The Possibilities and Constraints of Youth Work Practice in Youth Diversion Projects

Thomas J. Cluskey

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Research Supervisors

Dr. Hilary Tierney and Prof. Maurice Devlin

Head of Department of Applied Social Sciences

Dr. Niamh Flanagan

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Student name: Tom Cluskey

Student number: 69146071

Doctor of Social Science (DSocSc)

Maynooth University

Department of Applied Social Studies

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Head of Department: Dr Niamh Flanagan

Supervisor: Dr Hilary Tierney, Associate Professor and Professor Maurice Devlin

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Abstract

This research explores the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) in Ireland. Nine participants with extensive experience of working in YDPs, who identify as youth workers, engaged in semi-structured interviews and a focus group exploring their practice. A dynamic youth work practice is evidenced within YDPs.

Using the discourses of occupational and organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2010), a flexible and responsive youth work practice was revealed, where synergies between the occupational and organisational spaces were exploited, tensions navigated, and opportunities pursued. The type of youth work practice evidenced in this research is young person centred aiming to enable and empower young people through a process of critical and dialogical engagement. The youth workers blend both non-formal and informal educational approaches within their practice. The youth workers display a strong commitment to their profession, strengthened by the values of social justice and equality which enables them to navigate and negotiate the possibilities and constraints inherent in the YDP context.

A source of fundamental tension experienced by the research participants is the lack of recognition of youth work as a profession, by the Department of Justice (DoJ), in the policies and procedures associated with YDPs (DoJ 2022; DoJ 2023). The research participants also experienced associated tensions and constraints as the principles and values that inform youth work were not considered in the design of the procedures and operational requirement of YDPs. However, these tensions were often skilfully managed by youth workers to ensure the principles and values of youth work practice were applied and upheld.

To address the key constraint of the lack of recognition of the profession of youth work, two recommendations are made in this study. Firstly, to use reflective practice through peer learning networks, as recommended in a recent DoJ (2023) evaluation report on YDPs, using the values and principles identified in this study as an ethical framework to evidence and promote youth work practice, and enhance the professional status of youth workers. Secondly, to establish a professional association for youth workers to collectively work towards gaining recognition for youth work as a profession from the state. Such recognition should apply across the broader youth work sector, with the goal of creating a knock-on impact on all funded projects within the sector including YDPs.

List of Acronyms

CBO	Community Based Organisation
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DoJ	Department of Justice
GYDP	Garda Youth Diversion Project
IYJS	Irish Youth Justice Service
NSETS	North South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
RFPP	Risk Framework Prevention Paradigm
YDP	Youth Diversion Project
YJW	Youth Justice Worker
YLS/CMI	Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory
YLS/CMI-SV	The Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory–Screening Version

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This research sets out to explore youth workers' perspectives on the possibilities and constraints of practising youth work in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) in the Republic of Ireland under the governance of the Department of Justice (DoJ). Youth work organisations have been the primary operators of YDPs since 1992. The projects were originally known as Special Projects for Youth, then renamed as Garda Youth Diversion Projects and were renamed again as Youth Diversion Projects in the new Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 (DoJ, 2021). For the purpose of this research, the projects will be referred to as YDPs, however literature presented throughout may refer to Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) or Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs).

There are currently 105 YDPs in operation in the Republic of Ireland, with a further 10 projects having a more specific focus, such as family support. The research participants throughout this study are referred to as youth workers and/or research participants.

While the youth work sector in Ireland cannot be characterised by universally accepted values and practices, there are certain fundamental and broadly shared principles that serve to differentiate youth work from other professions working with young people. Devlin (2017) identifies key principles of youth work in Ireland, including a primary focus on the education and personal and social development of young people, the voluntary participation of young people, empowerment and the promotion of equality. This will be discussed further in chapter 2.

There are two research questions that underpin this project:

1. What are the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in YDPs, and
2. What are the implications for youth work as a profession?

1.1 The context of Youth Diversion Projects

The Irish state operates a youth diversion programme within the juvenile justice system as an alternative to prosecution for young people who engage in criminal activity. This programme gives An Garda Síochána (Irish police) the statutory powers to give a young person aged 12 to 17 inclusive, who has committed minor criminal offences, the option of participating in the diversion programme. The Diversion Programme was placed on a statutory footing with the enactment of the Children's Act 2001 (Government of Ireland, 2001); prior to this, it was known as the Juvenile Liaison Scheme and operated in a non-

statutory capacity since 1963. The Diversion Programme gives Juvenile Liaison Officers (JLOs), dedicated members of An Garda Síochána who work with young people, the statutory powers to caution a young person under the age of 18 and divert them away from court proceedings. These cautions are not recorded as criminal convictions (Seymour, 2017). If appropriate, the young person may also be encouraged to attend a Youth Diversion Project (Swirak, 2016). YDPs are described as community-based youth development projects which seek to divert young people from becoming involved (or further involved) in anti-social or criminal behaviour (Redmond, 2009).

Within the policy context of youth justice, 'diversion' is based on the logic that young people should have as little contact with the justice system as possible, as such contact can further criminalise them (Government of Ireland, 2001). Most young people grow out of such criminal behaviour as they mature, so the diversion approach aims not to exacerbate the problem during their adolescence (Case et al., 2015). Crime statistics for young people in Ireland provide some evidence that a significant drop in first-time entrants and custody rates can be partly attributed to the increased use of diversion (Kilkelly, 2011). Other factors include a move away from punitive approaches, local mediation, and increased practitioner interventions (Haines and Case, 2018). The main criticism of the diversion programme in Ireland is that it may widen the net for young people involved in the broader crime control apparatus (Tolan and Seymour, 2014), who might previously have been handled informally, like receiving a warning, are instead brought into diversion programme, leading to greater intervention than if they had faced traditional court sentencing (Tolan and Seymour, 2014).

Furthermore, there is some concern that since young people do not go through the court system, they will not avail of their procedural rights such as due process. Seymour and Butler (2008) argue that because the young person must admit that they committed the offence and consent to entering the diversion programme, they waive their rights implicit in the formal criminal justice system.

1.1.1 The Department of Justice and youth justice policy

The objectives of YDPs outlined in the new Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 (DoJ, 2021) are:

- to promote focused and effective interventions to challenge and divert young people from offending behaviour,

- to utilise YDP resources in areas of greatest need and to establish effective crime prevention supports in co-operation with other youth service providers nationwide, and
- to actively promote crime prevention policy through focussed educational interventions influencing positive development of young people towards becoming responsible citizens.

YDPs are described as 'community-based multi-agency crime prevention initiatives', which also aim 'to support wider preventative work within the community and with families at risk' (Government of Ireland, 2024). The YDP is only one intervention in the range of measures available within the broader diversion programme. The YDPs are managed by what the Department of Justice refer to as 'Community Based Organisations' (CBOs) which are mainly youth work organisations or organisations with youth work projects such as Foróige, Youth Work Ireland and Crosscare (Government of Ireland, 2024). They are largely situated in disadvantaged communities and the young people who attend them are often victims of intergenerational poverty (Kilkelly, 2008).

YDPs are administered by the Department of Justice's Crime Victims and Youth Justice Policy Unit and Funds Administration Unit (Government of Ireland, 2024). Previously, the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS) which was established in 2006 oversaw the operation of YDPs [GYDPs as they were known then] from 2006-2020. Originally the IYJS was based within the Department of Justice. It now operates as an executive office located in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (Government of Ireland, 2024). YDPs were in operation since 1992 (previously known as Garda Youth Diversion Projects, and before that Special Projects for Youth), funded by the state and run by youth work organisations who employed professional youth workers. They were set up through a partnership between youth work organisations and the state to address antisocial behaviour in Ronanstown and Killinarden, both suburbs of Dublin city (Reddy, 2018). Prior to the establishment of the IYJS, the state provided funding with little interference in the day-to-day youth work practice (Swirak, 2013). Since the establishment of the IYJS in 2006, the state has made a significant number of reforms to YDPs that have influenced the day-to- day practice. Prior to these reforms practitioners in YDPs were referred to as youth workers but they are now referred to as youth justice workers (YJWs). The IYJS had the responsibility for leading and driving reform in the Irish youth justice sector (and YDPs) and its objective was to improve the delivery of youth justice services and reduce youth offending. According to the National Youth Justice Strategy 2008-2010, the IYJS was guided by the principles of the

Children's Act (Government of Ireland, 2001) and was focused on one of the key objectives of diverting children and young people under 18 from crime and the criminal justice system (O'Connor, 2019). The National Youth Justice Strategy (2008-2010) was a significant document that stimulated the reforms (known as the 'Agenda for Change') in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs). One of the key objectives of the strategy was to reduce offending more effectively. A baseline study of YDPs carried out in 2008 by the IYJS informed this strategy. Three key initiatives were implemented based on the findings of the baseline study: the setup of project guidelines to enhance governance structure and practice, the provision of staff training to improve best practice, and the introduction of a risk assessment and planning tool (IYJS, 2008). Swirak (2016) highlighted how the introduction of the 'Agenda for Change' marked a substantial step in the history of YDPs. With the change of the government in Ireland in 2020, the IYJS was relocated in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and did not have the same oversight role with YDPs.

