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Measuring outcomes in youth work: The efficacy of positive psychology

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Abstract

Providers of youth work provision in Ireland are increasingly finding themselves in a position of having to demonstrate the impact that they have among the young people with whom they work. This paper suggests that a positive psychology framework operationalised through the PERMA questionnaire is one way in which impact can be assessed among young people. The PERMA model assessing the five dimensions of: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. First this paper sets out the background to current youth work in Ireland; second, it presents an overview of positive psychology with a focus on the PERMA model. Third, this paper presents an overview of one study that has been conducted in Ireland employing the positive psychology framework. Finally, this paper suggests the implications of using this methodological framework for assessing the impact of youth work in different contexts.

Introduction

Youth work in Ireland, along with their European counterparts, is experiencing significant changes in practice. These changes are driven by a number of factors including increased demand for their services, a push to professionalise youth workers, and increased pressure by Government departments and funders to collaborate with other sectors working with young people (European Commission, 2014). These set of circumstances leave the youth work sector in Ireland in a position where they feel compelled to meet the demands of Government policies and funders (Jenkinson, 2013). This results in a need to adapt practice that delivers effective evidence-based approaches which demonstrate outcomes, predominately targeted to specific cohorts, addressing specific issues, whilst maintaining the core principles that form the foundation of youth work practice (Jenkinson, 2013). Some of those within the sector see this trend as placing extensive pressure on youth work services and argue that these changes in practice take youth work away from its original purpose (Jenkinson, 2013). At the same time, working collaboratively with various Government departments and funders offers a potential opportunity to demonstrate the positive contribution youth work can have on the lives of young people. The difficulty in the Irish context is that youth work currently has very little in terms of evidence that demonstrates what they do, how they do it, and the impact it has.

Youth work in the Irish context

There are over 40 national youth work services in Ireland, and they oversee a much larger number of local, community-based projects, services and groups, who deliver services on the ground. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) (2012), the national representative body for voluntary youth services, estimate that each year just under 400,000 young people, benefit from the various activities and programmes provided by youth work services. This represents 43.3% of the total population aged between 10 and 24 years of age (NYCI, 2012). Youth work is extraordinarily diverse, and as a result, to date, there is no international commonly agreed definition or aim of youth work (DCYA, 2013). However, youth work in Ireland is defined and guided by the Youth Work Act, 2001, as: *"A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations."* This definition highlights the focus on young people's social and personal development through informal and non-structured voluntary engagement. The challenge is how to capture the outcomes of this work given that it

is argued that youth work is particularly unsuited to ‘measurement’ because of its open-ended nature and its focus on ‘soft skills’ through informal education (De St Croix, 2018). Moreover, because youth work outcomes are not defined in advance, but instead emerge through working collaboratively with young people to identify their needs and interests within specific environments amongst a variety of individuals or groups capturing the outcomes can be very challenging (De St Croix, 2018). The lack of measurement of the youth work process does not take from the impact youth work has in the lives of young people, because in theory, this approach is said to be transformational, harnessing the skills of young people not achieved by formal education. However, it does impact the preservation of the youth work approach in the Irish context. According to Gilchrist *et al.* (2001), by failing to record their history, youth work has neglected to record its successes and its failures, leaving the sector vulnerable to the demands of others.

In 2013, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, 2013) commissioned a systematic review to determine how youth work could contribute to positive outcomes for young people. The systematic review was to provide part of the foundation that would inform a new youth policy framework in Ireland. The review provided a comprehensive overview of youth work and highlighted that youth work plays a key role in the lives of young people. However, the majority of the literature within the review was from a non-Irish perspective highlighting the significant dearth of research relating specifically to youth work in the Irish context (DCYA, 2013). The systematic review also found that most of the evidence used to demonstrate the outcomes from engaging in youth work was qualitative data based on self-assessments or case studies taken after young people experienced youth work. While the review stressed the importance of qualitative data it emphasised the need to produce quantitative data to complement qualitative measures and provide an estimate of effects. To date, there remains a paucity of research evidencing impact within the youth work sector, while at the same time, since the publication of the review, the landscape of youth work in Ireland continues to change, as have the lives and contexts of the young people who present to their services.

