

Editorial

The Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Report (2014-2020) sets out a realistic vision for the future of children and young people in Ireland. This vision is for 'Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future'. Forming the basis of this vision is the realisation that young adulthood is precious and there is an onus on the State to ensure that today's youth feel confident, and are supported and prepared for adulthood. Objectives central to this vision include listening to and involving young adults, providing quality services underpinned by effective transitions to youth employment, and cross-government and interagency collaboration and coordination.

Almost ten years on from the economic crisis of 2008, and three years into *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, some may argue that Ireland has recovered from the 'lost decade', and the situation for the some 400,000 plus young adults (categorised as those aged 18-24 years) who live in Ireland has improved. Exploring a number of challenges related to the lives and experiences of young adults – namely, mental health, access to higher education and employment, and climate change – this issue of *Working Notes* suggests however that considerable progress is required if the type of vision presented in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* is to be realised, and if the situation for many young adults in Ireland today is to be improved.

Drawing on experiences of working directly with young people, Dr. Tony Bates of Jigsaw, The National Centre for Youth Mental Health, argues in the opening article that mental health is the number one health concern for young people in Ireland, and almost all serious adult mental health disorders are present by 18 years old. He asserts that positive mental health and support is central to allowing young people in Ireland to be themselves, to speak in their own voice, and to reconcile their personal strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures.

In the second article, James Doorley of the National Youth Council of Ireland highlights that many young adults struggle to find work, and often experience precarious employment conditions. He also outlines the difficulties faced by young people who are unemployed in accessing adequate training opportunities.

Kevin O'Higgins SJ reflects on his experience as teacher and mentor with the Jesuit University Support and Training (JUST) project in Ballymun, one of the most marginalised communities in Dublin. He explores the relationship between social inequality and educational opportunity, and outlines how improved access to education helps break the cycle of poverty that can impede a young person throughout their adult life. The final article in the issue, by Catherine Devitt of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, considers how, because of climate change and environmental decline, the young adults of today will mature in a world much different to that of their parents'.

Young people are an important group to engage with when formulating and implementing policy measures that aim to support a societal shift to a low carbon future. The article discusses the future challenges that will be faced by today's young adults in a climate changing world, and more broadly, outlines some of the considerations, particularly for policy and education, that need to be addressed to help prepare young adults. Specific reference is made to the vision for environmental education put forward in the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

Overall, as a collection of different articles on a common theme, the Issue offers key insights into the experiences of young adults, and the challenges that need to be addressed by government, and society more broadly, to help realise better outcomes and brighter futures for today's youth in the years ahead.

A Very Unlevel Playing Field: A Reflection on Young Adults in Higher Education

Kevin O'Higgins SJ

Introduction

A lifetime of working with young adults has left me in no doubt that inequalities associated with the circumstances of our birth are more than likely to lead to successive waves of inequality that may accompany us throughout the remainder of our lives. This is true whether we are born into disadvantage or privilege.

In this article, I offer a personal reflection on the educational challenges encountered by young adults who are socially disadvantaged. The reflection is based on my experiences of working with young adults in Ballymun, one of the most marginalised communities in Dublin. In the following, I reflect on the relationship between social inequality and educational opportunity, and how improved access to education can break the cycle of poverty that can impede an individual throughout their lifetime. I draw on how the Jesuit University Support and Training project (known as JUST) in Ballymun provides a variety of supports aimed at breaking down the obstacles that can prevent many young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing third level education.

What happens during the first twenty years of our lives have a decisive influence on how we will live our remaining decades. For some, the pre-adult years may mean a nurturing family environment, optimal physical and mental nutrition, opportunities for travel, wide-ranging exposure to all manner of cultural riches, and a first-class education. For others, those same years may mean unrelenting instability, poverty, fear, discrimination and lack of opportunity on all levels. The playing field on which young adults are formed is anything but level! And as disadvantaged young adults mature into middle age and beyond, the likelihood is that inequality will be piled on inequality. In their later years, they are more likely to suffer from ill health, unemployment, isolation, poor housing conditions and, ultimately, a shorter life expectancy.

A documentary aired in 2014 by Ireland's TV3 described the gap in educational opportunity between affluent and disadvantaged sectors of our society as a form of 'educational apartheid'.¹ By

way of example, the programme cited one area of Dublin in which practically every child can look forward to eventual university graduation, while in another part of the city, just a few miles away, only one child in seven can reasonably have the same expectation. When many families with a similar history of disadvantage are clustered together in marginalised housing estates, the problems are greatly exacerbated. Some of these estates may be notorious for high levels of anti-social behaviour, drug abuse and criminal activity. Many of the young men may be drawn into local gangs, partly for self-protection. For young women, early pregnancy can mean that all thought of education and career must be postponed, or dismissed altogether as an impossible fantasy. Needless to say, for the children of young parents struggling with severe difficulties, the outlook can be very bleak indeed.

The Impact of Social Inequality on Educational Attainment

Expensive school fees do not simply buy a first-class education, but entry into a world of influential contacts and friendships which may prove decisive when it comes to job applications, career progression, and so on. Contrast that with a young person born into disadvantage, most of whose friends have little hope of advancing to university, or even as far as the Leaving Certificate. This person will be obliged to face life utterly devoid of any supportive network of friends, relatives or old schoolmates with influence. The scenario is sometimes summed up in the saying, 'it's not what you know, but who you know, that really counts'. In my work, I have encountered countless real-life examples that lend credence to that.

Working in universities in Ireland and several other countries, I have seen many instances of moderately talented students with comfortable family backgrounds exceeding their own expectations thanks, in great part, to advantages bestowed on them by the circumstances of their birth and upbringing. Sadly, I have also seen many cases of exceptionally talented students defeated by inner and outer demons associated with a lifetime of social and economic disadvantage.

One has only to consider the disparity in results attained at the end of the secondary school cycle to understand that, for young people in disadvantaged areas, many career paths are simply out of the question. Regardless of innate talent and potential, a young person's social status plays a major role in determining future career opportunities, or the lack thereof. For those who do manage to overcome the barriers to third level it can easily be forgotten that a student from an educationally disadvantaged background will end up sitting in class and competing with students who have enjoyed the advantages offered by a stable, supportive family and a home environment conducive to study. Students who failed to complete secondary education, or who attended schools with a poor record of achievement, find themselves sitting side-by-side with others who have been educated in the country's most exclusive primary and secondary schools. Simply offering free or subsidised college fees is not nearly sufficient to counteract a lifetime of marginalisation and deprivation.²

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Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

In bygone eras which regarded social inequality as a fact of life, or even part of a divinely ordained natural order, raising the issue of life's unlevel playing field might have been greeted with raised eyebrows and puzzlement. It was largely taken for granted that being born into wealth and privilege or poverty and disadvantage was simply an unalterable fact of life that should be accepted as such. Everyone was expected to know their place in the social order and make the most of the hand they had been dealt. Nowadays, we have a much clearer understanding of the causes of social inequality, as well as some of the tried and tested solutions.

At the very top of the list of interventions that can help to counter the negative effects of disadvantage in early life and break intergenerational cycles of poverty is improved access to educational opportunity. I have witnessed the transforming power of education while working in various parts of the world, most dramatically in Latin America.



Young adults in education

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When Ballymun was launched as a sparkling new high-rise housing development back in the 1960s, many of the earliest residents moved from old, crumbling inner-city tenements. Some of those tenement dwellers, in turn, were the descendants of people driven into the city by the poverty of 19th Century post-Famine Ireland. The emotional and psychological scars inflicted by successive generations of marginalisation and deprivation are slow to heal. They continue to affect many families in Ballymun, as well as similar areas of Dublin and other Irish cities. In some families, generations of relative poverty and disadvantage have produced a home environment in which academic learning plays practically no role whatsoever, and it may even be perceived negatively, as a total waste of time.

Low levels of educational attainment often translate into poor literacy and numeracy skills. Unsurprisingly, this has a knock-on impact on employment prospects and generally makes it much more difficult to engage with everyday challenges like corresponding with State agencies or simply controlling a family budget. For some young people, personal and family difficulties can result in unhappy encounters with school authorities, leading them to drop out of the educational system at an early age. A small minority may even find a seemingly attractive alternative in a life of petty crime or antisocial behaviour.