More recently, the Department of Justice (DoJ) has launched the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027, which aims to establish a youth justice system grounded in international children's rights (Forde and Swirak, 2023). This strategy delineates a comprehensive roadmap for enhancing the youth justice system, demonstrating its dedication to respecting Ireland's responsibilities under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Positively, the new strategy outlines a set of core principles that mirror the UNCRC's provisions, underscoring the significance of protecting and advocating for the rights of young people within the youth justice framework (Forde and Swirak, 2023). The strategy also outlines updated initiatives for the newly named Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs), including a focus on working with families, working in the community and recognising the disadvantage that many of the young people experience (DoJ, 2021).

1.2 Rationale

Over the course of seven years, the researcher was employed as a Youth Justice Worker in a Youth Diversion Project (YDP), practising youth work within the policies and procedures of the project. While these structures provided a clear sense of purpose, they also hampered the practice, for example, by focusing on reducing individual risk factors instead of working holistically with young people. Thus, tensions developed at times between youth work practice and the implementation of the required procedures within YDP projects. This experience motivated the researcher to comprehensively examine youth work practice with YDPs and to explore how the practice could be enhanced within this setting.

This could potentially be achieved by embedding youth work values, principles and processes in the design of the policies and procedures of YDP projects. Scanlon et al. (2011) assert that youth work organisations should do more than just address the deficiencies in other systems (such as health, justice, and education) they should also contribute their own unique youth work practices, with associated benefits. If youth work organisations do not seek equal partnerships with the state, the demands of funders may compromise the values and principles of youth work. This study aims to examine how youth workers' experience practising youth work in YDPs and to identify possibilities and constraints.

1.2.1 The possibilities and constraints of youth work in YDPs

The Irish state is the primary source of funding for youth work organisations (Kiely and Meade, 2018), which can impact directly on the daily practice of youth work. Some aspects of youth work are at risk of being constrained while other aspects benefit from the state's involvement (Kiely and Meade, 2018). The funding provided by the state to the youth work sector has brought raised expectations with ambitious targets and increased oversight. This has resulted in funded youth work services being redirected to align with the mandates of the state. The state places a strong emphasis on accountability, effectiveness, evidence, and cost efficiency (McMahon, 2018). This has been prominent in youth work projects and especially within YDPs with a series of reforms driven by the IYJS to improve the effectiveness of reducing offending which in turn has been viewed by youth justice workers as both beneficial and limiting to youth work practice (Swirak, 2013).

One 'cost effective' measure used by the state is targeting certain young people as priorities for engagement by youth projects, allowing all resources to be focused on the young people perceived as most in need of the service (Barrett, 2004; McMahon, 2021). Within YDPs, a young person is targeted to undergo a risk assessment, followed by a discussion with a referral committee to ascertain if they reach the required criteria to gain admission to the youth justice project (Swirak, 2013). Such a targeted approach will, by definition, limit the inclusivity that has been a principle long associated with ~~a~~ youth work practice. The state's own National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) for youth work itself outlines the importance of ensuring equality and inclusiveness for all services (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010).

Additionally, targeted interventions frequently face criticism for potentially undermining the core principle of voluntary engagement, which is widely regarded as a cornerstone of youth work practice (Kiely, 2009), although the established position of YDPs

is that participation is voluntary (Scanlon et al., 2011). Through the involvement of the Juvenile Liaison Officer (JLO) and the pressure placed on youth justice workers to engage specific young people in the project, inconsistencies have occurred in relation to voluntary participation with varying degrees of coercive influence exerted on young people (Swirak, 2013). However, this influence may serve to enhance the level of engagement with young people, particularly with young people more reluctant to engage.

Accountability measures introduced by the state funders have placed an emphasis on achieving specific pre-determined outcomes within a set timeline. On the one hand, the measures provided clarity, direction and accountability to practice. However, the youth work process was undermined with the focus on meeting these pre-determined outcomes (Brady et al., 2016). In a survey conducted by Devlin and Gunning (2009) with young people and youth workers, the educational focus of youth work was viewed as a fundamental aspect of youth work, yet the imposition of targets often blurs this focus, as well as placing added pressure on young people and making it difficult to address the specific needs voiced by the young people (Slovenko and Thompson, 2016).

According to Swirak (2013), the IYJS defined youth offending using quantifiable criteria, enabling the application of new public management techniques to yield measurable and visible results. By deconstructing the issue of offending into specific risk factors associated with each young person, the logical strategy shifted towards addressing the individual deficiencies of each young person rather than the broader societal challenges that contribute to involvement in antisocial behaviour.

Youth work organisations are often in unequal power relationship with the state as the primary funder and thus must adapt to the demands of their state partners (McMahon, 2021). McGimpsey (2018) suggests that the government's focus on evidence-based practice, cost-effectiveness, and predetermined outcomes could potentially lead to the erosion of youth work as a specific form of educational practice with young people. Calls have been made for youth work to assert itself with greater confidence, presenting its distinctive contributions rather than merely compensating for the shortcomings of other institutions, and conforming too much to the demands of its collaborators (Scanlon et al., 2011). These are some of the issues explored when examining youth work practice within the context of YDPs.

1.3 Conceptual framework

This research project adopts an interpretive paradigm which focuses on

understanding human experiences and the meanings people assign to phenomena, rather than confirming or refuting existing theories. It emphasizes subjectivity and social context, highlighting how individuals construct their own realities through interaction and shared meanings. Unlike the natural sciences, where researchers observe natural processes, interpretive research in social sciences aims to uncover the perspectives, motivations, and behaviours of participants (Scotland, 2012; Pulla & Carter, 2018). Key methods include semi-structured interviews and focus groups, allowing researchers to explore internal factors like thoughts, values, and perceptions that are not directly observable (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). The interpretive paradigm treats participants as partners in generating insights and rejects the idea of a static reality, embracing relativism in meaning-making (Schwandt, 1994). This approach is particularly useful for examining social forces and structures that influence behaviour, where the research explores how social dynamics shape practice (Goldkuhl, 2012; Scotland, 2012).

Evetts's model of professional discourses (2010) was used in analysing how youth workers navigated and negotiated youth work practice within the organisational requirements of the YDPs. Evetts (2010) proposes a model that differentiates between discourses of organisational and occupational professionalism, providing an understanding of how these two discourses can influence the practitioner in/and on their practice context. Organisational professionalism is a discourse employed by managers to exert control. The level of responsibility and decision-making within the organisation is determined by seniority, and it promotes standardised work procedures and managerial controls. External measures are also used to evaluate the work. In contrast, occupational professionalism is characterised by certain essential qualities: practitioners build trust with both clients and employers, retain autonomy over their work, impose agreed educational standards, and maintain a well-defined occupational identity. Occupational professionalism is often guided by a code of ethics, developed within the profession itself and governed by institutes and associations (Evetts, 2006). Evetts's model will frame the analysis of practice, policy and procedures shaped by the two discourses of professionalism and how they interrelate with one another and whether/how they create possibilities or constraints to youth work practice.

1.4 Layout of the dissertation

Chapter Two presents a literature review, starting with research on youth work practice and the concepts of professions, professionalisation, and professionalism. The chapter also outlines Evetts's model of occupational and organisational discourses of professionalism, which provide the conceptual framework for this study. The role of the state

and the influence of youth justice policies and procedures on youth work practice is also discussed.

Chapter Three considers qualitative research design and details the methodological dimension of the research including the utilisation of semi-structured interviews and focus group methods. The positionality and motivations of the researcher are also discussed. The phases of thematic analysis and the process of developing the five themes is reviewed. Finally, the ethical considerations surrounding the research are detailed.

In Chapter Four, the findings of the study are presented in two sections. The first section offers an insight into each of the individual research participants, while the second section presents the findings based on five themes: critical holistic analysis, perspectives and responses; providing safe, attractive and welcoming spaces for young people; enabling young people to find direction and take positive decision, opportunities and actions; lack of recognition of youth work as a profession; and managing policies and procedures in YDPs.

Chapter Five interprets the findings through Evetts's discourses of occupational and organisational professionalism. This chapter, based on the findings, is presented under two key headings of Governance and management, and Practice, procedures and judgment. The chapter discusses the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) and considers the implications for youth work as a profession.

Chapter Six describes the type of youth work practiced in YDP and how youth workers navigated their practice guided by the values and principles of youth work practice. It also outlines key recommendations to enhance youth work practice in YDPs such as creating a balance between occupational and organisational professionalism and introducing new principles into policy.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research examines the possibilities of and constraints on youth work practice in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs). This chapter firstly presents an overview of the key features of youth work. The concepts of professions, professionalisation and professionalism are then examined, with a focus on discourses of occupational and organisational professionalism. Following this, the relationship that youth work has with the state will be considered. Finally, the relationship between youth work and youth justice is explored to further support an understanding of the context of this research study.

