Peace4Youth

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youth pact
QUALITY
& IMPACT

UNDERSTANDING GROUPWORK FOR INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL LEARNING

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Think of the group as a hall of mirrors, in which everybody sees themselves reflected by the others present. Members can see others reacting to events in the same manner in which they do, or in marked contrast to their own behaviours….It is the unique property of the group that quite quickly it can provide the individual with a multiplicity of self-reflection. (Benson, 2019: 236)

GROUPWORK WITHIN PEACE4YOUTH

The Peace4Youth Programme is funded by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and supported by the Department for the Economy (NI) and the Department for Children and Youth Affairs (RoI). Embedded in the projects that fall under Peace4Youth is the youth work approach. The programme works with young people to promote greater levels of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland. Programmes cover themes of personal development, citizenship and good relations, and run over 3-4 days and generally last for 6-9 months.

Groupwork is a core feature of Peace4Youth programmes and a central tenet of the youth work approach. The essential feature of groupwork, as opposed to working with an individual, is that the one-to-one space is largely private (or at least holds strong elements of privacy), whereas the group experience calls us out into a more social arena, where we get to practise our relationships, develop interdependence and take risks to show ourselves to others. Through the group there is scope for healthy relationships with self and others, for fostering agency while at the same time being at ease with difference. In the youth work setting and with the youth work approach, young people and the groupmaker are not merely a collection of individuals assembled with the purpose of completing a task – they coalesce into a group with a life and purpose of its own. In a group young people can test themselves, see themselves reflected in others, like themselves, challenge and be challenged and have an experience of belonging.

This paper seeks to articulate the key concepts of groupwork as a social learning process that offers fertile ground for young people to grow and change, in connection with their peers. The material presented is drawn from four primary sources: first, from existing literature on youth work and groupwork; second, from YouthPact training days facilitated by Jarlath Benson with Peace4Youth workers, third from a paper written by Gail Neill based on a training session with Jarlath Benson; and fourth, from 'Distilling the Essence of Peace4Youth Practice' (McConville & McArdle, 2018) a qualitative research report on the learning of young participants through the Peace4Youth programme. Direct quotes from Peace4Youth participants are presented here, to illustrate their experiences of groupwork.

DEFINING GROUPWORK

Benson (2019:8) in his seminal text on groupwork states that,

> *'Groupwork practice refers to the conscious, disciplined and systematic use of knowledge about the process of collective human interaction, in order to intervene in an informed way, or promote some desired objective in a group setting...'*

The practice is a complex process that depends upon a combination of the groupworker's techniques alongside their intuitive practice wisdom. It is both a catalyst for growth and movement, and a social intervention in its own right.

> *'Group work is a productive, healthy, and creative experience, carried out on the basis of explicit agreements, openly pursued and clearly arrived at, about the purpose and task of the group, rights and responsibilities of the members.'*
> *(Benson, 2019: 8)*

GROUPWORK FOSTERING ASSOCIATION AND BELONGING

Youth work has consistently embraced and used a group work methodology, as this approach fundamentally promotes the core conditions of association and belonging. The central concerns of youth work, such as relating to others in meaningful ways that develop empathy and self-awareness, are outcomes of the groupwork process.

Gilchrist, Jeffs and Spence (2003:10) muse on the principles of youth and community work through history. They argue that whilst contexts and societies have changed, the basics of the human condition remain constant:

> *'For at a fundamental level, people need each other. They need association in families, groups and organisations. They need to recognise themselves in the other and they need the security of knowing that they are known. The striving for community is at its heart a striving to belong which transcends time and place.'*

A group is a means by which young people can be known, and test and shape what it means to belong to something outside of themselves and their primary unit. Individuals within the group can learn to navigate and balance their own individual needs, with the needs of the group. There is an inherent understanding that all human life is relational and personal growth is more sustainable when achieved as part of the group and the wider social structure. This sentiment is further echoed in policy:

> *'Having good friends and positive relationships is an important protective factor for emotional wellbeing throughout childhood and the teenage years. The individual's experience during childhood and adolescence of positive relationships with family, other significant adults and their peer group will underpin their ability to go on to make successful and emotionally satisfying relationships as an adult, both with a partner and future children, as well as at work and in the community.' (Department for Children & Youth Affairs, 2014:54)*

Building positive relationships with peers and interested adults is possible in the group work setting and interdependence is an important outcome of these relationships. Interdependence is a repeated concept in this paper.