The Jesuit University Support and Training Project (JUST)

Jesuits arrived in Ballymun in the early 1980s.³ A quarter-century spent serving the people through the Virgin Mary Parish enabled the Jesuits to glimpse into a world normally inaccessible to those whose own family circumstances and upbringing had been more fortunate. Even in a relatively small city like Dublin, it is extraordinary how one half frequently knows little or nothing about how the other half

lives. When I first came to live in Ballymun in 1999, I was astounded to find that most of the area was surrounded by a high wall, physically isolating it from neighbouring areas. Even while working in materially deprived barrios (urban areas where poor people live in very precarious conditions) in Latin America, I had never witnessed such blatant social segregation. The wall said something about Ballymun, but it said a lot more about the society that constructed it.

The Jesuit University Support and Training project (known as JUST)⁴ was formally initiated in May 2006. This followed an intense year of consultation and planning, during which key issues were identified, goals defined, and the necessary resources gathered together. The central challenge wasn't difficult to discover or justify. Available data at that time indicated that approximately three per cent of eligible Ballymun residents were participating in third level educational programmes, as against a national average of about 60 per cent.⁵ By any reckoning, such a low level of participation in post-secondary and lifelong learning programmes was shocking. The JUST project proposed to identify the principal difficulties and barriers, and respond with a variety of services and supports designed to eliminate the obstacles, or, at least, to alleviate them sufficiently to enable more Ballymun residents to take the first steps towards a third level qualification.

A little over ten years on, we can report success beyond our most optimistic initial projections. From tentative beginnings in 2006, with a small team of three and a group of twenty students, today a nine-strong JUST team annually supports an average of one hundred students. They are enrolled in a wide range of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses at universities and smaller colleges throughout Dublin. There is a healthy balance between male and female participants. Our youngest students are 18-year old recent school-leavers, while the oldest to date was a 74-year old studying postgraduate Law. Most of our students are in the early-20s to mid-30s age group. Some are enrolled in a year-long pre-college preparatory programme designed to improve basic study skills. The majority have already embarked on their chosen diploma or degree courses. We now have our first group of postgraduates, mostly pursuing Masters Degrees and several completing PhDs. It takes huge conviction and determination to meet essay deadlines and prepare for exams when circumstances are conspiring to make failure often

seem inevitable. In many cases, conventional academic support structures available in universities and other third level colleges are unable to address difficulties experienced closer to home. Family crises, financial pressures and the lack of adequate study facilities are just some of the factors that could undermine a talented student's potential to perform. The fact that so many JUST students have not only completed undergraduate degrees, but have then proceeded to post-graduate studies is a constant reminder that the human spirit can triumph over all kinds of adversity.

In an ideal world, the various problems that diminish educational and employment opportunities would be tackled simultaneously. Realistically, it is usually only possible to adopt a step-by-step approach, with various forms of personal, familial and social support. Whenever suitable support mechanisms are made available, there is ample evidence to show that most people are eager to avail of them. Frequently, the results are nothing short of life-changing. Furthermore, the multiplier effect of an investment of people and other resources in a project like JUST is incalculable, since one person's decision to pursue a college degree often results in a better life for an entire family.

The JUST model is based on individual tutoring and mentoring. Every effort is made to match students with tutors who have similar academic interests and compatible personalities.

The JUST Model of Learning

The JUST model is based on individual tutoring and mentoring. Every effort is made to match students with tutors who have similar academic interests and compatible personalities. Very often, the key to overcoming adversity is the gradual development of a student-tutor relationship based on friendship and mutual trust. In order to sustain this personalised approach to supporting students, JUST relies on the time and effort of generous volunteer tutors. Some of these are active or retired professional academics, while others are recent graduates only too familiar with the challenges

faced by those taking their first tentative steps on the path towards a university qualification.

It is always wonderful for new students to meet with local graduates whose life stories are marked by the same kinds of difficulty, but whose success is living proof that obstacles can be overcome. Of the hundreds of students who have availed of JUST's support services, many examples could be cited of heroic courage and perseverance in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity. As a network of local graduates has developed, JUST has been able to assure students that help is available at any time. When someone is struggling with an unfinished essay on a Saturday evening, with a Monday deadline looming, panic can set in and the temptation to give up soon follows. In my own teaching experience, a succession of missed deadlines was often the prelude to a student dropping out altogether. Students with a more conventional educational background can take for granted the permanent availability of emotional and academic support from within their immediate circle of family and friends. For a student with a history of educational disadvantage, no such support network exists. It can be very reassuring to know that help is never more than a phone call away.

The Future for JUST

Whither JUST in the coming years? The one sure thing is that the task far exceeds our available material and human resources. Within Ballymun, the project could easily be several times larger, given the long history of educational neglect and the growing appetite for lifelong educational opportunities. It must be remembered, also, that Ballymun is only one of many similar disadvantaged areas in Dublin and throughout Ireland. So, while the Jesuit presence in some traditional fields of educational endeavour may be winding down, we are confronted with a host of new challenges.

The Ignatian pedagogical paradigm that informs the Jesuit approach to education in schools and universities all over the world provides the blueprint for JUST. With its insistence on the need to nourish all aspects of the human being – emotional, imaginative and spiritual, as well as intellectual – its relevance for our work is self-evident. It is a simple fact that the type of comprehensive educational and personal support offered through JUST is not available through any other agency.

Some Latin American theologians speak of contact with marginalised people as a blessing, or even as an epiphany, since it opens a window onto a hitherto unknown, normally invisible reality, thereby challenging our habitual preference for whatever is comfortable, familiar and seemingly unquestionable. Consigned to the margins of our society and sometimes even isolated by high walls, traditionally disadvantaged areas like Ballymun constitute a tangible 'beyond' that can serve as a vital reminder that the apparently all-encompassing and self-sufficient world of mainstream society is by no means the whole story. They represent a fundamental questioning of conventionally accepted notions of fairness, decency and justice. Continuing to allocate access to quality education and career opportunities through a type of postcode lottery is anything but decent, fair or just.

Exposure to an alternative view of society, from the perspective of people normally consigned to the margins, acts like a slow-burning fuse that eventually produces a transformative explosion. In a word, it can result in a 'conversion' that is simultaneously personal, social and, most profoundly, spiritual. Whatever little JUST can offer to students in Ballymun is repaid in abundance through the privilege of witnessing the heroic commitment and determination of these young adults to succeed, whatever the odds.

Notes

1. The documentary called *Education Apartheid* was aired on December 1st, 2014.
2. In a previous Issue of *Working Notes* (Justice in the Global Economy, Issue 79, December 2016), Brian Flannery looked at some of the challenging questions that relate to fee-paying education, and questioned whether the challenges of our time require a more radical response and commitment in education. The full article can be accessed at: www.workingnotes.ie
3. A comprehensive overview of the Jesuits in Ballymun written by Michael O'Sullivan SJ, *Twenty three years of Jesuits in Ballymun* can be accessed at: <http://homepage.eircom.net/~jadsj/23%20Years%20in%20Ballymun.htm>
4. See: www.justballymun.org
5. See: Dublin City University. 'Access to education in Ballymun'. (Available at: <http://www.dcu.ie/community/location.shtml>)

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Young Adults in Search of Mental Health

Dr. Tony Bates

Introduction

When 'Deirdre' arrived to see me with her mother, my first impression was of a young woman with a warm smile and not a problem in the world. She was twenty-three years old, already the mother of two. As she checked out my office, I wondered if she was happy to be here. I was concerned that coming to see me might have been more her mum's idea than her own. In confirming the appointment, her mother had described her as 'a bit lost', 'having lots of panic attacks', and 'stuck in a relationship that's not doing her any good'. But none of this was apparent in those opening minutes of our meeting.

Deirdre assured me our meeting was her choice. She added that even though she might appear relaxed, she was anything but. She had been nervous about coming to see someone because she didn't find it at all easy to talk about 'personal things'. She remained cautious at first, sat slightly hunched in the chair avoiding eye contact as if to protect herself. Gradually, Deirdre opened up. And before long, her words flowed. She barely paused for a breath, as if pausing at all would risk her shutting down completely. Deirdre was determined to tell her story, to release what had been pent up inside her for a long time.