2.2 Overview of youth work

Youth work is concerned with young people, where youth workers build trusting relationships to support and empower them (Young, 2006). It is based on young people's voluntary participation in non-formal and informal education and is focused on their interests and needs (Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Ord, 2016). Corney et al. (2023, p. 347) explains that 'youth work is understood as a pedagogic practice that supports the "young people's full enjoyment of human rights and human dignity" (Council of Europe, 2008)', placing it firmly as a rights-based practice and profession. Internationally, youth work has been associated with a set of progressive values that set it apart from other forms of working with young people (Kiely and Meade, 2018) and it is recognised as being different in significant ways from other 'social professions' (Banks 2004, 2012 cited in Devlin, 2017). Young (2006, p. 109) proposes that this difference is associated with its purpose which is 'to engage young people in moral philosophising through which they make sense of themselves, their experiences and their world'. There is a broad consensus that youth work is recognised across jurisdictions as 'non-formal education, framed by human rights' (Corney et al., 2023, p.346). Youth work around the world has been influenced by different historical and theoretical trends. Cooper (2018) presents several models to provide examples how different historical and theoretical inclinations shaped certain types of youth work; however, it is not the only influence on youth work practised in each perspective country. One prominent British model was based on informal education, and theory derived from critical pedagogy. A model based on rights, social justice and theory derived from political philosophy had an influence in Australian youth work. A model that concentrated on the interplay between personal and structural change, and theory derived from the sociology of the organisation had an influence on Irish youth work. Harland and Morgan (2010) highlight

that youth work has been largely developed based on the two competing interests of emancipation and control. On the one hand youth work can take a young-person-centred approach by focusing on the concerns of young people from their own perspective but on the other hand it can also be used to intervene in societal issues impacting young people, such as crime, early school leaving and social exclusion (Siurala, 2017; Kiely and Meade, 2018). Corney (2021) also suggests that the lack of a 'consistent definition' is due to the nature and focus of the work, as young people themselves are 'diverse and complex'. Despite this contestation, there is broad agreement within the literature of what youth work is, although as noted, variations within the definitions exist. Some lay claim to a personal and social change agenda, others recognise young people's active participation and the relationship with the youth worker as key. Fundamentally however, youth work is concerned with young people. Banks (1994) describes youth work as informal education with young people aged roughly between 11 and 25 with the aim of promoting their personal and social development. Youth work is also credited as an approach to bring about social change in an unequal society, viewing young people as active participants in the process (Rogers and Taylor, 1997; Jenkinson, 2000). In their definition, Bessant et al. (1998) name the relationship as a key feature of youth work and recognised youth work as taking a person-centred and holistic approach to working with young people and prioritising the young person.

> 'the practice of engaging with young people in a professional relationship in which the young person is the primary constituency, and the mandate given by them has the priority; the young persons are understood as social beings whose lives are shaped in negotiation with their social context; the young person is dealt with holistically' (Bessant et al., 1998, p.239).

Although there are various models of youth work, as noted in Chapter One, Cooper (2018, p.14) proposes five shared characteristics of contemporary youth work observed globally:

1. A focus on young people's lives and their concerns;
2. Attending to the social connections and the context of young people's lives;
3. Positive regard and process for working through supportive and friendly relationships;
4. A holistic approach to young people that includes commitment to:
    i. Informal education;
    ii. An ethic of care and concern for the flourishing of young people;

iii. Facilitation of youth participation, rights, and social justice; and

5. Acting with integrity.

2.3 Features of youth work

As noted above, Cooper (2018) identifies shared characteristics across youth work globally. There are also key features of youth work practice that have been documented internationally and that are consistent with Devlin and Gunning's (2009) research with Irish youth workers and young people involved in youth work. These features include a youth centred approach, youth work as an informal and non-formal educational approach and the participation and empowerment of young people.

2.3.1 Young person-centred approach

Throughout the literature, it is evident that the focus on youth work should be based on the needs of young people (Jeffs, 2015), not on the needs of the youth worker, the youth work organisation, or the funders (Jenkinson, 2000); this is a very important distinction in terms of positioning, perspective and power. The youth worker should come with an approach that looks at the positives and strengths within young people, respecting and believing in their potential (McKinney, 2012) and to become their ally (Corney et al. 2022). Batsleer et al. (2010) emphasizes that the youth worker's first objective is to understand the potential and aspirations of the young people. This information can be garnered by asking questions about their interests, concerns, knowledge, and beliefs. These questions are not just about the future, but also about the immediate present, and take into consideration their desire to relax and have fun. Siurala (2017) also suggests that youth workers see themselves as supporters and advocates of young people, particularly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The foundational process of youth work is meeting the young people on their own terms and where they deem themselves to be (Jeffs and Spence, 2007; Corney et al., 2022); once this is achieved, the youth worker can then continue to incorporate working on developmental areas. Meeting a young person where they are can be a complex, sensitive process and can often be the starting point for young people to engage more deeply in the youth project and broader society. This process understands the socio-economic, cultural context of young people lives and can respond to the individual needs of young people (Pickard and Bessant, 2018). Jeffs and Spence (2007) further highlight that listening is the fundamental skill required in engaging young people on equal terms as the youth worker is

not just listening to what is said but also to what is unsaid. Youth work takes a rights-based approach (Corney et al., 2022), so the best interest of the young person takes precedence over that of any other stakeholder, including funders, parents, youth work organisations and the community (D'Arcy, 2016). If the work no longer regards the young person as the leading concern, it would no longer be considered youth work (D'Arcy, 2016). Underpinning the concern with young people is the cultivation of meaningful relationships between the youth worker and the young person/people, 'recognising the privileged position occupied by Youth Workers in the social ecology of the young people with whom they work' (Purcell, 2024, p.149). Relationships are at the heart of youth work and are the most consistent theme in youth workers' descriptions of youth work (Batsleer et al., 2010). Harland and Morgan (2006) emphasise that the success of youth work is dependent on the quality of the relationship between the young person and the youth worker, and the relationship has also been argued to be a key element in retaining young people's involvement in youth work services (Bowden and Lanigan, 2011). The relationship with youth workers allows the young person to construct a model of themselves; this model can then be developed, reformed, and reshaped as the young person explores their identity. The development of identity, values, and virtues is fundamental to youth work's purpose (Young, 2006). Relationships established by youth workers with young people should be grounded on mutual respect, trust, concern, and appreciation. These can support young people to become aware of their own values, to develop critical capabilities, and to inform their decisions in life (Banks, 2011). Youth workers can create an environment through their behaviour and character that encourages honesty, cooperation, optimism, and empathy for others, or, alternatively, hypocrisy, dishonesty, pessimism, criticism, and competitiveness (Treacy, 2009). Youth workers therefore need to be aware of their beliefs, values and attitudes so they can bring integrity to their relationships with young people by aligning their values and their behaviours to develop positive interactions built on trust and mutual respect in order to allow the young person to realise and communicate their own values (Young, 2006; Banks, 2011).

It is widely accepted that participating on a voluntary basis is a fundamental aspect of youth work (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Davies, 2015). The principle of voluntary participation can empower people in terms of their freedom of choice to attend or not attend the project (de St Croix, 2013). It results in the young person being more committed to participation in the project rather than just simply compliant (Davies, 2015). This can also maintain the appropriate balance of power between the young person and youth worker (Banks, 2011), as well as limiting the level of control the government has over the young

people (Mason, 2015). Importantly, the youth worker is advised to remain consistent in their practice while supporting and promoting genuine participation, committing to reflect on key youth work values and to be 'sensitive to the diversity of young people' (Corney et al., 2022, p.687).

2.3.2 Informal and non-formal education in youth work

The emphasis on non-formal and informal education and learning makes it clear that youth work is a form of pedagogy (Corney et al., 2023). The Youth Service Liaison Forum in Northern Ireland (2005, p. 13, as cited in Devlin & Gunning 2009, p. 10) explains;

> "Non-formal education refers to learning and development that takes place outside of the formal education field, but which is structured and based on learning objectives. This is differentiated from informal learning, which is not structured and takes place in daily life activities within peer family groups etc. Youth work interventions typically result in both non-formal and informal learning".

Batsleer (2008) states that youth workers, as informal educators, begin with the learners' immediate preoccupations, so the learning content is based on the context of everyday occurrences. The learning process is engaging as it is of current significance to those involved and is not based on a pre-established curriculum. Informal education is driven by conversation and informed by values (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Young (2006) explains that meaningful conversations do not arise spontaneously but instead occur when the appropriate environment has been created. The initiation of most informal educational sessions involve chatting. Chat can be used as the starting point for a more purposeful conversation later (Wolfe, 2001). Everyday small talk can act as the glue within a relationship (Batsleer, 2013). Informal educators are curious and genuinely interested in young people, aiming to discover what subjects would appeal to individual young people, even if the subject should happen to be politically incorrect (Batsleer, 2013). The temptation would be to bring such a conversation to an abrupt close, but this well-intended curtailment makes the process of building trust a challenge. An alternative is to build connection by asking questions, for example, during a discussion on racism, asking how young people would feel if negatively stereotyped (Batsleer, 2013). Dialogue supports young people to become more reflective about themselves, their responsibilities, and their impact on society (Aubrey, 2015). Based on an extensive literature review of youth work, Corney et al. (2023) represents professional youth work as a social pedagogy, critical and transformative in nature embracing non-formal

and informal educational approaches located within genuine relationships and the meaningful participation of young people. They refer to Hämäläinen's view that 'the basic idea of social pedagogy is to promote people's social functioning, inclusion, participation, social identity and social competence as members of society' (Hämäläinen, 2003, p. 76 cited in Corney et al., 2023). Such an approach is concerned with young people's particular context and requires creativity from the professional youth workers.

