

Shaking up Power

I happened to be in the Rialto Youth Project on the day the “What’s the Story” Collective were gathering to go to IMMA for their reading event. I could feel the tension, excitement, and apprehension in the air and inquired “what’s going on?” I felt the shake up of power just hearing what was about to happen and knew that whatever the outcome, this would be an event to remember for everyone who participated in it. I went on about the business of my meeting which was to plan a dialogue event to include some of the same young people, youth workers, artists and community organisations. Little did I know that these two events would come together one year later when the same young people would suggest the use of dialogue to inquire into the impact of the IMMA reading event on those who participated.

When asked why dialogue, the young people said “because it is a way of really hearing what people think and feel in a space that is based on equality and that allows for different experiences of the same thing to be shared”. What a great description of Dialogue! They acknowledged that while they often feel powerless in their lived experiences with Gardai, they had taken huge power in the way the IMMA event was conducted and now were ready and willing to share power in the proposed joint reflection and learning. When challenged, they considered how they might feel letting go of the way in which they had controlled events to date within the Collective. They explored the fact that they would be required to participate as individuals and not as a group presenting and defending a position, even to the point of considering how they might be if they disagreed with each other in the dialogue itself. They made a conscious decision to engage in and promote dialogue and from that moment on, I began to feel really privileged to be part of what happened next.

My sense of privilege grew and was expanded to include awe, admiration and hope when representatives of the Gardai joined the planning meetings, the dialogue itself and the Inquiry into Training that all formed part of the Policing Dialogues. I feel awe at the leadership and courage that both the Collective and Gardai have exercised to engage in a process that is so outside everyone’s comfort zone and yet so important for the way in which we all strive to live in this society. I admire the creativity of the initiative, both in terms of its process and methods of engagement but also in terms of grasping the strategic opportunities within the local Division and community to make it happen. I feel a huge hope for the future of active citizenship when I reflect on the capacity of all involved to share experiences of power at such a deep level – the young people to expose their very personal lived experiences to such scrutiny and the Gardai to do the same in terms of their challenges with regard to power internally and in the exercise of their duties.

That said, the whole question of power, respect and dignity in community policing is a critical one and what emerged in the following conversations has certainly challenged and exercised my mind and heart in many ways. Before I share my personal reflections, let me say a word or two about the key features of dialogue.

It is underpinned by four practices:

- Speaking one's true voice and encouraging others to do the same
- Deep, mindful, listening both within oneself and to others. Listening not just to what is said but to the what is not said
- Respecting others by listening to what they are saying, whether we agree with them or not. Acknowledging that each person has a legitimate reason for holding his/ her point of view.
- Suspending our own reactions, opinions and the certainties that lie behind them, so that we can listen without judgment to that of others. Being mindful of the limiting assumptions we make in relation to others

This is very different to the usual conversations which take place in discussion, debate, or negotiation. It is a lot about asking why, being as curious about one's own experience as that of the other, and in so doing accepting realities that might be very different to the one I experience. Creating the space for equality of participation and asking why requires a lot of listening, especially in a large group. This in turn can often generate as much frustration and impatience as it does insight and understanding. It is not called a "practice" for nothing and this dialogue presented as many challenges as it did insights for those who participated in it.

Its purpose was to share and deepen the learning from the IMMA event, inquire into and understand more fully the impact of that event on all those who participated, develop more effective relationships between young people and Gardai and identify core issues to be worked on in the future. The dialogue was situated in the middle of a series of meetings which was inquiring into how Gardai could be trained to work in a more mindful way, with respect and dignity centrally integrated into the way they exercise power in their relations with young people. In this way, it played a key role in shaping the outcome of the Inquiry.

My Reflections and Insights

It is often said of dialogue that it has the capacity to touch the dangerous as people use the energy of their differences to enhance the collective wisdom. My experience of this dialogue is that it did just that.. The dangerous emerged at different times within all the conversations and nearly always highlighted the complexity of what it is we were trying to talk about and understand. Giving voice to different perspectives allowed assumptions to be inquired into and new meaning to be co- created.

A good example of this is the emergence within all the conversations – the pre dialogue, the dialogue and the Inquiry of a stuck pattern of interaction between young people and the Gardai in relation to community policing. On the one hand, young people living in many communities that experience poverty and disadvantage often feel they are not respected in their dealings with Gardai, which in turn provokes anger and frustration. They feel guilty until proven innocent and fail to understand why they are regularly stopped and questioned as if they are up to no good. Gardai on the other hand face many

challenges in policing such communities and they in turn, struggle to know how to do this in a manner that meets conflicting needs, investigates possible crime and builds relationships. As the conversations progressed, the factors that keep this pattern in place were inquired into in more detail and once again many assumptions were checked out and discarded in favour of a more shared understanding.

Whenever the subject was raised young people talked about how the impact of legacies from the past, peer pressure, surviving the influence and activities of gangs, fear and stereotyping operate at a local level. Families and communities have had negative experiences of policing, often for very complex reasons – how one family member’s activities can result in tainting the entire family or how the activities of a few in a community can result in what is experienced as heavy handed policing for the whole community. This can build up into a culture of non engagement, one that is reinforced by unmet expectations of what the police should be doing in such areas i.e. targeting the real criminals. Young people can grow up never questioning the practice of non engagement and accepting the stereotyping of all Gardai as intrinsically “not on our side”, always seeing the uniform and never the person.

Young people shared the fear and often real intimidation and attack from gangs where they live, resulting in devising strategies for survival that include never being seen to talk to Gardai, and never doing anything to provoke further trouble from gangs. Indeed Gardai coming from similar areas have to be very mindful of exactly the same fear and intimidation. As the conversations deepened, the realities of poverty, unemployment, income, social class all surfaced as central to the conversation. So too, did the shortcomings of the court system and the lack of effective, targeted services. Not everyone agreed on the way in which these realities impact and talking about them helped surface even more differences in terms of attitudes and stereotyping.

As the complexity unfolded, so too did the feeling of Stuckness. What could be done to change this reality? Dialogue is not about agreeing outcomes but it does provide the opportunity to look at how relationships and behaviour can be more effective into the future. When we did this, we began to get a sense of a possible direction and it was then very helpful to bring this conversation into the Inquiry. The Inquiry translated the insights into conversations of possibility, grounded in an open and honest reality that acknowledged the potential and the constraints.

The way forward is not at all clear and I believe we have just begun to scratch the surface on some of these issues. However, they have exposed the need for new and creative thinking about the role of community policing, within the Gardai, within communities and between both. The seeds for change have been sown in this process and will need to be nurtured and cultivated within the existing relationships where courage and leadership have demonstrated the capacity to dare to envision of different way.