Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Scholarship Programme

Note No. 22 Research Briefing

A post-structuralist analysis of Irish youth crime prevention policy, with a specific focus on Garda Youth Diversion Projects

1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2013) by Katharina Swirak of the School of Applied Social Studies at University College, Cork, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.*

2. What is the study's purpose?

Since their beginnings in the early 1990s, Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) have gained an increasingly important role and now constitute a central feature of Irish youth justice provision. Managed by the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS) and implemented by the Gardaí and a variety of youth work organisations, as well as independent community organisations, GYDPs are located at the crossroads of welfarist (based on principles of rehabilitation) and corporatist (based on principles of managerialism) approaches to youth justice, combining diversionary and preventative aspects in their work. To date, these projects have been subjected to relatively little systematic research examination and analysis.

To address this gap, this study located the analysis of GYDP policy and practice within a post-structuralist theoretical framework, which seeks to interrogate what are often deemed accepted truths, and deployed discourse analysis primarily based on the work of Michel Foucault. In particular, the thesis traced the discursive shifts and the implications for practice that are occurring in the context of current reforms, as the projects move away from a youth work orientation towards a youth justice orientation, supporting the Garda Youth Diversion Programme. The study sought:

- to go beyond the 'what works' approach to social policy analysis and to identify the discourses underlying official youth crime prevention and GYDP policy;
- to identify how official and alternative discourses relating to youth crime prevention and young people and their offending behaviour were drawn upon, negotiated, rejected or re-contextualised by project workers and Juvenile Liaison Officers.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings and conclusions of the study. The full report is available from the Library, University College, Cork.

3. How was the study undertaken?

The corpus of data collected for this study consisted of two elements. The first element comprised two policy archives of contemporary official youth crime prevention policy (covering the period 2003-2011) and GYDP policy respectively. The second element consisted of 28 semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with 22 project workers and 8 Juvenile Liaison Officers (JLOs) across 12 project sites.

* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

GYDPs were selected according to a systematic set of criteria, such as location (urban, rural, suburban), management organisation and projects' participation in the ongoing reform process led by the IYJS. Interview questions were designed with the overall research objectives in mind and the view to identify how project workers and JLOs engaged with dominant discursive constructions identified in official policy and project discourse. Interviews were anonymous and transcribed in detail. Both policy texts and interview transcripts were analysed rigorously through several stages of coding and the application of a systematic analytical framework based on the principles of genealogical discourse analysis.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 Dominant discourses in official youth crime prevention and GYDP policy: Advanced liberal rationalities

The study has shown systematically how contemporary youth crime prevention policy, and GYDP policy more specifically, reflects what can be described as 'advanced liberal rationalities', characterised by several dominant discourses. These include:

- **The centralisation of leadership and shifting responsibility to partners:** Improved systems of coordination are emphasized as the overriding solution to the youth crime problem. Projects and project workers are incorporated into a centrally steered youth crime prevention agenda by addressing their self-governing capacities and keeping a close check on how and if these are being fulfilled.
- **Actuarialism:** An actuarialist discourse, characterised by increased monitoring, reporting and quantification of outcomes, emphasizes the imperatives of evidence-based interventions, effectiveness and value-for-money.
- **Individualisation:** Youth crime prevention is conceived largely as an individual problem of young people and their families. As a consequence, interventions mainly focus on behaviourist types of interventions to achieve individual change of the young person and their families, often evading issues related to failures of other social systems and supports, and social exclusion.

4.2 From Youth Work to Youth Justice Work: Successful reform and resistance

The study has analysed how several governance tools (such as reporting, auditing, training and piloting) have been deployed successfully by the IYJS with the outcome of repositioning the GYDPs – at least at official level – as support tools to the Garda Youth Diversion Programme. The study has shown how the reform process aligned project workers with the centrally decided and steered project agenda, but also addressed concerns around lack of leadership and insecurity with regards to project workers' roles in a relatively fluid and undefined project landscape. The study has further shown how practices typically associated with more controlling professional groups seemed to be further legitimised by the reform process.