Ord (2020) outlines three types of curricula utilised in youth work today: content, product, and process-based curriculum, framed within an informal and non-formal educational youth work process, remaining committed to the interests and needs of young people. Content-based curriculum focuses on priority areas or themes to be discussed with young people. Product-based curriculum is the planning of specific intended objectives and developing session plans to achieve these ends. In process-based curriculum, the focus is learner-centred, and the curriculum is developed based on the interests and inclinations of the young people. The educator is focused on creating a stimulating learning environment and the outcomes arise from this process, but the outcomes are more incidental (rather than planned and predetermined) and it is the activity itself that is purposeful. In Ord's view (2020) the educational process is not linear as inputs are not directly correlated to specific outcomes. A process-based curriculum therefore demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of the educational process and is better suited to youth work practice because it is directly linked with the interests of the young people (Ord, 2016). Using a non-formal educational approach, young people can engage in critical dialogue (Freire, 1996), building their confidence and considering their own context (Stuart and Maynard, 2015). The nature and design of non-formal education can promote inclusion and may be more accessible to those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Mariona et al., 2022 cited in Corney et al., 2023).

Smith (1982) outlines how youth work encompasses the practice of experiential education which is based on three key assumptions: people learn best when they are involved in the learning experience, knowledge must be discovered by the learner to have any real meaning or achieve behavioural change, commitment to learning is at its greatest when learners can set and pursue their own learning objectives. The education process in youth work requires reflection and deliberation. Therefore, learning needs to be tested (Young, 2006). In his seminal work, Kolb (1984 cited in Young, 2006) explains the learning process as a cycle that includes the concrete experience, observation, reflection on experience, formation of abstract concepts (based on experiences and other sources such as peers, books, and educators), and finally testing these concepts in real life situations.

Therefore, education is not just an abstract process but requires action and experiences. Youth workers can then use these experiences to facilitate reflections and create new understandings.

Youth work also explores young people's feelings on values and morals and identity. Young (2006) explains that young people who engage in youth work take part in a process of moral philosophising that facilitates the formation of their identity and expansion of their ethical standards. The youth work process, therefore, is a dedication to helping young people to learn from their experiences and to make sense of their lives through dialogue (Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Tilsen, 2018). Youth workers can debate with young people about the virtuous and immoral on a whole range of topics, but the main goal remains to determine what is a good life. Youth workers discuss conflicting values to develop the young person's own personal values. Young people then experiment with such beliefs to discover self and gain independence (McKinney, 2012). Moral education within youth work is about developing into a person who engages positively with society (Young, 2006). Corney et al., (2023, p.358) suggest youth work to be a 'counter hegemonic pedagogy that conceives of the youth worker acting pedagogically as an organic intellectual' using critical dialogue to better understand young people, but also to challenge and explore possible futures.

2.3.3 Empowerment, participation and equality

Informal educators acknowledge dialogue as a process of empowerment and action. Through this process young people can build awareness of what is in their power to achieve and what is outside of their power. Young people are empowered by questioning the status quo and taking action to challenge the limits that are set for them. This empowerment can happen through interpersonal relationships but also on a broader scale (Forrest, 2010). In various ways, youth workers can align themselves with the young people to shift the unequal power balance (Forrest, 2010). Ignoring how power operates within a relationship fails to examine how power can be shifted in favour of young people (Batsleer, 2008). If youth workers, as social educators, genuinely want young people to gain the confidence necessary to challenge the political forces that structure their lives, then the issue of power needs to be taken into consideration. It is necessary to embrace the 'creation of the conditions that facilitate growth' (Morciano, 2015, p. 72 cited in Corney et al., 2023). Youth workers need to examine what level of decision-making young people have in their projects and self-reflect on how youth workers contribute to the powerlessness of young people. This requires youth workers to examine their own prejudices and perceptions (Smith, 1982). Slovenko and

Thompson (2016) examine the use of social pedagogy in youth work practice. Social pedagogy links empowerment with democracy where young people feel involved in the decisions that affect their lives. It also places an emphasis on young people taking responsibility over their own learning: an approach that focuses on working 'with' young people not 'on' young people.

Participation has been long lauded as a fundamental aspect of quality youth work. Smith (1982) defines participation as making decisions in collaboration, with both parties having power over the outcome (in contrast with other possible approaches of 'telling', 'selling' and 'spectating'). When young people are involved in making decisions, they are more likely to follow through with these decisions, increasing motivation, communication and learning within groups. Devlin and Gunning (2009) state that structures should be implemented to ensure participation happens formally as well as informally in youth work services (Devlin and Gunning, 2009). Active engagement in a youth work service can also lead to active engagement in society, individually or collectively (Devlin and Gunning 2009).

The National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007 developed a set of principles, supports and goals to enhance youth work's contribution to active citizenship, social inclusion and social cohesion (DES, 2003). Youth work also strives to be open and inclusive, actively promoting equality so that no individual or group of young people feels excluded or marginalized in a youth work context (Devlin, 2017). Youth work services take active steps to support young people to identify mechanisms of inequality within their own lives and enable participatory actions that attempt to reduce its impact (Coussée, 2008). The European Union also views youth work organisations as key policy actors to reduce inequalities experienced by young people and enhance social inclusion (Morciano and Scardigno, 2014). The proposals for a *National Youth Work Development Plan* focus on promoting a vision of youth work that embraces diversity, fights injustice and inequality, and ensures openness and inclusiveness (DES, 2003).

2.4 Youth work in Ireland

In Ireland, youth work is named and defined in legislation. The Youth Work Act 2001 (Government of Ireland, 2001a) outlined youth work as:

> 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, which is: a) complementary to their formal, academic, or vocational education and training; and b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work

organisations.

The educational process of youth work is primarily focused on educating young people in non-formal settings, where education is defined as a deliberate, intentional, and structured process (in contrast to "learning," which may occur with or without planning, intention, or awareness) (DES, 2003). Youth work in Ireland is also recognised as a developmental activity based on young people's 'voluntary participation' (NYCI, 2023) and concentrates mainly on the interplay between personal and structural change (Hurley and Treacy, 1993). In a survey carried out by Devlin and Gunning (2009) asking youth workers and young people about the distinctive nature of youth work in Ireland, they identified five main features:

1) providing a voice and role for young people
2) the emphasis on process
3) young people's voluntary involvement
4) youth work is needs-based
5) the centrality of the relationship.

These features are important as they capture the practice and experiences of youth workers and young people against the narrative or rhetoric proposed in policy. Devlin and Gunning's (2009) findings are consistent with the broader features of youth work practice that is represented in youth work literature internationally. The Youth Work Act in Ireland defines 'young persons' as individuals under 25 but places special emphasis on those aged 10 to 20, who are the primary participants in youth work. The Act also highlights the importance of addressing the needs of young people who are socially or economically disadvantaged. This stresses that while youth work is universally beneficial, it can be especially valuable or necessary for specific groups of young people (Devlin, 2017).

From its origins in the late nineteenth century, youth work has been delivered by voluntary organisations funded by the Irish state and focused on the key principle of the voluntary participation of young people, which is reflected in the language of the Youth Work Act (Rannala et al., 2024). The definition in the Youth Work Act contains the phrase 'personal and social development of young people'. This shows the priority placed on the individual as well as the social interactions they have with their community and society (Devlin and Gunning, 2009). The origins of youth work in Ireland are based on social and moral development and had links to religious orders (Devlin, 2010). The City of Dublin Youth Services Board (CDYSB) was Ireland's first funded youth service in Ireland in the 1940s.

Following this, national youth work organisations and representative bodies began to emerge such as Macra na Tuaithe (now Foróige) in 1952, the National Youth Federation (now Youth Work Ireland) in 1961, and the National Youth Council of Ireland as a representative 'umbrella' body in 1967 (Jenkinson, 2000). Advances in thinking around youth work were evident in the policy documents produced throughout the 70's and 80's (Jenkinson, 2000), and professional youth work in Ireland emerged around this time (Rannala et al., 2024). A shift in policy focus occurred with the introduction of the Bruton and O'Sullivan reports (Department of Education, 1977; O'Sullivan Committee, 1980). The O'Sullivan report still had a focus on the development of young people, but it also entailed an acceptance and promotion of the norms in society (O'Sullivan Committee, 1980). The Final Report of the National Youth Policy Committee (known as the 'Costello Report') in 1984 outlined the importance of the empowerment, participation and the social education of young people and promoted both the political and social activation of youth to bring about a more equal society (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984). However, this liberal approach in the Costello Report was not implemented universally across youth services, apart from projects that lent themselves to a more radical/critical approach (such as programmes for Travellers, young women, and development education). Overall youth work remained conservative despite this report (Jenkinson, 2013) and it did not lead to a shift in approach in most youth work services and organisations: the character-building and personal-development models of education continued (Treacy, 2009). However, McMahon (2021) highlights that since the Youth Work Act in 2001, the policy context for youth work in Ireland has evolved significantly, with a growing focus on compliance.