The last decade has presented challenges in maintaining a hold on youth works’ core values and practices, mainly as a result of significant changes that have occurred regarding the monitoring, and evaluation of youth work. Currently, in Ireland, youth work is experiencing a move towards a model of funding, whereby the Government funders focus on value for money through proof of effectiveness (Jenkinson, 2013). The focus on value for money through

evidence of effectiveness can result in youth work services becoming overly focused on activities and cohorts with proven outcomes as opposed to the focus on the actual youth work process, such as building strong relationships. This shift of focus has the potential to impact and/or compromise the youth work process, potentially diluting the outcomes of the youth work process.

Creating a quantitative evidence base to support current qualitative evidence is particularly important, given the demand from funding departments on the youth work sector to move towards outcome-led and evidence-based work. Generating evidence from both quantitative and qualitative methods has the potential to provide a rich source of data that would support and further developments in youth work. Quantitative data has the potential to provide evidence of outcomes over time, while qualitative data has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of young peoples' experiences. Both have the potential to assess the impact of young people engaging in youth work. Being able to make evidence-based statements from studies conducted in Ireland, would help to establish actual outcomes for young people. It also has the potential to identify what is possible to achieve in the Irish context regarding youth work provision, practice, and policy. This shift in focus driven by funder's means that it is essential for youth work to demonstrate the efficacy of their approach and the impact it has.

Over the years the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have employed the services of the Centre of Effectiveness (CES) to support the Youth Work sector to evidence their work. The CES works with agencies, government departments and service providers in Ireland in areas such as education, health, children and young people and social services. For example, the CES played a pivotal role in the systematic map of the research in youth work mentioned above. The CES was also instrumental in the implementation of the National Quality Standards Framework in Youth Work. However, the exploration of youth work should be developed from the perspective of improving practice, developing an evidence base, and increasing the confidence and professional identity of the youth work sector as opposed to the research being a funding led agenda. Moreover, evidencing the youth work process and its respective outcomes should be led by the youth work sector. One of the main barriers in determining outcomes of youth work is the lack of standardised evaluation measures informed by youth work practice. According to Catalano *et al.* (2004), a universal standardised set of outcome measures to identify if outcomes that are consistent and replicable are needed. Standardised outcomes measure would not only support current qualitative data but also enable an independent assessment of outcomes.

Young people's wellbeing in the Irish context

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2015) adolescence is a unique developmental phase between childhood and adulthood where multiple physical, emotional, and social changes occur. One of the main impacts on positive adolescent development is mental health and wellbeing (WHO, 2004). The World Health Organisation (2020a) reports that mental health conditions account for 16% of the global burden of disease and injury in young people aged 10-19 years. It is estimated that half of all mental health conditions begin by 14 years of age, but that most cases are undetected and consequently untreated. Globally, among this age cohort, depression is one of the leading causes of illness and disability. Moreover, suicide amongst young people aged 10-19 is the third leading cause of death (WHO, 2020a). The consequences of not addressing adolescent mental health conditions extend into adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities for young people to lead fulfilling lives as adults.

In 2012, the My World Survey (MWS-1) reported the mental health experience of over 14,000 adolescents and young adults aged between 12 and 25 in the Irish context. MWS-1 reported that the majority of young people were found to be functioning well across a variety of mental health indicators (Headstrong, 2012). At the same time the report also highlighted significantly high levels of depression and anxiety amongst young people in Ireland. The report also demonstrated that mental health difficulties emerged in early adolescence and peaked in the late teens and early 20s. This peak in mental health difficulties, in general, was coupled with a decrease in protective factors such as self-esteem, optimism, and positive coping strategies (Headstrong, 2012). The MWS-1 brings into focus the needs of a significant number of young people who are not coping and reaffirms the importance of early intervention (Headstrong, 2012). Six years following MWS-1, MWS-2 reported an increase in levels of depression and anxiety in adolescents alongside a further decrease in levels of protective factors, including self-esteem, optimism, and resilience (Headstrong, 2012; Jigsaw, 2019).

Current service provision in Ireland is struggling to support young peoples' mental health (Government of Ireland, 2006; Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), 2013). Service provision in Ireland continues to be heavily focused on the higher level of need, which supports young people with a mental health diagnosis (Government of Ireland, 2006; Mental Health Reform, 2015). These services report long waiting lists, demonstrating that they are under pressure to meet the demand on their service. In an attempt to improve access to services

recent Government policies have aimed to support young peoples' mental health and wellbeing by re-orientating service provision. Collectively, these policies aim, through inter-sectoral and interagency collaboration, to promote young peoples' mental health and wellbeing by providing both services and other relevant support within the community (Department of Health, 2013; DCYA, 2014; DCYA, 2015). Findings from the most recent MWS-2 suggest that young peoples' mental health and wellbeing are not improving (Jigsaw, 2019).

