A SNAPSHOT IN TIME: STAKEHOLDER'S PERSPECTIVES OF THE MEITHEAL MODEL

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Author Request

This article is an abridged version of a research dissertation, conducted in Cork during spring 2015, as part of a BSW degree at UCC. The author seeks opportunities to undertake similar research in other communities that are using a Meitheal-informed approach; the full research is available on request.

Abstract

The National Service Delivery Framework, a prevention, partnership and family support (PPFS) strategy, accompanied the 2014 launch of the Child and Family Agency, Tusla. As a key component of PPFS, the Meitheal Model aims to support lower priority cases through integrated community services. Despite slow implementation and no official training, some areas have been employing a Meitheal-informed approach since Tusla's launch. This small-scale study offers a contextual snapshot of Meitheal-informed practice through the experiences of those involved; from service user to management level. A literature and policy review is followed by analysis of findings from a series of qualitative interviews. The model's strengths and challenges relate well to comparable model evaluations. While there was overall enthusiasm for this partnership approach, several challenges exist centred around paucity of resources and training. The challenge for schools within Meitheal groupings was an unforeseen finding that could potentially be resolved via specialised training.

Key words: Prevention, Partnership, Family Support, Interagency, Community, Meitheal Model, Tusla.

Introduction

Fergus Finlay (2012) in his foreword to *Community Development in Ireland* asserted: "strong communities are a fail-safe preventative mechanism [in which] we've never invested enough" (p.vi). Only in the last two decades has Irish policy begun speaking in terms of community partnership and integrated services as means to improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families (DoHC, 2000; Commission on the Family, 1998).

With its focus on PPFS, Tusla's National Service Delivery Framework clearly supports this policy trend:

> [T]he implementation of Meitheal, a National Practice Model for all Agencies Working with Children, Young People and their Families...will deliver a standard and consistent approach on how we support and intervene with children and families. (Tusla, 2014, p.2)

Meitheal is an integral part of the new framework, steering child and family services towards a more integrated approach to intervention. This article is based on a small-scale study exploring the experiences of people involved with the Meitheal process. An outline of the Meitheal Model is firstly offered, followed by the rationale for the research and its design. The underlying theories and policy trends, including appraisals of comparable models, are examined, offering insight into why Meitheal was developed and how it could effectively progress. The strengths and challenges of the model are identified through key findings from participant interviews leading to a conclusion with recommendations.

Outline of Meitheal Model

Meitheal is an outcomes-focused, preventative strategy that may be implemented in cases that come below the threshold for social work intervention – Levels 2 and 3 on Tusla's four levels of intervention scale, based on the Hardiker model (Tusla, 2014). A Meitheal intervention may only take place with the parent/carer's consent. Each Meitheal case is Tusla-led but referred back to community agencies through Local Area Pathways (LAPs), "a fundamental link in connecting the range of health and wellbeing services at the frontline" (CFA, 2013a, p.8). Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) will be established, comprising *all* children and family services in a particular area. A lead practitioner from a community agency will be decided upon in each case. The model is underpinned by a holistic, strengths-based approach that works in partnership with families to create a "team around the child" (Tusla, 2014, p.4).

Rationale

Full implementation of Meitheal would see lower priority child welfare cases being referred to community-based services for earlier intervention; this should significantly reduce social workers' caseloads and improve outcomes for children. However, it is normal for systemic changes to elicit some fear of the unknown (Forkan & Landy, 2011). Hence, the rationale for conducting this study was to examine how the model operates in practice, what works well and where improvements may lie i.e. a snapshot capturing its present performance and informing its future development.

Research Design

Initially, a wide-ranging policy and literature review was undertaken to investigate the evidence base underpinning Meitheal, and trace policy trends in relation to comparable approaches. Primary research

entailed identifying a purposive sample of prospective participants, with the help of the Springboard child and family support agency in Cork; in order to encompass a range of Meitheal stakeholders from service user to management level. This resulted in a sample of eight participants divided into four distinct cohorts, broken down as follows:

1. Tusla professionals with Meitheal management/ coordination roles:
    - One Senior Manager (regional) for PPFS;
    - One CFSN Coordinator.

