

Northern Irish Critical Dialogues 2008: Final Report

14 February and 10 April.

Introduction

Hosted by SWAP and supported by Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster these two critical dialogues were designed to provide reflective and critical forums for social work and social care academics and practitioners to explore some key issues for social work and social care post devolution in Northern Ireland. The idea for the two dialogues originated from an earlier consultation forum with academics from the Universities of Ulster and Belfast held in February 2007.

Critical dialogue 1 – key question: 'To what extent is it the role of the academic community to affect change at policy and practice level (locally and nationally)?'

20 delegates from the Universities of Ulster, Belfast as well as Belfast Metropolitan and the Southern Regional College attended the event. Delegates heard three stimulating papers from Paul Martin (Chief Social Service Officer, Social Services Inspectorate DHSSPS), Professor Ann Davis, Professor of Social Work and Director of CEIMH (Centre of Excellence in Mental Health), University of Birmingham, and Dr. Eoin O'Sullivan, Fellow, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Paul Martin presented the government vision for social work in NI. Delegates acknowledged that there was a crucial partnership to be fostered between academics and policy makers in Northern Ireland. Suggestions for how academics might go about influencing policy makers and indeed what type of relationship might be useful and productive included:

- Looking at ways to promote and enhance the 'academic voice' – for example defining what it means to be a social worker in Northern Ireland
- Proactively respond to ongoing government reviews e.g. Review of Social Work – currently underway in Northern Ireland and due to be completed by Nov 2008.
- Continuing to engage in critical dialogue e.g. the social work and social care interface was recognized as another core area in need of debate and further dialogue.

Ann Davies and Eion O'Sullivan considered the role of the social work academic within the broader UK and all Ireland context. Discussion highlighted some of the drivers behind the current positioning of social work academics within the UK university sector. There is pressure for social work researchers in Northern Ireland, for example, to 'speak to the London context' in order to justify the local emphasis for an international readership. Underlying much of the discussion was a desire to move away from such tendencies in order to 'craft' a Northern Irish identity for social work – both practitioners and academics. Delegates suggested ways in which this might be done:

- Create more active all Ireland partnerships
- Identify unique challenges and opportunities in a post-conflict context (e.g. the expertise which already exists regarding working with trauma as well as the involvement of service users and carers) and consider application of the Northern Irish experience to a globalization context
- Develop further existing relationships with Northern Irish local contexts

- Look at ways in which academics can engage more fully with surrounding jurisdictions in a devolved post-conflict era
- Use critical dialogue to explore the diversity of social work within NI and acknowledge diversity of need across client groups
- Develop more partnerships and promote critical engagement
- engage proactively in offering a NI perspective to national, cross-border and international debates

At the end of the event delegates recognized that it would not always be easy to match such a vision with the reality on the ground. The following barriers in particular were identified:

- Finding the space for critical thinking in the light of every-day pressures
- Tensions between what academics wish to/have to focus on and what practitioners prioritize.

Consequently, the second critical dialogue was designed to further the process of overcoming such barriers by providing a forum for reflection on ways in which academic social workers and practitioners might become agents of change in a post conflict society.

Critical dialogue 2 – key question ‘How might practitioners be agents of change?’

23 delegates attended from the universities of Ulster and Belfast together with delegates from Belfast Metropolitan College and the South East Trust for Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland. Delegates were also interested in:

- The role of practitioners in policy applications and implementations
- Differences between English and NI contexts
- The implications of the new democratic context for NI
- Ways to make connections between the lessons of sectarianism and new emerging issues.
- Ways to empower service users

Discussion focused on case studies from both the UK context and Northern Ireland with delegates interested in :

- The place of values in social work
- How students experience practice
- How practitioners can be heard
- Better critical engagement with managers
- Ways to produce examples of positive uses of power

Suggestions for becoming agents of change included:

- Making use of the extra curricula opportunities offered by universities for students in order to engage with community development
- Using legislative requirements to reflect on and consider impact of conflict
- Using legislative requirement to promote equality
- Using legislative requirement to involve service users
- Using the uniqueness of the NI context to develop effective communication channels (e.g. BASW – one union representation, NI Social Care Council where a third of members are service users
- Seeing public figures with social work backgrounds as champions (e.g. Berni Kelly, Mayor of Belfast)

The key things participants took away from both events included:

‘Importance of time to reflect, review and refresh, network and engage in NI dialogue’

‘good beginning of dialogue between academics and government’

‘thank you for an enjoyable, well run and informative event’

'I think there would be a lot of interest in possibly organizing a follow up session (maybe a 3rd dialogue??) on the basis of the discussions yesterday at some point'

'insight into issues across NI and social work and opportunity to think about the future of social work in NI ..'

Actions agreed after both events

In addition to the suggestions made during each event delegates agreed to:

- Engage fully with the forthcoming Review of Social Work –by being proactive and working in partnership to maximize potential impact
- Commit to ongoing critical dialogue within the NI academic community and between academic communities and practice and policy contexts
- Move notes and PowerPoint presentations from both events to the new swap website, and to try a wiki to circulate notes and promote discussion.
- Send ideas for future critical dialogues to SWAP at swapenquiries@soton.ac.uk
- Interested delegates to contact Mark Baldwin (m.j.baldwin@bath.ac.uk) re Social Work : a profession worth fighting for? 3rd annual conference at Liverpool Hope University 12-13 September 2008.

Suggestions made by delegates for future events and links

- Overview of changes to social care in the UK
- Workshop on spirituality and/or sectarianism (possibly led by Bernard Moss from the Centre for Health and Spirituality at Staffordshire University (b.r.moss@staff.ac.uk) <http://www.bernardmoss.org.uk/publications1.htm>)

Resources and activities

The following learning and teaching audio resources (MP3 format) have been produced following the event and are available from www.swap.ac.uk/events/swapevents/100408nidialogue.html and www.swap.ac.uk/events/swapevents/140208nicritical.html

- Audio extract 1: Paul Martin, 'what do social workers do?' (5.16 MB)
- Audio extract 2: Paul Martin, 'the role of social work academics in the change agenda' (3.7MB)
- Audio extract 3: Ann Davis, 'promoting and advocating for the discipline'(3.41 MB)
- Audio extract 4: Ann Davis, 'issues for the academic social work community and top tips for working with change' (7.8 MB)
- Audio extract 5: Mark Baldwin 'definitions of social work' (1.14MB)
- PowerPoint presentations from each critical dialogues are also available online.

Follow up plans for SWAP

- SWAP will be organising a further event in NI for the academic year 2008-2009.

Rebecca Johnson, May 2008