Evidence suggests that population-based approaches that target whole populations or specific population groups such as adolescents, which focus on improving wellbeing, can significantly reduce the number of individuals experiencing mental health disorders (Huppert, 2005). This suggests that improving young peoples' wellbeing, lowers the rate of anxiety and depression within this cohort. The World Health Organisation (2005, p.7) defines adolescent mental health as: *"the capacity to achieve and maintain optimal psychological functioning and wellbeing. It is directly related to the level reached and competence achieved in psychological and social functioning"*. Moreover, the World Health Organisation (2020b) identifies mental wellbeing in young people as an essential determinant of mental health later in life and proposes actions for Governments to improve wellbeing across the lifespan through universal and targeted interventions that have been shown to be effective. Both the World Health Organisation's definition of adolescent mental health and their recommendations not only highlight the significant role psychological wellbeing plays in positive adolescent mental health, but further suggests that increasing wellbeing among the adolescent cohort is a necessary and worthwhile goal. A strong sense of wellbeing contributes to good mental health, acting as a guardian of our mental health. Mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness rather it is a state of overall wellbeing.

Youth work role in supporting young people's wellbeing

Currently, in Ireland, the youth work sector is engaging with just over 43% of the youth population aged between 10-24 years of age, and it is estimated that 50% of youth work activities specifically target young people intending to influence their behaviours, to improve or preserve their health and wellbeing (NYCI, 2012). It is possibly for the reasons outlined above that it is estimated that 50% of youth work activities are directed at supporting young peoples' wellbeing. This suggests that youth work have developed their practice to meet the presenting needs. However, to date, there remains no evidence to document the outcomes of this work. That said, evidence is continuing to mount, suggesting that increasing wellbeing

among the adolescent cohort is a worthwhile goal. Wellbeing seems to operate as a protective psychological strength that provides a buffer against some effects of adverse life events in adolescence (Suldo & Hueber, 2004). Additionally, high levels of wellbeing is associated with many positive outcomes across several life domains (Diener & Chan, 2011). For example, it is associated with better academic achievement (Proctor *et al.*, 2010), more satisfying relationships with friends and family (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Proctor, *et al.*, 2010), a stronger immune system (Hoyt *et al.*, 2012), improved cognitive performance (Hoyt *et al.*, 2012), improved long term health associated with fewer risky health behaviours (Hoyt *et al.*, 2012), and the ability to cope with life's ups and downs (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). In addition to these tangible benefits, wellbeing is essential during adolescence, with research suggesting that it is the cornerstone of good mental health (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004).

At the same time, evidence of young peoples' wellbeing presents a complex picture, the influences on young peoples' wellbeing are multifaceted and become increasingly varied as adolescent's transition into adulthood.

Supportive environments including the family, school and the wider community all play a significant role in building and supporting young peoples' wellbeing. There is a lot of evidence documenting the impact of both family (Jigsaw, 2019; Glynn *et al.*, 2021) and school (Ford *et al.*, 2021) play in adolescent wellbeing and while research is continuing to accumulate on the community influence (Jigsaw, 2019; Foster *et al.*, 2017), there is no specific research to date documenting the impact youth work has on adolescent wellbeing. The youth work sector has experience engaging young people regarding wellbeing issues and practice related evidence suggesting that their presence among the youth cohort is felt and their work is effective (European Commission, 2014). That said, assuming their work is making an impact, there remains a void in the Irish context regarding both measuring the outcomes for young people and communicating it.

The core principles and values of youth work suggest that youth work services offer a supportive environment. Youth work engages with young people to deliver strategically planned programmes with a strong emphasis on building personal and social competencies. These programmes provide meaningful activities to young people in a safe and positive environment. Therefore, it could be argued that all good quality youth work should provide positive outcomes in terms of health and wellbeing and that by creating this supportive

environment suggests that youth services are best placed to support and enhance young peoples' wellbeing.