2. Professionals with lead practitioner (LP) roles in Meitheal-informed interventions:
    - Three LPs.

3. Other professional participants of Meitheal-informed interventions
    - One School Principal;
    - One Social Care Worker.

4. Service users subject to Meitheal-informed interventions.
    - One Parent.

To "grasp the subjective meaning of social action" (Bryman, 2012, p.30), an interpretive approach to data collection and analysis was adopted, allowing concepts to emerge from the differing meanings implicit in human experience. The interviews were semi-structured based around interview schedules of between six and nine open-ended questions allowing participants to elaborate on their responses; a qualitative approach to yield more in-depth 'soft' data than quantitative methods (Fuller & Petch, 1995). In order to ensure accuracy, audio recordings of each interview were made with participant permission. The data was thematically analysed, in accordance with Braun & Clarke's (2006) methodology, and salient themes identified. A contextual snapshot of Meitheal-informed practice became evident leading to a discussion and recommendations.

To ensure ethical approval was granted from UCC, the purpose of the research was explained to participants beforehand, in non-jargonistic language. Their consent was obtained with the understanding that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. It was not anticipated that issues of a sensitive nature would arise during interviews; nevertheless, the researcher committed to dealing with this respectfully and sensitively in the event they did. Confidentiality was of utmost importance and the safe storage of all data was guaranteed to preserve the anonymity of participants; audio recordings were deleted six months post completion. With participants' permission, the transcribed data has been retained for its potential benefit to future research on this topic. Due to the small-scale nature of this study, the findings cannot be generalised; however, they are of value in documenting Meitheal's development and contributing to its future implementation.

Theories Underpinning Meitheal

The literature revealed a plethora of evidence supporting the theoretical underpinnings of Meitheal, which is also reflected in policy trends globally, where integrated child and family services are recognised as being more efficient and improving outcomes (McKeown, 2012). According to Chaskin (2006): principles of prevention, early intervention, partnership, a strengths perspective and service provision based on need, are central to the concept of family support. Furthermore, both prevention and early intervention strategies have been evidenced as key factors in avoiding the poor outcomes often associated with crisis interventions (Frost & Parton, 2009; Allen, 2011; Forkan & Landy, 2011). The message from parents, through research, is that when they share equal partnership with professionals and are involved in decision-making about their lives, they are happier to engage well and outcomes improve (McKeown et al., 2001; Forkan & Landy, 2011). An individual's entitlements to independence, security, inclusion, having a voice and equal power are all recognised in the partnership approach (Baldwin & Walker, 2009). Building good relationships is essential for creating partnerships, which, Trevithick maintains, opens up many possibilities with "the trust and understanding...held within the relationship, act[ing] as a vital thread" (2004, p.77). The strengths perspective, argues Saleeby, moves away from pathologising approaches to concentrate on people's strengths and resilience, empowering service users to "have a better quality of life on their terms" (Saleeby, 1997, cited in Howe, 2009, p.103). Healy (2005) suggests this focus on strengths emphasises future possibilities and embraces the significance of community networks. The value of which is captured in Jackson and O'Doherty's description of community as a "unit [ ] of belonging where intangibles such as feelings, attitudes and perceptions connect members in a network of relationships" (2012, p.1).

Interagency working is a key element of Meitheal and similar models. The Children Acts Advisory Board (CAAB) found that good working relationships (implying role clarity, trust and commitment), communication, clarity of purpose and clear protocols for information-sharing enable good interagency practice (CAAB, 2009). Confidentiality issues, inadequate funding, lack of time, long waiting lists for 'key' services and limited family support services were identified as disabling factors (ibid.). In a five-year evaluation of a well-functioning interagency initiative, McKeown (2012) discovered very few improved outcomes. While many agencies and individuals performed well on good practice standards, he found several did not, concluding: "a good inter-agency process can help to correct relationship difficulties between agencies...but it cannot correct the performance of poorly functioning agencies, or weaknesses in national policy management" (*ibid.*, p.198). This indicates how crucial the development of good interagency culture is, and from the highest levels down.