However, the analysis of engagement of project workers and JLOs with these major reforms resulted in a more complex picture on the variety of effects achieved by these changes:

- In some instances, the discourses promoted by the reform process were entirely successful across the board. It was striking, for example, to see how the discourse of economic rationality and accountability promoted in official policy discourse was reproduced by a wide range of project workers and JLOs. Here, it was evident how influential and uncontested these concepts have become.
- Some project workers and JLOs were highly supportive of the reforms and even positioned themselves as champions of the ongoing changes, explaining and defending the introduction of reforms. This was mostly the case for those who had participated in the first phase of the piloting process, as well as some others who felt that the piloting process acknowledged their input and created a form of partnership between them and the IYJS.
- On the other hand, different avenues of resistance to the ongoing reform process were espoused by several project workers. Some adopted a rather pragmatic approach to dealing with the required changes, referring to the threat of discontinued funding. They utilised the strategy of official expression of agreement with the introduced changes, while maintaining room for continuing with project work as before. Others

were more openly critical of the ongoing changes and were struggling to adhere to some of their work practices which they considered central to youth work (e.g. building long-term relationships with young people). They expressed resistance through processes of 'de-authorising' the IYJS and the carving out of space for what they thought was central to their work with young people.

4.3 Youth Work practice in GYDP settings: A patchwork of practices

- The positive and unique contribution of youth work in the context of the GYDPs was highlighted by most project workers and JLOs. However, a closer analysis revealed certain contradictions. Thus, while certain practices were, for example, described as 'youth work', they were strongly reminiscent of policing roles and often contained language that described the GYDPs as locations of containment of young people.
- It was observable that despite most projects being characterised by a strong youth work ethos, several of what are often considered core youth work principles were challenged in many GYDP settings, such as:
  - young people's voluntary participation, although officially upheld, was sometimes compromised through close supervision and reports to JLOs and even the Courts;
  - young people's active participation in GYDPs was in many cases limited to choosing activities;
  - group work and critical social education were mostly used as an avenue to achieve individual behavioural change. Personal development with individual young people constituted the favoured sort of intervention.
- A striking finding was that those workers who throughout associated themselves strongly with a youth work tradition were critically reflective of many of these changes, while those with other backgrounds (e.g. social care) were less so.
- The study traced the contours of what could be described as 'youth justice work' emerging in the context of the GYDPs. These included an increasing limitation to working exclusively with those young people already in contact with the law; a strong focus on challenging behaviour through individual work with young people; and more involvement of families than in more generic youth work type of interventions. However, it also emerged that in many instances the boundaries between 'youth justice work' and more progressive ways of working with young people were not clear cut and combined, despite contradictions, in daily project practice.

4.4 Constructions of young people and their offending behaviours

The systematic analysis of the textual archives has shown how official youth crime prevention and GYDP policy discourse prefer several dominant constructions of young people and their offending behaviour:

- Young people were relegated to the margins in the process of important pieces of policy formulation, particularly in relation to the GYDPs.
- Young people were constructed as passive service recipients, to be managed.
- Young people were made known through a limited range of risk factors and behavioural models and categorisations. These served to position the promoted knowledge as 'objective' and 'neutral', but the analysis has shown how this resulted in several effects, such as the cutting adrift of young people's offending behaviour from its broader societal contexts and the definition and measurement of the 'troubled' or 'troublesome' young person against the 'ideal' young person in a context where middle-class norms tend to be promoted over many young people's lived realities.

The analysis of project workers' and JLOs' constructions of young people resulted in the following findings:

- Both project workers and JLOs across the board were passionate about their work with young people and genuinely interested in supporting them in a wide variety of ways.
- Interview participants repeatedly drew on different variations of individualising descriptions of young people. These were recognisable as longstanding characterisations of young people promoted both in popular as well as academic discourse, including different combinations of psychological, developmental and bio-medical explanations of behaviour.
- Despite many variations and nuances, the commonality shared between all these confident

characterisations resulted in the highlighting of individual responsibility of young people and the simultaneous exclusion of broader social, economic and cultural constraints and opportunities as factors relevant to young people's offending behaviour. In their combination, the descriptions of young people's families were measured implicitly against middle-class ideals on a variety of issues, including education, parenting and family life more generally.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study has reached the following overall conclusions:

1. **The study has traced and analysed the emergence of 'youth justice work' in the Irish context and has put into sharp relief the unresolved and, in the context of the GYDPs, hidden debate on the involvement of the youth work sector in a youth crime prevention initiative such as the GYDPs.**

   The study confirms empirically some of the challenges thrown up by the participation of the youth work sector in youth crime prevention. For example, the element of relationship-building with young people is increasingly challenged as shorter lengths of project participation are prescribed. However, the study has also shown that this debate does not allow simplistic conclusions. While it was noticeable that project workers with a stronger youth work identity were more critical on some issues, this was not uniformly so. Similarly, the study showed that youth work in itself is conceptualised in a variety of ways, which often allowed for an easy accommodation of the youth crime prevention agenda. For example, in several instances, project workers confirmed their belief in the voluntary participation of young people and yet did not find it problematic that their participation in the projects was an element of their supervision agreement made under the Garda Youth Diversion Programme. This process has significant implications for young people's rights, which are increasingly vocalised in relation to the Diversion Programme, but have so far entirely escaped any significant attention in the context of the GYDPs.