Youth work from a political and policy perspective has a strong footing in the Irish context. Through its emphasis on wellbeing, along with its core processes and practices, youth work contributes to a range of policy outcomes for young people, most notably in the areas of mental health. Currently, a general lack of data and robust evaluation hinders the sector from demonstrating effectiveness. To date, there is very little literature that can offer reliable evidence about the impact from a non-USA perspective. There is also a lack of evidence on the benefits of participation in youth work activities in the Irish/UK context. Most of the available research evidence continues to be based on self-reports collected as part of case studies, or on measures taken after young people experience youth work, but not before (DCYA, 2013). More specifically, regardless of youth work emphasis on wellbeing, to date no research has identified the impact youth work has on adolescent wellbeing. One of the main barriers is the lack of effective measuring tools to capture this information within a youth work setting. The following section presents a methodological framework which is based in positive psychology and suggests that this framework can be employed as an effective tool for assessing the impact of youth work on young peoples' psychological wellbeing.

Methodology

What is positive psychology?

Positive psychology is defined as the scientific study of what makes life most worth living (Donaldson *et al.*, 2015). Positive Psychology includes the study of three pillars including positive experiences (like happiness, joy, inspiration, and love), positive states and traits (like gratitude, resilience, and compassion) and positive institutions (applying positive principles within entire organizations and institutions). This framework for positive psychology provides a vision intended to inspire others to help build a science and profession that will provide knowledge and a practice base on how best to facilitate individuals, communities, organisations, and societal flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The same scientific rigour applied to the field of psychology in general, are also used to study human behaviour through the positive psychology lens (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A core foundational belief shared among most positive psychologists is that humans strive to lead meaningful, happy, and good lives. In doing so, the field spans across multiple areas and is applicable in a variety of contexts, including schools, communities, work places, and family

life (Donaldson *et al.*, 2015). Donaldson *et al.* (2015) suggest that positive psychology has ignited a new way of thinking accumulating a wide range and ever-increasing number of publications in areas such as human strengths and virtues (Park & Peterson 2009; Gillham *et al.*, 2011), optimism (Rasmussen *et al.*, 2009; Peterson, 2000), flourishing (Seligman, 2003), life satisfaction (Peterson *et al.*, 2005), wellbeing (Diener, 2000; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Alder & Seligman, 2016), social media and wellbeing (Guntuku *et al.*, 2017), school-based resilience (Alder & Seligman, 2018), and achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2017) to name but a few. However, the most researched topic in positive psychology is wellbeing, accounting for almost 40% more publications than all other key topics combined (Donaldson *et al.*, 2015).

Positive psychology and PERMA

A key element in the promotion of wellbeing is the need to measure and document levels of and changes in wellbeing at individual, community, and national levels. Historically, scientific study of global wellbeing has been strongly influenced by two philosophical traditions, hedonia and eudaimonia, both of which continue to underscore much of our current understanding (Tesar & Peters, 2020). Psychologists who study subjective wellbeing from a hedonic perspective focus on factors that contribute to maximizing pleasure and minimising pain. Whereas psychologists who study subjective wellbeing through the eudemonic lens focus on factors that contribute to generating happiness and meaning in one's life. Positive psychology has combined both these philosophical traditions into what is known as the PERMA model to measure wellbeing (Seligman, 2012). The PERMA model has five distinct routes to wellbeing, including Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. The theory posits that focusing on all five elements enable individuals to flourish and find happiness in life. Positive emotion is focused on finding ways to deliberately increase positive emotion. By repeatedly experiencing positive emotions, they become more noticeable and automatic over time. Engagement is focused on finding 'flow' (participating in activities that consume your attention in a positive way) like playing sports, reading your favourite genre, learning more about a topic that you enjoy. Experiencing 'flow' often generates and sustains a long-term sense of enjoyment. Relationships are all about focusing on investing time and energy into personal relationships that yield a deeper sense of connection and overall wellbeing. Meaning is all about focusing on the things that bring personal value or a sense of purpose in daily life. Accomplishment is focused on taking time to take account of both the big and small success that happens throughout daily life.

Potential for measuring outcomes

The PERMA model is a multidimensional approach to measuring wellbeing and offers the potential to systematically understand and promote wellbeing (Kern *et al.*, 2015). Positive psychologists highlight that determining how wellbeing can be enhanced and how individuals can thrive, and flourish is important (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As previously discussed, adolescence is a period of growth and development, enhancing wellbeing is particularly important because increasing wellbeing may not only prevent future mental health problems but also have benefits for other life domains.