Finally, an ecological perspective is essential to understanding the impacts of children's environments on their welfare. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (DoH, 2000) is a tool flexible enough to assess a diverse range of child and family situations, the proof lying in its widespread application across various cultural and legal contexts (Gray, 2002; DCYA, 2011a). It forms the basis of Meitheal and other comparable family support models (Pithouse et al., 2005; Ward et al., 2002; Robertson, 2014), including the Identification of Need (ION) Initiative in the Donegal/Sligo/Leitrim region (Forkan & Landy, 2011) and the Limerick Assessment of Need System (LANS) (SMCI Associates, 2012); both of which informed the development of Meitheal (CFA, 2013b).

Policy

The influence of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), which Kilkelly argues is "the most important international instrument on the treatment of children" (2012, p.30), was apparent throughout the policies examined, with the child's best interests and right to be heard featuring prominently over the last two decades. This study explored trends internationally and found widespread endorsement of integrated, early intervention practices for the safeguarding of children (Adams, 2009; DCYA, 2011a; Eurochild, 2012; Robertson, 2014).

Ireland shows a similar trend, starting with a profound development in child and family policy throughout the 1990s. Until then, family policy centred on financial support rather than service provision with minimal selective state involvement (Phillips, 2012). In 1992 Ireland ratified the UNCRC, which has increasingly influenced policy towards recognising children's rights (Considine & Dukelow, 2009). The *Child Care Act, 1991* was introduced to provide the legal framework for child welfare and protection, Sect. 3 providing for statutory childcare and family support services (Landy & Canavan, 2010). In 1998 this family support element of the Act was finally realised when the Springboard initiative was launched (Phillips, 2012). Also that year, the *Commission on the Family* described family support as promoting empowerment, family strengths and self-determination, as well as being a potential preventative strategy (*ibid.*).

In 2000, the *National Children's Strategy* (NCS) fostered "a 'whole child' perspective" for the first time ever (DoHC, 2000, p.24) with six "operational principles": child centred; family oriented; equitable; inclusive; action oriented and integrated (*ibid.* p.10). *The National Children's Office* was established in 2001 to oversee the strategy's implementation, and the first Ombudsman for Children was appointed in 2004 (Considine & Dukelow, 2009). The family resource centre programme was given legal provision through the *Family Support Act 2001* and the *Children Act 2001* provided for support measures, such as mentoring, for young people involved with youth justice services. The 2007 *Agenda for Children's Services* offered a framework for applying the NCS principles and in 2011, the objective of the Working Together for

Children initiative was "to secure better developmental outcomes for children through more effective integration of policies and services" (DCYA, 2011b, p.1).

In response to the *Report of the Commission into Child Abuse*, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs' 2009 *Implementation Plan* advocated that community-based family support services best serve children with welfare needs (OMCYA, 2009). Updated in 2011, *Children First* advocates interagency working and information sharing as key factors in ensuring improved outcomes for children (DCYA, 2011c). The *Child and Family Agency Act 2013* "provides for the bringing together of a range of existing services to children and families into one agency" (CFA, 2013c, p.3) and Tusla was launched in 2014, enabling a more integrated response to the needs of children and their families. Finally, the passing of the *Children's Rights Referendum* in 2012 ensures that the explicit rights of children have become constitutionally recognised. Consequently, the political thrust towards integrated, preventative family support initiatives is clearly evidenced.

Key Findings – Meitheal's Strengths and Challenges

The research findings indicate considerable strengths in the Meitheal approach, in addition to many challenges. Enthusiasm and goodwill were expressed by all participants, the CFSN coordinator affirming, *"...people just seem very, very eager really and enthusiastic about it"*. This enthusiasm was tempered by tangible concerns, primarily around inadequate resources and training. These findings correspond well with appraisals of similar models (Landy et al., 2011; Forkan & Landy, 2011; SMCI Associates, 2012).

Partnership, Relationship-Building and Improved Outcomes

Family involvement in decision-making was acknowledged overall as hugely empowering. Participants were enthusiastic about the model's focus on family partnership; one professional maintained it reduced service user apprehension. The parent interviewee stated this approach made her feel listened to and respected. Furthermore, it helped her to understand and accept that, although everyone *"really tried hard"*, they were unable to do everything, a factor echoed in the ION evaluation (Forkan & Landy, 2011).

