Environmental Justice and Youth Work

The purpose of this document is to outline a framework for youth workers to explore environmental justice concepts, campaigns and activities with young people in youth work settings[1], and in particular with young people living in tougher social realities[2]. While the environmental justice movement is often perceived (with some justification) as a middle-class largely white group of somewhat privileged individuals, the reality is that the profound human impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are being and will increasingly be felt more by those with scant resources.

By outlining links between youth work theory and environmental justice campaigning, this resource seeks to set a context and rationale (rather than a prescription or 'curriculum'[3]) for youth work that addresses the lived realities of young people faced with the consequences of global heating[4] and environmental degradation. It isn't feasible to go into exhaustive explanations of either, so instead we will outline what we mean by each and their relation to each other.

Youth Work

It can be argued that youth work is a family of practices rather than a set of particular skills and ways of working with young people. Indeed Brian Belton[5] who argues for more critical youth work theory, has described it as "...a thing constantly in the making". Youth work infrastructure (both in terms of funded programmes, youth clubs and college training) has been decimated in much of the UK over the past two decades[6], so youth work practice is both less ubiquitous than it once was and is often isolated from networks of support and development. For the purpose of

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[1] These could be local youth clubs but also any environment where youth workers are engaging with young people and could potentially include 'detached' youth work settings and/or settings impacted by the issues the young people are seeking to address.

[2] By virtue of poverty, racialisation, disability or inter-sectional realities

[3] There is a long established debate in youth work about the merits or otherwise of a curriculum in a youth work context, and there are different models of this in different parts of the UK and Ireland. This resource does not seek to offer a curriculum, though the activities developed with young people might well respond to local models and/or the objectives and requirements of funders. Rather it is seeking to encourage environmental activism and raising awareness of the challenges to the climate and the potential for meaningful action at a local, national or international level.

[4] Friends of the Earth prefer this phrase to 'global warming' as it is a more accurate description of the problem faced

[5] Belton, B. (2009), *Developing Critical Youth Work Theory - Building Professional Judgement in the Community Context*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam

[6] The notable exception is Northern Ireland where the Department of Education has continued to invest significantly in youth work as have a range of other funders - in large part to help underpin the 'Peace Process' before and since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (1998)

this resource, we are referring to critical youth work practice, drawing on models of social change. So in that sense youth work should be seen as a political practice - seeking to support young people's civic and political agency. Helping them to make sense of the world around them and the political context of their lives. This is what Brazilian educationalist and social activist Paolo Freire referred to as *'conscientisation'*. He argued *"There's no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom."*[7]

Youth work practice is increasingly delivered in bite-size programmes, often with accredited courses and thematically driven by various forms of curricula. Whilst there can be undoubted educational benefits to such approaches, they can also be off-putting to young people who have negative experiences of formal education. Such models are often dictated by what funding is available, from whom and for how long. It can leave youth workers struggling to find time for meaningful interactions with young people and runs the danger of being compliance rather than change focused. As Smith and Jeffs[8] warned, *"There is pressure - seen and unseen - to tone down questioning and to quieten those they work with"*.

Dana Fusco[9] frames these different approaches in youth work helpfully:

> *"In the broadest sense, youth work has been characterized as falling into one of two sociological approaches: either as a strategy that aims to support young people to become productive members of existing society or as a strategy aimed towards changing the societal structures and oppressive mechanisms that recapitulate inequalities in the lives of younger generations."*

One potential frame for youth workers to engage critically with young people is within models of citizenship and human rights. Citizenship models too can be problematic in that they can be compliance focused and deficit based (young people as 'future citizens' and reducing citizenship to the acts of voting and 'lawfullness' - without any critical thinking about how law is constructed and applied - or to mimicking 'adult' institutions such as Councils and Parliaments), or can

> *"...argue that young people need to be more involved in their communities and civic society, not just to gain skills and experience for the future, but because their contribution is relevant and valuable to society now. …Youth councils and forums are not likely to be the route by which very marginalised young people are consulted. Imaginative mechanisms to promote their claims to citizenship and the value of their contributions need to be explored. Without a commitment to engagement and participation of*

[7] Freire, P. (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed
[8] Jeffs T. and Smith, M.K., (1996), Informal Education - Conversation, Democracy and Learning, Education Now Books with the YMCA George Williams College
[9] Heathfield, M. and Fusco, D. (eds) (2017) Youth and Inequality in Education, History of Youth Work, Transitions, Illuminations and Refractions (Chapter 3), Routledge, London

marginal young people they will continue to be perceived only as a problem." Crimmens and Whalen[10].

VeLure Roholt et al have proposed a model they call 'Civic Youth Work'. *"Civic youth work is a way of working with young people oriented to their becoming and living as citizens who actively engage civic issues and problems meaningful and important to them…"[11]* The model also includes an orientation for the worker - *"Civic Youth Workers want young people to experience democratic citizenship and not simply to learn about it."*
[12]

This model (explored further in the accompanying training) sees young people as citizens in the here and now (not future citizens or citizens in-the-making), goes beyond social and personal development to invite and support young people's civic and political development in community and social change, and is based on a critical reflective approach.

