on youth work in the USA (Dickson, et. al., 2013: 46). Furthermore, the search for relevant research was limited to English language databases and studies. So, while its authors were very candid about the significant scientific limitations of the map produced – e.g. the review was not presented as a systematic review, such as typically benchmarks evidence based policy making in medicine - and they describe it instead as 'a systematic map of research evidence', they nonetheless claim it is 'a tool for policy-makers, practitioners and academics interested in interrogating and developing the evidence base further' (Dickson, et. al., 2013: 6).

Responses to the map were mixed. Some viewed it as 'a resource that has the potential to positively improve the content, the process and the evaluation of youth work practice' (Ryan Culleton, 2013: 22) while others questioned 'the un-youth work like' spaces - 'golf course, farm, school, clinic, university and wilderness camp!' - featured in some of the studies identified as providing 'evidence' of good practice (McVeigh, 2013: 23). Indeed the relevance of what were predominantly US studies as comparators for Ireland's distinctively different policy and practice context was also queried (McVeigh, 2013; Ryan Culleton, 2013). Given that the youth sector was then experiencing significant budget cuts, the lack of analysis within the map of the contingent relationship between funding and outcomes, generated some additional commentary. For example, Hayes (2013: 24) highlighted how a preponderance of studies featured in the map constructed youth work as primarily relating to 'personal and social development', as opposed to 'social change', and he wondered how that classification might be 'influenced' by 'where funding is allocated'. For us, this raises important questions about the potentially self-reproducing character of the policy/evidence relationship, whereby the discipline of funding arrangements orients youth work towards particular ends, which then serve as a template and justification for the further use of state funds. Consequently, such research potentially delimits the 'field of visibility' (Dean, 2010: 41) for the government of Irish youth work, because it 'illuminates and defines certain' practices as legitimate or valid while through its 'shadows and darkness it obscures others'.

The Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (VFMPR)

In 2012, the DCYA subjected a selection of youth programmes to the Department's first value for money and policy review (VFMPR), a selection justified with reference to the requirements of the Public Spending Code and by those programmes' receipt of comparatively higher levels of state expenditure (DCYA, 2014: 16). The VFMPR was positioned as part of the DCYA's agenda to 'rationalise, reform and improve programmes' (2014: 16) and its steering committee

was comprised of persons whose expertise lay in finance, economic evaluation, auditing, and governance. Even prior to the VFMPR and in the context of austerity's roll-out, the National Youth Council of Ireland commissioned independent economic consultancy INDECON to conduct an assessment of the economic value of youth work in Irish society. Published in 2012, the report (Indecon, 2012) concluded that every euro Government invested in youth work ultimately saved €2.22. Senator Jillian van Turnhout, speaking at its launch, noted that the exercise provided the first 'hard evidence' that youth work was 'value for money' (NYCI, 2012). Arguably, the dominance of economistic rationalities and quantitative measures of value propels youth organisations into cycles of 'defensive instrumentalism' (Belfiore, 2012), whereby they too deploy similar rationalities and discourses to legitimise their work and to obviate external reviews, which can prove burdensome and have little resonance with youth work practice.

The text of the VFMPR (DYCA, 2014: 18) explicitly focuses on specific 'programmes… and not the effectiveness and efficiency of "youth work", which is essentially a professional/policy consideration': the rationale behind this distinction being that a programmatic as opposed to professional focus 'permits examination of efficiencies and effectiveness in securing objectives *irrespective of the particular philosophical, practice and professional make-up of any one organisation*' (DYCA, 2014: 18, emphasis added). We contend that this emphasis on programmes facilitates the channelling of funding into the specialist 'problem solving' or 'liquid' engagements designed to produce quick results (Batsleer, 2010). For example, while austerity starved generic youth work services of important resources, an additional €2.8million extended youth justice/crime reduction work into 10 new geographical areas. Additionally, the bifurcation of mainstream and special/targeted provision and the associated privileging of funding for 'programmes' within the targeted provision framework expedite the streamlining and comparison of outcomes, particularly when the prescribed grounds for comparison are unencumbered by the political and ethical baggage of youth organisations themselves. In keeping with UK developments (McGimpsey, 2017), Governments' preference for 'programmes for young people' rather than a more expansively understood youth work practice, is becoming ever more discernible in Ireland.

