Youth Work Ireland

Youth Climate Justice

Developmental Group Work Project

Youth Work Ireland

YOUTH CLIMATE JUSTICE FUND

Youth Work Ireland Galway

KDYS Kerry Diocesan Youth Service

Youth Work Ireland Tipperary

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Foreword

We all in Youth Work Ireland, have always known that group work effectively empowers young people to address needs and aspirations around the things that are happening in their lives. Group work effectively delivered helps young people work through issues, whether they be the big things in the wider world like climate change, or big things in their peer group, like civic participation, health and personal development.

Group work by its nature is dynamic and complex. It takes a lot of skill and commitment on behalf of youth workers to do it well. It is for that reason, hard to describe, difficult to capture and harder still to adequately evidence. Even though young people and youth workers know that it works, it's not sufficiently understood or supported as a way of working with young people. To help youth workers to use group work in addressing climate justice and other issues, Youth Work Ireland undertook research with South East Technological University and developed a research report, manual and theory of change. Three groups of young people, in three locations, undertook ten weeks of developmental group work climate justice project. In addition, to the projects, the young people and youth workers undertook an enormous amount of recording and reflection to inform a research study. Young people and youth workers answered a panel of research questions every week for ten weeks, producing case studies and thirty sets of interviews for the researchers to analyse.

Thanks to the efforts of young people, youth workers and researchers working together we have a new theory of change and research that goes some way towards describing and explaining a valuable way of working with young people. The research is a validation of the value of group work and the proficiency and interest in this work with Youth Work Ireland Members. We look forward to discussing this model with our stakeholders and look for future opportunities to do this important work. I wholeheartedly commend this publication to you.

Dr Patrick Burke
(CEO Youth Work Ireland)

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Overview

1.1 Introduction

This report addresses the findings and analysis arising from research on the implementation and development of a group work programme relating to climate justice, which was facilitated in three youth work settings in the Irish Republic.

This programme was designed and developed by Youth Work Ireland. The motivation for the programme arose from consultation with Youth Work Ireland's Youth Participation Groups, National Youth Action Group and Youth Panel. It was identified in these contexts that group work was a potentially relevant form of practice for the development and support of young people to engage with issues relating to climate change, climate action, and climate justice.

1.2 Aims and Objectives of Research

The research encompassed the development of an understanding of the role of group work within contemporary youth work and its potential to foster meaningful benefits and outcomes for young people.

The objectives of the study are defined as:

1. Developing an understanding of the role of group work within youth work settings and contexts and a relevant theory of change framework.
2. Identifying models of group work practice utilised by youth workers, with particular reference to the context of the Climate Justice Group Work Programme.
3. Identifying benefits and outcomes of group work within youth work settings, with particular reference to the context of the Climate Justice Group Work Programme.

1.3 The Role of Group Work in Youth Work

In Chapter 2, it is argued that the conceptualisation of youth work within contemporary policy discourse has emphasised targeted and individualised forms of practice, which implicitly situate young people as in need of regulation, surveillance, and control (see McMahon, 2021; Kiely and Meade, 2022; de St Croix and Doherty, 2022).

This has led to a diminishing role for group work within youth work settings, which it is contended is a key aspect of the values of youth work as established in extant literature.

In particular, the emphasis that this literature places upon association, relationships, and group experience (for recent examples see Davies, 2010; Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Wood, Westwood, and Thompson, 2015).

Equally, by contrast with conservative orientations of youth work, a reengagement with group work in the context of models of informal education and critical social education allows for the promotion of principles of democratic action, political engagement, and critical thinking amongst young people.

1.4 Research Design

The dominant policy emphasis with regards to the assessment and evaluation of youth work is increasingly framed with reference to principles of value-for-money and empirically justified on the basis of measurable and calculable outcomes.

As de St Croix and Doherty (2022, p.2) argue: *'This provides a simplistic and individualised view of how diverse experiences and relationships contribute to young peoples' lives in a wider political context of social inequalities.'*

Arguably then, examining the processes and benefits of group work is not meaningfully pursued by adopting variants of experimental (e.g. randomised control trials) or quasi-experimental (e.g. pre- and post-measurements) approaches.

This research adopted the principles of theory-based evaluation to establish a framework for understanding group work and evidencing its role within youth work contexts.

In particular, a theory of change approach was utilised. In contrast to outcome-focused assessments, this form of evaluation and research seeks to identify the causal pathways that are intended to produce outputs and outcomes. Through this, research can work towards demonstrating whether and how steps in a causal chain produce, or fail to produce, intended results (see, for example, Funnell and Rogers, 2011).

In relation to methods of data collection, a qualitative approach was adopted. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth workers involved in the facilitation of the group work programme.

In engaging with young people, the research sought to reflect the context of youth work in the methods used. Thus, the research adopted the broad principles of participatory research, through which young people engaged through informal conversations and in a facilitated, participatory activity on their views of the programme experience (for recent examples see Davies, 2010; Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Wood, Westwood, and Thompson, 2015).

Equally, by contrast with conservative orientations of youth work, a reengagement with group work in the context of models of informal education and critical social education allows for the promotion of principles of democratic action, political engagement, and critical thinking amongst young people.

1.5 Findings

There was a consistent understanding amongst participants of the role and values inscribed within youth workers and their practice. These reflected prominent themes within the literature in relation to voluntary participation, youth-centred and youth-led practice, and associative and relational characteristics.

The benefits of group work within youth work settings were broadly shared and understood in relation to: friendships and relationship-building; collaboration, communication and teamwork; learning with others; and group- and self-expression and confidence building.

Recognition of the process of group work was clearly articulated by youth workers. In particular, their understanding of the process activated within the group was an important mechanism for learning and development of skills, but also it revealed specific benefits and outcomes of importance.

In relation to the Climate Justice Group Work Programme, youth workers identified how it promoted self-confidence, communication, and leadership, which developed through the process of relationship-building and collaboration amongst young people involved.

Young people were also seen as developing an understanding of issues relating to climate change, climate action and climate justice, particularly though engaging in activities that reflected their needs, interests, and skills.

Young people involved in the research viewed friendships and relationships as a strong part of their experience in youth work and a motivating factor to engage in group work.

For young people, youth work is meaningful in terms of offering a space to make friends, be listened to and heard, and sits in contradistinction to the formal nature of their educational experiences. Groups generally pointed towards the fun and enjoyment they had in the group, the relationships they had made, and the opportunity to learn that this experience had afforded them.

In particular, young people highlighted how the Climate Justice Group Work Programme developed their confidence, provided a space in which they worked together creatively and engage in self-directed activities that promoted a greater knowledge of climate justice.

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Background and Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter identifies how core features of youth work identifiable within the literature are consistent with an approach that includes a concerted and coherent engagement with the associative practice of group work within youth work settings.

In particular, we assert that a form of group work informed by a critical social education model allows for the articulation of a framework of practice that adheres to longstanding youth work values and the specific conceptualisation of group work within youth work literature and practice.

Prior to this discussion, we seek to situate the context of contemporary youth work in the Irish Republic with respect to policy discourses that, we argue, have increasingly cleaved group work from youth work practice.

2.2 The Retreat from Group Work in Irish Youth Work Policy

The review and analysis of the development of youth work in the Irish Republic has been well served and thoroughly rehearsed elsewhere (e.g. Devlin, 2010 etc) and it is not our intention to replicate these historicizations. Our starting point is the legislative instrument through which the practice is defined, the Youth Work Act (2001), wherein it states that youth work is:

[A] planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is –

(a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and

(b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.

Devlin (2010) argues that, while this characterization has been criticised for being too structured and populated with contestable concepts, it offers a suitably broad remit that provides youth workers with space to articulate and pursue their practice in diverse and meaningful ways. Equally, as Jenkinson (2013) suggests, the realisation of the Youth Work Act (2001) was the culmination of efforts to have youth work given a statutory role that stretch at least as far back as the publication of the Costello Report in 1984.

Aligned with the increased legislative provisions for the role and practice of youth work, Jenkinson (2013) identifies increased professional identity and a more united sector as two positive outcomes of this process.

This perceived development of a professional identity and cross-sector collaboration has been, at least in part, attributed to the distillation of key features of youth work within the 2001 Act.

Devlin (2010) argues that the act pitches essential components of practice in a register that would be familiar to youth workers. In particular, he isolates how youth work as educational, and implicitly informal or nonformal, based on voluntary engagement and participation, and underscored by the aim of 'personal and social development' *'would command widespread agreement among people involved in youth work in Ireland today'* (Devlin, 2010, p.94).

Indeed, it remains the case that academic characterisations of youth work, discussed later, may, on the surface, not be necessarily opposed to how the practice is framed in legislative terms. However, analyses of how youth work is understood within public policy suggest that, notwithstanding Devlin's (2010) advocacy for the positive potential of the broad flexibility provided in the legislative description, statutory definitions fail to adequately explicate the 'critical' components of youth work practice in relation to youth work's role in working with young people to challenge structural forms of inequality and promote social justice and empowerment.

Whilst the 2001 Act may implicitly provide for an expansive utilisation of youth work practice, it can be equally argued that it also offers policy makers sufficient leverage to recalibrate the playing field upon which youth work operates to an increasingly narrow sets of parameters, processes, and practices.

In this context, as Jenkinson (2013) identifies, significant economic and political issues have emerged that have severely diminished the autonomy of youth work organisations and their staff. The financial crisis of 2008 mitigated a redrawing of the role of youth work within wider public policy statements and documentation. In immediate economic terms austerity policies implemented in the Irish Republic impacted heavily on the youth work sector, leading to reductions in services, pay cuts, and redundancies (Melaugh, 2015).

The swingeing cuts to youth services have been more broadly viewed as part of a wider reform agenda emergent with the Irish government post-2008 wherein youth work itself became problematised (McMahon, 2021) and subject to the 'governmental rationalities' of 'neoliberalized austerity' (Kiely and Meade, 2018).

