

Launch of Guerin, Hayes and McNally (eds), *Research and Evaluation in Community, Health and Social Care Settings: Experience from Practice*, Routledge, 2018
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I would like to begin by thanking Suzanne for the invitation to speak at this evening's event, to launch this important edited collection on Research and Evaluation in Community, Health and Social Care Settings: Experience from Practice. While I am absolutely delighted to be with you all this evening, I can't help thinking that this is payback Marian for work you kindly did for us in Oberstown last year! But seriously, thank you again for the invitation. It is always important to mark a new book's arrival and even more so when it focuses on such an important subject as this. As the editor of several collections – as many published as unpublished! – I fully understand the work that goes into conceptualising, writing, editing and ultimately delivering on a book of this scale and I want to congratulate your many authors for their respective contributions to the literature, and to congratulate the editors – Suzanne Guerin, Noirin Hayes and Sinead McNally – for ensuring that this book was brought into the world. The subject of this collection is an important one – containing a series of reflections on diverse aspects of and perspectives on the process of research and evaluation in community, health and social care settings, directly informed by the experience of conducting and commissioning such research. Written by more than 20 experts in their respective fields - of academia, practice, policy and philanthropy - and across multiple disciplines of social care, health, education, psychology, among others, this anthology is underpinned by a unique collaboration between those who commission, who undertake and who apply research, and those who are both subject to and use its findings. It is clear that apart from the co-authored chapters, the book embodies many shared perspectives and experiences of the community-based research processes. In that way, the book clearly is the product both of your reflections and of the many individual pieces of work that generated the observations so carefully communicated here.

There are so many important elements to the book that it is difficult to do it justice in just a few words this evening. It's especially useful and important aspects, however, include how it captures and shares learning on the commissioning and undertaking of research and evaluations of practice in a way that is accessible and practical. Important too is how

collaborative the book is – all chapters are co-authored and contain diverse inter-disciplinary perspectives – and how it speaks both to those who are involved in the commissioning of research and evaluation on the one hand and those who undertake it on the other. While there are many books on the shelves of our libraries on research methodologies, there are too few texts providing the kind of practical insights that we see here - on the process of procuring and commissioning research (an area rarely explored from the academic perspective), on undertaking research in community-based settings and on making this research matter through dissemination and communication. A spotlight on procuring research and on ethics and governance is especially welcome and with the increased focus on research for impact, in terms of policy and practice, this book is an important addition to the field in this area. If we are to continue to learn, we simply have to get better at documenting, analysing and sharing evidence of change processes and exchanging and disseminating knowledge is a skill that, like research, can and must be learned. The empirical research we do now – with all of its ethical and practical considerations – must be archived appropriately and ethically so that it can be used by our fellow researchers and students. For this reason, it is great to see archiving practices receive attention in the book too. At the same time, the book acknowledges that commissioning and undertaking research can have its challenges – research does not always produce expected outcomes – nor should it - and adverse or negative findings can pose challenges for all the parties involved. In the book, the point is repeatedly made that relationships and trust are vital to any research and evaluation process and time invested early on in the process will pay dividends later, especially if the parties encounter unexpected pitfalls along the way. While it is replete with experience, knowledge, guidance and practical advice, what shines through in the book in various ways is a belief in the value and importance of the complex but enriching endeavour of community-based research.

I thought I would conclude this evening with some remarks of my own on the importance of research, on its value to the community. I make these remarks as an unapologetic academic, albeit one who has spent her academic career at the interface with policy and practice, publishing books and articles and undertaking millions of euros of commissioned research for dozens of grant making bodies in Ireland and internationally. In particular, I had the pleasure to work with Gail Birkbeck of Atlantic Philanthropies on the advancing Child Rights