This idea encapsulates moving beyond models of practice, to engaging in *praxis* - described by Mark Smith as *"Informed, committed action"*

> *"It is not simply action based on reflection. It is action which embodies certain qualities. These include commitment to human well-being and the search for truth, and respect for others. It is the action of people who are free, who are able to act for themselves. Moreover, praxis is always risky. It requires that a person makes a wise and prudent practical judgment about how to act in this situation."[13]* (original emphasis)

Youth workers often downplay their role and skills - but their role is complex and involves an interplay of ideas, experiences, instinct, skills and knowledge. In social action focused work they have to act (in social capital terms[14]) as both a *bridge* between different practice worlds, and a *link* into systems of power both with and on behalf of young people. In doing so it is critical that the youth worker is able not only to listen to young people, but to hear, understand, interpret and communicate their words and actions.

> *"...we need to take into consideration that there is not just one reality, but many different constructions of reality which are based on a person's experiences and how they perceive the world around them. Their world can only be understood through their eyes and in their social context. And if we don't understand their reality then we are of little help to them."[15]*

[10] In Ethical Issues in Youth Work, (1999), Sarah Banks (ed), Crimmens, D. and Whalen, A., Rights Based Approaches to Work With Young People (Chapter 10)
[11] Velure Roholt, R. and Baizerman, M. (2013), Civic Youth Work Primer, Peter Lang
[12] VeLure Roholt, R., Baizerman, M. and Hildreth, R.W.(2013), Civic Youth Work, Cocreating Democratic Youth Spaces, Lyceum Books, Chicago
[13] Smith, M.K. (1994), Local Education: Community, Conversation, Praxis, Open University Press, Buckingham
[14] Putnam, R. (2001) Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, Simon and Schuster Ltd, New York
[15] Eichsteller, G. (2010), Social Pedagogic Practice, The Importance of Hermeneutics, The Therapeutic Care Journal, International Centre for Therapeutic Care

With this in mind it is useful to think of frames which allow us to understand the interactions between young person, youth worker, community and the world and all the intersections between these. The training will encourage youth workers to:

- **Observe:** interactions between young people, the power relations that impact on them, their behaviour, body language, status symbols, how they feel or react in different situations and consider how the issues related to climate and the environment impact on young people, their behaviours, relationships and so on.

- **Empathise:** youth workers should consult their own biographical experiences - remember their own actions in similar situations. They should consider how the state of the natural environment may have consciously or unconsciously impacted on their own life and circumstances as well as considering changes over a number of years (growth in traffic and pollution for example).

- **Dialogue:** What do our conversations with young people teach us? Can new questions help open new lines of discussion and perspectives? What activities and opportunities can we create to bring new perspectives on existing issues in our communities and the lives of young people?

- **Engage Practice Wisdom and Evidence:** how do our frameworks of understanding (youth work and other theories, scientific and other kinds of evidence, critical understanding of media, our understandings of youth culture etc) inform what we have learned? Does it lead to any new theory or perspectives? Ideas we need to test further?

Environmental Justice

One of the challenges for youth workers engaging in environmental justice work with young people is coming to terms with the language used by the various environmental movements focusing variously on wildlife, the natural environment, the climate or other more specific challenges that our planet faces. It is of course more important to support young people to understand how climate change impacts on their lives and to take action than to get the language right, but navigating the language can be challenging.

Fortunately Friends of the Earth have some terrific resources to help, and in this project, local FOE staff will be available to support youth workers and young people with their skills, experience and resources. One particularly good resource is the *"Climate.Youth.Society"* handbook created with the Richard Sandbrook Mentoring programme[16] which many youth workers will find useful and thought provoking. In particular it looks at 'intersectionality' - how

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[16] Available from Friends of the Earth UK

environmental justice intersects with other social issues, particularly class; disability; race, ethnicity and colonialism - and how it is important to work in ways which draw on and are respectful to the experiences and perspectives of different groups, and particularly the groups we are working with and the intersectionality within and between these groups.

The terms environment and climate are used pretty much interchangeably even though they mean slightly different things. Young Friends of the Earth have produced a useful infographic on climate justice[17] which they say means:

> "...solutions to the climate crisis that are fair for all. It looks at climate justice through a political, social and economic lens as well as considering the environmental impacts."

The National Youth Council of Ireland has developed useful resources for youth workers[18] (in collaboration with others), and they define climate justice as follows:

> Climate Justice is a term used to frame global warming as an ethical and political issue, rather than one that is purely environmental or physical in nature. Therefore, any solution proposed to an environmental problem needs to take into consideration the unjust and unequal situation our current system has produced (from an economic, social, political, cultural, technological and environmental perspective). Climate Justice argues that the only way the world will overcome the environmental challenges is by working together and by accepting a readjustment of the current system.