McMahon (2021) argues that the targeted nature of contemporary youth work funding, particularly through UBU programmes, have divested youth workers of discretion and autonomy. Equally, they suggest that the focus of youth work has become increasingly telescoped toward managing, surveilling, and controlling individual young people.

The policy landscape of youth work in the Irish Republic has equally been shaped by these imperatives. Developments in this context include: National quality standards framework for youth work (NQSF); the Value for money and policy review youth programmes (VFMPR); Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF) and the National Youth Strategy (NYS).

Kiely and Meade (2018, p.35) situate these within Foucauldian conceptualisations of governmentality, arguing:

We are concerned that open-ended and deliberative conceptions of youth work are endangered by the programmatic and evidence-based turn in policy making; that youth work policy's responsiveness to young people's own experiences or world-views will be sidelined in the interests of economizing and disciplining their conduct

In this context, the experience of youth work within the Irish Republic has followed patterns evident elsewhere (see, for example, Davies, 2015, Hughes, Cooper, Gormally, and Rippingale, 2014, and Jeffs and Smith, 2010). As Jeffs and Smith (2010) observe this redrawing of the role of youth work is evident in policy shifts from voluntary participation to more coercive forms, from association to individualised activity, from education to case management, and from informal to formal bounded relationships.

This broader reorientation of youth work policy discourse has a demonstrable impact on the perceived role of group work in this context. The Performance and Oversight Framework produced in 2018 by the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs with the Centre for Effective Services (CES) places a temporal value on aspects of youth work provision and practice. Within this framework, group work is afforded the lowest value, and is implicitly assumed to be a less efficient or effective means of achieving assumed outcomes of youth work.

Thus, we contend, a dominant feature of contemporary youth work has been a refocus from group work and association, which we now turn to arguing constitutes a central component in the ecology of youth work practice and a significant means through which the values and outcomes youth work are engaged with and acted upon. As Spence (2004) argues 'the very aspects of youth work which make it attractive to policy makers are in danger of being undermined by policy.'

2.3 Youth Work as Associative and Group-Oriented

Conceptualisations of youth work and its realisation in practice are contested issues, which are often misunderstood or differently defined depending on who is doing the defining and in what context. As Simon Bradford (2005, p.58) observes '[youth work] has remained an ambiguous set of practices, pushed in different directions at different times by different interests.'

Firstly, conceptual categories assigned to youth work are open to contestation and varying understandings and iterations. For example, debates are evident in relation to conceptualisations of voluntarism (e.g. Ord, 2009), youth participation (e.g. Corney, Cooper, Shier, and Williamson, 2021), and social education (e.g. Batsleer, 2013).

Secondly, as Williamson and Cousée (2019) identify youth work is a 'heterogenous practice', whereby policy and the practical implementation of youth work may vary across jurisdictions. As suggested in the previous section, associative elements of youth work have become increasingly diluted within state-led discourses. Alternatively, we assert that an engagement with that statements of its core values point towards to the centrality of group work within youth work practice.

Numerous authors have iterated core features and characteristics of youth work, which broadly coalesce around voluntary participation, trust and equity in relationships, placing power and control with young people, and principles of non-formal and informal education (for recent examples see Davies, 2010; Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Wood, Westwood, and Thompson, 2015).

Jeffs and Smith (2010, p.1) delineate five core features of youth work, suggesting 'remove one and what is observed may possess a resemblance to, but is unquestionably not, youth work'. These are inclusive of: voluntary participation; education and welfare; young people; association, relationships and community; being friendly,

accessible, responsive and acting with integrity. Similarly, Wood et al (2015) identify key features of youth work as follows: an educational practice; a social practice; working towards social justice; voluntary; strengthening the voice and influence of young people; a welfare practice; and working with young people holistically.

More broadly, higher level distinctions about the role and purpose of youth work reveal tensions within its conceptualisation and implementation. For example, Treacy (2009), reflecting on an earlier contribution regarding a typology of youth work (see Hurley and Treacy, 1993), characterises the formal statutory and policy conceptualisations of youth work as largely conservative in nature. In particular, in exploring the tensions within youth work between enacting 'social control' and promoting 'social change', they argue the former has predominated.

Treacy (2009) situates Character Building models as uncritically accepting of the prevailing social order and structure, and Personal Development models as assuming an individualised focus with little reference to social contexts. Their orientation is summarised by Treacy (2009, p.182) as follows: 'both models seek to enable young people to slot smoothly into society and to negotiate and regulate their lives in ways that do not disrupt the status quo.'

By contrast, Critical Social Education and Radical Social Change models are animated by 'a strong focus on young people's creative energies with the hope that they might be unleashed in the name of social and political transformation' (Treacy, 2009, p.182). Notwithstanding critiques of these models (Kiely, 2009), it is this latter emphasis, particular in relation to Critical Social Education models, that appears at least broadly apposite with descriptions of youth work's focal modes and features of practice and the orientation within these towards group work and association.

Jeffs and Smith (2010, p.2) argue that, across the educational traditions emphasised within youth work based group work – such as informal education, social education, experiential learning, and social pedagogy – 'these traditions encourage us to focus on learning through conversations, experience and relationships'.

Furthermore, Jeffs and Smith (2010, p.3) assert that '[H]istorically, group work – the ability to enter, engage with and develop various types of collectives – was viewed as a central skill required of youth workers.'

Young (2006, p.62) highlights the central role of relationships in youth work:

because it is within the context of 'being with' and 'sharing with' others that people are supported to create and recreate themselves, take charge of their relationships (with self and others), actively in engage in their community and contribute to the world.

They characterise youth work as a process of 'moral philosophising', that involves and exploration of values and the development of critical thought. Drawing on Dewey's description of educational activity as liberating and Kolb's model of experiential learning, they iterate the central role of group work in this process. Young (2006, p.78) emphasis the processual nature of this orientation, writing:

Youth work is not, therefore, an activity for reforming young people or inculcating rigid patterns of socially required behaviour. Neither is it a static yardstick but rather a set of processes that must be re-assessed to meet the needs of different individuals, situations and circumstances.

Similarly, Spence (2004) argues that 'starting where young people are at' is part of a process that seeks to support collective, as well as individual, identities, and whereby young people are not conceived of as problems to be solved or managed. This orientation is predicated on a process of reflection which cannot be pre-planned or oriented toward pre-defined outcomes.

Explicit then within academic and practice-based conceptualisation of youth work is the centrality of association generally, and group work specifically. As Wood et al (2015, p.3) suggest, amidst the growing tendency toward individualised case-management within the sector, 'youth workers seek to prioritise working with groups in order to nurture collective associations amongst young people'.

The emphasis within youth work on group work processes is evident from its historical antecedents in forms of uniformed youth groups, youth clubs, etc. through the initial development of principles of group work with young people (e.g. McAlister Brew, 1946; Coyle, 1948) and, arguably, their apotheosis within youth work literature in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Matthews, 1966; Davies and Gibson, 1967; Button, 1974).

The significance of group work and association within youth work can be viewed as predicated upon the practice's avowed and appreciable understanding of young people's lives as important to engage with on their own terms. In this context, young people's informal associations are viewed, not as problematic or anti-social as per much public discourse and policy dictates, but as positive and social.

Spence (2004) identifies that '[there are] fundamental and distinguishing aspects of youth work practice in terms of relationships, partnerships and time, which enable youth workers to undertake successful interventions with groups of young people who are defined as 'socially excluded'.

Equally, the associative and group-oriented components of youth work are readily identifiable with conceptualisations of the benefits of youth work. For example, Jeffs and Smith (2010, pp.4-7) summarise these as including: sanctuary; enjoyable activity; personal and social development; and relationship and community. The centrality of relationships and friendship within the context of youth work should not be understated. While this may not be demonstrably seen as an 'outcome' within dominant policy documents, the process of cultivating relationships is not merely a process of youth work.

As Ord and Jeffs (2023), adopting an Aristotelean conception of friendship, stipulate its sustained nature, in contrast to the looser term association. Equally, they argue for the importance of friendship as an outcome in relation to its amelioration of isolation and loneliness, its being predicted on 'patience, time, sensitivity, and social skills', and a constituent element of a happy and healthy life (Ord and Jeffs, 2023, p.1280-1281). Referencing the work of Jephcott (1947) they contend: 'above all else it is the quality of this relationship which is the test of the true effectiveness or otherwise of the group' (Ord and Jeffs, 2023, p.1281).

Emphasised within this context is the promotion of a space that is meaningful for young people, centred on their needs, and promotes engagement in social change. As Jeffs and Smith (2010, p.7) contend, youth work's civil society focus is based on an understanding that 'local activity involving local people is often better regarded by young people than provisions linked to schools or state institutions.'

By contrast with the supervisory, controlling, and monitoring orientation often found within state involvement in young people's lives, Jeffs and Smith (2010, p.7) conclude that youth work engages with young people through 'relationships and the enjoyment of each other's company.' As Davies (2010, p.4) observes 'their [young people's] self-selected groups therefore provides numerous opportunities for youth work to prompt and support both personal learning and constructive collective activity'. This reflects Davies broader principle of 'working with and through young people's friendship groups', whereby youth work can provide a means to engage in a manner that is consistent with their pre-existing lives.