The literature review above has considered the current challenges in the Irish context with evidencing outcomes associated with successful youth work practice. The PERMA model offers youth work an empirically tested measuring tool (psychometric test) that can help identify the impact youth work has on young peoples' wellbeing. The effectiveness of this is further enhanced by the symbiotic relationship between the youth work process and positive psychology. This is in part because the youth work process is largely informed by Positive Youth Development (PYD) but equally because the basic tenets of positive psychology do not differ to those of youth work which is ultimately to support young people to be the best that they can be. Similar to the aims and objectives of youth work outlined in its definition, PYD and positive psychology both aim to prepare a young person to meet the challenges of adolescence, achieve his or her full potential and successfully transition into adulthood (Lerner *et al.*, 2013, Chapter 15).

Moreover, research within positive psychology can benefit a wide range of disciplines including youth work. Positive psychology emphasises that applying their insights can enable people to live better lives (Lopez & Gallagher, 2011, Chapter 1; Diener, 2011, Chapter 2). This can also be a two-way process as the scientific study of wellbeing requires a multi-disciplinary integrated approach including sectors such as health, education, social work, media, and academia to name but a few (Huppert, 2005, Chapter 12). So arguably, research evidencing youth work that is informed by PYD processes and practices could also inform positive psychology applications.

While structured provision is not standardised across the youth work sector in the Irish context, their presence is strongly felt amongst young people, through delivering programmes, activities, information, and advice focused on supporting wellbeing (DCYA, 2013). As noted earlier, while youth workers organically orientate practice to meet the presenting needs of

young people, there remains no documented evidence of this need. Equally, there remains no evidence of the outcome of meeting the need to support young people's wellbeing. Collectively, this lack of evidence hinders the youth sector from articulating their approach and the impact it has on young people's wellbeing. Having an evidence base regarding its practice has the potential to benefit the youth work sector. It would create a common language within the sector that would allow youth work to demonstrate both what they do and the impact this has on young people. In addition, it would create a research base related to current practice as opposed to the research being a funding led agenda. Demonstrating the impact of youth work should ideally be founded on the perspective of improving practice, developing an evidence base and increasing confidence, and professional identity among the youth work sectors. This paper considers a methodological framework that investigates the impact of youth work on young peoples' wellbeing and asks if positive psychology's PERMA model can effectively measure outcomes of youth work practice among young people.

An example of the application of the PERMA model to youth work practice in Ireland

The PERMA approach to assessing the impact of youth work practice in Ireland was employed among a sample of 377 young people. Prior to this assessment a pilot study was conducting to consider the questions appropriate for inclusion in the measure.

Measure Development

To create the measure, a comprehensive compilation of items and measures aligned with the PERMA model was compiled. These included the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for Children (PANAS-C) (Laurent *et al.*, 1999), The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being (Kern, *et al.*, 2016), The PERMA-Profilier (Butler & Kern 2016), The Flow Scale (Csikszentmihalyi,1975), The Meaning In Life Questionnaire (Steger *et al.*, 2006), The Multidimensional Scale Of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet, *et al.*, 1988) and the Purpose Of Life Subscale (Ryff, 1989). The measure was piloted amongst forty-two young people and six youth workers from a variety of projects and services within Youth Work Ireland. No adjustment was made to the scales before the pilot. Both young people and youth workers were asked to complete all the measures to help identify possible problems and experience the data collection from a participant's perspective. Following feedback from the pilot, The Flow Scale (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), The Purpose in Life subscale (Ryff, 1989), and positive emotion, engagement, and relationship subscales within the PERMA-Profilier (Butler & Kern, 2016) were excluded. All other scales were included. Participants also

recommended that the same Likert scale (response format) be used for all measures as it was experienced as time-consuming and confusing having different Likert scales for each of the measures. No other problems were reported on the comprehension or layout of the questionnaires.

As outlined in Table 1 below to operationalise PERMA, the final measure included the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for Children (PANAS-C) (Laurent *et al.*, 1999), The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Wellbeing (Kern *et al.*, 2016) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet *et al.*, 1988). Additionally, items assessing meaning and accomplishment from the PERMA profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) that were judged to be relevant and appropriate for the adolescent cohort were also included. The measure used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *almost never to almost always* for all measures.