To build good partnerships, relationship-building is key and, as Robertson (2014) argues, it is critical to maintaining appropriate interventions in family and community work. Asked to rate the importance of relationship-building, between *all* members of a Meitheal group, to its success, participant response was unanimous in declaring it is vital, trust being a noteworthy feature –

> *"I think it's very important...you have to trust them...just to be nice to someone and they're nice to you" (Parent).*

Outcomes for children from integrated service provision are difficult to measure accurately (O'Brien *et al.*, 2009). A long-term evaluation will offer some insight into whether better outcomes have been achieved with Meitheal; however, in order to gauge stakeholders' views on whether *their* experiences saw improved outcomes, the question was asked. The experiences of seven participants indicated mostly positive outcomes. The parent stated that both her and her children's lives had improved, another participant maintained Meitheal improved communication and efficiency. Only the school principal felt outcomes had not improved, although she saw potential for good outcomes if procedures were *"tighten[ed] up"*.

Interagency Working and Supportive Environment

As indicated in the secondary research, interagency working is a core component of many prevention models. Most participants in this study work within an interagency culture and viewed this as 'best practice' for working with families. One LP described it as one of the best features of Meitheal because *"a more holistic view of the family"* is gained. Challenges were also identified, in particular changing mind-sets and getting 'buy-in'. Similar to the ION evaluation, this study revealed that changing how people think with regard to partnership approaches was challenging at times. One participant argued some workers could be uneasy about *"opening up...their methodologies"*. Two interviewees felt training just needed to formalise things, as many were already doing the work.

Support is intertwined with both the interagency and relationship-building themes. The Tusla and LP participants were asked whether they felt supported by, firstly, Tusla, and secondly, their Meitheal colleagues. All five felt well supported by their colleagues, one LP describing it as *"having a team around the worker"*. The former question, however, elicited a mixed response, highlighting the challenges facing these leading professionals. Both Tusla professionals, while acknowledging challenges, affirmed they felt supported by Tusla and believed allowances should be made for the newness of it all. By contrast, two LPs felt let down in terms of resourcing needs, complaining about *"the simple things"* such as a lack of stationary or an administrative person to assist with the extensive paperwork.

It emerged that resourcing and training needs were most challenging for contributors, and underpinned all their concerns. The senior manager emphasised that because of the huge systemic changes in statutory services over the last few years, more integrated and coordinated planning was required from government level down. The ION evaluation highlighted concern about the lack of government mandate affecting buy-in from management across agencies, recommending the model should "be located within a broader service model" (Forkan & Landy, 2011, p.72). Meitheal being a national model of practice should address this problem; the senior manager was

wholly enthusiastic about Tusla's suite of documents declaring, *"for the first time in my lifetime I've seen in policy...what an agency is...really striving to around children and families"*. However, policy means little if it cannot be put into action.

Resourcing Needs

A lack of appropriate resources arose as a strong concern, a factor shared in many evaluations of similar models (CFRPU, 2006; Forkan & Landy, 2011; SMCI Associates, 2012). A dearth of key personnel was identified as troubling; it transpired that Meitheal coordinators were required urgently to ease the pressure on LPs, who have been taking on this role in addition to their existing roles, finding the extra responsibility quite stressful:

> *"...coordinating [several] Meitheals...finding times to suit everybody...chairing [and] facilitating meetings...taking [and] circulating minutes...doing the bulk of the work"* (LP)

In addition, the CFSN coordinator argued that more family support workers were required to undertake much of the direct work with families, explaining that

> *"it's meant to be wraparound...early intervention...if there are waiting lists...it won't work"*

This mirrors similar factors found to inhibit effective interagency working in the CAAB report (CAAB, 2009).

Training Needs

Charles & Horwath (2009) argue training is an essential element for successful interagency practice. Joint training between multidisciplinary professionals was considered helpful to the interagency process in an evaluation of assessment practices in Scotland (Robertson, 2014). Unlike Meitheal, some degree of training had taken place in most of the models compared; yet many respondents felt more was required (e.g., Ward *et al.*, 2002; CFRPU, 2006; Forkan & Landy, 2011).