Deirdre described in detail her experience of living with a jealous man who had intimidated and threatened her for the past three years. She cried. She had been afraid to tell anyone – especially her mother – as he threatened to kill her if she did. I could feel her fear as she described the terror of living with this man. By speaking to me, Deirdre knew she was putting her life on the line. She also knew that by not saying anything, death was probably inevitable. Her partner's jealousy had grown more intense over time and now his aggression had spilled over on the children. He had always screamed and spat at them if they made any noise, but recently he had covered her five-year old daughter's mouth and held her so hard that she had almost suffocated. This finally pushed Deirdre to tell someone what was happening.

After listening to her story, and following a long conversation with Deirdre and her mother, she

agreed to go directly to her local Garda station and make a full statement on the physical and emotional abuse she had experienced.

Deirdre's experience may seem extreme and atypical for the majority of her peers. But as caring adults in their lives, it alerts us to some fundamental truths shared by all young people in search of mental health.

The Experiences of Young Adults and Mental Health

Our experience in Jigsaw has shown that young people struggle with what they want to say and with what they cannot say. When they find themselves in distress or in crisis, they may hide behind an outward appearance that suggests an indifferent or problem-free approach to life. Sometimes what young people need to say is not permitted to be spoken about, within their family, school or community. What they need to say may be deemed unsayable, but it doesn't go away. When the gap between their lived reality and their public persona becomes too great, a young person can feel incredibly isolated and trapped. The stress of trying to maintain a false sense of self can become unbearable. Without words, or some way to express what they feel, young peoples' distress becomes enacted in symptoms and risky behaviours. Even with someone to talk to, young people may find it hard to open up for the fear of judgement or the fear of having their deepest suspicion about themselves – that there is something fundamentally 'messed up' about them – confirmed.

Generally, as adults, and more specifically, as the people who support them who care, it helps to remember that whatever a young person is feeling, there is always a reason for why they are feeling that way. Symptoms of distress, such as panic, anxiety or sadness, don't appear out of nowhere. They arise from a person's history, from key relationships in their lives – oftentimes abusive relationships – and from social circumstances where they feel impotent and trapped. Our challenge as listeners is to help young people make sense of their experience so that they can stop feeling they are 'weird' and become empowered

to face real issues in their lives. This is not easy, especially for a young person who has experienced neglect or violence from the very adults they relied on to feel safe in the world. Their guard may be up and they may test any potential confidant in subtle ways to see if they are trustworthy. When as listeners we fail to grasp the layers of memory and history behind their unsociable behaviour, when we blame them for their problems, or reduce the complexity of their lives to a simple ‘diagnosis’ that explains everything in terms of something ‘wrong’ inside them – rather than something wrong ‘between’ them and their world – we prove to them once again that adults will let them down.



The importance of positive mental health

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On the other hand, when we can remain steady in the face of their uneasiness, tolerate awkward silences and testing behaviours, we may offer young people something new in their lives: the experience of being heard and of gradually learning to trust. To be that listener requires a capacity to see through the ‘noise’ of their defensive behaviours, recognise the strength and determination they’ve shown to make it this far, and convey to them our belief in their potential to deal with whatever is happening.

The Vulnerability of Young Adults

Returning to the account that opened this article, Deirdre was ready to talk and she did. Her ‘panic attacks’ became understandable when the full picture of what she was dealing with emerged. Her symptoms were her mind’s attempt to manage and to communicate, in the only way it could, what was a terrifying and overwhelming ordeal. In the weeks and months that followed that first meeting, we engaged a range of supports that Deirdre and her children needed to get their lives back. Once Deirdre let people know what had been happening, she found support in surprising places, and little by little, she regained a sense of safety and control over her life.

Mental health is the number one health concern for young people in Ireland.¹ Almost 75 per cent of all serious adult mental health disorders are present to a significant degree by 18 years old.² This may be related to the intensity and vulnerability of youth which can make it a time in our lives when we are most susceptible to mental health difficulties. It is rarely without periods of fear and self-doubt as a young person questions who they are, and whether they have what it takes to make something of their lives. It is also a time when the emotional consequences of childhood trauma can make its presence felt in distressing ways. The search for identity, belonging and purpose are critical psychological challenges in the lifespan between the ages of 12 and 25 years.

Protective experiences for young people include being affirmed in one’s particular gifts and strengths, acceptance by peers, and having a goal that gives direction and focus to their lives. Above all, the presence in the life of a young person of at least ‘One Good Adult’ who knows them personally, believes in them and who is available to them is the strongest protective factor when it comes to his or her mental health.³

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Many would argue that life was easier for young people in the past. Embedded in close knit communities, they knew where they stood and what was expected of them. Life’s trajectory came with a map that had milestones and timelines. When they encountered inevitable challenges and setbacks, young people had resources to draw on for guidance and direction. Today, even in small communities where young people may have a sense of place, their identities and sense of belonging can become blurred across their on-line and off-line lives. Add to this the anxiety that many young people feel in the cut and thrust of social media where the possibility of being ridiculed or rejected is a constant risk.

Table 1: Results from the My World Survey of Young Adults (17-25 years), N = 8,221

- 14% have severe/very severe anxiety
- 14% have severe/very severe depressive symptoms
- 43% thought their life was not worth living; 35% in the last six months
- 52% thought about taking their life; 28% in last six months
- 22% reported deliberately hurting themselves in past six months
- 59% reported problem drinking; 10% met criteria for possible alcohol dependence
- 18% report little adult support in their lives

Financially dependent on their parents, young people are tied to living at home beyond a time when such an arrangement is appropriate. Seeing property prices move out of reach, they wonder if they will ever be able to secure a place of their own. In a world addicted to happy endings, many young people are quietly feeling despair as though their lives are over before they've even begun.⁴ Traditionally, a young adult could expect to have left home by twenty-seven, be financially independent, married and have somewhere to live.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the consequence of this sense of detachment means that many young people report rising levels of anxiety.⁵ Epidemiological studies⁶ and extensive needs analyses⁷ document evidence of the extent of mental ill-health among young people. The most compelling recent evidence regarding the mental health needs of young people in Ireland came from the *My World Survey*. Table 1 summarises some findings in respect to the 17-25 year old sample.⁸

The absence of safe accessible support can lead to a mental health crisis becoming compounded by dropping out of education, social withdrawal, reckless behaviour and a growing sense of helplessness and despair. Clearly these factors play a part in the tragedy of suicide.⁹

Young People's Experience of Mental Health Services

Research carried out by Jigsaw found significant gaps in mental health services in Ireland.¹⁰ One participant in this research commented that:

The biggest problem for young people is mental health and yet there seems to be a huge gap in the system, where the most important thing for young people has been neglected. (Female, aged 21)

Despite the evidence that adolescence is the most vulnerable time when it comes to mental health, Ireland's mental health system is weakest where it needs to be strongest. Young people and their families in need of emotional support reported that they need 'somewhere to turn to, someone to talk to' but that their options to do so are few and far between.¹¹ Where services are available, the challenge for young adults and their families is how to access them. The system is fraught with complex referral pathways, long waiting lists, fees, and very few after-hour options. To illustrate, a parent of a troubled young person commented:

*You can't cross the sectors. It's all islands. It's an island here and it's an island there and some islands are better than others, you know.*¹²

Consultations with young people in both the United Kingdom and Ireland have shown that the needs that young people articulate have more to do with an investment of thought and consideration rather than major capital investment. Young people want to be treated with respect, to be listened to, and not to be dismissed as 'going through a phase' or treated like a child. As service providers, our experiences show that the guarantee of young peoples' confidentiality and anonymity is very important. They want a safe place where they can feel comfortable; this includes somewhere where they can clear their head without being labelled or stigmatised, somewhere where they will not be told to go elsewhere.

Jigsaw: A Step in the Right Direction

The American poet Mary Oliver, in her poem *The Journey*, has the line 'One day you finally knew what you had to do'.¹³ The year 2006 was such a time for me. For the previous twenty-five years, I had heard over and over again the phrase *if only* from adults in a psychiatric hospital: *If only I'd been able to talk to someone and get the support I*

needed when I was younger, when all this started. Problems and issues that first emerged in the teens of these adults had become entrenched. In the absence of support, they did the best they could to ‘manage’ their troubled inner lives. Substance misuse, self-harm, social withdrawal or simply running with the wrong crowd, turned some crisis in their lives into a diagnosable psychiatric disorder, or a criminal record.