For Spence (2007, p.134), youth work provides an alternate space for young people disengaged and disenfranchised from formal institutional contexts: 'It is the open informality of youth work which encourages the engagement of young people who refuse other institutional participation'. Patton (2010) explicitly situates young people, and by implication youth work, as associative and group based, contending that 'youth work

remains central to providing opportunities for group experiences' (Patton, 2010, p.117). In particular, they identify the significance of such group-oriented processes to 'promote and focus on the educative power of social movements and voluntary associations' (Patton, 2010, p.115). In spite of the significance identified here, specific youth work oriented iterations of group work have been sparse. Writing in 2002 Jeffs and Smith identified that subsequent to the boom in group work theorisations in the 1960s and 1970s 'there has been relatively little written on the process of group work within youth work' (Jeffs and Smith, 2002, p.52). In the intervening two decades there has been little to correct this gap. However, as we have argued group work is an approach consistent with the established features and values of youth work, and in the next section we identify how it can promote principles of democratic action, political engagement, and critical thinking. As Patton (2010, p.119) cogently and persuasively argues:

Youth workers are potentially well placed to support and encourage young people in groups. However, the group provides the opportunity for much more than this – the development of valuable social skills and attitudes such as listening, understanding and empathy. Attributes that cannot be learnt from a computer programme or acquired in isolation from others. Youth workers can maximise the potential of young people who meet in groups and set down the foundation for practising democracy. In turn this can create the pathways to wider political processes.

2.4 Developmental Group Work in Youth Work

Group work has been utilised within a range of sectors and professions (e.g. social work, education, community development) and been informed by a variety of theoretical frames, including: group dynamics, group theory, social psychology etc. The development of youth work within the British and Irish contexts has been a significant force for the articulation of group work theory and practice. As Patton (2010, p.114) observes: 'workers with young people were amongst the first to develop 'group work' as a specialism and separate aim and activity'.

Jeffs and Smith (2002), drawing on the work of Reid (1981), identify three fundamental issues animating and orienting group work with young people. Firstly, the maintenance of democratic society, often associated with ideas of citizenship; secondly, as a means of socialisation and the development of individual and social values or skills; and thirdly, as a response to perceived deviance and for the purposes of addressing maladaptive behaviours.

Jeffs and Smiths (2002) argue that while all three have been in evidence within British and Irish youth work 'it is the first two that have predominated and which came to be understood in the language of club and association.'

However, they identify a movement away from the strands of democracy and socialisation towards addressing individual young people as needing to be worked on in order to conform to orthodox, normative, and adult-defined conceptions.

In this context, Jeffs and Smith (2002) highlight what they classify as 'a new individualism' predicated, in part, on the waning significance of community life for the development and articulation of identity. Smith (2003, p.15) subsequently suggested that the targeted and bureaucratic organisation of youth services was commodifying youth work transforming it 'into something that is less than excellent and not youth work.'

Early iterations of group-based youth work (e.g. Macalister Brew and Kuenstler) were predicated upon ideas consonant with models of informal education and the need to engage young people in a process of association with one another.

This foundational basis established the subsequent deployment of group work within the context of youth work in the 1960s and 1970s (Matthews, 1966; Davies and Gibson, 1967; Button, 1974). For example, Matthews (1966, p.103) connects the individual and communal benefits of group work with young people writing that it works 'to help young people develop their potentialities more fully as individuals and become better able to contribute to the life of the community.'

Button's text Developmental Group Work with Adolescents (1974) represents a significant capstone in the initial development and articulation of approaches to group work with young people, and specifically within the context of youth work.

Button (1974) argues for a form of group work that is 'about helping people in their growth and development, in their social skills, in their personal resource and in the kind of relationships they establish with other people.' However rather than being oriented purely towards individuals, this process, for Button (1974), was premised on the contention that youth work can have a significant value in enabling young people in helping one another in a process of informal education.

Robertson (2009) argues that Button's work 'stands alone within youth work methodology as a coherent system of theory and practice... [and is] a way of enabling young people to develop confidence and the capacity for self agency'. For Button (1974, p.1) the development of skills and competencies occurs in concert with others, rather than in isolation:

Social skills can be learnt only in contact with other people and it is the purpose of group work to provide the individual with opportunities to relate to others in a supportive atmosphere, to try new approaches and to experiment in new roles.

The purpose of group work, for Button (1974), was to provide a meaningful space wherein young people could come to support and help one another. Rather than viewing the youth worker as the centrifugal force for change, the group itself becomes interactive, consultative, and dynamic.

As Button (1974, p.5) observes: 'developmental group work is especially concerned with building the social competence of the individual so that he becomes more capable of dealing with his own problems'.

For Button (1974), this was realised through an engagement with young people where they are at and an understanding of group dynamics and norms. In particular, he stresses how group work can encourage responsibility amongst young people to examine and enquire about issues of importance to them.

In setting 'goals' within the context of group work, Button (1974) articulates that achievements in this context can promote learning, self-esteem, and belonging. In particular, they argued that developmental group work promotes activities 'to enable young people to gain skills, versatility, a sense of achievement, and incidentally, companionship' (Button, 1974, p.139).

Robertson (2009) acknowledges that changes to young people's experience that have occurred since Button's work in the 1970s but concludes that:

Developmental group work still has an effective role to play in these situations. It is an ideal methodology for working with young people in a reflexive, participative way to develop alternative strategies for developing their capacities in the areas of emotional literacy, social competence, self efficacy; self confidence; and motivation to learn.

Brown (1994) positions Button (1974) in the wider context of models of social group work. Social group work has been commonly associated with social work practice and was initially defined by Konepka (1963, cited in Brown 1994, p.7) as a method 'which helps individuals to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experiences, and to cope more effectively with their personal, group or community problems.'

However, Brown (1994) critiques this definition as being 'traditional' and focused on 'helping the individual with a problem.' For Reid (1981, p.191) this strand of group work attend to 'ameliorating or preventing the adverse conditions that negatively influence individuals and result in deviant behaviour.'

Brown (1994, pp.8-9) subsequently offer a wider definition whereby 'groupwork provides a context in which individuals help each other; it is a method of helping groups as well as individuals; and it can enable individuals and groups to influence and change personal, group, organizational and community problems.' Brown (1994) articulates a typology of social

group work that includes approaches with a social control ethos (e.g. guided group interaction models); structured behavioural focus (e.g. social skills models); and an individual psychology emphasis (e.g. therapeutic models) (for similar discussions of social group work typologies see, for example, Reid, 1981; Mullender and Ward, 1991; Benson, 2000; Cohen and Mullender, 2005).

For Brown (1994) the tradition evident within youth work, including Button (1974), is most closely aligned with social goals/social action/self-directed models, which they contend is focused on 'goals external to the group and with some form of social development and social change.'

Pappell and Rothman (1966) positioned social goals groups in distinction to those with remedial individual change or reciprocal mutual aid focus, and associated them with the desire to foster social justice through collective social action. Reid (1981, p.202) defines social goals groupwork as addressing 'those problems that are related to the social order and social value orientation in small groups.'

Mullender and Ward (1991) developed the model of self-directed group work within the broader social goals context. This approach has an avowed commitment to the empowerment of group members, a focus on external goals and self-direction by members, and a facilitating, rather than leading, role of practitioners and professionals (see Cohen and Mullender, 2005). While this model has been argued for within literature on social work practice, Brown (1994) suggests that it's use in this way, for example with young offenders, family conferencing, and disability services, raises questions regarding 'whether in the statutory context it can be

reconciled with agency social control objectives.' While there may be various ways of developing groups, youth work's adherence to core principles of voluntarism and equitable, empowered youth participation bracket group work in this context in unique ways. While there is consonance between the broader values of youth work and social goals models of group work, Smith (2008) further articulates that a youth work built on informal education, social pedagogy and social action invites consideration of working with groups 'in a manner that: is educationally informed; has a vision of people as social beings; is committed to democracy and social justice; looks to the groups that arise as part of everyday living.'

Thus, it is suggested here that an alignment of the practical components of Button's work on developmental group work with the commitment to process of informal education and critical social education can provide a meaningful frame of reference through which to consider the role of group work within contemporary youth work practice.

three

Research Design

3.1 Research Aims

As outlined this study aimed to examine the implementation of a climate justice-oriented group work programme across three youth work settings in the Irish Republic. This encompassed the development of an understanding of the role of group work within contemporary youth work and its potential to foster meaningful benefits and outcomes for young people.

The objectives of the study are defined as:

1. **Developing an understanding of the role of group work within youth work settings and contexts and a relevant Theory of Change framework.**

2. **Identifying models of group work practice utilized by youth workers, with particular reference to the context of the Climate Justice Group Work Programme.**

3. **Identifying benefits and outcomes of group work within youth work settings, with particular reference to the context of the Climate Justice Group Work Programme.**

3.2 Ethics

This project received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of South East Technological University (Carlow) in June 2023.

In adhering to relevant ethical principles relating to research practice, researchers were cognisant of the need to ensure the gaining of voluntary informed consent, the management of individuals' confidentiality, and the appropriate procedures for the handling and storage of data.

As stipulated in the introduction, the initial recruitment of and engagement with participants in the ten-week group work programme was overseen and undertaken by Youth Work Ireland and on-the-ground youth work staff across the three programme sites. Relevant staff involved in the delivery and facilitation of the programme were provided with an Information Sheet and Consent form to review and sign. This group were also invited to attend a preliminary meeting to explain the purpose of the research and address any questions they may have prior to the commencement of the study.

Once young people had voluntarily self-selected to participate in the programme, they were provided with an Information Sheet, Assent Form, and Parental Consent Form relating to the research component. This documentation clearly indicated that their consent to participate in the research was (a) separate to that provided to participate in the programme (b) would be agreed on an ongoing basis and (c) was revocable.

Additionally, researchers made initial site visits to introduce themselves and the research being undertaken, and to address any questions group members might have.

A significant amount of data collection was conducted in groups, whereby personal thoughts are shared. In this context we adopted Tolich's (2009) distinction between 'external confidentiality', wherein the researchers will assure participants that material that may identify them or an alignment of them with specific data will be avoided, and 'internal confidentiality', wherein participants were asked in written information and assent/consent forms as well as through verbal discussion to avoid disclosure of information or views expressed within group contexts.

The research adhered to the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016 and the Data Protection Acts 1988 - 2018, as well as other relevant Data Protection Policy involving ethical practice in research (SETU, 2023). Additionally, the researchers were aware of all responsibilities involving ethical practice and the disclosure of sensitive information which may be presented during the research process.