YOUTH WORK PRINCIPLES UNDERPIN THE GROUPWORK PROCESS

The National Occupational Standards for Youth Work (Lifelong Learning UK, 2014) identify a set of core values for the youth work profession. An extract is presented here for the particular resonance they have with McConville & McArdle's research (2018) into the experiences of participants on Peace4Youth programmes:

- recognizing the young person as a partner in the learning process
- being concerned with how young people feel and not just what they know and can do
- seeking to go beyond where young people start
- widening horizons
- promotes participation
- invites social commitment, in particular by encouraging them to be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them
- treats young people with respect, valuing each individual and their differences
- promotes the acceptance and understanding of others, whilst challenging oppressive behaviour and ideas
- respects and values individual differences by supporting and strengthening young people's belief in themselves
  and
- recognizes their capacity to grow and to change through a supportive group environment.

These values are not only tangible through the content of group programmes, activities and exercises but are embedded through the mood and atmosphere of the group process itself. The group provides the space to talk about opinions, stereotypes and offer questions to stimulate thinking and discussion. Furthermore, it provides the space for individuals to be challenged by others not liking what we say, and others behaving in ways that disrupt our perception of what is 'acceptable'.

An important mantra in youth work is to 'start where the young person is at' – but always with the notion of looking to where they want to go, while valuing them for who they are in the 'here and now'. This is true also of a group experience where 'working with and through young people's peer groups' (Davies & Merton, 2009:21) gives legitimacy to young people's realities, while simultaneously creating a learning space where the sharing of insights or dialogue within the group can lead to moments of personal awareness.

McDermott (2002) refers to this as a 'thinking group'. A 'thinking group' means focusing on the group as the backdrop to individual experience – 'considering everything that happens in terms of the group context (also the wider context in which it is embedded – social, political, organizational) because this is where meaning is manifest' (McDermott 2002: 81-2). In this context the role of a facilitator is to reveal or uncover meaning that emerges from the group interactions.

THE TREPIDATION AND TRIUMPH OF BEING PART OF A GROUP

The experience of being a part of a group is a complex one, with equally as much discomfort as comfort for the participants. It is useful therefore to understand the motivation of individuals to be part of a group and what they might hope to derive from this experience, that might explain enduring these intense emotions.

The groupwork aspect of the youth work approach is best understood as therapeutic, but not therapy. A group can have therapeutic qualities where the groupworker sets up conditions that are similar to the therapeutic relationship. Therapeutic qualities relate to reality and honesty; groups can grow when they deal with what is real, and where members have the freedom to share openly.

In the group there can be many manifestations of anxiety or unease that shows itself as self-exclusion, inappropriate behaviour for the particular group setting, pushing the group away to avoid the feeling of being rejected by the group. Wishing to be part of a group can be a risky business for many young people especially those for whom previous experiences of wanting to belong and/or belonging to a group have been an overwhelming or even a frightening experience. As is previously stated the act of bringing people together in itself does not make a group; some young people will resist being part of a group and express this in behaviour that isolates them, that causes disruption for others and poses questions for the group worker.

The potential for meaningful encounter in a group is immense, and that brings with it however, for some members, a fear of the potential of being named and shamed by other group members who can recognise our defence mechanisms. Moments of confrontation can challenge individuals; however, they can result in building a clearer sense of self. Personal realisations of strengths and weaknesses can be further boosted by others bearing witness to such fortés. One research participant for McConville & McArdle's study (2018), spoke of trust and distrust as a gateway to empathy, courage and support:

> *'I don't trust very easily. I find it very hard. So for me to be able to trust them so easily it was really good because I do tend to keep people at arm's length really, and here [the group] you can come and be yourself - talk about what you want to talk; … So, whenever you do tell them that you are having a bad day they will actually sit and talk about it and then you realise there are a lot of people around here actually feeling the same.'*
>
> *(McConville & McArdle, 2018:50)*

For a group to function, workers must be conscious of and make use of the heightened emotions that are present in parallel with the many cognitive aspects of the group. Peace4Youth participants identified deeply held fears and anxieties, and were given space by workers who worked with the group on an emotional level first; with a view to building group connections and intimacies through candid communication, as was the case for this participant:

> *'And I was really nervous and my legs wouldn't stop jiggling. It was proper pins and needles and we had a group discussion, sitting in a circle and we did the same thing where we opened up to each other. So we kept our group contract which we do at the start of the year, which is about respecting each other and if we have any issues we bring it up in group and this is what 'sharing the road' was for, because I had kind of let go of that thought that everyone else was going through something at the exact same time but it was just separate and that we were all on the same boat...'*
>
> *(McConville & McArdle, 2018:55)*

For other research participants the group established social bridges which were built through a non-judgemental environment. Engaging with others in this atmosphere boosted self-esteem and self-confidence to face fears:

> *'I think they'll always be my friends now. Like you just felt like you were in a safe place. Like no-one judged you.'*
>
> *(McConville & McArdle, 2018:47)*

> *'I believe if you overcome your fears everyone would be a superstar. Our group is like this in helping you overcome your fears.'*
>
> *(McConville & McArdle, 2018:55)*

CORE ACTIVITIES OF THE GROUPWORKER

The core activities of the groupworker are not only about developing and delivering curriculum content, but the care and attention given to creating and enabling a learning environment within the group setting.

Peace4Youth workers and young people spoke of session content and learning activities and in addition, clearly articulated the ways in which youth workers made a youth-centred space where challenge and support are evident (McConville, McArdle, 2018). The following elements are presented by Neill (2015) as the foundational behaviours of the groupworker in creating this atmosphere:

•   Giving young people opportunities to practise what it is to take responsibility
•   Helping young people find a place where they can belong, supporting them to bond and make connections with one another
•   Evocation and education – to draw out what is within the person and to place value on that
•   Facilitate the group – paying attention to and responding to the natural cycles of the group
•   Connecting to the group – caring about, having empathy for and genuine interest in the group, its interactions and its members.

The youth worker who underestimates these behaviours as peripheral to groupwork planning, risks undermining the heart of this social learning process.

BUILDING A SAFE SPACE.... OVER AND OVER AGAIN

Embarking on a group can be an intimidating journey for young people and the groupworker; in large part because there are many unknown and unseen areas to be navigated. Making the group a safe space is a key unceasing task for the group worker that requires consistency, clarity of purpose and patience.

Benson (2019) points to the concept of contracting as central to safety. He notes that contracting is more than simply listing a 'ten commandments' to a group of young people. In facilitating YouthPact workshops (2018, 2019) Jarlath Benson proposes the notion that contracting with a group is akin to 'placing a protective skin' around the group. This 'protective skin' comprises of three elements – 'purpose; choice to be here; and taking care of self.'

The following is adapted from Benson's workshops and captured by Neill (2015), detailing each of these elements:

Purpose – *It is essential that participants have a clear understanding of the purpose and boundaries of the group. This is as much about knowing what the group is not about. The group will coalesce around a specific task or common bond and it is important that individuals don't have unrealistic expectations of what the purpose of the group is. This has the potential for frustration and disappointment. Benson reminds us that the motivations of individuals may not always match the group purpose and the worker needs to be discerning to avoid being drawn into meeting individual needs that detract from the group purpose.*

Remaining focused on the purpose of the group while responding to the micro-behaviours and situations that emerge in the group can be challenging. The skill of maintaining the group purpose while allowing for the ebb and flow of group dynamics is central to holding and building a functioning group.

Choice to be here – *Winning the 'hearts and minds' of individuals alters the experience for participants, both those who may be regarded as 'conscripts' because of their circumstances and those who are willing volunteers. Ultimately the prize is for participants to have an experience of their own agency as a member of the group and to be present, to trust in the process and not be a passive recipient. The groupworker differentiates between simply having people present and having 'their hearts and minds'. While it may appear that those who attend the group voluntarily can exercise greater agency regarding physically attending the group, they too must choose to be mentally present.*

Take care of yourself – *Taking care of yourself in every way extends to taking care of the group. By taking care of yourself and the group it mitigates against the worker taking too much responsibility. This can be a challenge as many young people are used to the adult in a group taking charge. The challenge for both the worker and the young people is to allow this to develop, therefore providing the opportunity for young people to practise taking responsibility. It is essential to emphasise to group members the importance of taking care of themselves; by being mindful of what they say or do not say in the group setting and that they, rather than the worker, takes responsibility for this. Benson further proposes that as individuals take care of themselves, in turn they will begin taking care of the group. He cautions that the more responsibility that the worker takes, the less the group take. And while young people may expect the adult in the group to be the traditional voice of authority, fulfilling this role does little to foster individual responsibility.*