With the help of several others who also felt the need for a new approach to mental health among young adults, Headstrong – the National Centre for Youth Mental Health (now called Jigsaw) was established in 2006. The goal of Jigsaw was to change how Ireland thinks about youth mental health and to support vulnerable young people. Jigsaw puts young people at the heart of the planning process, and invites agencies and professionals in the community to move beyond silo thinking and work collaboratively in a new way. Participation of young people keeps these conversations grounded and practical.

Direct support for vulnerable young people is provided through main-street youth-friendly Jigsaw Hubs, where support from a multidisciplinary team is available, and clear pathways to specialist services are facilitated, if required. Jigsaw also supports young people indirectly through building competence and the confidence of key people in their lives who engage with them every day in schools, colleges, community and youth services.

Jigsaw is now operating in thirteen communities across Ireland. It is a step in the right direction. But there is still a long way to go if we want to strategically improve the mental health of young people in this country, particularly of those who are marginalised and seldom heard.

Conclusion

Young people are seeking to establish a personal identity that ‘does not let them down in their struggle, the struggle for identity, the struggle to feel real, the struggle not to fit into an adult-assigned role, but to go through whatever has to be gone through’.¹⁴ They want to be themselves, to speak in their own voice, rather than fit into a role that has been assigned to them. Mental health is central to this struggle. Good mental health means learning to hold and accept tensions and contradictions in their personalities. It is not about being perfect; it is about being whole. For every human being, this involves learning to integrate

and reconcile in themselves both light and dark, strength and weakness, success and failure, so that, when a person uses the word *I*, there is really someone present to support this pronoun.

None of this can happen without a facilitating environment and without people who can calm and steady them in times of crisis, so that they don’t succumb to their fears. These ‘good adults’ – parents, siblings, grandparents, counsellors, teachers, sports coaches – show young people the handrails they need to survive tough times and remind them they have what it takes to achieve goals that are important to them.

Mental health is the courageous struggle to step into and own one’s truth. To hide behind some socially desirable version of themselves, to play it safe, leaves a young person feeling empty. But to come out of hiding and risk sharing what feels broken with another takes guts. Sometimes it takes a crisis and the painful realisation that their lives are not working for them to decide to push through their fears and start being real. That’s what Deirdre did.

Notes

1. The transition to adulthood can include potentially serious mental disorders (See: McGorry, P. (2011) ‘Transition to Adulthood: The critical period for pre-emptive, disease-modifying care for schizophrenia and related disorders’, *Schizophrenia bulletin*, Vol. 37 (3), pp. 524-530). In Ireland, while the majority of young people function well, mental health difficulties can emerge in early adolescence and peak in late teens and early 20s. For an insight into the experiences and concerns of young adults, see: Dooley, B., and Fitzgerald, A. (2012) *My World Survey: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland*, Dublin: Headstrong and the UCD School of Psychology. (Available at: http://www.drugs.ie/resourcesfiles/research/2012/My_World_Survey_2012_Online.pdf)
2. Evidence of this is cited in a number of studies including: Hickie, I.B., Groom, G., & Davenport, T. (2004) *Investing in Australia’s future: the personal, social and economic benefits of good mental health*. Canberra: Mental Health Council of Australia; Kessler, R.C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., et al. (2015) ‘Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distribution of DSM-IV Disorder in the National Co-morbidity Survey Replication’, *Archives General Psychiatry*, Vol. 62, pp. 593-602; Kim-Cohen, J., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T.E., et al. (2003) ‘Prior juvenile diagnoses in adults with mental disorder: developmental follow-back of a prospective-longitudinal cohort’, *Archives General Psychiatry*, Vol. 60(7), pp. 709-17.
3. Dooley B., & Fitzgerald, A. (2012) *My World Survey: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland*. Dublin: Headstrong and UCD School of Psychology.
4. There is now a growing body of evidence showing the negative impacts of social media on mental health. For example, see Pantic, I. ‘Online Social Networking and Mental Health’, (2014) *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, Vol. 17(10), pp. 652-657.
5. Cannon, M., Coughlan, H., Clarke, M., Harley, M., & Kelleher, I. (2013) *The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research*

across the Lifespan. (PERL) Group. Dublin: Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

6. These studies include: Martin, M., Carr, A., Burke, L., Carroll, L., Byrne, S. (2006) *The Clonmel Project: Mental Health Service Needs of Children and Adolescents in the South East of Ireland*. Dublin: Health Service Executive; National Office for Suicide Prevention. (2009) *Annual Report 2009*. Dublin: Health Service Executive. (Available at: http://www.nosp.ie/annual_report_09.pdf)
7. Illback et al. (2010) and Illback and Bates (2011) report that young adults in Ireland exhibit high levels of psychological distress that is often amplified by poor access to support services. See: Illback, R.J., Bates, T., & Hodges, C., (2010) 'Jigsaw: engaging communities in the development and implementation of youth mental health services and supports in the Republic of Ireland'. *Journal of Mental Health*, Vol. 19, pp. 422-35; Illback, R.J., & Bates, T., (2011) 'Transforming youth mental health services and supports in Ireland'. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, Vol. 5, pp. 22-27
8. Dooley, B., & Fitzgerald, A. (2012) 'Methodology on the My World Survey (MWS): a unique window into the world of adolescents in Ireland'. *Early Intervention Psychiatry*, Vol. 7(1), pp.12-22
9. See: <http://www.nsrif.ie/statistics/suicide/>
10. Bates T., Illback R., Scanlan F., & Carroll L. (2009) *Somewhere To Turn To, Someone To Talk To*. Dublin: Headstrong National Centre for Youth Mental Health.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Oliver M., *The Journey in Dream Work*. Atlantic Press Publishers, 1986.
14. Winnicott, D.W., Caldwell, L., and Taylor Robinson, H., *The Collected Works of D.W. Winnicott, Volume 6*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pg. 429.

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Republic of Opportunity or State of Insecurity?

James Doorley

Introduction

On the day of his election as An Taoiseach (June 14th 2017), Leo Varadkar T.D. spoke about creating a ‘republic of opportunity’.¹ Although an admirable vision for the country, the evidence suggests that Irish society has a long way to go to make such noble ambitions a reality, particularly for unemployed young people and those struggling to find decent employment. Nearly a decade on from the economic crisis of 2008, Ireland is a different country; the scars of the economic recession are felt through unemployment, debt, cuts in income supports and the withdrawal of social services. As noted by both the National Economic and Social Council (NESC)² and OECD³ young adults were particularly hard hit by factors such as reduced employment opportunities and insufficient quality education and training opportunities. Ten years on, some analysts argue that Ireland has recovered from the ‘lost decade’ and with this, there may be a perception that the situation for young people in Ireland has improved.⁴ However, many young people in Ireland still feel marginalised by the economic crisis,⁵ and increasingly, young people are at the frontline of a radical change in the nature of the labour market, such that in many sectors, the old model of permanent contracts and fixed hours has been replaced by precarious employment.⁶

The Extent of Youth Unemployment

While acknowledging that prospects for some young people may have improved in recent years,⁷ the reality however, is that too many are still unemployed and struggling to survive on reduced levels of unemployment support.⁸ Unemployment, while young, especially over long periods, can leave permanent effects in the form of increased probability of unemployment later in life and reduced future earnings.

In some respects, the data on youth unemployment can mask the extent of the on-going problem. In July 2017 for example, the actual number of young people signing on the live register was 32,237.⁹ This is not an insignificant number. Of particular concern, are the substantial numbers of young people in long-term unemployment; figures for

September 2017 from the Department of Social Protection indicate that 10,624 young people under 26 years are on Jobseeker’s Allowance or Benefit for 12 months or more.¹⁰ The aforementioned data does not capture the significant number of young people on other payments such as Disability Allowance or the One Parent Family Payment.¹¹ There are also young persons who do not qualify, or have not applied for a social protection payment, that are absent from the dataset. These three categories of young people are generally excluded from consideration and inclusion in policy discussions and decisions relating to youth employment. This invariably means that the education, training and employment support needs of all young people are not met – an absence that was evident when the Irish implementation plan for the EU Youth Guarantee was published in 2014, which focused primarily on young people on the live register.¹²

The data available on the number of young people ‘not in education, employment and training’ (NEET) also challenges any suggestion that youth unemployment and underemployment are not serious problems. Figures show that the percentage of young persons aged 15-29 years in the NEET category in Ireland doubled from 11 per cent in 2006 to 22 percent in 2011.¹³ While the situation has improved, the percentage of NEETs in 2015 stood at 17.1 per cent above the OECD average and well above the 2006 Irish figures. Those with low education levels fare particularly badly in Ireland, with 65 per cent of young people who left school before completing upper secondary school in the NEET category, compared to just 13 per cent of third level graduates.¹⁴ This represents one of the largest gaps across OECD countries.