With respect to handling and storage of data, all electronic material (e.g. audio recordings, transcripts, etc.) was stored on a secure password protected account accessible only to the researchers; equally, paper/hard copies of data were held in secure office locations.

3.3 Researching and Evaluating Youth Work

As per previous chapter, youth work has within policy discourse become increasingly framed with reference to principles of value-for-money and empirically justified on the basis of measurable and calculable outcomes (McMahon, 2021; Kiely and Meade, 2022).

Specifically, the policy context for contemporary youth work is predominated by the emphasis on standardised, prefigured and measurable outcomes.

As de St Croix and Doherty (2022, p.2) argue: 'This provides a simplistic and individualised view of how diverse experiences and relationships contribute to young people's lives in a wider political context of social inequalities.'

In particular, given the iterative, flexible and processual nature of group work within youth work settings, forms of assessment and evaluation predicated on traditional impact measurement appear unsuited.

In this context, de St Croix and Doherty (2022, p.2) stipulate that dominant evaluation methodologies and methods 'are incompatible with open timescale and purpose of youth work' and do not reflect its youth-centred and informal characteristics.

de St Croix and Doherty (2022) have argued that the meaningful assessment and evaluation of youth work requires a shift away from top-down and strictly defined outcome measures towards approaches that 'practice-informed, youth-centred, and anti-oppressive' (see also, for example, Spence, 2004; Young, 2006; and Ord et al, 2021)

Their call for this rearticulation of how youth work can be meaningfully researched is based on three interrelated political and policy developments – firstly, austerity cuts that limit youth work's scope and how it is defined; secondly, the 'youth impact agenda', which advocates for specific outcome-oriented practice and evaluation, undergirded by a mobilisation of youth work for the purposes of control; and thirdly, a growing emphasis on outcomes aligned with a value-for-money ethos.

The privileging of outcome-oriented evaluation and the orthodoxy of the 'hierarchy of evidence' presents issues for the meaningful evaluation of youth work generally, and group work specifically.

In particular, this emphasis insensitive to the inherent nuances and processes of group work; that is, the intermediate, as well as long-term, outcomes that can be identified and the mechanisms of group work through which this are promoted and produced. Arguably then, examining the processes and benefits of group work is not meaningfully pursued by adopting variants of experimental (e.g. randomised control trials) or quasi-experimental (e.g. pre- and post-measurements) approaches.

3.4 Theory-Based Evaluation and Research

de St Croix and Doherty (2022) proffer wider questions in relation to whether issues highlighted in the previous section can be ameliorated by the selection of 'better' evaluation tools – such as the potential continuation of inequalities and the external determination of what constitutes 'value' or 'impact.'

Notwithstanding these relevant arguments, an established alternative to forms of outcome measurement oriented around presumed objective and quantitative

techniques exists within the context of theory-based evaluation approaches. Emergent in the 1990s, theory-based evaluation has become increasingly seen as a means to move away from 'input-output' description and provides evidence on how a programme does or does not work.

Stame (2004) contends that theory-based evaluations are predicated on the desire to open the 'black box' wherein the processes leading from cause to effect can remain hidden. In general, theory-based evaluation houses various iterations that has included 'theory-driven' evaluation, 'programme theory', and 'theory of change' (Funnell and Rogers, 2011).

Theory of change (ToC) approaches were developed with a particular focus on the evaluation of complex community change initiatives (Connell et al, 1995; Fulbright et al, 1998). Mason and Barnes (2007) suggest that ToC has been used with considerable variation, but that it is consistent with broader principles of theory-based approaches that seek to identify the set of assumptions about what should happen in order for specific forms of change to take place.

Weiss (1995) specifies that a ToC is a theory of how and why a programme or process works. In contrast to outcome-focused assessments, research and evaluation utilizing ToC are founded on identifying the causal pathways that are intended to produce outputs and outcomes. Through this, research can work towards demonstrating whether and how steps in a causal chain produce, or fail to produce, intended results.

Subsequently, there has been significant discussion of what is intended by the term 'theory' in this context. Weiss (1997) differentiates between 'implementation theory', which focuses on what is required to deliver objectives, and the more meaningful 'programme theory', which establishes

hypothesized causal mechanisms that create outcomes.

Rogers (2007, p.64) suggests that 'implementation theory', and the associated use of logic models, 'fall short of the conceptual summary involved in a programmatic theory because they do not examine the causal mechanisms involved in programs and policies.' Nonetheless, while often descriptive rather than explanatory, logic models can provide a context which can be integrated within the development of theory-based approaches (Stern, 2004).

By contrast, programme theory allows for the explication of mechanisms within a programme that can produce intended outcomes within particular contexts, and examine responses to activities undertaken rather than merely describing activities in isolation. A focused examination of the relationships between context-mechanisms-outcomes is evident within the Realistic Evaluation (RE) framework developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997).

Stern et al (2012) indicate that the term 'theory', in this context, is used in 'various' and often 'inconsistent' ways. However, in relation to ToC approaches, they describe them as being generally 'process oriented' and focused on identifying causal pathways that are anticipated to lead to intended goals and under what conditions.

More broadly, Leuww and Donaldson (2015) suggest theories may often relate to views of stakeholders involved in the development and delivery of programmes, which are often iterated via logical models. Additionally, they advocate for a theory of change being informed by extant research evidence and conceptual categories of relevance, which they argue can provide 'crucial insights about mechanisms and contexts underlying policies and programs' (Leuww and Donaldoson, 2015, p.472).

3.5 Researching and Evaluating Youth Work

The overarching aim of the current study was to examine the implementation of and outcomes arising from group work within youth work settings. Specifically, the research focused on the example of a Climate Justice Programme initiated by Youth Work Ireland.

As the preceding discussion suggests, the application of theory-based evaluation has progressed in various ways. However, in accordance with principles of theory-based evaluations, and ToC approaches specifically, the research sought to develop a framework that captures the underlying assumptions within group work, and the processes, or mechanisms, intended to produce intermediate and long-term outcomes (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Theory of Change Framework of Group Work in Youth Work

ASSUMPTIONS:
1. In relation to climate justice issues, young people are marginalised and disenfranchised in relation to policy, public debate, and action
2. Group work within youth work settings can build on young people's own associations, interactions, and group formations to provide a meaningful space within which to encourage and support young people's articulation of views, needs, and concerns in relation to climate justice
3. Within group work processes young people can be empowered to develop the capacity to critically consider, situate themselves within, and act in relation to climate justice issues

INPUTS:	ACTIVITIES:	MECHANISMS OF CHANGE:	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES:	MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES:	LONG-TERM OUTCOMES:
Youth Workers Young people Time & Space Toolbox and training on programme form and content Financial resources to deliver and support group activities	10-week group work programme, involving: ↓ Identification within the group of the young people's strengths and needs ↓ Articulation of relevant climate justice issue(s) and planning how to address this ↓ Putting agreed plan into action and monitoring its progress	• Voluntary and meaningful youth participation in process, and young person led • Informal/non-formal space that is enjoyable and relevant for young people • Group is planned, facilitated and developed in a purposeful way and using models of informal education and critical social education	• Develop interpersonal and communication skills • Build capacity of young people to work together as a group • Build young people's capacity to engage with and learn about social issues as a group and individuals • Development of agency, connection and meaningful relations within a group	• Build capacity for leadership and participatory decision-making in the group • Develop ability to identify, define and implement/research actions of interest • Development of critical thinking skills that allows for the identification and articulation of values and beliefs	• Empowered to recognise and question forms of structural disadvantage and power relations • Empowered to see themselves as able to contribute to relevant social issues • Empowered to take considered action in relation to causes and impacts of climate change in relation to personal, group and societal consumer practices

Initially, the articulation of the programme by Youth Work Ireland, and the associated logic model developed in this context, provided a description of the proposed activities and outcomes of the programme. As such, this logic model represented an appropriate form of implementation theory, which offered an indication and description of programme goals.

Subsequently, this work was situated in relation to a literature review of relevant theoretical models and empirical evidence in relation to youth work and group work (see Chapter 2). In line with this, the research articulated the perceived underlying assumptions of the programme, mechanisms of change, and its intended short-, medium-, and long-term Yutcomes (see Figure 3.1).

This framework provided a context through which to develop an appropriate focus of data collection that sought to examine whether, how, and the extent to which elements of the theory of change were evident and in what context. The specific development of methods of data collection are discussed in the following section.

Additionally, a consultative process was engaged in with relevant stakeholders in relation to initial development of the theory of change. This included representatives of Youth Work Ireland, staff involved in the implementation and facilitation of the group work programme, and external youth workers. At this stage, the framework was identified as being relevant and meaningful to participants, with some minor amendments being developed by the researchers subsequent to comments and feedback provided.

3.6 Methods & Data Collection

3.6.1 Data Collection with Youth Workers

There were two main elements of data collection used in engaging with youth workers facilitating the programme.

Firstly, they were asked to complete and update accordingly, a template relating to numbers of participants, week-to-week activities engaged in, and any relevant reflections on the process. This allowed researchers to be aware and up-to-date on the implementation of the programme. Equally, information provided in this context was relevant for the development of subsequent engagement with youth workers using semi-structured interviews and with young people in relation to their experiences of the programme.

Secondly, youth workers were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews toward or at the conclusion of the programme. Subsequent to relevant ethical procedures being followed and implemented, four staff involved in the programme were interviewed.

Two interviews were conducted in-person during a final site visit, while a further two were conducted online. The use of online interviewing was related to time available to youth workers during site visits.

The interviews were guided by the general principles of qualitative research and placed an emphasis on participants interpretations of their values and experiences, the process and context of actions and behavior, and a flexibility in relation to research design and implementation (see, for example, Punch, 2014).