The term environment can of course refer to the natural environment (including the climate) as well as the physical environment of neighbourhoods, and also the atmosphere, ethos and mood of the groups we create and how we work with them. In the latter case this is what Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith[19] describes as follows:

> "Here the focus is the relationships between people rather than physical or material conditions. Individuals participate in some activity - be it talking, watching a video or making some thing. The process we go through has meaning for each of us involved . …Through our interactions we create social and hence emotional and political, environments."

Much of how young people respond to issues of environmental justice will depend on how engaged (or otherwise) the youth worker is in these issues, and how effectively they can relate issues of climate and the environment to young people and their lives. So the first step is for us to explore together how these issues impact our communities and those who live in them and to consider how we might act to create change together.

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[17] https://youngfoee.eu/resource/what-is-climate-justice-infographic/
[18] Future Generations Climate Justice Project - How to get Young People Involved in the Climate Justice Movement - our top tips and links to resources. Available for download at:
https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Future-Generations-Resource.pdf
[19] Informal Education, cited above

Young people who are living in tougher social realities and are marginalised (by virtue of poverty, disability, ethnicity etc including intersectional realities) are highly likely to be more greatly impacted by climate change. The poorest neighbourhoods are often those with the least green space, and the worst air quality as in the case of Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah who died following an asthma attack due to traffic pollution. Fuel poverty disproportionately impacts these neighbourhoods due to a combination of low incomes, high (and increasing) energy costs and poor insulation and construction of dwellings. Other impacts of climate change including extreme weather events (flooding and significant storms) tend to impact more on those with fewer resources both in the UK and around the world.

It is also important to be conscious about how we contribute to the climate crisis as organisations, families and individuals - for example through 'fast fashion', our use of cars and other transport, poorly insulated buildings, international travel and other activities. Here the purpose is not to create a sense of guilt, but rather to raise consciousness and aid decision making. By equipping ourselves as youth workers and the young people we work with, with frameworks for thinking about the existential challenges our planet faces and ways of addressing those challenges, we can help develop a new wave of activism among young people who are often left out of these important discussions.

There is increasing evidence that in addition to the social and existential implications of climate change, young people are also impacted psychologically. The global Covid-19 Pandemic has made this a highly unusual time to be a young person with unprecedented restrictions on their lives and education. It is also a time when awareness of global heating and its consequences is rising among young people.

> "*The direct impacts of climate change disproportionately burden children and young people, as they are developing psychologically, physically, socially and neurologically. …young people are also more burdened by the indirect impacts of climate change, for example climate anxiety, which affects psychosocial health and wellbeing, and may exacerbate pre-existing mental health problems in some children*"

The current model of capitalism, and in particular the relentless need for 'growth' (profits for shareholders) drives consumption of the earth's resources. It makes the challenges of preventing global heating and protecting the natural environment almost impossible to address as efforts by individuals and even committed governments are dwarfed by the actions (or failure to act) of global corporations.

Youth workers wanting to look into this further might want to look into the 'Rights of Nature'[20] movement - which seeks to challenge the notion that land is 'owned' (and therefore the owner

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[20] Environmental Justice Ireland Network (January 2022), Rights of Nature: Origins, Development and Possibilities for the Island of Ireland, available to download here: https://ejni.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/EJNI-Briefing-Paper-Rights-of-Nature-Jan-2157.pdf

can do anything they like with it including mining, destroying or polluting it) and shift our relationship with nature by seeing ourselves as part of it, not apart from it.

> "...protecting the environment is impossible if we continue to assert human superiority and universal ownership of all land and wildlife to pursue endless economic growth. Our contemporary dominant culture and the legal system that supports it are 'self-destructive'… We need a new approach rooted in ecology and ethics. Humans are but one species among millions, as biologically dependent as any other on the ecosystems that produce water, air, food, and a stable climate. We are part of nature: not independent, but interdependent". David Boyd - UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment

So - to be clear - what is proposed here is not simply to engage young people in thematic programmes on the environment (though if these are driven by young people's concerns they can be an output) but rather to raise their consciousness of how the political choice to go on damaging our planet to existentially threatening levels is impacting and will increasingly impact on their lives and communities (and the wider world), and importantly how they might go about seeking to change that outcome with others.

For youth workers their role in environmental justice is not to be 'objective'. As Freire[21] reminds us, *"The educator has the duty of not being neutral"*. Rather it is to work with young people to help co-create new understandings of the social, political and economic causes of climate change, to better understand how it affects our communities, societies and the planet. Working together in groups, young people and youth workers can find ways together to act efficaciously in the face of the challenges we face. Working closely with Friends of the Earth, youth workers can access a tremendous resource of knowledge and experience and connect with others locally and internationally who are committed to these issues.

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[21] Horton, M., Freire, P. (1990), We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, Temple University Press