Welfare Rates among Young Adults

One of the more controversial policy decisions by successive Governments has been the large cuts in the rate of the Jobseeker’s Allowance (JA) payments for young people.¹⁵ The official rationale for these cuts was that some young people were unwilling to take up education, training or employment opportunities and financial cuts were required to incentivise them.¹⁶

A later argument used to justify the cut was that the higher rate created a poverty trap. This was without basis, and was even more bizarre because when the cuts were first introduced there were very few job opportunities available for young people.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Government's claims that this decision was required to incentivise young people to take up education and training opportunities was undermined by the failure to provide adequate places.¹⁸ In reality, the savage cuts in unemployment supports were implemented to meet the savings required by the EU and IMF programme of financial support.¹⁹ These were imposed on young people in the belief that there would be limited public outcry and political backlash. While there is no evidence that the policy incentivised young people into work or education and training, the negative consequences of the policy on young people is becoming more evident.

*Many young people in Ireland
still feel marginalised by the
economic crisis ...*

For example, the impact of these reduced payments is confirmed by data on the rate of consistent poverty among young people.²⁰ In 2015, the consistent poverty rate for young people (aged 15-24) was 15.6 per cent – the highest of all age cohorts (almost double the overall rate of 8.7 per cent).²¹ Furthermore, evidence shows that four out of ten young people on JA are struggling to make ends meet.²² This is not surprising – the cost of a single adult living as part of a household was €184 in 2014 (this data does not take into account the financial burden on young people who are not living with parents or family).²³ Despite calls for the cuts to be reversed, there has been no change or reversal in Government policy,²⁴ and there is now compelling anecdotal evidence to show that financial cuts are contributing to youth homelessness.²⁵

Youth Guarantee: An Initiative to Support Young Jobseekers

The concept of a Youth Guarantee is not new;²⁶ it has been in operation in countries such as Sweden and Austria since the 1980s. At national and EU level, support for the implementation of a Youth Guarantee gathered pace as the youth unemployment crisis deepened. Official

authorisation of a European Youth Guarantee progressed swiftly, supported by the promise of EU funds for countries and regions with a youth unemployment rate of 25 per cent or higher, which included Ireland. The Irish Government deserve credit for advancing the European Council Recommendation on the Youth Guarantee which was agreed during the Irish EU Presidency in 2013.²⁷

Following agreement at EU level, member states were required to develop national plans to implement the Youth Guarantee Initiative. The Irish Implementation Plan published in January 2014,²⁸ while overall satisfactory,²⁹ a number of concerns were raised by civil society organisations including the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), particularly in relation to clarity around funding and capacity.³⁰

Since the publication of the Plan, it appears that the initial political commitment to introduce and deliver this programme in Ireland has dissipated. This may be explained by a lack of willingness to follow through on the significant changes required, including the ways in which young people are engaged with and supported, in how the Department of Social Protection interacts with other stakeholders, and in how information and data are sourced and evaluated.

A key element of the Youth Guarantee initiative was increased provision to meet the commitment of an offer to young people who were unemployed for four months or more. NYCI had concerns about the actual number of new places set out in the implementation plan. For 2014, the plan anticipated the delivery of 28,350 places, which would have been a significant increase on the number provided before the Youth Guarantee. An analysis undertaken by NYCI in 2015 estimated that the level of provision fell below that promised.³¹ This has been echoed by institutions such as the European Court of Auditors, which found that in Ireland and six other member states implementation of the Youth Guarantee three years on had fallen short of the initial expectations raised in 2013.³² The failure to implement the Youth Guarantee as promised is a missed opportunity. If the Government had proceeded as planned, not only would the levels of youth unemployment now be lower, but we would be embedding a proven system which would act as a buffer against future sharp increases in youth unemployment arising from economic shocks and recession.

The Impact of Low Pay and Precarious Employment

Alongside the unemployment crisis of the last decade, major changes have been occurring in the labour market, with significant growth in precarious employment. This trend impacts in particular on young people, women and migrants. Many young workers are having the traditional entry into well-paid and secure employment elongated and frustrated by low pay, temporary employment, and so-called ‘if and when contracts’ – contracts of employment without guaranteed hours, with the number of hours varying from week to week.³³

The rate of the minimum wage is important for young people; given the fact that almost four in ten (39.1 per cent) young people (aged 18-29 years) in the labour force were being paid rates on, or below, the minimum wage.³⁴ The Central Statistic Office recently reported that approximately 10,100 people were on a rate lower than the minimum wage in the period from Quarter 2 to Quarter 4, 2016.³⁵ This is not an insignificant number and despite calls for the sub minimum rates to be abolished, the Government has failed to do so.

Temporary employment has always been a feature of the labour market, it is becoming more prevalent amongst younger workers. While the extent of temporary employment remained relatively static for workers over 30 years of age between 2004 and 2015, the percentage of those at work under 30 years on a temporary contract in the same period increased from 14.8 per cent in 2004 to 20.8 per cent in 2015, with almost two thirds of young workers unable to get a permanent contract.

Conclusion

Too many young people are struggling to find work, and those that do, struggle to find work that gives them a decent salary and quality of life. Government must provide an adequate income and invest in services that support unemployed young people into work, while tackling low pay, temporary employment, and ‘if and when contracts’. But our present need is for actions, not words, to lift this generation out of a state of insecurity and give real meaning to the promise of ‘a republic of opportunity’.³⁶

Notes

1. The full text of this speech is available at: <https://www.fine Gael.ie/speech-taoiseach-leo-varadkar-td/>

2. National Economic and Social Council (2013) *The Social Dimensions of the Crisis*, Dublin: NESC, Report 134. (Available at: http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/NESC_134_The_Social_Dimensions_of_the_Crisis_Main_%20Report.pdf)
3. OECD (2013) *Economic Survey of Ireland*, Paris: OECD. (Available at: http://www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/2013%20Economic%20Survey%20IRELAND_Overview_Eng_FINAL%2030%20Aug.pdf)
4. Report on ‘Ireland has emerged from the ‘lost decade’. Forecast report from Goodbody Stockbrokers (8 August 2017). (Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2017/0808/895865-economy>)
5. In 2016, a Eurobarometer poll found that 68 per cent of young people in Ireland still felt they had been marginalised by the economic crisis. (Source: European Parliamentary (2016) Research Service, *European Youth in 2016, Special Eurobarometer for the European Parliament*, European Union). (Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2016/eye2016/eb85_1_eye_2016_analytical_overview_en.pdf)
6. For more on the implications of precarious work conditions on equality and social justice, see: Wickham, J., ‘Decent Work: Implications for Equality and Social Justice’, *Working Notes*, Issue 79, December 2016. (Available at: www.workingnotes.ie/component/zoo/item/decent-work-implications-for-equality-and-social-justice)
7. It is important to note that there has been some progress with regard to the provision of more and better options for young people. For example, excellent work has been done by Government and relevant stakeholders to expand the range of apprenticeships beyond their traditional territory in the construction sector. This allows young people to earn an income while they learn. Another initiative such as JobsPlus Youth, which provides subsidies to employers, has supported almost 13,000 young jobseekers into employment since 2013. The recent decision of Government to widen access for young jobseekers aged 21–24 years to the Community Employment scheme is also a welcome move.
8. This is from a high of 31.6 per cent (February 2012) to 12.3 per cent (July 2017): Central Statistics Office, *Monthly Unemployment Report, July 2017*, Dublin: Central Statistics Office. (Available at: <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mue/monthlyunemploymentjuly2017>)
9. Central Statistics Office (2017) *Live Register, July 2017*, Cork: Central Statistics Office. (Available at: <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lr/liveregisterjuly2017/>)
10. Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Question 202 (18 October 2017). (Available at: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2017-10-18a.462>)
11. At the end of June 2017, there were 17,825 and 9,292 respectively in receipt of these payments. See: Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Question 447 and 448 (12 July 2017).
12. Department of Social Protection, *The implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee*, 2013. (Available at: <https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Youth-Guarantee-Implementation-Plan.pdf>)
13. OECD, (2016) *Society at a Glance*, Paris: OECD. (Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/ireland/sag2016-ireland.pdf>)
14. *Ibid.*
15. Initially this policy, introduced in 2009, was applied solely to young persons aged 18 and 19 years, but over time the policy has been extended and applies to all those under 26 years. At present young people aged 18–24 and aged 25 on JA receive €102.70 and €147.80 respectively per week. There are a limited number of exceptions, such as when the young person has child dependants or where they were previously in care. The most recent data indicates that 19,240 (71 per cent) of the 26,808 young people in receipt of Jobseeker’s Allowance in April 2017 were on €102.70 a week, 2,863 (11 per cent) were on €147.80 with 4,705 (18 per cent) on the full rate of €193 per week. Source: Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Question 185 (31 May 2017). (Available at: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2017-05-31a.409>)