Specifically, the interviews were guided by principles summarized by Gillham (2005) as: 'in interviewing you start off with a question, the opening shot; where it goes from may be unpredictable, but you have to follow, controlling the direction.' In this way, participants were given the space to reveal their views and experiences, but within the context of guiding issues and questions associated with key elements of the theory of change.

3.6.2 Data Collection with Young People

de St Croix and Doherty (2022, p.2) that research in, with and about youth work should be based on a 'practice-informed, youth-centred, anti-oppressive approach.' In this context, they privilege an emphasis on active and creative methods for engaging young people in research; and implicitly, we argue, reflect wider tendencies in literature on participatory research practice.

Models of participatory research are part of an ongoing methodological debate that has interrogated, challenged and questioned traditional notions of objectivity. It has been centrally aligned with a democratisation of the research process. As James and Shaw (2022, p.1) summarise it offers a means for participants and researchers to work in partnership and engage in a coproduction of knowledge and understanding.

Participatory research has been commonly deployed in research with children and young people. Broadly, this methodological shift emerged in relation to wider sociological theories that sought to view children and young people not as objects in research, but as subjects with whom researchers should actively engage (see, for example, Heath et al, 2009).

Given this, the research sought to reflect the context of youth work in the methods used with young people, and adopt the broad principles of participatory research outlined above. In short, the research wanted to use activities that would engage and involve the young people in a meaningful and accessible manner.

The three sites for the programme were attended by researchers on three separate occasions each. The initial visit was conducted to introduce researchers and the research component of the research. This was in order to address any questions or concerns and to establish trust with the group for subsequent visits.

The second and third visits incorporated informal conversations and activities that were conducted primarily within the context of the group as it was being experienced.

A key activity was undertaken during the second series of site visits. This involved the use of flipcharts and markers; and was designed to encourage the young people to discuss and document the role their participation had in their lives. In particular, this activity was oriented towards being youth-centred and reflective of the orientation of group work.

In consultation with youth workers and young people, the activity was conducted during their group work session and was facilitated by the researchers during the wider set of activities in which they were engaged.

The activity was built around three interrelated issues: what the group meant to them individually and as a group; what skills and competencies did they feel the group helped develop; what they had learned from being in the group.

The group was asked to draw a person on flipchart sheets. In doing this, researchers asked for a volunteer to lie on the paper and others would draw around them. Once this was done, the first part was to ask the young people to write word or sentence in the person about what they enjoyed about the group, learned from being involved, and any skills they feel they had developed individually and/or as a group.

Secondly, young people were asked write words or sentences around the person about experiences of the group. Prompts were used in this context, such as what activities or elements had they engaged in and their experience of these, did they feel listened too, was the group important to them and why.

Thirdly, they were asked to think about and write word or sentences about the groups potential wider significance in their settings and communities, that is how the activities and outputs from the group maybe transmissible beyond the immediate group context.

3.7 Sample and Participants

As outlined earlier, the selection of programme sites was undertaken by YWI. Once this was done, researchers were linked with relevant youth workers to discuss the research component. In this context then, the researchers did not have to pursue a specific sampling strategy and were working with what was intrinsically an available cohort within the group work programme.

In total, four youth workers were interviewed as part of the research, this represents the main facilitators working across the three programme sites.

The numbers of young people involved in the programme was as follows:

Site A – 7   **Site B – 8**   **Site C – 15**

3.8 Data Analysis

Data from the interviews and recorded informal conversations with young people were analysed in line with the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This encompassed a process of 'familiarisation' with the data and subsequently the development of codes across the data.

Following this, individual codes were organized into thematic headings relating to: the values and role of youth work; the understanding and benefits of group work; and the process and outcomes of the climate justice group work programme.

3.9 Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that there were certain limitations on the scope of the research. In particular, the research was small-scale in that it encompassed a relatively short ten-week programme implemented across three youth work settings. However, as per findings presented in the next chapter we argue that this sample size has provided meaningful data in relation to developing an understanding of the role, benefits, and outcomes of using group work within youth work.

Four
Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses key findings arising from data collected with youth workers and young people involved in the climate justice group work programme.

Section 4.2 includes findings arising from the series of in-depth interviews conducted with four youth workers involved in the programme. These interviews were conducted at or toward the end of the programme, and were designed as an opportunity for a summative and reflective engagement with the process.

Substantive issues addressed related to participants understanding of contemporary youth work, the role of group work in youth work practice, and the implementation of the specific climate justice group work programme.

Section 4.3 provides an overview of data arising from the researchers' engagement with young people participating in the programme across the three sites. The overall number of young people that participated in the programme was 30 – although numbers week-to-week varied owing to factors including adverse weather conditions, individual illness, and school exams. The age of young people involved range from 12-18 years, with the majority being toward to lower end of this range.

As per previous chapter, this data was collected through the use of informal group and individual conversations, observation of the group in practice, and group activities conducted by the researchers during the programme.

4.2.1 Youth Workers Understanding of their Role & Values

There was a consistent understanding amongst participants of the role and values inscribed within youth workers and their practice. This was built around a number of key issues, including: relationships between young people and youth workers, and with their peers; engagement of young people in youth-led processes; and the adoption of an equitable participatory approach to their practice. In terms of the orientation of practice in this context, the difference to formal education or other statutory service provision was identified as a significant factor in youth workers' sense of identity and how they were viewed by young people.

> 'They don't see us a threatening, they don't see us as teachers' (P2).

Furthermore, Participant 2 identified that an emphasis within youth work was the significance of engaging and building relationships with young people over time in order to 'get to know them' and 'get them comfortable… [so] they know it's a safe space.' As they noted further, 'it takes a while to get to that point… they don't come in like that' (P2) Similarly, Participant 3 identified they need to

take time to build trust with young people: 'as they get confidence in the youth worker and they know that the youth worker is there for them, they're not a teacher, they're not a social worker, and they're not a parent.' (P3)

The significance of a space wherein young people are provided with a sense of safety, participation and inclusion was identified by participants. For example, Participant 3 noted youth work is often about being 'youth led, fun, doing something different, somewhere to go… away from whatever is going on in their lives… [and] they can be themselves.'

However, whilst participants were clear in terms of values central to youth work practice, issues within contemporary policy contexts were identified. For example, one participant noted that targeting youth work in relation to specific cohorts often served to minimise engagement with wider groups and individuals: 'we're not thinking about that silent kid in the room' (P1).

They further articulated that funding was becoming 'narrower', making it difficult to meet wider forms of need amongst young people. In this context, it was seen that youth work was seen as a means to solve problems in young people whereby 'youth work becomes so much more than youth work because the needs are so high… [and] what's falling to the youth worker is so beyond the job description now… we're actually losing what is youth work' (P1)

Similarly, Participant 3 observed that the specificities of funding requirements has diminished the autonomy of youth work, whereby '[youth work] would have had more freedom to respond to need. If we saw something in the community, we would maybe talk to people in the community and go with it together. But now it's very much the funding dictates you do it this way… [and] taking away a little bit of youth workers' knowledge and skills base.'

These issues were situated by participants both in relation to the narrower frame of reference in which youth work was positioned, and immediate concerns around budgets, staffing in terms of numbers and availability of qualified youth workers, and workload. Also, as participants noted this can lead to an underappreciation of the processual nature of youth work within contemporary policy and funding imperatives:

'you're addressing an issue or you're addressing a challenge… then you have to deliver a result, an outcome, an output, and sometime that takes a while to come' (Participant 3).

Understanding of the Role Group Work within Youth Work

Participants understanding of the role of group work within youth work reflected and was contextualised within the identification of key features and values described in the previous section.

The benefits of group work within youth work settings were broadly shared and understood in relation to: friendships and relationship-building; collaboration, communication and teamwork; learning with others; and group- and self-expression and confidence building. As one youth worker summarised, group work promotes: 'Communication, teamwork, that ability to get information through activities with peers' (P1)

All participants identified the importance of groups being youth-led and providing a context for meaningful youth engagement and participation predicated on young people's needs, skills, and preferences.

'Providing a space for them to feel like they're being listened to and they can participate in and they can feel safe and welcome' (p4) Fostering this was underpinned by being flexible and adaptable to young people and allowing a group to develop in relation to its own interests and preferences: 'you have to adapt to them in the moment' (P1).

'Things go wrong and you just have to adapt… it doesn't have to be so regimented all the time, that you kinda let it flow and let them be – express themselves – and maybe the idea of structuring things too much doesn't work' (P4) While groups will often be planned and have a goal orientation, the process whereby you pursue that goal was emphasised by participants. The youth-led focus of youth work generally, and youth work specifically, was identified as important factor for promoting engagement and participation.
'that's why it's important to let the young people lead… or they'll say if you're going to tell us what we're doing why would we come back next week… [and] sometimes them just coming back is a win' (P2)

'that's to make sure that no young person decides 'oh, I don't want to come anymore''… the young people's voice has to be at the heart of it' (P1)

Thus, voluntarism and promoting equitable, empowered participation were stressed as key processes in group work. Equally, a recognition of young people's desire to coalesce in peer relationships was identified:
'They really want to work with themselves… they will look for assistance and help when they need it, it's just giving them their independence where they can do it, make decisions themselves' (P3)

The importance of giving time to allow a group to develop was stressed by participants. In particular there was a consciousness of the learning emergent over time and the benefits accruing over time: 'process not the end-product, if we don't get the end-product that's ok, but what they learn through the process is what's important' (P1)

Recognition of the process of group work was clearly articulated by youth workers. In particular, their understanding of the process activated within the group was an important mechanism for learning and development of skills, but also it revealed specific benefits and outcomes of importance:

'It can be difficult that there's an expectation to have certain outcomes at the end… [rather than] giving them the confidence and space really to be open to learn new things and learn new ways I suppose from each other, that they're sharing their ideas with the group' (P4). Equally, it was identified that a youth group doesn't sit in isolation from other elements of youth work practice and settings. Participation in one group can encourage further and ongoing engagement with youth work
'If they come to one group, they might ask about a separate group that they want to attend… And then of course you'd have the people in group work who then come to one-to-one' (P2)

'The one-to-ones have come out of my relationships that have been built in a group work setting and they've reached out' (P1)

More generally, Participant 3 observed that involvement in group work can build a relationship, a trust and understanding of the role of youth work and youth workers, whereby young people identify that 'they could actually be a person I could get information from, they're not just doing activities, they actually have qualifications and skills, that they'll help me if I need, so they will reach out to the youth worker.'