Treacy (2009) also highlights, that the youth work sector in Ireland, has been underfunded by the Department of Education and Science (who traditionally funded youth work) for over thirty years and thus youth work organisations sought funding from other statutory bodies such as health and justice. The funding provided to youth work services from these government departments focused on societal concerns about young people with problems or problem young people. This has provided youth work with many opportunities to work together with other agencies and collective agendas, but has also led to youth work being misunderstood, as simply a method that can be adapted to a range of settings that are problem focused and welfare based rather than educational, developmental, and rights based (Devlin and Gunning, 2009). Another impact of youth work gaining funding for specific interventions was the move away from the provision of universal services provided to the general population. During the economic recession from 2008 onwards, the use of public

funding was reduced, the universal provision of youth work services was severely impacted in terms of funding (Jenkinson, 2013). This resulted in significant reform measures, focused on targeting certain cohorts of young people coupled with increased compliance and accountability (McMahon, 2021). Kiely (2009) asserts that this removed one of the fundamental tenets of youth work, universal access. Powell et al. (2010) argue that attempts should be made to maintain a balance of the provision of both universal and targeted youth work services.

2.5 Youth work: professions, professionalisation & professionalism

This section firstly focuses on the concept of the profession and youth work's relationship with the notion of being a profession. The concept of professionalisation and the progress youth work has taken in professionalising in Ireland will then be examined. Finally, Evetts's model of professionalism, which employs a distinction between occupational and organisational discourses, will be presented as a conceptual framework for this research, and literature on how these discourses might shape professional practice will be examined.

2.5.1 Professions

Professions are knowledge-based occupations that generally require a significant level of education, training, or experience to carry out the role. Professions are often tasked with addressing matters that are unpredictable in modern day society (Evetts, 2003). Some of the uncertainties addressed by the professions include birth, survival, security, religion, physical and emotional health, dispute resolution and law-based social order, educational attainment and socialisation, entertainment and leisure, and finance and credit (Olgiati, 2010). Youth work has been acknowledged as a profession in official Irish policy, in the sense that both volunteers and paid workers are required to 'uphold the highest standards and be accountable for their actions', ensuring the wellbeing of young people and benefiting society (DES, 2003). However, sociologists have not been conclusive in providing a distinct dividing line between what constitutes a profession and what constitutes non-professional occupations. The 'professions' were traditionally associated with the three long established occupations of medicine, law, and ministry (Devlin, 2012). Professions in general had a strong appeal based on the perception and image of these three traditional professions revered in Anglo-American systems. The appeal of this type of profession was based on high levels of

autonomy and discretion: however, this image may have been idealised by society and did not generally exist in practice (Evetts, 2010). The reality of professions is very different to this traditional image due to the influence of market-based and organisational logics (Evetts, 2018). The development of democracy and social welfare systems across Europe has led to the rise of social professions, and youth work can be classed as one of the social professions along with community work and social work (Banks, 2004). As states committed to upholding the rights of their citizens, social professions were tasked with ensuring these commitments were realised. The social professions have had relatively little research conducted on them by social scientists for several reasons. Firstly, they were for a long time regarded as 'semi-professional' and therefore of relatively low status. Secondly, they had no clear regulations, structures, or formal recognition provided to them by the state, meaning that they may not have provided a clearly defined area of study. And thirdly, the dismantlement of the welfare system in favour of market driven principles has resulted in at least some places in the decline of social professions (Sáez and Sánchez, 2006) and this too may have made them of less interest as a focus for research.

Parsons (1951) was one of the first theorists to explain how the capitalist economy, the rational-legal social order, and modern professions were interconnected and supported one another to sustain and stabilise the unstable normative social order. He outlined how the authority of both the professions and the bureaucratic organisations followed the same principles that included restriction of the power domain, application of universalistic, impersonal standards, and functional specificity. However, the professions took a different direction to bureaucratic organisations, coordinating their work differently by basing their work on competency and values garnered from education and training. Professional relationships were also based on cooperation and trust between practitioner/client and practitioner/employer. Two predominant views taken by sociologists in the research of professions in the twentieth century include one taking a positive perspective and the other taking a negative view, sometimes known as 'consensus' and 'conflict' schools of thought (Devlin, 2012). The 'consensus' view on professions examines areas such as social function in society, their role in the economy, and ability to use their status to leverage power in the pursuit of positive ends (Sercombe, 2010). The 'conflict' approach takes a critical view of the professions, in general portraying them as self-interested associations of the privileged which created monopolies focused on enhancing their own status and power (Evetts, 2003). Historically, much official youth work policy in Ireland and elsewhere can be seen to rest on

consensus-based ideological assumptions (Devlin, 1989). The same has been true of many policy publications issued within the voluntary sector. For example, the National Youth Council of Ireland's policy statement *Towards a Comprehensive Youth Service, 1994* described youth work services as a vehicle to encourage and integrate young people into the economic and social structures of society by working in tandem with statutory services. Like many other policy documents, it highlighted the ways in which youth work provides benefits to society through a range of services to enhance employment, life skills, health, abstinence, social behaviour, school retention, and inclusion (Treacy, 2009).

For some time, sociologists focused on researching professions from a 'traits approach'; this involved identifying and classifying the defining features of a profession (Devlin 2012). Greenwood (1957) defined a profession as having several traits including: a systematic body of knowledge; professional authority and credibility; regulation and control of its members; a professional code of ethics; and a culture of values, norms, and symbols. However, Sercombe (2010) sees a problem in attempting to define a profession based on a list of traits: it only describes the profession rather than identifying the central commitment that drives it. He draws on Koehn's (1994) view that the covenant relationship with a client is one of the key aspects of any profession. This relationship requires agency from the client to bring about transformation; the professional may be the catalyst, but the change must come from the client. Koehn (1994) ultimately defines the central motivating and defining of the professions as their ethical and moral commitment to serve a constituency, and Sercombe (2010) believes that youth work meets this criterion due to its covenant relationship with and ethical commitment to young people.

2.5.2 Professionalisation

Professions and professionalisation are understood as two distinct, but related, concepts. Professionalisation is the process of attaining the status of a profession, and public/legal recognition as such, which is something of particular interest to newly emerging occupations (Evetts, 2018). Occupational groups typically seek status and recognition through systematising education, training, and qualifications for practice (Evetts, 2018). Looked at critically, professionalisation involves the process of meeting the self-interests of professionals in relation to their salary, status, security, power and control over their occupational field (Larson, 1979).

A concept that arose during the 70's and 80's was that of the 'professional project'

(Larson, 1979): this outlined the ways in which occupational groups pursued domination in the market for their status, service, and advancement in the social order. The successful professional project would gain credibility from the public and have its competency legitimatised by official authorised experts (Larson, 1979). Professionalisation (usually concerned with working towards enhancing areas such as status, recognition, and relationships) refers to the development of an occupation over time rather than describing its features at any one time (Devlin, 2012). Wilensky (1964) identifies a number of common steps that a wide range of areas of activity have taken in the course of professionalisation: becoming a full-time occupation, establishing university training courses, developing professional associations, gaining legal recognition/protection, and implementing a code of ethics.

However, youth work professionals have not professionalised to the same extent as other professions such as social workers or psychologists (Corney et al., 2009). This is due to a number of factors, such as youth workers' perception of professionalisation, and ambivalence at a political level and among policy makers to the idea of youth work as a profession and towards professionalisation itself (Devlin, 2012). Historically, youth workers have always been uneasy about professionalisation because they work with the most disadvantaged people in society, and some wanted to remove themselves from the elitist trappings of the established professions; since volunteers founded youth work organisations, they tended to resist professionalisation as it might undermine their role (Davies, 1988: Devlin, 2012). Professionalisation of youth work has also been hindered by ambiguity around its function and purpose. Harland and Morgan (2010) emphasise that youth work has no one set definition and there are competing views as to its core purpose and characteristics. There is concern that the lack of agreement on the fundamental role of youth work may continue to cause confusion and obstruct its development as a distinct profession. For example, emancipatory forms of youth work and community work occasionally conflict with other forms of practice focused on social control and the state agendas (Bright and Pugh, 2019; Kenny, 2019). This conflict with the state's agenda may have delayed youth work's professionalisation, as state recognition is a key element of professionalisation (Devlin, 2012). The state has always played an important role in the development of professions as it has granted licences for professional activity, regulated standards of practice, and worked as guarantor for professional education (Evetts, 2018). In summary, the professionalisation of youth work has been hampered both by the lack of drive from youth workers themselves and by the state's uneasiness about recognising youth work as a profession, particularly one

that criticises the state on social justice issues such as poverty and inequality (Devlin, 2012).