16. Michael Brennan, 'Gilmore: young people should not be permanently in front of flatscreen TVs', *Irish Independent*, 17 October 2013.
17. Even a young person on a 35-hour week on the minimum wage would earn a wage in the region of €320 and be €127 a week better off in work when compared to the full adult rate of JA (Source: Department of Social Protection. *Benefit of Work Ready Reckoner*. Available at: <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Benefit-of-Work-Ready-Reckoner-Introduction.aspx>)
18. The National Youth Council of Ireland estimated that the cuts introduced in 2013 would impact on at least 20,853 young jobseekers in 2014 based on those already on the live register, not taking into account any new claimants. (Source: Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Question 321 (24 September 2013). Available at: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2013-09-24a.736>).
19. From an analysis of the 2014 budgetary measures, NYCI estimated that there were only an additional 3,250 places on various programmes. In fact, since the onset of the crisis in 2007, successive governments failed to provide sufficient places.
20. Department of Social Protection, *Social Inclusion Monitor*, 2015. (Available at: <https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/SocialInclusionMonitor2015.pdf>)
21. The percentage of young people in this cohort in consistent poverty has increased by 73 per cent between 2010 and 2015, compared to the overall increase of 40 per cent over the same period.
22. National Youth Council of Ireland, (2014) *NYCI Briefing Paper 2: Jobseeker's Allowance* (Available at: http://www.youth.ie/sites/youth.ie/files/NYCI%20Briefing%20Paper_RedC_Jobseekers%27%20Allowance_Final.pdf)
23. Vincentian Partnership *Budget 2014: Minimum Essential Budget Standards Impact Briefing*, 2013 (Available at: <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B-cR3V9wzdLJSnpCVVRsSTVBcX/edit?usp=sharing&pli=1>)
24. In response to calls from NYCI, the Government did increase the weekly payment to young people engaged in education and training from €160 to €193 per week in 2017. (See: National Youth Council of Ireland (2016), *Post Budget Analysis 2017*, Dublin: NYCI, 2016. Available at: <http://www.youth.ie/sites/youth.ie/files/NYCI-Post-Budget-2017-Analysis.pdf>)
25. See: RTÉ News, *Warning of 'deepening' youth homelessness crisis*, 17 April 2017. (Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2017/0417/868215-housing-homeless/>)
26. The Youth Guarantee is a commitment that young jobseekers unemployed for four months or more would be guaranteed the offer of good quality education, training, work experience or employment opportunity.
27. EU Council Recommendation (22 April 2013) on establishing a Youth Guarantee. (Available at: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013H0426\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013H0426(01)))
28. The implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee-Ireland, January 2014. (Available at: <https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Youth-Guarantee-Implementation-Plan.pdf>)
29. The focus on young people furthest from the labour market, such as those with limited qualifications was particularly welcome. The plan also proposed that each young jobseeker would be assisted to develop a personal progression plan, which would map their route into employment.
30. NYCI (2014) *Youth Guarantee Plan broadly welcomed by Youth Council*, 28 January 2014. (Available at: http://www.youth.ie/youth_guarantee_plan)
31. NYCI (2016) *European Court of Auditors told of concerns on implementation of Youth Guarantee in Ireland*, 11 February 2016. (Available at: <http://www.youth.ie/nyci/European-Court-Auditors-told-concerns-implementation-Youth-Guarantee-Ireland>)
32. European Court of Auditors, (2017) *Youth unemployment – have EU policies made a difference? An assessment of the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative, Special Report*, European Court of Auditors. (Available at: http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR17_5/SR_YOUTH_GUARANTEE_EN.pdf)
33. The issue of precarious work conditions was covered by James Wickham in a previous issue of Working Notes (Issue 79). The article *Decent Work: Implications for Equality and Social Justice* can be accessed at: <http://www.workingnotes.ie/component/zoo/item/decent-work-implications-for-equality-and-social-justice>. More research needs to be undertaken to quantify the number of young workers on 'if and when contracts'. There is ample evidence from the UK that such contracts not only impact on the incomes, personal and family life of employees, but also have negative consequences for the health and wellbeing of workers. (See: University College London, *Being on a zero-hours contract is bad for your health*, 5 July 2017. Available at: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0717/050717-Zero-hours-health>)
34. See: Collins, M.L., (2015) *A Profile of Those on the Minimum Wage* NERI Working Paper, 2015/ No. 27. Dublin: The Nevin Economic Research Institute. The recent increases in the minimum wage are welcome, but the current rate is still well below the recommended Living Wage of €11.70. There are also young workers who receive the 'sub minimum' hourly rate (between 70 per cent and 90 per cent of the full rate) approved for new entrants or trainees.
35. Central Statistics Office (2017) *Quarterly National Household Survey, National Minimum Wage Estimates*, Cork: Central Statistics Office. (Available at: <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-nmw/qnhs-nationalminimumwageseriesq42016/>)
36. In addition, NERI note that almost one in ten young workers (9.2 per cent) aged 15–24 years were underemployed in 2016, which is well above the EU average of 5.9 per cent. (Source: Nugent, C. (2017) *The growth of precarious work in the Republic of Ireland*, Dublin: Nevin Economic Research Institute. Available at: <https://www.nerinstitute.net/blog/2017/05/18/the-growth-of-precarious-work-in-the-republic-of-i/>)

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Young Adults in a Climate Changing World

Catherine Devitt

Introduction

*It's going to impact the rest of my life; the kinds of decisions I can make, the kind of world I can live in. It's going to augment other social problems which we already have. Our lives are not going to look like our parents' lives, because of climate change.*¹

The young adults of today will mature in a world different to that of their parents'. In the decades ahead, climate change and widespread environmental degradation present the biggest threats to human health, progress and wellbeing, regional peace and security, sustainable livelihoods, and to the overall health and diversity of our planetary ecosystems.² This article considers the future challenges that will be faced by today's young adults in a climate changing world, and more broadly, outlines some of the considerations, particularly for education, that need to be addressed to help prepare young adults for a climate changing world.

There are over 400,000 young adults in Ireland, and as they mature, the implications of changing environmental conditions will mean that their world will face food shortages, regional and international population displacement, new public health threats, land-use pressures, shortages in freshwater supply and drought, and decline in the health of our planet's ecosystems. Here in Ireland, the human impacts of increasingly unpredictable and intense weather events on homes and businesses are already significant. These impacts here and elsewhere are not being evenly distributed; affected most intensely are populations whose vulnerabilities are exposed, and their capacity to respond undermined by social, economic, and geographical inequalities.

The living earth is being exhausted and the gap between rich and poor is widening. These are the consequences of a single crisis that, as highlighted quite clearly by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, is social and environmental, a problem of social injustice and a wider disconnect with our common home, the living earth. Although climate change affects individuals of all ages, young people can expect to bear a particularly heavy burden

because they will face this challenge throughout their lifetimes. The situation of youth in countries greatest exposed to the climate threat is especially fragile.