project and I want to commend Gail for her vision in this area. These include the Irish Research Council, Ireland's only funder of frontier research across all disciplines, where I now have the pleasure to sit on the Board helping to shape the research landscape for the current and we hope future generations. I say 'unapologetic academic', because I have always believed that research plays an important role in shaping our lives and our society – I have worked for 20 years in a Law School whose mission is to shape a just society and so I have always taken for granted that we research for a purpose. Although strongly committed to the value of University research, I have nonetheless always had a strong awareness of the limitations of the academic perspective. Those who see Universities as dusty places will not be surprised that my experience since 2016 as chair of the Board of Management at Oberstown Children Detention Campus has served to blow these particular cobwebs away. Just as my experience at Oberstown has enabled me to indulge in the hugely rewarding process of applying youth justice theory to practice, confronting the reality of effecting change in youth detention has taught me hard lessons about the messy and complex reality of practice. In many ways, I cannot unlearn what I have experienced in Oberstown but I hope that my academic perspective is enriched by it, to the benefit of my students and my various contributions to the literature. I thoroughly recommend this kind of experience to anyone thinking that serving on a state board is boring!

But while being an activist academic is my hallmark, it is not where we as academics derive our credibility. Rather, we get it from years of honing our skills, sharpening our expertise and building our experience – academic credibility comes from the rigour, legitimacy and the originality of our work and the high standards regulated by a system of accountability, administered through international, peer review processes to which our published work is routinely subject. This is what marks us out from private consultants for example.

So, from this perspective I want to reiterate a number of points to you this evening, speaking directly both to those who commission and those who undertake research. To the former – whether an NGO, a community-based group, a government department or a philanthropic organisation in addition to the valuable guidance set out in the book we are launching this evening – I would say this: don't just commission research, build partnerships with the research community – with established and early career academics, and with

students. While you are entirely legitimate to look for researchers to examine or evaluate a particular programme or approach, think about what blue sky ideas might emerge from discussions that don't have borders or frameworks. Look for excuses to poke your noses into University lecture theatres, into academic offices, PhD rooms and laboratories. And do it with purpose and with no purpose at all. For it is truly when we look to have open-ended discussions, without frontiers or limitations, that the most creative ideas will germinate and the greatest solutions will emerge. Being open to different disciplines and approaches, as well as negative and constructive outcomes, really can add value to your organisation, to society and its development. And I know you are entirely legitimate to look at the most cost effective way to secure your project's evaluation, for instance, but maybe think too about the value you are attaching to the work that you are commissioning in taking this approach.

For researchers, I would encourage you to be equally open to the opportunities that emerge from what you see in the community as much as what you read in your discipline's journals. Reach out to community based groups, government departments and professionals in your field and look to present your work to them, to explore common themes and to tease out how your work can be enriched by the interaction with practice and policy perspectives. Think about research dissemination – from the beginning – and always think about how your research can and could impact on those it reaches. Take a principled and ethical approach to stakeholder engagement – for instance, research about children should where possible involve children. As a researcher, consider the impact of your work – real and potential – and build partnerships with practitioners, policy-makers and others so that your contribution to the research literature is also relevant to society.

I firmly believe that everyone involved in the research process, regardless of perspective or position, can help to enrich its outcomes and its impact. We all have a responsibility to ensure not only that the research with which we are associated is ethical and adds value, but in doing so we are ambassadors for research that matters in our organisations and in our communities. We must always expect that those involved in commissioning and undertaking research are committed to the highest levels of research integrity, governance and ethics. That our research is inclusive of marginalised groups, of children, and that where possible it directly involves as research partners those affected by what we study. I also

strongly believe that we must all advocate for a better framework for research - we should use our collective credibility to ensure the delivery of a more supportive ethical framework that - for example - gives children the right to participate in studies that are clearly not harmful to them. And we should insist that Government provide more generous funding for bodies like the Irish Research Council to support individual, non-directed research that pushes the boundaries of knowledge across all disciplines to mutual benefit. Ultimately making this research available to everyone through open access dissemination strategies will ensure everyone benefits. Just like the book we are launching this evening, this really would be in everyone's interests.

So congratulations again Suzanne, Noirin and Sinead on your terrific publication. I look forward to using it in my work and to advocating its many principles to my colleagues throughout the research and policy communities.

Thank you.

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