4.2.3 Youth Workers' Views on the Climate Justice Group Work Programme

The three sites were, as discussed in previous chapter, identified by Youth Work Ireland as suitable locations within which to run this programme of group work.

The localities in which the programme was run were all identified by participants as having areas with significant levels of deprivation and disadvantage. In particular, school attendance was highlighted as an issue for many of the young people with whom they work. Relatedly to this was the identification that many of the young people engaged in youth work exhibit mental health issues, are neurodiverse, and have struggled with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

More broadly, extant adverse social conditions were identified by participants in relation to socio-economic status, family breakdown, and addiction related issues.

In relation to the composition of the groups, for two of the sites their groups were formed from pre-existing engagement with and relationships in the youth work setting, and with young people who had expressed an interest in issues pertaining to climate change and climate action. The third site ultimately, after initial issues with recruitment, integrated the group work programme into an extant Comhairle Na n'Og group.

For Sites A and B, there was an ongoing relationship with the young people involved which was deemed important in group development. However, as Site C was a mix of new and old members in Comhairle Na N'Og and a new facilitator, there was a perception in this context by the youth workers of needing to take a little more time developing the group.

Participants identified how the group work programme promoted self-confidence, communication, and leadership, which developed through the process of relationship-building and collaboration amongst young people involved. As per previous sections, this process-oriented aspect of group work was emphasised.

Participant 3 identified that the group was a means of 'bringing them together, to communicate, look at their strengths and their skills without too much pressure.'

In relation to a variety of activities their group engaged in, Participant 2 indicated

'it's everything, they're working together, they're creative, they're building relationships.'

Friendship and relationships were viewed as both an important mechanism for cohering group members as well as a benefit in

and of itself of the group work process. As one participant observed, that while group members may have known of each other they would not necessarily have been friends outside the confines of the group

'Seeing that arm of friendship being stretched out… [a young person] being their relaxed self, with someone they've only known because I've crossed their paths, but that has brought a joy and light to their day and maybe made them leave with a bigger smile on their face than they came in with. They're the special moments' (P1)

Similarly, Participant 4 noted the importance of these interactions and how they can promote confidence for group participants:

'My main focus is they all come and feel like when they leave that they've either chatted to somebody new or voiced an opinion on something that they wouldn't get a chance to do anywhere else' (P4)

The participant continued by noting the relevance of how an individual engagement becomes integrated into wider group development:

'The build up to that was really interesting in terms of how do I develop that as a group activity so that one person's contribution leads to a group contribution.'

All youth work participants identified benefits to individual and group levels of confidence amongst young people participating in the programme. These included a demonstrable engagement in discussion and activities, particularly pronounced in relation to young people that may have previously been withdrawn or shy in relation to speaking.

Participants also identified the role of the group to lean into the interests of the young people

involved and to raise their awareness of what they enjoy and are good at:

'being able to work with a group that allows them to excel at that interest' (P1)

In this context, participants noted that some group members had come to recognise their interests as presenting potential educational and career pathways. For example, two participants indicated that group members had begun discussing how some of the work done in the group had them thinking about future directions in this regard.

It was noted that one young person indicated that they had never thought they'd go to college but was now actively involved in the identification of courses related to their group work activities. As Participant 1 observed:

'talk about broadening their horizons, this is a young person who'd already written themselves off' (P1)

In relation to engaging with issues around climate justice, this was seen as a process of working towards this in relation where the young people in the group started and wanted to go:

'bringing in the idea that climate change is happening, we are a part of it, this is leading to lots of stuff happening in the world, this is leading to an injustice and we can take action for a better world' (P1)

Equally, Participant 2 noted that the planning was iterative and after an introduction to 'the basics' of climate change, climate action, climate justice, their group was guided by the young people in terms of activities they engaged in.

In this context, starting where young people are at and giving them a space to lead were important parts of the process in this programme of work.

'even if you do want to do a topic like climate justice, you kinda have to start where they're at which is they understand climate change…

cos that's what is being talked about in their world, but letting them pull it apart to start to see where the justice piece is coming in' (P1)

Allowing the space for young people to be empowered to guide the direction of the group was an important aspect of this work:

'I think to engage young people in climate action you really have to work a lot more with them and the group on getting to know each other. Because we're finding there is a little bit of young people saying 'oh climate action, I've heard enough of it now' or it can either get too complicated for them or be too simplified' (P3)

Through working around young people's own interests and preferences Participant 1 identified that they have seen this process

develop with their group wherein 'I've seen their passion and interest in climate change, and they're starting to get climate justice a bit more.'

The development of the work on climate justice in this way was seen as more beneficial than how it may be delivered in formal educational contexts.

'My hope is that they kind of develop some critical thinking looking at both issues that affect young people… [and] global issues and local issues… [and] that young people develop themselves and they use language that they understand.' (P4)

4.3 Young People's Views and Experiences

4.3.1 Young People's Experiences and Perceptions of Youth Work

In initial conversations and flipchart activities with young people, they identified the significance of youth work for them. Specifically, this was framed in relation to their views on youth work and why they chose to participate in the climate justice group.

In general, participants viewed friendships and relationships as a strong part of their experience in youth work and a motivating factor to engage in the group work programme:

'I like doing group work stuff and getting to know new people… I like having fun with others.'
(Group Conversation w/Young People – Site A)

Other young people across the sites referred to groups as allowing them to work with existing friends, make new friends, and learn about issues relating to the environment.

Equally, youth work was situated by the young people as enjoyable: 'it's something to do… you have fun' (Group Conversation w/ Young People – Site B) and as another young person noted: 'youth club is definitely an important part of my life… [it's] a safe place to go.' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site A)

An important aspect of this was the young people's role within youth work settings, in particular how they were included and empowered in decision-making:

'We get to decide on what happens, [if we] want to do or if we don't want to do it' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site A)

In particular, this was made in reference to its contrast with their experience of school environments.

'What we do here is different than what we

do in school… You have more freedom here than school… You get to speak here as you can't speak in class.' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site A)

'It is not like a classroom, you are listened to and get to discuss stuff it freely and give opinions… It is more fun instead of strict formal experience' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site A)

As noted, Sites A and B were developed with young people that had indicated an interest in environmental issues. The specific focus on the group work programme was also identified as a factor for participation. The learning component was noted in group conversations:

'See how other people are helping the environment… it's a good opportunity' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site B).

These findings suggest that for young people involved in the group work programme, their positive experiences in their prior engagement with youth work was a motivating factor. As such, this demonstrates the ongoing role of youth work in their lives as meaningful in terms of offering a space to make friends, be listened to and heard, and sits in contradistinction to the formal nature of their educational experiences.

4.3.2 Experiences and Benefits of Group Work & the Climate Justice Group Work Programme

As described in the previous chapter, during the programme the researchers engaged with the young people in relation to their experiences and the perceived benefits of their participation in the climate justice group.

From the activity, common words and phrases identified by all three groups are provided in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Benefits and Outcomes of Climate Justice Group Work Programme Identified by Young People (across all three sites)

Individual	Group	Community
Build Confidence	Listening and listened to	Make difference
Making friends & friendships	Working together and/or teamwork	Cleaner environment
Fun	Being part of a group	Influence
New experiences	Individual youth workers name	Community awareness
Listening to others	New things/experiences	
	Creative	

Additionally, Table 4.2 provides a list of words and phrases that were emphasised in at least one of the groups.

Table 4.2 Additional Benefits and Outcomes of Climate Justice Group Work Programme Identified by Young People (in at least one site)

Individual	Group	Community
Communication skills	Opportunities	Social Media
Recommend the group to others	Discussions	Don't Litter
Visiting new places	Learning to compromise	Improving the environment
Learn about one another	More respectful	Chance to make changes for future generations
Improve new skills	Felt important	Need more sustainable energy
Be outgoing	Public speaking skills	Chance to talk to people in charge
		Sustainable development

Informal conversations and activities conducted at the end-point of the groups raised similar points. Groups generally pointed towards the fun and enjoyment they had in the group, the relationships they had made, and the opportunity to learn this experience had afforded them.

'It's definitely a good way to get involved with a lot of other people, and it's a good way to meet people as well' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site C)

'It's a break… it's more of a fun activity'
(Group Conversation w/Young People – Site A)

Young people identified their ability to work together and, as one participant stated: 'find a common thing that people like…' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site A)

Equally, the collaboration within the group was noted:

The importance of friendships was identified across all three groups. For example, as one young person noted:

'I really like how everybody asks to help and helps each other out' (Group Conversation w/Young People – Site C)

4.3.3 Group Work Activities and Outputs

As part of the research, youth workers facilitating the programme across the three sites were asked to record details of activities and document any reflections on their work week-to-week.