The VFMPR's concern with specific programmes also permits consideration as to whether alternative market or societal actors, i.e. other than voluntary youth organisations, can deliver what Davies (2015: 96) dubs 'cherry picked' or 'derooted' practice. It opens up the possibility that the DYCA might reposition itself as purchaser in the market of 'off the peg' programmes for young people (DYCA, 2014: 122). Although ruled out in the short term, this

option is retained for longer term consideration if the intermediate statutory governance structures (Education and Training Boards - ETBs) with responsibility for youth services are perceived to be underperforming (DCYA, 2014: 124). Indeed VFMPR outlines significant changes to how ETB Youth Officers, as mediating actors, might enact their obligations to the DYCA. As 'local effort is aligned with policy objectives and programme outcomes are set centrally', Youth Officers must become increasingly vigilant in terms of their 'sign-off responsibilities' and hierarchy is accentuated as 'the relationship between the DCYA and ETB Youth Officer' becomes one of 'principal and agent', while the youth officer's role shifts from '*development* to implementing DCYA policy' (DCYA, 2014: 124, emphasis in original). The threat of future outsourcing functions as a disciplinary tool to ensure compliance, upwards accountability and the seamless delivery of targets.

The document makes frequent allusions to positive outcomes for young people but it is clear that those outcomes must reflect and be aligned with the DYCA's own strategic priorities. There is a consequent distancing, diminishing and essentialising of young people, who are constructed as objects of intervention or persons with problems requiring resolution. The VFMPR notes how the 'needs domains covered by the schemes are wide, ranging from preventing drugs misuse to reducing anti-social behaviour to improving uptake of training and employment opportunities' (DCYA, 2014: 33). But clearly, this all too predictable reckoning of what young people need is remarkable for its narrowness rather than its breadth. There is scant recognition that young people may participate in youth work to form positive relationships with adults who respect them and relate to them as persons of equal standing, rather it is assumed that young people participate in youth work so that their attitudes, behaviours and ways of being can be redirected towards more productive ends. If 'soft outcomes' such as relationship building do emerge, they are ultimately to be seen in instrumental terms, whereby young people and workers can '"co-produce" outcomes that can improve the chances of … higher level impacts occurring' (DCYA, 2014: 106). Resistance to programme interventions is not to be accommodated as an act of self-determination by young people, but to be addressed and overcome by the administration of psychological treatments, i.e. motivational interviewing (DCYA, 2014: 162). Resistant young people are thus constructed as unable 'to exercise their own autonomy or act in their own best interests' (Dean, 2002: 47) and in line with neoliberal governmentalities, youth workers are tasked with deploying techniques of the self that incite young people to work on themselves and look for 'solutions' within themselves rather than within their wider socio-economic or political contexts. Notably, the first significant increase in state funding post-austerity, a €5.5million increase to the overall

budget for youth services in 2017, came with the condition that services use the additional resources to support early school leavers and other groups of young people identified as disadvantaged to access employment (DCYA, n.d.). We thus see an accelerating policy trend that requires youth workers to engage in 'the conduct of conduct' (Murray Li, 2007: 275) while making funding contingent on solving young people's 'problems'.