Professionalisation can also be seen positively by occupational groups—as a vehicle to improving occupational status and as a bolster to the notion of becoming and being professional (Evetts, 2018). However, youth workers may be uneasy about the type of professionalism favoured by the state in the professionalisation of youth work (Fraser, 2023), as the state focuses on managerialism and regulation and this can narrow practitioners' scope for professional discretion and autonomy (Devlin, 2012). Metz (2017) describes this as *objective rationality*, which relates to the process of achieving intended goals as efficiently and effectively as possible, an approach aligned with organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2010). However, this creates tensions with youth work values, because practice is reduced to supervising the individual learning process at the expense of the pedagogical and social context (Metz, 2017). An example of this occurred in a related field known as Community Learning and Development (CLD), which is an umbrella term used in Scotland to describe three strands of practice: youth work, adult education and community development. Fraser (2023) describes two distinct time periods in the policy and practice context for CLD, and the difference between them can be seen to relate to the tensions noted above. The social democratic period, from 1975-1990, allowed occupational professionalism to flourish. However, this positive climate for occupational professionalism gave way to neoliberal discourses during the 1990s with an increasing emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency with less room for professional discretion and autonomy (Fraser, 2023).

Youth work gained more recognition from the state in Ireland when the Youth Work Act was passed in 2001. Youth work now had legislation expressing government commitment to taking responsibility for its development and support (Jenkinson, 2013) although its major structural provisions have never been fully implemented. Among the developments arising from the Act were the recognition of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) as the organisation to represent the youth work sector and the appointment of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC) to advise the Minister on policy as well as the delivery, organisation, development of youth work services (Jenkinson, 2013). In 2003, NYWAC made a series of proposals to the Department of Education and Science for the advancement of Irish youth work. The DES accepted the proposals and published them as the National Youth Work Development Plan (NYWDP) (DES, 2003). The NYWDP outlined several proposals for youth work as a profession, including a professional validation body (which eventually was established in 2006 as the North South Education and Training

Standards Committee for Youth Work (NSETS), a variety of routes to professional qualification/certification, and consideration of both professional registration and a professional association for youth work. It is important to note however, that NYWAC had its final meeting on the 26 November 2013, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs subsequently said it was not the government's intention to 'reconvene the National Youth Work Advisory Committee while the reform process is ongoing' (Katherine Zappone, Dáil debates, answer 494, 17 October 2017). NYWAC has not been reconvened to date. However, NSETS is still currently operating, housed within the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI, n.d.). In the UK and Ireland, academic youth work courses that have met the standards set by NSETS, and its British counterpart bodies, are professionally endorsed and mutually recognised (Devlin, 2012). However, the system is based on a set of sectoral agreements and understandings rather than a formal legal or statutory basis: youth work is not regulated by the state in the UK or Ireland. This means among other things that individuals applying for youth work roles are not required by law to have a youth work qualification (Davies and Merton, 2010). 'Youth worker' is not a protected title and therefore youth work is vulnerable to de-professionalisation through state reform. Youth work in the UK, for instance, has experienced significant funding cuts despite the UK having historically been a global leader in the professionalisation of the sector (Davies and Merton, 2009). Jenkinson (2011) recognises an 'increased professionalisation of the youth work sector' in Ireland as a result of engagement with other social service professionals but others stress that youth workers do not enjoy the same recognition as practitioners in cognate professions (Devlin, 2012) and youth work remains in the view of some a 'sub - profession, or a para-professional occupation' (Nicholls, 2012, p.104).

Another aspect of professionalisation as identified by Wilensky (1964) was the development of professional ethical codes. Ethics are a set of principles underpinned by values (Ara Taiohi, 2011). Cooper (2018) states having clear boundaries between what is and what is not youth work helps others understand the nature of youth work. This clarity helps create suitable environments for youth work and boost public support for the role of youth workers. These codes can provide a framework as to how youth work should operate and serve as a reference point when resisting practices that do not align with the practice. Codes of ethical practice can also be used as a guide to support youth workers in making challenging decisions in practice (Corney et al., 2009). Petkovic and Bárta (2014) explore the nature, content, and limitations of ethical codes and standards to identify how best to support youth

workers. The common values identified across all documents were:

1) the importance of the voluntary relationship

2) a focus on personal, social, and political development through informal and non-formal educational processes

3) partnership with young people

4) actively involving young people in decision-making about issues affecting their lives

5) an emphasis on human rights.

Having such clear boundaries that define youth work would support resistance to other professions colonising youth work and redefining it in a way that meets their own interests thus protecting the integrity of the practice (Cooper, 2018). One way to provide this clarity is to create a code of ethical practice and quality standards for the youth work sector. Ethical codes can provide parameters to youth work practice, although the interpretation of broad ethical codes can be a challenge leading to varied interpretations within different cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs (Ara Taiohi, 2011; Broadbent and Corney, 2008). The shared values within codes of ethical practice across Europe identify youth work as distinct from other social professions that work with young people (Petkovic and Bárta 2014).

Although Ireland does not currently have a code of ethics or a professional association for youth workers, it does have an ethical framework published by NSETS (2021) and intended to provide a resource for higher education institutions in their professional education and training programmes for youth work (Ranalla et al., 2024). Ireland's current primary youth work policy and associated funding scheme, *UBU Your Place Your Space* (DCYA, 2019, p.14), also recognises key youth work values such as the relationship with young people, the developmental nature of the process, and the rights of young people, which is welcome. As seen in this section, youth work's status as a profession in Ireland is still emerging, with a legislative definition and formal responsibility assigned to statutory bodies (ETBs), and with a range of policy statements over the years (most recently DCEDIY, 2024) as well as a non-statutory professional endorsement process (NSETS, 2021) and associated ethical framework (D'Arcy, 2016); but as yet without formal state accreditation or regulation of the qualifications and professional status of youth work practitioners. Devlin (2012) maintains that energy should not be wasted deciding if youth work is a profession or how far it has professionalised, but instead the focus should be on what *kind* of profession

youth work ought to become. Similarly, Corney et al. (2009) argue that deliberating whether youth work is a profession or not is a distraction from more crucial issues such as how youth workers can resist deskilling, maintain professional identity and find ways to collectively organise to improve pay and conditions. They describe how training programmes for youth workers promoted by the Australian government and employers were 'value neutral' and competency-based, an approach that resulted in deskilling the youth work sector. They suggest that if youth workers were aware of the broader political, economic and social policy context they would view collective action as the most viable way to gain recognition for their professional status, as well as improve their working conditions. Corney et al. (2009) go on to outline how the Australian nurses provide a strong example of how a salaried occupation can develop into a profession with industrial strength. They developed a professional association and trade union and eventually combined the two groups to create the Royal Australian Nurses Federation (RANF). Davies (1988) discusses how debates and controversies arose over several decades in the UK on whether professionalism or trade unionism was the best approach to collectively organise. On one hand, some argued for orientating collective action around professionalism that viewed youth workers as autonomous professionals with unique knowledge and skills, guided by a code of ethics developed through a professional association. In contrast, others argued to collectively organise based on a trade union model that viewed youth workers as employees, concerned with the level of control over their work situation, and to challenge the power and conflicting interests of the employer. Although the two approaches have different sets of assumptions and orientations, Davies (1988) proposes that a compromise can be reached between the two forms of collective representation, so that aspects of both orientations can be achieved, protecting workers' employment conditions, gaining recognition of professional status and enhancing progressive youth work practice.

2.5.3 Professionalism

Professionalism is a way of thinking, acting, and approaching one's role, tasks, and practice (Devlin, 2012). It is possible to distinguish between two different approaches to professionalism; one is when practitioners organise the work based on their own practice norms and occupational values, while the other is when funders or employers organise the work based on hierarchical, administrative, and management control of organisations. Sociologies of organisations and professional groups historically developed as separate areas of study. However, in modern employment settings most professional work takes place in

organisations and publicly managed services. This change has resulted in Evetts proposing that there are two alternative discourses at play, which she terms organisational and occupational professionalism. Professionalism has increasingly become organisationally defined and understood through the rationality of the organisation, market, and managerialism (Evetts, 2010). Evetts states that one perspective she has taken in previous writing (Evetts, 2009) was to view this dominance of organisational professionalism as a threat to professions leading to de-professionalisation (Evetts, 2010).

Professional 'discourse' in this context refers to a cluster of ideas, images and associated practices within an occupational field (Devlin, 2013). Evetts (2014) explains how the image of the doctor, clergyman, and lawyer had a significant influence on aspiring occupational groups throughout the 20th century. The image depicts an independent gentleman, trusted for their expertise and experience, offering altruistic guidance within the community. Ideas or images such as these are then manifested in practice, and in turn reflected in how society responds to and rewards the 'professionals'. The concept of professionalism as a discourse can be used for a range of purposes for various groups—for example, practitioners and educators can use it to structure their approach to education, training and socialisation, whereas organisations often use it as a method to discipline and control workers (Devlin, 2012).

In Evetts's approach, occupational professionalism has the following characteristics: an emphasis on trust and confidence built by the professional with both the client and employer; control of work processes and procedures; the personal autonomy to prioritise a work plan; attainment of a shared standard of education among professional colleagues; strong occupational identity; and discretionary judgement (Evetts, 2018). This image of the professional has very strong appeal to practitioners due to its high level of professional autonomy and discretion (Evetts, 2010).

Organisational professionalism sets out a discourse that is more likely to suit managers in their efforts to organise workplaces. Based on hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision making, it standardises work procedures and relies on external forms of regulation and accountability processes (Evetts, 2010). Increasingly occupations operate in hierarchical organisations; these organisations have become key actors in the development of professions alongside the traditional players that include the state, practitioners, users, and universities (Torstendahl and Burrage, 1990). In such hierarchical settings, it may be more common to find elements of the organisational discourse of

professionalism.