Understanding the Scale of the Transformation Required

Climate change is one of the defining challenges of our time, in terms of both the societal responses needed to address it, and the means necessary to face its adverse impacts. The non-negotiable nature of climate change places a moral imperative on states to protect the current generation and future citizens from preventable harm. Indeed, while some aspects of climate injustice are well acknowledged in international negotiations and policy frameworks – namely, those who have caused the least harm are most affected and have fewer resources to respond to the impacts – commitment to intergenerational and intragenerational justice is often absent from policy frameworks, or not translated from political discourse into policy formation.³ This is despite sufficient evidence to show that the costs of inaction over the long-term greatly outweigh the costs of taking immediate action.⁴ Today's adult policy makers are making decisions (which can be absent, weak or ambitious on climate action) that will influence the future that young people inherit as they become tomorrow's parents – they will bear the implications of policy responses, or lack thereof, on how we organise ourselves now in a climate changing world.

Although Ireland has a relatively small population size, it is a high emitter of greenhouse gases.⁵ Historically, over the last two decades,⁶ Irish climate policy has suffered from an implementation gap, and failure to take consistent, ambitious action has had consequences for Ireland's international reputation.⁷ Despite ratifying the Paris Agreement in late 2016,⁸ and despite the Programme for Government (2016) acknowledging that 'climate change is the global challenge of our generation, and requires radical and ambitious thinking to respond to a changing environment', Ireland's emissions continue to rise.⁹ The policy objective for 2050 is an 80 per cent reduction in combined emissions from energy, transport and buildings,

and carbon neutrality in agriculture. While the year 2050 may conjure up images of mega smart-cities connected by super highways of flying car-fleets suggesting some far-off science fiction future, 2050 is just over three decades away. Yet, data from 2016 signals that across all sectors of the economy, emissions trajectories are heading in the wrong direction.¹⁰ Ireland is currently falling short on undertaking its fair share of the global effort required to prevent and reduce the risks involved.

As argued strongly by the Climate Change Advisory Council (Ireland's independent advisory body on climate change), and echoed by the Environmental Protection Agency, the extent of social and economic transformation required to achieve Irish policy objectives and international commitments, and help mitigate dangerous climate change globally, is considerable. Both bodies assert that transformational change, long-term planning, a stable policy framework, and concrete policies are now essential across all aspects of Irish society to help shift towards a low carbon future:¹¹



There is no Planet B

© iStock photo

*The transformation required across Irish society to meet this objective represents a different and more difficult task than any other area of public policy. The costs of inaction will fall much more heavily on future generations. The current generation in Ireland, and elsewhere, will have to be leaders in transforming the economy and society to halt the rise in global temperature, the most well-known measure of climate change.*¹²

The time available for meaningful action to prevent dangerous climate change is quickly diminishing, and despite international scientific and political consensus, along with evidence of the unfolding impacts, the rate of progress on this problem of the global commons remains too slow.¹³ Countries, like Ireland, are threatening the rights of young people here at home, and in countries most affected by climate injustice.¹⁴

The Policy and Educational Challenge

A critical challenge facing policy-makers as they address climate change is that necessary proposals, on their own, may be regressive. In order to be progressive, how can policies be so shaped so as to consider the specific vulnerabilities and needs of certain social groups who will be adversely affected by climate mitigation? As the world moves forward in implementing mitigation and adaptation measures, the combined wisdom and involvement of all individuals, from citizens to policy and scientific experts will be needed. Young people need to be prepared to play a central role within this process; they are the ones who will live to experience the long-term impact of today's crucial decisions.¹⁵ There is evidence to suggest this is already happening; public and political conversations on how to bring about environmental change frequently identify young people as the drivers of change – they constitute the majority of the population in many countries and have increasingly strong social awareness and environmental perspectives.¹⁶

For example, Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* believes that young people 'demand change [and] wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded' (§13). He goes on to argue that young people in the societies that should be making the greatest change in consumer habits 'have a new ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit', and are 'making admirable efforts to protect the environment' (§209). Here in Ireland, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment frequently refers to the role of young people in climate action: meeting young people 'invariably makes me optimistic about how we deal with climate change and our environment',¹⁷ and young people are 'Ireland's Transition Generation - the way [they] live today will have huge effects on future generations.'

Through direct engagement on energy solutions and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), nation-wide initiatives such as the National Dialogue on Climate Action also aim to position young people at the centre of their engagement practices. Because young adults need to be a key stakeholder group in climate policy planning, this focus has its merits.

The challenges of the immediate decades ahead, the positioning of young adults as important players

in environmental change, and the need to prepare young adults for the costs and opportunities of a low carbon world will demand considerable capacity building and engagement. However, this focus on young people cannot be based on a business-as-usual approach. Policy makers need to develop best practices for addressing climate change concerns as highlighted from a youth perspective. This may require identifying the best activities and mechanisms that allow policy makers to authentically engage and work collaboratively with young adults, as well as identifying how best youth-driven projects can help address the compounding vulnerabilities brought about by environmental decline. According to a United Nations report on youth and climate change, access to information is important, as is consultation, involvement in decision-making, and support to help young people collaborate with their peers to mobilise on issues.¹⁸

*What could be more important than the future of our world? As young people, we have the most at stake, so we should be stepping up to our roles as the major stakeholders and stand up for the kind of future we want.*¹⁹

Nevertheless, young people cannot be expected to engage meaningfully in local mitigation or adaptation programmes, policy dialogues with governments or coordinated campaigning, without first being empowered with the necessary education and skills.²⁰ The changes in the world today are characterised by ever increasing complexity and contradiction, as well as new knowledge horizons, and these changes create tensions for which education, learning and awareness-raising must aim to prepare individuals and communities by enabling them with the capability to adapt and respond.²¹ A climate changing world requires the incorporation of new knowledge and practices to chart the course required to build a sustainable future. Young people will need to be empowered, their skills nourished, and the spaces provided to allow them to engage in policy making processes. Formal and informal educational processes will have to equip today's young adults to cope with not only living on a damaged planet, where risks are multiplied by global environmental decline, but also a world that will have to mitigate and adapt to the effects of dangerous climate change through transformative policy measures.

Climate change and the shift towards a low carbon future will affect employment sources and patterns.

Adapting to these changes requires a policy and education model that facilitates 'education for sustainability and enhances employability that can enable young people to enter a low carbon labour market'.²² In attempting to achieve this goal, national skills development and employment policies linked to broader development plans will need to incorporate education for sustainability, with coherent skill strategies to prepare young people for work in a low carbon economy.²³ These considerations have considerable implications for how and what we teach young adults through our educational institutions and more broadly, how our wider communities choose to collectively transition. Education for sustainability is, therefore, critically important. It places teachers and educational institutions, along with formal and informal pedagogical processes, in a decisive position to the current and future wellbeing of the world.²⁴

Goal 13 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals commits member states to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts through, among other activities, 'improving education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning'.²⁵ This activity can be closely related to Goal 4 which acknowledges that 'obtaining a quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development'.²⁶ While this Goal is generally understood in terms of equality and access within education, its target also includes the aim of ensuring that 'all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including... through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles', among other objectives. It is worth noting however, that criticisms have been directed at the SDGs as seeking to 'repair the existing global economic model significantly', forging ahead with a business-as-usual approach to sustainable development.²⁷

Here in Ireland, academics, such as Peadar Kirby, draw on the language of *Laudato Si'*, to argue that existing educational trajectories educate young people into a value system which supports and sustains the dominant techno-economic paradigm so frequently criticised in the papal encyclical.²⁸ Acknowledging the changes that must be made between now and 2050, if the human family is to keep within safe planetary boundaries, he contends that the socio-ecological crisis of climate change must dominate the concerns of educators: 'we are

educating young people for a society that is fast disappearing, we are giving them none of the skills they need for the challenges they are going to face'.²⁹

Similar sentiments are expressed by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. In a recent address for World Philosophy Day 2017, he argued that new ways of thinking are required to meet the challenges of the coming decades: 'in conditions of change it is surely important to have the capacity to generate the questions, listen to the suggestions as to how we might live together sustainably in an ethical way'.³⁰ In terms of responding to environmental change, this requires an educational response that alerts young people to the social and environmental challenges that society faces over the immediate decades, and empowers them with new values, practices, and imaginations for an ecologically challenging, low carbon future. A climate changing world calls for an integral ecological approach to knowledge, learning and education – these processes need to be inclusive, based on a humanistic, integrated approach with renewed ethical and moral foundations.³¹

Perhaps the most radical vision of a way forward is offered by *Laudato Si'*. Quoting Pope Benedict XVI's address at the 2010 World Day of Peace, Pope Francis argues that only a renewed sense of intergenerational solidarity can address the injustices climate change provokes. This needs to move us to a deeper reflection on the meaning and values that will help transform a concern for future generations into a realisation that what is at stake is our own dignity: 'What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?'. (§160)

The transformation required is a great educational challenge, and the way forward must offer a distinctive attitude in thinking, lifestyle and spirituality, whereby:

Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care. (§202)

Conclusion

Sustainability and living within the Earth's planetary boundaries has emerged as a central policy and justice concern in the face of climate change, the degradation of vital natural resources, and the loss of biodiversity. With a population of over 400,000 in Ireland, young people are an important group to consider, include, and consult when formulating and implementing policy measures that aim to transition to a low carbon, more ecologically sustainable future. The ecological challenges of our times demand that young people be provided with the opportunities that will give them the skills and knowledge, attitudes and values to respond and participate meaningfully in a climate changing world. This will require not only providing young people with a greater voice by strengthening values-driven learning, engagement and participatory opportunities across the sectors of society that involve young people, but also orienting all the social structures that provide these opportunities towards more ambitious, and transformative climate action.