As stated earlier many youth workers will be familiar with the well-trodden ground of creating a group contract that features a 'ten commandments' for the group for a fixed time. Benson's contract is more reflective of what the group worker does continuously, maintaining a contract through the life of a group. The worker is constantly monitoring, paying attention to and being attuned to the group. The contract, or as Benson calls it, the 'Protective Skin' requires attending to and maintaining:

> *'The concern of the worker is not simply to wrap the group in this protective skin but attend to the maintenance of it. Here the focus is on identifying those 'fractures', 'deviations', 'interruptions' and 'disturbances' that threaten to break the skin and threaten the group.'*
>
> *Neill (2015:7)*

INTERDEPENDENCE AS THE CORNERSTONE OF GROUPWORK; CONVERSATION AS THE VEHICLE

'Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice' (2003) has interdependence as one of its core values The notion of interdependence has had additional local significance because of 'the Troubles', but has been a key concept in group development for much longer than this. Lewin (1939) proposed that interdependence was a key concern for most groups, whether formally or informally constituted, and for task-focused groups as well as therapeutic or social groups. Lewin further suggests that space still exists for difference in an interdependent space:

> *'It is not similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but interdependence of fate.'*
>
> *(Lewin, 1939: 165)*

Group members develop a growing awareness of similarities with other group members. They may see similar circumstances, behaviours or characteristics. However, Lewin (cited in Smith, 2018) proposes that where the goals of group members converge, interdependence is of greatest importance for those individuals who share goals.

The concept of interdependence is given life through people connecting with each other through warm and trust-filled relationships. Wilson (2016:2) explains how the quality of the relationship determines further growth and development opportunities:

> *'The base of thoughtful youth work practice is to foster personal and social education and this base cannot be built unless relationships are easy and enjoyable.'*

Furthermore, Gadamer points to the pivotal role of dialogue and conversation in this relational work:

> *'Conversation involves working to bring together the insights and questions of the different parties; it entails the fusion of a number of perspectives, not the entering into of one.'*
>
> *(Gadamer, 1979: 271).*

DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY, CONFLICT AND CHAOS

Difference is central to a meaningful experience for members and the group that can talk about difference in a creative rather than a destructive manner holds great opportunities for growth. In managing difference, youth workers tread an important line between conflict and chaos in the group setting. When working with a group there are differing agendas, deeply held and opposing belief systems, the impact of individual egos, the effect of power dynamics and conflicting personalities. All these arise as a result of difference. While the worker or others may consider those in the room as a 'group', they may not actually share that much in common. Rather there are a multitude of differences.

Workers who facilitate the space for difference create a rich learning space, where it is possible to uncover deeper and more nuanced opinions, discover alternative viewpoints and at times discard values and beliefs that are no longer congruent with a growing sense of self. In the work of becoming a group the youth worker embodies the values and principles of the youth work profession; most especially that young people are partners in the learning as the group is formed and begins to function. While the youth worker who is the groupmaker has a particular responsibility for the group, they are not separate from it.

In the context of peace-building programmes there can be a tendency to seek out consensus and an over-reliance on sameness in order to cope with our recent history of conflict. Wilson highlights a failing in this style, stating,

> *'To live separate lives; to participate in avoidance and politeness is neither respectful of others nor expressing humility. Such actions work against the core guiding principles of promoting fairness in relationships, acknowledging difference and building interdependencies between people.' (2015:8)*

Morrow and Wilson (1996) offer a richer approach, suggesting,

> *'New ways of being together and learning together need established where people meet respect fully and with humility and openness, engaging in robust discussion about their different experiences, aspirations and even hopes for a shared society, post conflict.'*
> *(Morrow & Wilson, 1996 cited in Wilson, 2015)*

Groupwork offers the opportunity to acknowledge differences, manage the coming together and the ensuing conflicts and, at times the chaos that can emerge. This does not need to be directly related to the 'conflict' or the 'troubles'. Conflict can be an enriching opportunity and dealing with it can be a transformative experience. According to Lederach, (2014:16) a transformational perspective is built upon two foundations:

> • *'a capacity to envision conflict positively, as a natural phenomenon that creates potential for constructive growth, and*
> • *a willingness to respond in ways that maximize this potential for positive change.'*

In the context of a society engaged in a peace process the opportunity to practise having difficult conversations is to be treasured. To understand what it is to be hurt by another and to hurt the other by our words and attitudes is a first important step to find a mature way to address, rather than avoid, what has divided us in the past.