Evetts also outlines how the predominance of organisational professionalism also brings new opportunities, as professionalisms could benefit professions despite the challenges. Balancing continuity with change in professionalism within organisations is crucial for both states and researchers (Evetts, 2010). While organisational professionalism is transforming professional identities, structures, and practices, the degree to which this impacts professional values remains speculative. Solutions to client issues are often shaped by organisational priorities and financial limitations rather than traditional ethical standards (Evetts, 2010). The impact of organisational professionalism on youth work practice is central to this study and will be examined throughout this thesis and later in this chapter.

How an occupation is regulated can be different depending on the type of process (occupational or organisational) used to construct the professionalism of the occupation. Noordegraaf (2007) states that the concept of professionalism is shaped from multiple sites of power and has become 'hybridised' (with features from both organisational and occupational professionalism). The predominant discourse on professionalism varies from one occupation to another (Evetts, 2018). McCelland (1990) categorises two types of professionalism by differentiating whether professionalisation occurred from within (change made by the occupational group) or from above (change made external to the occupational group). From within, occupational groups' discourse can be used to create their own occupational identity and enhance their image with the public and clients; they can also negotiate with the state to obtain and retain its regulatory obligations. When the discourse is imposed from above (by employers/ managers/funders/state) a certain set of beliefs are chosen to bring about occupational change or to control employees to ensure they abide by the required conduct (Evetts, 2018). Occupational and organisational professionalism are not necessarily exclusive terms-- one can reinforce the other. Faulconbridge and Muzio (2008) describe this combination of the strands of professionalism operating within a profession as 'hybridity' where each strand can co-exist and co-penetrate. The changes made to professionalism are not uniform and consistent. There are both changes and continuities among the different forms of professionalism, with certain aspects maintained while others evolve. Highly complex and variable, they are continually changing and developing across different states, work contexts, and policies. The consequences and challenges of organisational professionalism are being documented by researchers as it spreads throughout a range of occupational settings (Evetts, 2012). However, it may not be as impactful as some initially thought. For example, researchers have been unable to establish

a causal link between organisational changes and the deterioration of professional occupational values (Evetts, 2012).

2.6 Youth work and the state

In this section, literature on how state funders can interpret, define and shape youth work practice, and how youth work professionals respond to such influence, will be explored. Increased state funding has been associated with increased accountability. Following on from the previous section on professionalism and professionalisation, this section examines how the state's agenda (organisational professionalism) interacts and can often take precedence over the values of youth work practice (occupational professionalism).

2.6.1 State regulation

As previously noted, Evetts (2012) explains how the state uses the discourse of organisational professionalism to bring about desired changes to policy and practice. The state redefines professionalism so that it becomes budget-focused, managerial, and entrepreneurial. As funding becomes tight and governments require more from the service, the work becomes more regulated, targeted, measured, and assessed. Thus, the changes required are pitched as a need to professionalise the service and upskill staff through organisational forms of professionalism. These changes are often perceived by practitioners as additional responsibilities with no increase in status or salary (Hanlon, 1998). Practitioners can also feel the increase in bureaucratisation results in the quality of the service reducing as there is less time to devote to the client (Evetts, 2006). However, organisational professionalism can also be quite beneficial to the workplace, for instance resulting in an increase in transparency (particularly within human resources) so that decisions made around promotion become more equitable. It has also helped improve the status and respect of certain professional occupations (Evetts, 2012).

Smith (2003) outlines how managerial/bureaucratic thinking, and the ideologies of market economics shape the design of youth work policies. Managerialist approaches such as standardisation and increased regulation have been criticised for limiting the professional discretion and autonomy of youth workers (Banks, 2004). Youth work has been used by the state as a tool to address the socio-economic issues, but with extra funding came heightened expectations and increased regulation (Bright and Pugh, 2019). This resulted in youth work being commandeered and redirected to meet the state's commands. The process of tendering and commissioning has ensured youth work services dedicated themselves to

agendas, outcomes, and managerialism (Bright and Pugh, 2019).

Davies and Merton (2010) outline how youth work practice was working under this managerialist policy environment in the UK. The responses were mixed, with some feeling that it affirmed youth work by providing clear goals, evidencing impact, improving the status of youth workers among other agencies, and making the service more accessible to some young people. Managers found policy changes more beneficial in areas such as setting targets and evidencing practice (Davies and Merton, 2010). However, others found that the targets dominated the work and prioritised measurable outcomes over subtler outcomes that were not valued by funders, and the higher level of paperwork took away from face-to-face work. Evetts (2018) agrees that the imposition of targets can create unintentional consequences as the prioritisation of work activities is more focused on measurable activities to the detriment of less measurable duties and actions.

This focus on targets and measurement with youth services is attempting to evidence tangible outcomes. Kiely and Meade (2018) outline how reform measures designed by the Irish state created 'infrastructure to assess the value of youth work and to propagate outcomes driven, evidence-based youth work'. Governments are concerned with ensuring value for money, so governments tend to favour programmes with measurable outcomes, transparency, and quantifiable outputs, whereas youth work struggles to evidence the informal nature of its practice (Morgan, 2009). This limits the value placed on informal youth work. Youth workers want their youth work to focus on the needs, participation, and empowerment of young people; however, when complying with funding requirements, predefined outcomes tend to dominate the core objectives and how youth work is subsequently described and understood. Market-driven policies that focus on measurable outcomes create tensions and disconnections with youth work principles (Davies and Merton, 2010). The pressure to implement policy agendas leads to outcomes set by policymakers prior to meeting the young people: this prescribed approach is at odds with a youth-led approach (Davies and Merton, 2010). Funding conditions have resulted in historic youth work traits (such as the need for continuity, the educational base, and autonomy) dwindling over time (Morgan, 2009). Devlin (2010) cautions how youth work practice has been 'severely undermined by developments in policy' (p.103) while others highlight how 'market values and authoritarianism have become the norm for many working in community and youth work roles' (Ball et al., 2015, p.23) as a result of policy reform.

2.6.2 Top-down technocratic approaches

Concerns have been aired that education systems, such as youth work, have reduced the power of educators and service providers as meeting targets outweighs meeting the needs of young people (Cowen, 2002). This approach narrows the scope for innovation and creativity among practitioners (Pivaty and Johnston, 2023). Having less autonomy over their own practice leads to frustration as well as a loss of motivation and expertise (McKnight, 2006). A related effect may be the further de-intellectualisation of youth work: the main priority could become bureaucratic work that ignores social justice and social change as underlying principles (Neves, 2013). At times, youth justice services employ a very limited methodology whilst addressing crime, using standardised approaches and centralised targets (Forde et al., 2006). As a result, critical reflection and visionary alternatives may be eroded from educational practice leaving behind a more fragmented, technocratic, and pragmatic system responsive to quantitative market-driven demands (Cowen, 2002). Technical solutions to complex social issues are not equipped to deal with the nature of the problem. This approach is too simplistic and too crude a framework to enclose the multifaceted motivations of human nature. It concentrates on the short-term controllable variables and ignores any aspects of society that are outside the immediate responsibility of the individual (Neves, 2013). The North South Education Training Standards Committee for Youth Work (NSETS) warn against this trend, insisting that,

> 'Youth work cannot and should never be reduced to a set of discrete skills to be mastered in some mechanical process of assimilation. To adopt such a reductionist approach would be to deny the intellectual basis of youth work and the richness of the ongoing dialogue and learning that enhances professional practice.' (NSETS, 2021, p.5).

Nevertheless, Siurala (2017) notices that as youth work has become a more established profession, training became more formalised and focused on methods, moving away from pedagogical and political elements in certain regions. This resulted in youth work being seen (and described as) as a technical practice rather than an ethical practice.

Although the quantitative gathering of statistics is important for informing policy and can give the government an indication of the cost effectiveness, there is a risk that politicians will take a short-term approach to tackling youth crime and will have no long-term vision of eradicating the problem (Kilkelly, 2008). The top-down governance experienced by youth workers (imposing targets and outcomes) impacts on youth workers' roles, perceptions of

professionalism and professional autonomy. Grundy (1987) highlights how a curriculum that works to an exterior set of outcomes diminishes practitioners to technicians (Bright and Pugh, 2019). The work of technicians is essentially reactive to plans and programmes that are conceived and agreed outside of the actual experience and interface with participants/young people. Success is judged by how close practitioners come to externally set plans, as opposed to their capacity to react to the voices, interests, and rights of the young people they are working with.

Since the global crash in 2008, reform measures and cuts of public expenditure by the Irish state were widespread (Harvey, 2012) and affected youth work being funded from various government departments, such as Youth Diversion Projects through the Irish Youth Justice Service (Swirak, 2018). Swirak (2018) describes the reforms as having a constraining impact by introducing policy that pre-determines youth work outcomes that 'focused upon the prevention of problems' instead of aligning to the principles and practice of youth work. McMahon (2021) agrees with this description and argues that youth work practice has been 'problematized' through the reforms to justify high levels of bureaucracy and control. She also warns that a critique of current policy measures in Ireland has been fairly limited in comparison to the UK (McMahon, 2021) and reminds youth workers that critical policy analysis is a core and necessary skill of youth work (Davies, 2010 cited in McMahon, 2021).