This study revealed a lack of clarity around the different roles and on how to explain Meitheal's main purpose as a preventative strategy. Both non-leading professionals interviewed said they learned about Meitheal informally via LPs, who, in turn, acknowledged their difficulty in explaining Meitheal. One contributor felt training was needed to prevent people *"veer[ing] off into different understandings"*. Considering the model centres on a common assessment framework, this is somewhat significant. Training was identified earlier as key to getting buy-in; specifically, this study identified that there might be a case for more specialised training for schools, which are "a rich source of support to vulnerable children and their families" (McKeown, 2000, p.24). The Meitheal Toolkit states "every effort should be made locally to ensure...a coordinated approach between the operation of Meitheal and of [educational welfare services] intervention" (Tusla, 2014, p.65). The lack of general

training around child protection issues and Children First arose as particular concerns for the school principal, as did the risk of damaging the relationships schools build with families:

> *"One sentence...out of context or one hurt feeling can hugely damage that relationship in a very instant way"*

She sensed a separateness from the Meitheal group as she felt everybody else was *"much more familiar with each other [and] professionals meetings"*. As part of a principal's group, she was well positioned to report the frustration among schools generally with child protection services, claiming there was *"dissatisfaction"*, particularly around referrals and information sharing. Similarly, two LPs recognised a distrust of child protection services among schools due to *"high waiting lists"* and concerns not being addressed, which may impact on their buy-in to Meitheal. The senior manager also acknowledged the need for specialised training for schools, to address *"gaps and needs"*, which he hoped would be addressed by LAPs.

Discussion – The Value in a Snapshot

Opinions were shared by most, or all, of the participants. There was clear enthusiasm for this approach, underscoring the centrality of client-partnership for creating interventions best suited to families, as evidenced by the parent participant. In addition, she gained insight into what workers could and could not achieve, which she could then accept; another factor reflected in similar studies. The enthusiasm for this way of working needs to be supported by commitment and clear leadership from managers.

Another theme that received universal consensus was the importance of building good relationships. While this in itself is not surprising, it reinforces how necessary to the concept of collaborative working the relationship is. Relationship-building should be nurtured as it is vital for achieving good outcomes and effective cooperation between services. Perhaps this could be facilitated by LAPs offering joint trainings that focus on the relationship model, together with professionals' own multidisciplinary supervision groups and informal leisure activities.

All study participants acknowledged the merits of interagency working in order to gain a more holistic view of the child. Building a 'team around the child' is central to Meitheal; this was a recognised benefit of interagency collaboration, as was building a 'team around the worker' – mutual support and sharing workloads. These benefits are cited in most of the evaluations reviewed, as are the challenges.

Several barriers to interagency cooperation were also recognised, predominantly linked to lack of resources and training, both being common features in feedback from other models. Without these two fundamental aspects, organisations that do not operate in an integrated manner, or whose position within a professional grouping is somewhat different, will never fully buy into a collaborative approach. The position the school principal found herself in was one such example. The importance of schools within Meitheal interventions was acknowledged by participants, as well as by Tusla. Concerted effort to bring them into the hub of collaborative service provision is therefore essential. A need for specialised training with creative thinking on how to better integrate schools within interagency culture might be a role for LAPs. Training is also necessary for understanding roles, purpose and procedures, particularly in a model based on a standardised assessment of need that everyone should be able to understand. Resourcing issues were, likewise, a big concern in this study. Leading personnel were assuming multiple roles and consequently overstretched. Meitheal coordinators were deemed a priority in order for Meitheal to run efficiently and to relieve the pressure. It is clear that more front-line support workers are required to ensure services function without delays or gaps. In order to embed Meitheal within community-based practice, integrated planning and commitment must come from government down, as was indicated in the findings. The policies are in place and the action needs to happen.

Conclusion

Enthusiasm for the collaborative Meitheal approach, together with legitimate concerns about inadequate resources and training, are evident. Most findings correlate with studies of comparable models. The surprising element was the school's perspective within the process, raising interesting questions on how to best inform and include schools in interagency family work. Undoubtedly, a long-term evaluation will be undertaken in due course, to ascertain whether Meitheal's primary aim of improving outcomes nationally, is being realised. In the short term, however, capturing snapshots from other Meitheal hubs would create a sharper picture of the model's progress, informing the framework's architects in the process.

Acknowledgment

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