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Karen Smith

Anne Marie Shier

Margaret Fingleton

Kevin Murphy

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Guest Editors' Introduction: Social Care, Social Policy and Social Justice

Karen Smith
University College Dublin
karen.m.smith@ucd.ie

Anne Marie Shier
Dublin Institute of Technology
annemarie.shier@dit.ie

Margaret Fingleton
Institute of Technology Tallaght
margaret.fingleton@ittdublin.ie

Kevin Murphy
Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
kevin.murphy@itb.ie

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Following years of austerity budgets implemented in response to the recent economic and financial crisis Ireland is currently in 'recovery'. Despite the improved economic situation large numbers of Irish people are living in poverty and deprivation, homelessness continues to rise and many of the services working with vulnerable people hit by austerity have yet to see reinstatement of pre-crisis budgets. In the aftermath of the crisis there appears to be a widespread desire for a more just and sustainable approach to economic and social policy. The Programme for Government of the administration formed in May 2016 holds out the vision of a "just and fair society" in which widening inequality between rich and poor is addressed and the rights of vulnerable groups are respected. Realising this vision will require reflection on the mistakes of the past and their effects, as well as genuine commitment to do things differently in the future - social justice can no longer be an 'optional extra' but must be central to social policy, provision and practice. The articles in this special edition point to aspects of social care policy and provision in need of reform if policymakers are serious about moving towards a just society and provide some guidance as to the kind of reform required.

The direct impetus for this special themed edition of IJASS was a conference held in DIT Grangegorman in February 2015 which we guest editors organised. The theme of the conference was *Social Care and Social Policy in Ireland: Seeking Social Justice in the Era of Austerity and Beyond* and the aim was to provide a space for reflection and debate on the impact of austerity on those who use and provide social care services and to stimulate discussion on activism and advocacy in relation to social care policy and provision and social justice. This special edition is an attempt to continue and extend the conversation initiated at this conference.

We were fortunate on the day of the conference to have had the opportunity to engage with a variety of important and stimulating papers on a range of topics related to the conference theme. The keynote address was delivered by Professor Kathleen Lynch, University College Dublin who spoke on the topic of 'Care, Gender and Social Justice: Affective Equality and Contributive Justice'. Professor Lynch's paper centred on the links between inequalities related

to care and the affective domain and inequalities related to the political, economic and cultural domains and dealt with issues such as the limited value placed on care in Irish society and gender inequality in the provision of care. A panel discussion in the afternoon on the theme of social care, social policy and social justice was chaired by (then) Senator Katherine Zappone. The panellists were Frieda Finlay (Disability Rights Campaigner), Noel Howard (Social Care Ireland), Fr. Peter McVerry (Peter McVerry Trust) and Siobhan O'Donoghue (Uplift). Topics addressed during the panel discussion included homelessness, the rights of people with disabilities, growing economic inequality and experiences of policy advocacy work. The panel and attendees also discussed issues related to social care practice such as incorporating the views of those who use services into policy and service provision.

There were 26 presentations delivered during the various parallel sessions held at the conference addressing themes such as the impact of austerity, policy issues in social care and policy advocacy in the areas of migrant rights and asylum seekers, as well as a number of presentations on issues related to social care, social policy and social justice from theoretical and practice-based perspectives. The articles in this edition provide a flavour of the topics discussed at the conference and each represents a valuable contribution to ongoing reflection and debate on social care, social policy and social justice in the Irish context.

The first article in this special edition which was written by Liz Kerrins provides an important insight into the social impact of budget austerity measures in Ireland. Based on semi-structured interviews carried out with lone parents accessing support from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul the findings presented starkly illustrate the enormous practical and emotional challenges faced by lone parents in contemporary Ireland in meeting the basic needs of their children. The article begins with an overview of the particular difficulties faced not just by lone parents but by Irish women in general in relation to accessing affordable childcare and finding suitable employment. It argues that the logic driving active labour market reforms tends to ignore the 'gendered rationality' which informs decision making for some. It then outlines the recent policy reforms which have aggravated these difficulties considerably, as the findings from the research demonstrate.

The article by Jim Cantwell and Martin Power addresses recent changes in the delivery of social care services, focusing on the increase in agency working in social care since 2008 in the context of a public-service recruitment embargo, one of the first 'austerity' measures introduced at the onset of the recession. The article is based on the findings from a small-scale qualitative study carried out with social care managers and workers. Based on these findings the authors argue that although agency working is not without its advantages there are particular concerns in relation to issues such as the support available to workers and the insecurity associated with this form of employment.

Méabh Savage addresses the importance of taking into account affective inequality in the provision of homeless services. Her article deals specifically with homeless mothers unaccompanied by their children and draws effectively on existing literature in order to detail the manner in which approaches to social care policy and provision which neglect issues related to the affective domain can reinforce inequality by obscuring the particular needs of this group of service-users as well as their strengths and capacities.

Carmel Gallagher's article based on her research with participants of a 'Socrates Cafe' established in a daycare centre for older people demonstrates the need and desire for older people to contribute to the discourse on social justice issues. This project is an example of how

different generations can share and learn from each other. Based on the concept of ‘community philosophy’ the Socrates Café provides a forum for older people and staff to meet and discuss philosophical questions about life and living. It operates through a “community of enquiry” approach, led from within and supported and facilitated by community, social and leisure services. Gallagher’s article outlines the concept of the community philosophy and discusses how older people in the “third and fourth” age engage in this process, before presenting the findings from observational research and interviews carried out with participants. The findings presented suggest that this approach seems to empower participants to critically analyse views and values and to promote social engagement and inclusion.

The final article by Ruth Harris and Bríd Ni Chonail examines inequality in Irish Higher Education focusing on the impact of English Language Competency on academic achievement for migrant students. The research highlights the lack of state response to issues concerning migration and English competency in the higher education sector and in promoting equality in higher education for migrants. This study focuses on the views of migrant students and their lecturers from a particular IOT and data from questionnaires and interviews is presented. This article emphasises the huge potential of education to allow people to move beyond social and economic exclusion but cautions that there is a risk of creating an educational underclass if students are not supported adequately.

As guest editors we are grateful to have been provided with the opportunity to develop this special themed edition of the Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies. We would like to thank the outgoing editors Kevin Lalor and Sinead Freeman and the incoming editors Colm O’Doherty and Ashling Jackson for their support. We would also like to wish the incoming editors every success in their stewardship of the journal over the coming years. Finally our thanks to all of the authors who contributed their work to this edition and to each of the anonymous peer reviewers who gave so generously of their time and expertise.