From the reflections, the youth workers carried out at the end of every session a number of things emerged. All groups adopted a similar approach with the groups, which included beginning with group contracts and moving onto discussing young people's ideas in relation to specific climate change issues.
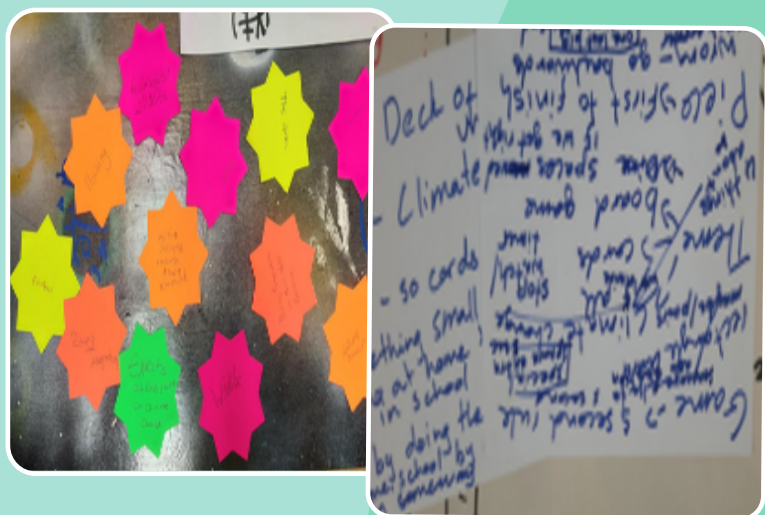
Based on the young people's interests they broke into smaller groups to work together. These groups changed from week to week in some programmes. Within these smaller groups, creative activities were used along with discussion, teamwork and collaboration to form ideas and plans. Other activates were also used to cement teamwork and relationship building for example baking, trips and board games.

Then once the plans were decided on, work each week took place to make sure that the plans were followed through with. Even though all groups picked different aspects of climate change, they all followed a very similar process to produce the work they have done.
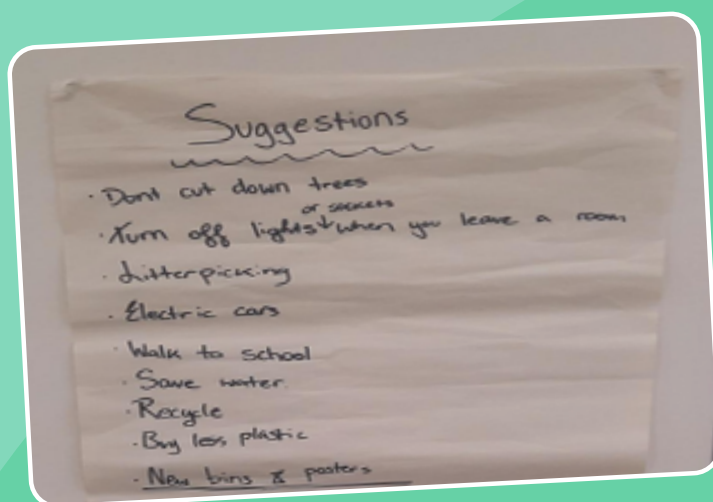
The development of activities and creation of artefacts as part of the group work programme are evidence of the meaningful engagement in the process over the course of the programme.

For example, Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show images relating to brainstorming work amongst young people in relation to developing ideas and actions related to eventual artefacts being produced as part of the programme.

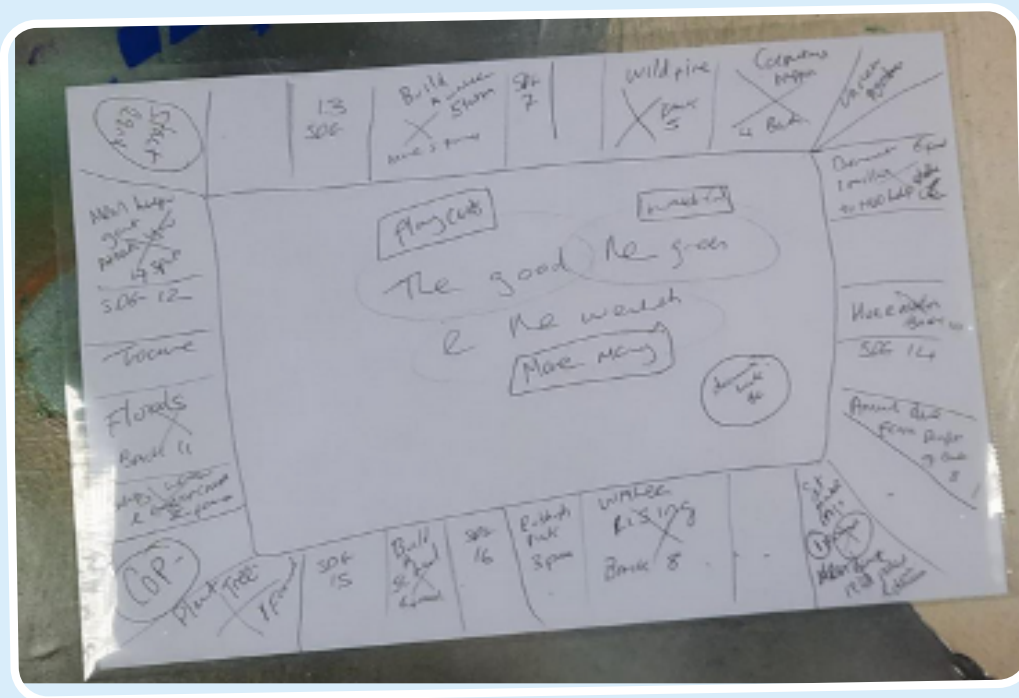**Figure 4.1 SITE A – BRAINSTORMING WEEK 5**

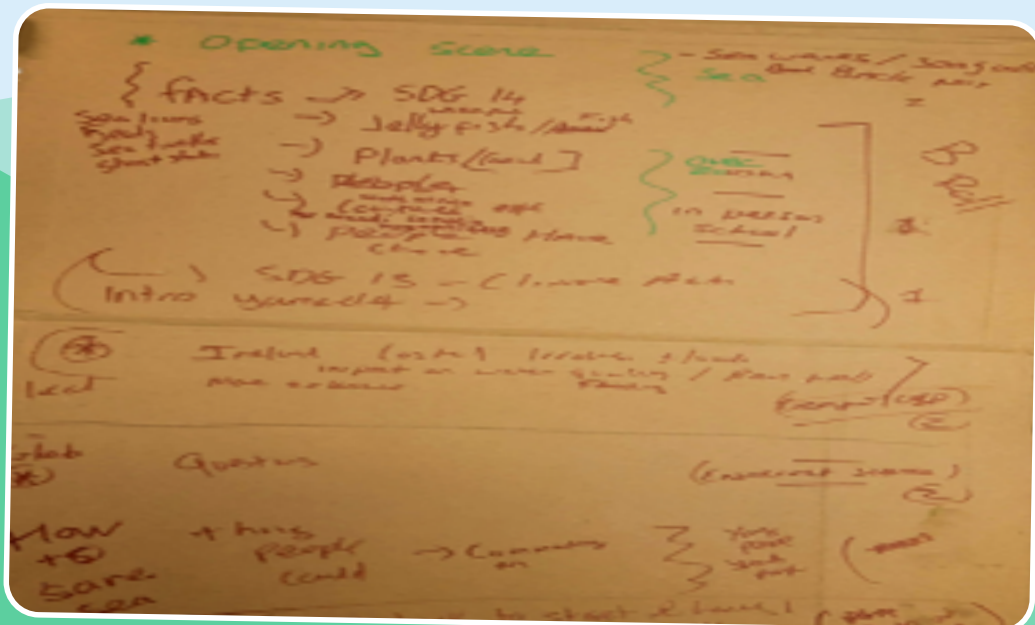**Figure 4.2 SITE B – BRAINSTORMING WEEK 1**

This work was engaged in collaboratively by young people as they discussed and debated ways of creating meaningful content and designs. In the context of Site A, this involved the creation of a board game and a video documentary, Site B produced a mural in the shared space within the youth work setting, and Site C engaged in the production of zines on UN Sustainable Development Goals. Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 provide images relating to these outputs developed within the group.

Figure 4.3 SITE A – TEMPLATE FOR BOARD GAME WEEK 10

Figure 4.4 SITE A – DOCUMENTARY 'SCRIPT/STORYBOARD' WEEK 10

Figure 4.4 SITE B – MURAL WEEK 10

5. Discussion

Five
Discussion

5.1 Introduction

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discuss the findings detailed previously in this report. In particular, these findings are situated with reference to the ideas explored in Chapter 2 and framework of group work practice established within the theory of change developed to define, understand and conceptualise this form of practice.

5.2 Mechanisms and Context of Group Work in Youth Work Settings

5.2 Mechanisms and Context of Group Work in Youth Work Settings

5.3 The findings suggest overall how features and values of youth work can be meaningfully pursued through the process of group work. Key mechanisms identified within the theory of change were appreciable amongst youth workers and evidently pursued within the programme. This included voluntary and meaningful youth participation, the creation of a space that is enjoyable and relevant for young people, and a model of practice informed by theories of informal education and critical social education.

In the first instance, youth workers indicated a strong awareness of and synchronicity with 'ideal type' formulations of youth work discussed in Chapter 2. The interviews revealed a strong desire to pursue their practice in adherence with youth-centred, youth-led and participatory approaches. The framing of values and practice amongst participants is consistent with ideas expressed within the extant literature on youth work discussed in Chapter 2 (for example, Wood et al, 2015 etc.).

Equally, the significance of group work for promoting this form of practice is evident in the views expressed by youth work participants. Group work was viewed, as per Button's (1974) conceptualisation, as encouraging meaningful forms of individual and group participation, promoting skills and competencies amongst members, and engaging young people in a reflective process of learning.

Aligned with youth-centred practice is the role of youth work in providing young people with spaces that are meaningful and enjoyable (see, for example, Davies, 2010). Youth workers indicated a strong desire to create spaces in youth work that afforded young people the opportunity to 'be themselves', develop relationships, and lead in activities and process in which they are involved.

This point was reflected in the views of young people, in particular, their identification of youth work as a space that contrasts with education and other institutional settings as per arguments made by Spence et al (2007).

Equally, views expressed by young people in this research supported this view of youth work settings and spaces. In relation to reasons for their participation in youth work, the significance of this context in offering a space in which they are listened to, respected, and afforded autonomy independence were clearly identifiable in the data.