The 'science' underpinning the VFMPR is undoubtedly positivist, signalling a shift away from what might be considered a 'softer' evidence informed approach towards a more hardwired evidence based one. The review acknowledges that it was from the outset hampered by 'poor and unreliable data' because randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of programmatic interventions have not been conducted and, so, sufficient amounts of the required data were not gathered in the required way to provide an evidence base to demonstrate programme effectiveness (DCYA, 2014: 4). The triangulation of the kinds of data drawn on for the review is presented as second rate and summarily dismissed as not providing adequate evidence to prove positive impact. Overall, the VFMPR concludes that too many factors hampered the reviewers' determination as to whether or not programmes offered value for money and that this is unsatisfactory given the significant investment (€128 million) in the programmes over the period of examination (DCYA, 2014: 11). Comparable reviews of youth work in other countries have reached similar conclusions (Fouché et. al., 2010; MacKie and McGinley, 2012). Interestingly, the VFMPR problematises high levels of local discretion, the lack of uniform codification, weaknesses in data quality and problems with programme governance structures (DCYA, 2014: 23) as key factors contributing to the evidence shortfall. Therefore, it proposes additional limits on the discretion to be exercised by programme implementers, greater standardisation in programme data gathering techniques and an intensification of top-down, centralised governance of programmes.

The VFMPR provides the first real indicator that youth work is regarded as having come of age in an evidence based climate where it should now be expected to prove rather than merely improve its practice into the future. Aside from privileging centralisation, control and standardisation, the review elicits other troubling political questions. It fails to fully acknowledge that the financial outlay on the specified youth programmes is modest relative to other public spending and that those monies are primarily spent on work with young people already disadvantaged by structural inequalities. The review does note that in the three years covered, funding provided for youth work programmes consistently fell, dropping by 16% between 2010 and 2012 (DCYA, 2014: 20), with staff salaries decreasing and participant numbers increasing simultaneously. It seems extraordinary, then, that there are no correlations made between what can/should be expected in terms of outputs and outcomes in a context of severe under-

resourcing. Indeed, as Dunne et al. (2014) observe, across EU member states there has been an increased demand for youth work, along with a greater emphasis on measurable outcomes, while at the very same time there has been a decline in upfront finance and support for more traditional forms of youth work, presumably the very forms of youth work that generated the demand in the first instance. In an article with the instructive title, 'There's no getting away from evidence in the youth work field', project specialist with the CES, John Bamber (2013) argues that it is precisely because youth work attracts so little financial support relative to other spending areas, like education, health and welfare, that the impacts of resources must be maximised. In Ireland's climate of evidence gathering and performance monitoring, it appears that those who are comparatively disadvantaged in terms of resources must both do more and demonstrate more if they are to be entrusted with future public subsidy.

Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF) and the National Youth Strategy (NYS)

The DYCA's wholehearted embrace of the practices and discourses of evidence and outcomes is further illustrated by the content of its own policy framework (2014-2020). Entitled 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures', it sets out five key national outcomes to be achieved in the period 2014 to 2020 for children and young people up to the age of 24 years, and which will in turn 'transform the effectiveness of existing policies, services and resources' (DCYA, 2014a: 7). Continuing the VFMR's concern with the need to prove rather than improve performance, it stridently asserts that 'Government investment in children will be more outcomes-driven and informed by national and international evidence on the effectiveness of expenditure', and that 'Resource allocation within services will be based on evidence of both need and effectiveness, and services that are not working will be decommissioned' (DCYA, 2014a: xv). A set of indicators aligned to the five outcomes is being developed by the DCYA in conjunction with the CES, for the purpose of tracking their progress (DCYA, 2016). Thus, as the BOBF policy framework makes clear, and as reiterated in the DCYA's 'Statement of Strategy 2016 -2019', the new performativity techniques that are shaping the government of youth work, will generate real material consequences for youth projects and workers (DCYA, n.d.).

The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 is directly informed by 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures'. It is not a strategy for youth work per se, rather it incorporates youth work into a wider governmental strategy for young people in Ireland. National strategies provide a mechanism for countries to align youth policies with European and international standards (Denstad, 2009). Developed out of the collaborative process that was referenced earlier and led