Notes

1. Hannah Mills, Nova Scotia, quoted on 'Youth to Youth Minister: Climate Change has no place in our Future'. See: <http://peoplesclimate.ca/youth-to-youth-minister/>
2. Barnett, J., and Adger, N. (2007) 'Climate change, human security and violent conflict', *Political Geography*, Vol. 26(6).
3. For example, while Ireland's National Mitigation Plan (July 2017) explicitly states that climate change is 'one of the greatest global challenges for this and future generations' and 'confronting climate change is the global imperative of our generation', the Plan has been criticised by NGOs for failing to give regard to the principle of climate justice, or establish a concrete plan for how Ireland will reduce its emissions over the coming years. See for example: Stop Climate Chaos and Environmental Pillar (2017) *Submission to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment on the draft National Mitigation Plan (NMP)*. (Available at: https://www.stopclimatechaos.ie/download/pdf/scc_pillar_joint_submission_on_national_mitigation_plan.pdf)
4. In 2006, the landmark Stern Report on the Economics of Climate Change estimated that the cost of inaction could be as much as 20% of global GDP, in comparison to just 1% of GDP for taking climate action. See: Stern (2006) *Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change*. London: HM Treasury.
5. The largest proportion of emissions come from the agriculture sector (35%), followed by transport (22%) and energy industries (15%) (Environmental Protection Agency. (2017) *Ireland's Greenhouse Gas Emission Projections, 2016-2035*. Wexford: EPA. Available at: http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/airemissions/ghgprojections/EPA_2017_GHG_Emission_Projections_Summary_Report.pdf)
6. Curtin, J., and Hanrahan, G. (2012) *Why legislate? Designing a Climate Law for Ireland*. Dublin: The Institute of International and European Affairs. Dublin: The Institute of International and European Affairs. (Available at: <http://www.iiiea.com/publications/why-legislate-designing-aclimate-law-for-ireland>)

7. Burke-Kennedy, E. (2016) 'Government criticised for failing to act on climate change', *The Irish Times*, 22 November 2016. (Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/business/energy-and-resources/government-criticised-for-failing-to-act-on-climate-change-1.2878291>)
8. In December 2015, 196 countries agreed to 'holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.' (The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2016) The Paris Agreement - main page". UNFCCC.int. Available at: http://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf). Over the coming years, the global community will have to reduce carbon emissions significantly if the planet is to keep within the 1.5 degree threshold as agreed upon in the landmark Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement reflected a united international consensus that the risks associated with climate change are too great to ignore.
9. Environmental Protection Agency. (2017) *Ireland's Provisional Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 1990-2016*. (Available at: <http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/airemissions/ghgemissions2016/#d.en.63244>)
10. *Ibid*.
11. Ireland's National Mitigation Plan published in July 2017 has been heavily criticised not just by Ireland's environmental and development NGO sector, but also the Climate Change Advisory Council, for lacking in the specific, concrete policies that are needed to guide Irish society along the type of social and economic transformation required.
12. Climate Change Advisory Council (2017) *Periodic Review Report 2017*. Dublin: Climate Change Advisory Council. (Available at: http://www.climatecouncil.ie/media/CCAC_PERIODICREVIEWREPORT2017_Final.pdf)
13. For example, a 2017 comment from a number of well renowned policy figures in the academic journal *Nature* stated that 'should emissions continue to rise beyond 2020, or even remain level, the temperature goals set in Paris become almost unattainable' (Figueres, C. et al. (2017) 'Three years to safeguard our climate', *Nature*, Vol. 546(7660). Available at: <http://www.nature.com/news/three-years-to-safeguard-our-climate-1.22201>). A similar sense of urgency was echoed at the 2017 climate negotiations in Bonn, Germany.
14. These include the right to health, the right to water and food, the right to reach full potential, and the right to equality.
15. To minimise the effects of environmental risk and climate injustice, ambitious, fair climate action must have the needs of the current generation at its core; young people need to be included and prepared for participating in a climate changing world.
16. This is evident in the energy and enthusiasm reflected in a number of youth movements involved in climate action. For examples, see One Young World (2016) 'We are young people and we will solve climate change' (Available at: <https://www.oneyoungworld.com/blog/we-are-young-people-and-we-will-solve-climate-change>), and Taking it Global (2007) *Climate Change Youth Guide to Action* (Available at: http://tig.phpwebhosting.com/guidetoaction/Climate_Guide_to_Action_en.pdf).
17. Merriem Street Irish Government News Service (2017) Speech by Mr. Denis Naughten, T.D. Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment at Eco-UNESCO Young Environmentalists Awards. 23 May 2017. (Available at: https://merriemstreet.ie/en/News-Room/Releases/Speech_by_Mr_Denis_Naughten_T_D_Minister_for_Communications_Climate_Action_and_Environment_at_Eco-UNESCO_Young_Environmentalists_Awards.html)
18. United Nations (2010) *World Youth Report: Youth and Climate Change*. New York: United Nations. (Available at: http://tig.phpwebhosting.com/guidetoaction/Climate_Guide_to_Action_en.pdf).
19. Taking it Global (2007) *Climate Change Youth Guide to Action*. Ontario, Canada: Taking it Global. (Available at: http://tig.phpwebhosting.com/guidetoaction/Climate_Guide_to_Action_en.pdf).
20. Plan International (2015) *We Stand as One. Children, Young People and Climate Action*. (Available at: <https://www.plan.org.au/~media/plan/documents/resources/we-stand-as-one--children-young-people-and-climate-change.pdf>)
21. Education plays a paramount role in raising awareness and promoting behavioural change for both climate change mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation efforts call for a concerted engagement to contain emissions and prevent further drastic consequences on the planet; adaptation entails reducing vulnerabilities and building resilience to its impacts.
22. Andrews, D. (2015) 'The circular economy, design thinking and education for sustainability', *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, Vol. 30 (3).
23. Although there is increasing discussion on the need for a *just transition*, this concept and related policy framework is typically applied to communities affected by the loss of employment created by the shift towards a low carbon economy, rather than a focus on the need to upskill young adults to enable them to participate meaningfully in a low carbon economy.
24. The 2014 Lima Ministerial Declaration on Education and Awareness-raising encourages 'governments to develop education strategies that incorporate the issue of climate change in curricula and to include awareness-raising on climate change in the design and implementation of national development and climate change strategies and policies in line with their national priorities and competencies.
25. United Nations. (2016) 'Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Sustainable Development Goal 13'. (Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg13>)
26. United Nations. (2016) 'Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. (Available at: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education>)
27. Sachs, W. (2017) 'The Sustainable Development Goals and Laudato Si': varieties of Post-Development?', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 38(12).
28. Kirby, P. (2017) Presentation to Green Foundation Ireland seminar: *A New Climate for Education*. 3 November 2017. (Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBnz_POZP9c)
29. *Ibid*.
30. President of Ireland (2017) 'Speech by President Michael D. Higgins at a Reception to launch Irish Young Philosopher Awards', 16 November 2017. (Available at: www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/speech-by-president-michael-d.-higgins-at-a-reception-to-launch-irish-young)
31. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (2015) *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?* Paris: UNESCO Publishing. (Available at <http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Cairo/images/RethinkingEducation.pdf>)

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