-Insert Table 1 about here-

The questionnaire included a range of demographic questions relating to age, gender, ethnicity, school, youth work, family composition and employment status of parents/ guardian/carer. The demographic variables chosen for study were based on previous research in the Irish context that identified the social economic factors impacting young people's mental health and wellbeing (Jigsaw, 2019; Headstrong, 2012). Gathering the above demographic variables allowed the study to compare the characteristics of participants in both the youth work group and the control group. The youth work group were invited to indicate specifically the project or programme in which they were engaged.

Example study

The participant group consisted of 377 participants, $n=198$ of whom were engaging in youth work services and $n=179$ were not currently engaging in youth work services. Participants were recruited from young people engaging in youth work services in the Republic of Ireland aged between 12-18 years. Of the 198 participants engaging in youth work services $n=80$ (40.4%) were males and $n=118$ (59.6%) were females. The majority of the participants were aged between 15-18 years ($n=103$) and the remaining participants aged between 12-14 years ($n=95$). The majority of the participants were Irish ($n=177$), compared with $n=21$ foreign adoptees. Except for $n=6$ participants (3%) all other participants were attending school. All participants were invited to participate in the study by the youth workers based in the projects in which the young people were participating.

The control group included participants attending post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland that were aged between 12-18 years who did not participate in any youth work service. Of the 179 participants in the control group $n=107(59.8)$ were male and $n=72 (40.2\%)$ were females. Participants in the control group were aged between 13-17 years with the majority of the participants aged between 15-17 years ($n=160$) and the remaining participants aged between 13-14 years ($n=19$). Most of the participants were Irish ($n=156$), compared with $n=23$ foreign adoptees. All participants were invited to participate in the study by the school year head.

Procedure

Participants engaged in youth work were recruited from within Youth Work Ireland, which is the largest youth organisation in Ireland. Youth Work Ireland comprises of a network of over 150 projects and services and over 300 youth clubs across Ireland. Weekly, they actively engage with and support over 116,000 young people that is 20% of all young people in Ireland. All projects and services were invited to participate. The youth worker responsible for the participating project was provided with information on the study, their role, and the role of participating young persons. Young people and their parents/carers/non-parents of those engaging in projects that agreed to participate in the study were provided information about the study on day one of the new group or activity. To implement the questionnaire the youth worker read out the questions from a central point in the room. The youth worker was instructed to read the questions slowly to allow all participants enough time to answer the question before moving on. Another youth worker was present to support young people if needed. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participants in the youth work group completed the measure before and after engaging in a youth work project or service. The timeline varied from 1 week to 6 months depending on the project or service.

Participants from the control group were recruited from selected (all girls, all boys, and mixed schools) post-primary schools throughout the southeast of Ireland. The same administrative procedure implemented in the youth work setting was applied to the control group with two exceptions. Participants in the control group completed the questionnaire only once because data was collected for comparison purposes and the researcher was present during data collection. Any young person who indicated that they were currently engaging in youth work on their questionnaire was withdrawn from the study at the data analysis stage.

Comparisons of wellbeing measures and PERMA factors, between Time 1, Time 2, and control groups were explored using a Kruskal Wallis. Investigations of the impact the type of youth work had on wellbeing were explored using a Kruskal Wallis.

Results

Table 2 reports a one-way analysis of variance (Kruskal Wallis). The results demonstrate that there is a significant difference between the groups in positive emotion ($\chi^2 (38.987) = p < .05$) and accomplishment ($\chi^2 (332.276) = p < .05$). This suggests that participants in the control group experienced higher levels of positive emotion, and accomplishment in their daily lives compared to participants who engaged in youth work both at Time 1 and Time 2. The findings also highlight that participants who engaged in youth work both at Time 1 and Time 2 experienced higher levels of meaning in their lives compared to participants in the control group ($\chi^2 (267.651) = p < .05$). No significant difference was found in relationship and engagement between participants who engaged in youth work both at Time 1 and Time 2 and the control group.

-Insert Table 2 about here-

Results by type of Youth Work

Table 3 demonstrates a significant difference in positive emotion for participants who engaged in youth cafés and summer camps. This suggests that participants who engaged in youth cafés ($\chi^2 (11.166) = p < .05$) and summer camps ($\chi^2 (20.535) = p < .05$) both at Time 1 and Time 2 have lower levels of positive emotion compared to participants engaged in other types of youth work and the control group.