2. **The analysis has systematically traced and made visible what has been described as 'paternalistic' cultural attitudes towards children and young people in Irish society, and as stigmatisation of young people in conflict with the law.**

   Young people and their offending behaviour are conceptualised both in youth crime prevention and GYDP policy, as well as in project practice, through a variety of individualising and problematising discourses, drawing heavily on the 'youth at risk' framework. Internationally, an increasingly large body of scholarly research is demonstrating how the 'at risk' framework (as well as several of its modifications, such as the 'resilience' framework) ultimately de-contextualises young people's lived experiences and excludes the broader social, economic and political circumstances that shape young people's lives.

   This study has demonstrated how, in the Irish context, these discursive constructions favour particularly middle-class norms and thus create very specific understandings of the 'ideal' young person or the 'ideal' family, while simultaneously excluding others. In addition, this study has shown how this is complemented with a discourse that defines young people's citizenship rather narrowly in terms of education and employment. While official youth justice policy increasingly involves a 'children's rights' discourse, this analysis has shown how young people's participation in youth justice policy and GYDP practice is non-existent or tokenistic. The study has established how young people's active participation and citizenship are constructed in limited terms. It has identified how age-old 'confident characterisations', coupled with continuous references to socio-cultural deficiencies of young people and their families, construct the young person involved in the GYDPs and their families as deficient 'others'.

3. **The study has shown how values essentially reflective of a neo-liberal market economy, such as effectiveness and evidence-based work with young people, are at the core of contemporary youth crime prevention policy as well as GYDP policy.**

The study has shown how actuarialist discourses of effectiveness, value-for-money and evidence-based interventions penetrate both official and practice discourses. The implications are that approaches to working with young people which are not deemed 'measurable' are all too easily sidelined. However, this analysis has called into question the extent to which these discourses were supported by real substance and showed instead how they served the maintenance of promoted truths. For example, the analysis has shown that the ubiquitous term 'effectiveness' evaded explicit definition and how the very assumptions underpinning what has been called 'evidence-based' knowledge were not adhered to in practice. This became obvious when analysing the ways in which 'evidence' was produced and how knowledge was reproduced in what, it is argued based on the findings, are 'pseudo-scientific' ways.

More importantly, the analysis has shown how these actuarialist discourses were utilised to further promote and put beyond question official policy discourse and perpetuate particular understandings of young people and their offending behaviour. Thus, for example, the discussion of the critiques of the risk-factor approach to understanding young people's offending behaviour was ultimately disregarded in favour of an orthodox approach to conceptualising risk factors. The study also showed how many of these actuarialist discourses are promoted not only in official policy discourse, but also reproduced by a wide range of project workers and JLOs. Here, it was evident how influential and uncontested these concepts have become.

6. What are the benefits of the study?

This study was conceptualised at a time when the Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) had just come under the leadership of the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS) and were undergoing significant changes, which this thesis has explored in detail at this important crossroads for the projects. The involvement of youth work organisations in the GYDPs had been built on what was seen as the unique contribution that youth work could make through establishing meaningful relationships with young people and ultimately through these relationships enabling them to consider making the behavioural changes that they too desire. This logic, however, has gradually been altered towards more targeted, interventionist and individualising ways of working with young people. This has involved combining different elements of youth work, practices of social work and technologies rooted in behaviourist psychology. It is hoped that the tracing of these developments, and making explicit some of the challenges in all their complexity, could offer a useful input for discussions on the involvement of the voluntary youth work sector in the GYDPs.

The post-structuralist stance adopted in this thesis showed how powerful policy texts are in terms of opening and closing discursive and practice options, and how discourse and language co-construct social realities. Policy texts are not mere words, but indicative of how society problematises young people and their offending behaviour. It is hoped that this analysis could ultimately contribute to rethinking the ways we construct young people and their offending behaviour, and allow for more creative interventions to be publicly supported based on 'hopeful' constructions of young people. This is not to diminish the value of systematic, accountable and evidence-based thinking and practice with children and young people in general and more specifically in youth crime prevention initiatives. However, maybe it is time to also create space for the emergence of alternative voices at different levels of youth crime prevention policy and practice.

For more information, please contact: **Katharina Swirak**, School of Applied Social Studies, University College, Cork. E-mail: kswirak@gmx.net

Published by Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43 Mespil Road, Dublin 4
Tel: (01) 647 3000; E-mail: dcyaresearch@dcya.gov.ie; Web: www.dcya.ie