by project team of six, including both a CES project specialist and graduate intern, the Irish strategy is 'evidence informed and outcomes focused' (DCYA, 2015: 2)[9]. The Strategy's objectives relate directly to BOBF's five national outcomes areas and its approach is cross-sectoral in that all interests/stakeholders are expected to work together in a co-ordinated way to achieve these outcomes. Indeed in 2014, the Children's Services Committees, drivers of local statutory and voluntary interagency work in the provision of services to children and families, were reconstituted as Children and Young People's Services Committees with a remit to co-ordinate all local statutory and voluntary services geared towards positive outcomes for those ranging from infancy up to 24 years of age; subsuming youth work in the process. Such 'multi-professional service architectures' (Bradford and Cullen, 2014, 102), along with a wider climate of policy submissiveness, further obscure value-led, relational youth work practice. Government invokes a variety of strategies for 'the instrumentalization of personal allegiances and active responsibilities' (Rose, 1996: 332). In 2015 the National Youth Council of Ireland's annual conference, 'Playing our Part', focused on how the youth sector would contribute to the Strategy. Promoting the conference, the NYCI (2015) urged youth work organisations to consider 'What can you contribute to its [the Strategy's] implementation and how can you drive it forward?'. This deployment of language and action verbs was revealing in terms of the Council's productive use of its own power and status to further legitimise the Strategy and to galvanise support for it among member organisations. The Strategy was constructed as unproblematic[10] for NYCI members, who were exhorted to make their practice amenable to the achievement of a set of desired outcomes (NYCI, 2015a).

The impacts of austerity, along with the policy developments explored above, undoubtedly underline the youth sector's dependency on (and vulnerability to reversals in) state funding. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has fuelled a growing interest in 'alternative' sources of finance. For example, the NYCI's annual conference 2016, 'Talking Cents', looked at how the sector might secure private and philanthropic investment in addition to state funding and it launched the 'Youth Work Changes Lives' fundraising campaign. Our governmentality perspective, however, suggests that 'alternative' funding may bring new freedoms *and* new restrictions. It calls for critical attention to the range of actors, both state and non-state, who may seek to govern youth work practice into the future. Furthermore, we are concerned that

[9] In its foreword the incumbent Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, James Reilly, contended that 'Improving outcomes for young people is everyone's business' (DCYA, 2015: v).
[10] Rather, the NYCI Director lamented that the strategy was 'not as far reaching or as ambitious' as the Council would like (NYCI, 2015a).

a turn to philanthropy further reinforces a neo-liberalised conception of the state; as smaller but more regulatory, as rolled-back but more disciplinary, as the arbiter but not the target of practice.

Concluding Discussion

By focusing on a policy infrastructure that both claims to provide evidence about and that seeks to conduct youth work in Ireland, this paper draws particular attention to the ways by which the state and influential policy partners potentially direct, contain, measure, judge and (in)validate practice outcomes. With governmentality approaches, there is a risk that power becomes conceptualised as such a totalising or inescapable phenomenon that all hope of resistance is precluded (Death, 2010), but Foucault (2009: 200-202) did in fact introduce the concept of 'counter-conduct' to acknowledge and capture instances of 'resistance, refusal or revolt' that work against attempts to conduct our conduct. As Murray Li (2007, 280) remarks, while 'the will to govern is expansive, there is nothing determinate about the outcomes'. Targeted individuals, be they young people or youth workers, may ignore, oppose or re-negotiate the identities they are expected to adopt and they may, in their everyday encounters in practice settings, conduct themselves in ways that challenge or upend neoliberal governmentalities. Therefore, resistances to the operations of governmental power must be understood as fluid, situationally specific and often unpredictable. While we do not pretend that resistance is easy or cost-neutral for those expressing it, in a world where we are continually exhorted to accept that 'there is no alternative', we want to emphasise that alternative ways of being are possible *and* necessary.

As we have acknowledged, because policy discourses provide the key empirical evidence for governmentality theorists, there may be an associated lack of attention to if, how, and to what degree governmental intentions are realized on the ground. Consequently, writers such as Kim Mckee (2009, p. 476) propose a reconfigured 'realist' governmentality approach to explore how governmental effects play out in practice. Others have undertaken ethnographic studies that show how efforts to govern are best conceptualized as partial and shifting (Brady, 2014; Murray Li, 2007, 2007a), and there are calls for more micro-level research to explore organizations' aspirations and activities for critical alternatives (Milbourne and Cushman, 2015). Irish research has shown that even within the punitive contexts of austerity or contingent funding, total compliance with policies and procedures cannot be guaranteed at local level. Both Bowden's (2006) and Swirak's (2013) research on Garda Youth Diversion Projects

(GYDPs) in Ireland reveal organizations' and workers' differentiated levels and types of acquiescence or resistance to the policy discourses
governing these projects and to prescribed ways of working with young people.