-Insert Table 3 about here-

Table 4 demonstrates a significant difference in engagement for participants who took part in summer camps. This suggests that participants who engaged in summer camps ($\chi^2 (11.955) = p < .05$) both at Time 1 and Time 2 have lower levels of engagement compared to participants engaged in other types of youth work and the control group.

-Insert Table 4 about here-

Table 5 demonstrates a significant difference in relationship for participants who engaged in youth cafes and summer camps. This suggests that participants who engaged in youth cafes ($\chi^2 (14.142) = p < .05$) and summer camps ($\chi^2 (10.711) = p < .05$) both at Time 1 and Time 2 have lower levels of connection and social support compared to participants engaged in other types of youth work and the control group.

-Insert Table 5 about here-

Table 6 demonstrates for participants who engaged in any type of youth work, a significant difference between groups in meaning including sports development ($\chi^2 (21.996) = p < .05$), specialised youth work ($\chi^2 (39.284) = p < .05$), community-based youth work ($\chi^2 (13.841) = p < .05$), youth café ($\chi^2 (13.686) = p < .05$), summer camp ($\chi^2 (74.130) = p < .05$), and leadership programmes ($\chi^2 (30.643) = p < .05$). This suggests that participants who engaged in any type of youth work both at Time 1 and Time 2 have higher levels of meaning compared to participants in the control group.

-Insert Table 6 about here-

Table 7 demonstrates that for participants who engaged in any type of youth work, a significant difference between the groups in accomplishment including sports development ($\chi^2 (21.555) = p < .05$), specialised youth work ($\chi^2 (42.526) = p < .05$), community-based youth work ($\chi^2 (16.22) = p < .05$), youth café ($\chi^2 (27.072) = p < .05$), summer camp ($\chi^2 (91.963) = p < .05$), and leadership programmes ($\chi^2 (31.923) = p < .05$). This suggests that participants who engaged in any type of youth work both at Time 1 and Time 2 have lower levels of accomplishment compared to participants in the control group.

-Insert Table 7 about here-

Discussion

This paper highlights a study which used a multidimensional construct, the PERMA model to develop a measure that would enable youth workers to access outcomes relating to their work in promoting wellbeing amongst young people. This methodological approach and the subsequent findings from this study have implications for youth work practice.

Traditionally, the youth work sector has struggled to convey what they do to the outside observer. Youth workers organically and intuitively adopt their practice to suit both the strengths and needs of young people. However, it is often difficult to articulate to funders the why and the how of the youth work approach. One of the factors attributed to the communication of its work was the lack of quality evidence that demonstrates the impact of youth work. Another contributing factor is the diverse audience both within and outside of the sector with whom they must communicate. Using a quantitative measure appropriate for youth work such as the one in our study provides the youth work sector with an evidence-based operational framework. This type of framework can be applied to practice while also serve as a method to communicate through a common language both within and outside the sector, their work regarding young peoples' wellbeing. The ability to effectively communicate youth work practice regarding young peoples' wellbeing could help to further clarify and validate their approach and potentially provide the youth work sector with more opportunities to develop collaboration with researchers, policymakers, and other relevant statutory and community bodies. Moreover it has the potential to contribute to literature including PYD, positive psychology, and the promotion of adolescent mental health

This study presents an example of the implementation of a methodological approach to measuring youth work which enables youth work services to identify the wellbeing needs of the young people presenting to those services and identify specific outcomes of their approach. It also highlights potential ways that practice could be developed to further support the wellbeing needs of young people attending those services. Findings from this study conducted within Youth Work Ireland highlighted that of the five PERMA factors, young people who engaged in youth work have significantly lower levels of positive emotion and sense of accomplishment compared to young people who do not engage in youth work. Moreover, by using the measure across different types of youth work, highlighted that young peoples' levels of wellbeing varied significantly by the type of youth work they engaged in. For example,

participants who engaged in summer camps had significantly lower levels of positive emotion, engagement, and sense of support compared to participants engaged in other types of youth work and young people who do not engage in youth work. Also, participants engaged in youth cafes had significantly lower levels of positive emotion, and sense of support compared to participants engaged in other types of youth work and young people who do not engage in youth work. No significant difference in positive emotion, engagement and sense of support was found between young people who engaged in long term structured youth work programmes and those who did not engage in youth work. Regardless of type of youth work, young people who engaged in youth work had significantly higher levels of meaning compared to young people who did not engage in youth work.