A core task for the groupworker is to continuously gauge where a group is in relation to healthy conflict and disruptive unhelpful chaos. At the point of conflict, the task of the worker is to stop and engage the group around this breach in the contract as this threatens the integrity of the group's 'skin', alienates individual group members and marginalises their experiences. The youth worker's ability to build relationships with individuals in the group and foster relationships between group members enables this 'calling out' in a manner that encourages members to reflect on themselves and their response to difference.

Engagement and retention of young people can be a strain for projects and individual workers and therefore making the judgement on 'calling' each disturbance as it surfaces is a key task. Benson proposes that there is an 'art' in intervening at the point of conflict. If disturbances are called out too soon then the potential for growth is stilted but if the group descends into chaos too often, the group becomes unattractive. The group worker recognises the cycle and 'murmurations' of the group and reads what is best to help it grow and mature. All issues do not need to be dealt with immediately if there is a fundamental trust that the group can work through different stages of conflict and storming, and emerge from this with individual and collective learning about difference.

In McConville & McArdle's research, two young people shared different experiences of conflict and difference within the group. The first described her experience of the group weaving their way through open hostilities between individuals; and the second describes how the group gave space and legitimacy for different personalities:

> *'The group... most of them got on... At the beginning like there was certain people you didn't like; and certain people don't like other people; but there was a few tests and we got through it and at the end, ended up being good friends, like most of us; the whole lot of us that you thought at the beginning would never have spoke breath to actually... '*
>
> *(McConville & McArdle, 2018:52)*

> *'Researcher: Do you think the group is a strong group?'*
>
> *'Very strong. And it is weird because there is a diverse amount of strong personalities and we're all very opinionated, but it works. You would think it wouldn't because of the strong personalities that we would clash but we don't. We all get along.'*
>
> *(McConville & McArdle, 2018:52)*

INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

A group does not happen by accident, it is planned and purposeful and relies on the skills of the group maker (either an appointed one – or one who emerges in an informal group). The skills of the groupmaker and the contribution of participants can bring about an orchestra-like excellence in communication, growth and relationship-building.

Regardless of a participant's initial motivation to join the group (be it voluntary or mandated participation) the group has no less value. *The groupmaker can and must find a starting point where individuals 'buy-in'.* The winning of hearts and minds for the group can transform it into a place of great potential and value.

The groupwork process is conducive to creating a space for increased self-awareness leading to meaningful and lasting transformation. The early life experiences in primary groups for some group members may have been difficult and even damaging. Previously challenging or negative experiences of groups can potentially be overlaid with encounters in this new space that are positive and growth orientated.

The connection with and proximity to peers in a group setting can enlighten the perspective on oneself. The inner struggles, anxieties of what it means to be human, a friend, a sibling etc. can be witnessed and shared in the safe space of the group.

The group process can help participants to identify, call out and address wider societal and structural issues such as scapegoating, repeating negative behaviours and avoidance. In the group, members grow in their ability to work with these issues and break harmful cycles. This learning can be applied in their own personal lives but also within social and community groups.

Relational work is an important place to learn skills of social living and interdependence. In the groupwork space participants can practise social skills that cannot be rehearsed through one-to-one interventions. Participants practise expressing and listening to opinions, navigating and appreciating difference and diversity; and manoeuvring through conflict and chaos in the groupwork space. *For good relations programmes, these core competencies for individuals are more acutely achievable through groupwork.*

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YOUTHPACT

YouthPact is the Quality and Impact body for the EU PEACE IV Children & Young People's Programme - Peace4Youth - funded by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). The Peace4Youth Programme has the specific objective of enhancing the capacity of young people to form positive and effective relationships with others of a different background and to make a positive contribution to building a cohesive society.

YouthPact is a cross-border partnership of four regional organisations:

• Co-operation Ireland (Lead Partner);
• Ulster University;
• National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI);
• Pobal.

The role of YouthPact is to engage with the Peace4Youth delivery agents and their partners in the projects funded under the Programme, to enhance the quality and maximise the impact of their work with young people by supporting a high-quality youth work approach, and nurturing a strong focus on change and outcomes. YouthPact's work covers four main areas:

• Support, development and enhancing delivery;
• Youth participation and youth-led approaches;
• Supporting monitoring and measurement actions;
• Signposting and dissemination.

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