The specific processes of youth work generally, and group work specifically, are embedded, we argue, in general conceptualisations of informal education (Smith) and critical social education (Hurley and Treacy, 1993; Treacy, 2009). Whilst often broadly defined and open to contestation, these models are broadly, we would suggest, based upon being purposeful while process-led, encompassing of personal development while working towards wider social change, and offering

learning while being informal and reflective. These characteristics animated the underlying conceptions of group work amongst youth workers involved in this research.

However, youth workers also demonstrated a keen awareness of issues relating to the orientation and emphasis within contemporary youth work policy. The challenges identified by participants reflected extant debates on the context of youth work (McMahon, 2021; Kiely and Meade, 2022)

and related to the narrowing conception of youth work's role, the constraints placed upon it by budgeting and funding imperatives, and the outcome-oriented emphasis within policies regarding youth service provision. These were identified by participants as impacting upon their ability to practice in accordance with espoused values, and were specifically seen as often limiting in relation to their engagement in group work with young people.

5.3 Benefits and Outcomes of Group Work in Youth Work Settings

Chapter 2 discussed Button's (1974) conceptualisation of developmental group work. It is the case that Button's ideas about groups include an emphasis on the promotion of individual competencies and skills, which reflects personal development elements associated with youth work. Whilst these are important potential outcomes, Button also articulated the importance of young people supporting and working with one another, as well as the wider learning that can take place in these contexts.

It was identified then that key short-term outcomes of group work relate to, for example, the development of: communication and interpersonal skills; teamwork and collaboration; learning; and meaningful relationships. Equally, medium-term outcomes relate to the activation of these skills in relation to engage in participatory decision-making; pursue meaningful group activities, and the identification, through critical thought, of their own values and beliefs.

These short-term outcomes were pronounced within the findings relating to both youth workers and young people. Young people can be identified as developing, through their engagement with the group programme, the abilities to communicate, individually and as a group, work and learn together, and develop relationships and friendship.
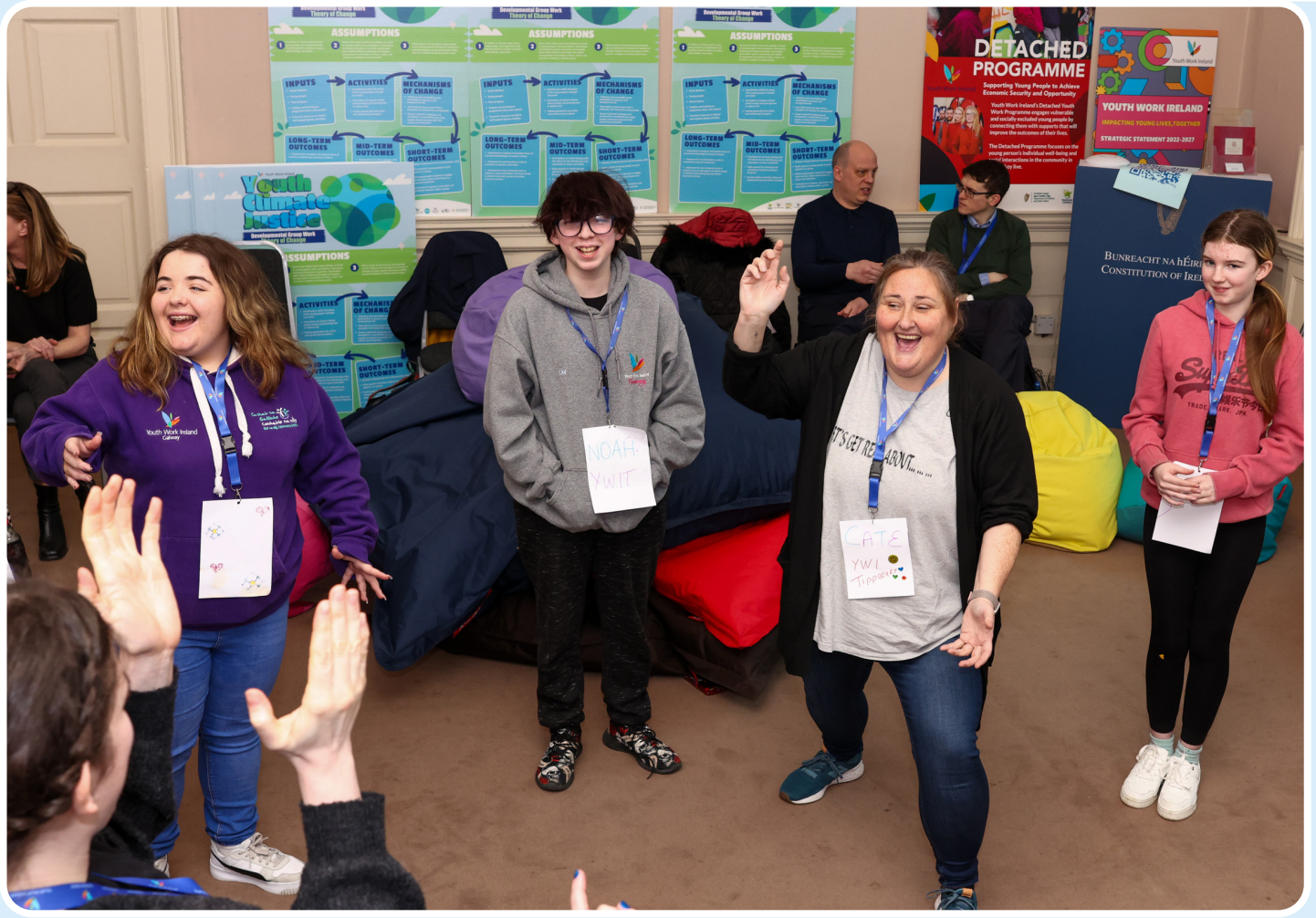
In relation medium-term outcomes, the youth-led activities and outputs arising within and

from this group work programme demonstrated young people's capacity to engage in participatory decision-making, engage in meaningful action that reflects the development and articulation values and beliefs in relation to climate justice.

These findings then reflect key aspects and features of youth work identified in Chapter 2. In particular, the evidence is consistent with Jeffs and Smith's (2010) articulation of the benefits of youth work as relating to: sanctuary, enjoyable activity, personal and social development, and relationship and community; as well as Davies' (2010) contention that using groups in youth work supports 'personal learning and constructive collective activity.'

More broadly, there would appear to be a relevant relationship between the delivery of group work within youth work settings, and the promotion of critical thought amongst young people (see, for example, Young, 2006; Smith, 2010).

In the context of the climate justice group work programme, young people were able to articulate through discussion, activities, and outputs their own values and beliefs in relation to climate-related issues. Furthermore, the activities and outputs arising in this context demonstrate young people's development of meaningful localised actions in relation to significant social issues and, in particular, causes and impacts of climate change and related climate justice issues.

Six

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this research point towards the significance of group work for youth workers and young people involved in youth work settings
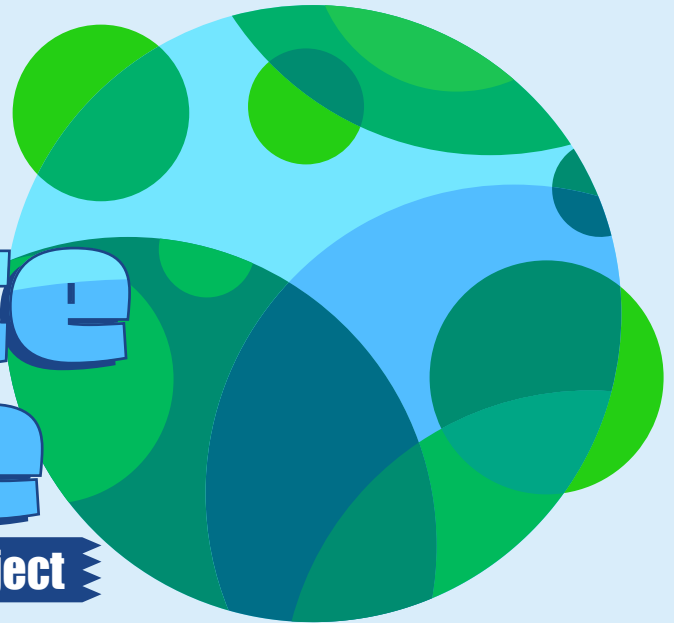
In particular, we argue that:

1. Amidst a context wherein group work is increasingly denuded within youth work policy discourse, the evidence presented here supports how group work is a meaningful and effective means of engaging and working with young people. In particular, group work practice both promotes the development of individual and group skills and competencies, and encourages an engagement in thinking critically about relevant social issues, including climate justice.

2. Given the nature of the benefits and outcomes arising from group work highlighted here, we would suggest a coherent relationship between the benefits and outcomes of group work encountered in this example and the spirit of existing youth work values, legislation and policies. Whilst the realisation of policy has become increasingly focused on targeted and individualised practice, the evidence presented in here in relation to group work would appear relevant to stated values and intended benefits of youth work within these contexts.

3. The Theory of Change framework developed in this research was broadly supported by the data arising from an engagement with youth workers and young people involved in the climate justice group work programme. This framework was informed by an understanding of group work's process-orientation in producing meaningful benefits and outcomes. Equally, the evidence demonstrates congruence with wider models of informal education and critical social education as underscoring group work practice within youth work.

However, it should also be acknowledged that the framework of group work developed in this research is nascent, as opposed to definitive or complete. This is owing to, firstly, the small-scale context for the research evidence presented, and, secondly, potential variations, both in practice and academic writing, of how key concepts may be understood.

In this context, there is potential to further engage with stakeholders in relation to developing how group work may be further understood and implemented within youth work settings.

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Youth Work Ireland

Youth Climate Justice

Developmental Group Work Project

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