Data from implementing the measure provides specificity and information regarding the wellbeing needs of young people presenting to youth work services and thereby providing youth work with a solid evidence base to identify impact. The data gathered in this study clearly and directly highlighted the different levels of need amongst young people engaging in different types of youth work. For example, data derived within the study indicates that young people engaging in youth cafés may need support to develop positive trusting relationships and to engage in additional leisure activities more regularly. Whereas young people in sports development programmes may need support establishing personal goals and preserving with them. Thus, this research highlights, the need to develop specific interventions for specific types of youth work and this multidimensional approach to wellbeing has the potential to enable youth work services to tailor systematic wellbeing approaches to the developmental needs of the young people presenting to their services.

This study also highlights the potential of using a quantitative measure that allows youth work to identify the outcomes of engaging in youth work on young people's wellbeing, with data suggesting that engaging in youth work generates meaning in the young people's lives. Regardless of life's challenges, according to Frankl (2004), the primary motivation of individuals is to discover meaning in life. Frankl, as a Holocaust survivor, insisted that meaning could be discovered under all circumstances, even in difficult life circumstances. For Frankl, meaning came from three possible sources: purposeful work, love, and courage in the face of difficulty. The youth work environment is conducive to engagement which can lead to experiencing meaning in ones' life by providing a unique opportunity for young people given other contexts such as school which tends to be less personal and more restrictive by nature.

Having a safe space supported by youth workers available for a developing adolescent provides an opportunity to explore different behaviours and identities. The youth work process is instrumental because youth workers tailor their programmes to the young peoples' strengths and interests, to engage and further build individual strengths. This process provides one possible explanation as to why engaging in youth work generates meaning in a young persons' life. For young people who are experiencing difficulties in other areas of their lives (e.g. family or school contexts), having this space appears to be vital key to building wellbeing. Further evidence of the importance of this service to young people is provided by the significant numbers of young people who engage voluntarily each year in youth work services in Ireland (NYCI, 2012). Youth work offers an extensive range of recreational activities and programmes within their services. That said recreational activities and programmes of various kinds are also available in several other contexts. However, one of the defining principles of youth work is voluntary participation. Therefore, young people are involved in youth work because they choose to be. In many ways, voluntary participation in youth work is unique as there are few other educational or even welfare services young people receive that they access of their own volition. The dynamic of voluntary participation establishes an important foundation for the work. The fact that young people have the choice to attend or not is believed by many to be one of, if not, the, defining feature of youth work (Ord, 2009). This suggests that young people chose to engage in an environment that is supported by youth workers which according to the findings in this study provides and generates meaning in their lives.

Historically, it has been argued that the softer skills youth work focuses on, such as wellbeing, are difficult to monitor and evaluate. To date, research demonstrating the impact of youth work has been predominately qualitative (DCYA, 2013). Furthermore, currently, there is no quantitative based evidence in the Irish context that has focused on wellbeing in the youth work sector. The research design applied in this study has important implications for practice within the youth work sector. One of the contributions of this study was to move beyond qualitative research and provide quantitative research relating to the wellbeing of young people who are presenting to youth work services. The study findings suggest that applying a multidimensional measure such as the PERMA model is practical for youth work service providers. The PERMA model which aligns with youth work practice enabled the study to take the abstract concept of wellbeing and provide concrete domains that could be measured quantitatively. From a methodological perspective, this model has previously been empirically tested amongst the adolescent cohort (Kern *et al.*, 2015; Kern *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, all the measures used to

operationalise the measure in this study had previously demonstrated strong psychometric properties and steps were also taken to ensure that the measure implemented was appropriate for the youth work setting.

Youth work services in Ireland are at the forefront of supporting young peoples' wellbeing and creating a culture that generates evidence-based literature that will not only allow the sector to communicate what they do but also advance the youth work profession. This study offers an opportunity for youth work to measure the wellbeing of young people, including vulnerable cohorts, and to identify the impact of engaging in youth work. The development and evaluation of wellbeing programmes and practices guided by the PERMA model applied in a youth work setting should be a continual process to ensure that the wellbeing needs of young people presenting to youth work services are addressed. Moreover, the youth work sector could create a common language and a shared understanding of young peoples' wellbeing. They could build a culture of wellbeing by developing and delivering interventions to young people and the community and generate and publish research on how to build wellbeing efficiently and effectively to the adolescent population in Ireland.

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