We are concerned that open-ended and deliberative conceptions of youth work are endangered by the programmatic and evidence-based turn in policy making; that youthwork policy's responsiveness to young people's own experiences or worldviews will be sidelined in the interests of economizing and disciplining their conduct. For example, Bowden (2006) found evidence in one of his two case studies that the youth work being practiced had hybridized and adapted to a more punitive social order, while Swirak was unequivocal that her research pointed to a discernible model of' 'youth justice work' as distinct from youth work, having hold in this practice field from 2009 onwards (Swirak, 2013).

In contrast to youth 'justice' work, we take inspiration from practice such as that developed by Rialto Youth Project in Dublin. Drawing on a vibrant tradition of community arts, its imitative *Policing Dialogues* involved a collaboration between young people and artist Fiona Whelan in the *What's the Story? Collective*. Over a three year period, the Collective engaged in processes of reflection, critique and analysis that contributed to a multi-media interrogation of their everyday experiences of oppressive power, culminating in a residency in Dublin's LAB Arts Space in 2010 (What's the Story? Collective, n.d.). One element of the process was an encounter that took place in the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2009, at an event called *The Day in Question*. Newly recruited Gardaí (police) were invited to read aloud from - *and thus really listen to* - young people's anonymised narrative accounts of arbitrary police power. In the words of artist Fiona Whelan (Whelan and Ryan, 2016; n.p.), 'Inviting those holding state power into a relational space where they would listen to young people was unique, particularly when compared to existing state-sponsored programs between young people and Gardaí, which are largely based on the assumption that young people from so-called "disadvantaged" areas harbor the potential to become future criminals and deviants'. While it is not possible to do justice in this article to the analytical depth and creative scope of *Policing Dialogues*, we want to acknowledge it as *youth work;* as a form of practice that sought to invert, destabilise and transcend dominant expressions of governmental power and their problematisations of young people's conduct.

Notwithstanding our recognition of the dialectical relationship between power and resistance, we argue that state funded youth work in Ireland is undergoing depreciation, distortion and a neoliberal re-imagining. A governmentality lens has been employed to highlight the enormous challenges involved in resisting the expansive power of evidence

based/informed youth work. But as Bronwyn Davies (ii, 2005) contends, the first step in resisting is to appreciate the constitutive power of that which is being resisted. Based on our review of Irish policy, we cannot trust that youth work is understood and promoted as a universal, generic and progressive practice. Instead we must critically assess who is engaged in what kinds of youth work for the realisation of what particular governmental ambitions and with what material effects.

Given the thrust of governmental rationalities and evidence in Ireland, if youth work is to be accorded or to claim the status of a 'free practice', such as is sought by MacKie and McGinley (2012: 7), then a deliberate shift away from its current operating framework is essential. If this seems too scary a prospect, we should at least affirm practice that occurs outside or in spite of the dominant outcomes framework, practice that may inspire re-imaginings of youth work for a post-neoliberal, post-evidence based practice world. Accordingly, we must continuously resist what Bronwyn Davies (ii, 2005: 6) calls the 'relanguaging' of what youth work and research were, are and should be. These of us in higher education might engage with a 'policy relevant counter-science' (Lather, 2004: 285) that challenges the workings and implications of narrow scientism and associated technocracies of research, intervention, surveillance and audit. We can equip ourselves and our students with a 'doubled gaze' (Davies[ii], 2005; 13) that recognises youth work is a field of possibilities that is infinitely wider in scope than that being circumscribed through the current exercise of power and knowledge.

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