2.6.3 The de-professionalisation of youth work

Despite increased state funding in youth work, it has not reflected an advancement of the profession as tensions remain in relation to compliance with a market-driven economy which highly rates the benefits of measurable outcomes and impacts. Youth work, instead of being recognised as an established profession, is diminished to an approach or method that could be used by other professions to achieve the state's policy ends (Coburn and Gormally, 2019). This reduced version of youth work is described by Scanlon et al. (2011) who highlight that youth work in Ireland is partnering with fields of work such as justice, health promotion, and education to compensate for the weaknesses in other systems rather than complementing these systems with youth work's own distinctive practice. Davies (2015) coined the terms 'cherry-picked practice' or 'de-rooted practice' to describe this type of youth work. Academics are calling for youth work to reposition itself more confidently, offering its own unique contributions rather than counteracting the failures in other institutions. If not, the youth work sector is at risk of losing its own purpose by adapting to the requirements of its partners (Scanlon et al., 2011). In Ireland, the preoccupation of the

Value for Money Policy Review (VFMPR) with research-designed modules has led to a consideration of what other actors can deliver these programmes outside of voluntary youth work organisations. In this scenario, state departments would purchase programmes to be delivered by various actors chosen (not necessarily youth work organisations) within the market. However, this approach has been stalled for the moment and retained for longer term consideration (Kiely and Meade, 2018). McMahon (2021) recognises the similarities between the UK and Ireland, noting the same approaches and the impact of 'policy travel' (Bacchi, 2009 cited in McMahon 2021) in making youth work problematic, and highly controlled, across jurisdictions.

2.6.4 Recognition of the relationship and informal education

There is a growing argument that the relationship between the youth worker and young person in youth work has been downgraded and subsumed into technical and managerialist practices. The importance of the relationship needs to be re-emphasised in youth work practice (Slovenko and Thompson, 2016). This highlights the challenge youth workers face in trying to quantify the value of relationship to external bodies. Thus, they often omit the relationship and instead resort to assessing youth work based on the demands of others, resulting in most accounts of youth work focusing on the activities - the doing not the being (Young, 2006, p.62). Spence (2008) warns that the bureaucratic processes cannot capture the fluidity and organic nature of the voluntary relationship between the youth worker and the young person. However, there is hope for change, considering that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs recognised relationships as one of the core outcomes of youth work in its recent UBU document (DCYA, 2018). This may be evidence of aspects of informal learning and non-formal education being understood and valued on a policy level. There is also interest in the relationship within an action research project currently being conducted by the University of Limerick in collaboration with the Youth Crime Policy and Programme Division of the Irish Youth Justice Service, under the management of REPPP (Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice). The study is exploring what constitutes an effective relationship between the young person and the youth justice worker in 16 YDP case study sites (University of Limerick, n.d). In preparation for this action research project, Fullerton et al. (2021) conducted a systematic evidence review across 'human services' to explore the relationship between practitioners and young people, particularly in relation to the youth justice sector. Importantly they recognise that 'establishing appropriate levels of trust between worker and young person increases the chances of active

engagement, involving iterative cycles of learning, testing and growth' (p.9). The action research is planned to inform programme reform in YDPs and disseminated to all 105 projects (Fullerton et al., 2021). These are encouraging signs that the centrality of the relationship to practice is starting to be acknowledged. This is vital as if the relationship is not prioritised in youth work, many young people will not engage in planned programmes of education to aid their personal and social development on a voluntary basis (Spence, 2008).

The language of informal learning has been used by youth workers to explain the dynamics of their relationship with young people (Jeffs and Spence, 2007). Smith (2001) recognises the relationship with the learner as main theme of social education, identifying relationships as an active task and not just 'something that happens'. While 'non-formal education' has some currency, the term 'informal learning' is not used in Irish youth work policy, and this creates a tension between policy objectives and the reality of youth work on the ground. Certain areas of informal learning in youth work are ignored whereas structured and formal aspects of practice are clearly understood by all stakeholders and are prioritised in the formal discourse of professionalism. It is important to identify the gaps in policy language and develop a more comprehensive language around informality in Irish youth work, just as has been identified as necessary in the UK (Jeffs and Spence, 2007). To strengthen the evidence base, further research is required to examine the value of what Little et al. (2015 cited in Fullerton et al., 2021, p.68) 'describe as "old-fashioned youth work" where the focus is on building the relationship to reduce the need for formal (and costly) intervention'.

2.6.5 Accountability measures

Increased involvement by the state in targeting and outcome led policies have led to a shift away from the principles of youth work (Spence, 2008) and an increased requirement in terms of compliance, evidence and targeted youth work (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Batsleer, 2010; Jenkinson, 2011; Nicholls, 2012; Jeffs, 2015). Government funded policy provisions expect youth work services to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their interventions. This requires youth workers to align their practice with the systematic evaluation of outcomes (Brady et al., 2016). Evidence based practice has been criticised for its focus on outcome evaluation while paying little attention to the educational process and expertise of the practitioner (Brady et al., 2016). The design of accountability measures may be an indication of how youth work has been understood by funders and policy makers, as literature suggests that stakeholders such as the state find it hard to see where youth work

fits within the broader services for young people (Cooper, 2018) which has led to uncertainty and distrust (McMahon, 2021). However, realist evaluations are becoming increasingly popular, as they measure outcomes while also taking into consideration the educational process and context that generated such outcomes (Brady et al., 2016). Also, the inclusion of an evidence-informed approach has been less restrictive than an evidence-based approach, as it incorporates the experiential knowledge of the practitioner. Slovenko and Thompson (2016) argue that youth work is compatible with qualitative, not quantitative forms of evaluation. They argue if methods of assessment are not equipped to evaluate youth work accurately, a gap may develop between what is reported and the reality of practice. Youth workers often remark that commissioners and decision makers do not understand the needs of young people, and fail to grasp youth work values, quality, and relevance (Hughes et al., 2014). This mismatch can be seen in the design of tedious, verbose, and time-consuming performance assessments that do not capture the true application of practice. The measurement should be meaningful and not merely a case of ticking boxes (Hughes et al., 2014). This incompatibility is evident in youth work that aims to liberate and empower young people, as it clashes with the top-down objectivist agenda that is focused on conformity, as opposed to a critical approach that questions the status quo (Coburn, 2011). Young (2006) criticises the youth work sector for its acceptance of external assessments and its unwillingness to argue the validity of youth work from the youth worker's or young person's perspective. As a result, the focus of youth work has been moved from a pedagogical practice that empowers young people, to programmes that address problematic behaviour due to the direction from funders (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Nicholls, 2012). To resolve this, youth work practice needs to be evaluated in a way that aligns with how youth workers reflect on their practice. Slovenko and Thompson (2016) conclude that youth work practice should be based on qualitative evaluation through reflective practice and experiential learning. Spence (2008) also believes that story telling is a way in which youth work could be held accountable, as stories about practice can capture the informal nature and experiences of young people in youth work.

2.6.6 Navigating youth work practice within this environment

Bright and Pugh (2019) mapped possible routes out of the current condition of state-funded youth work in England—routes which seek to reclaim the profession's *telos* instead of solely focusing on state objectives. They actively encourage youth workers to practice 'trickery': they described the trickster as availing of covert knowledge to undercut

powerful systems and challenge convention. The trickster is clear on the rules of the game but is willing to bend the rules when necessary (Bright and Pugh, 2019). Davies and Merton (2009) describe how some youth workers could 'play the game' but were willing to undermine and manipulate the system on behalf of the young people. The youth worker skilfully navigates a course between liberation and control, juggling the needs of the service, the young people, and the community. This requires a level of freedom, yet this space has become more limited as the work becomes increasingly controlled (Davies and Merton, 2009). In Ireland, Swirak (2013) analysed the impact of the 'Agenda for Change' (YDP reforms) and found that the reforms moved away from the fundamentals of youth work that traditionally informed practice in YDPs. Youth justice workers and JLOs responded to these changes with various strategies and practices that championed, accommodated, or resisted these modifications. Some youth workers developed creative means to satisfy the authorities while continuing to preserve the core aspects of youth work practice. Increasingly youth workers – in Ireland and other countries - feel they are trapped in a position where youth work proclaims one thing to young people but does something else (Davies, 2010). This 'janus-face' approach could be viewed as amoral, but many youth workers are working subversively to empower young people. One face pays lip service to the funders, while the other face sees the potential in young people, using the language of empowerment instead of problematisation. Youth workers have needed to become flexible, meeting the criteria of funders but in a way that matches the needs and concerns of young people (Nicholls, 2012). Tucker (2006) explains that youth workers are part of a game controlled by the state's quest for moral containment. This results in young people being manipulated to achieve the state's ends. Bright and Pugh (2019) suggest that youth workers need to reveal this manipulation to young people in order to shift power in their favour. The profession of youth work, in partnership with young people, has an ethical duty to name the systems and mechanisms used to control young people as a first step to bring about change (Bright and Pugh, 2019). Crucial to challenging the burden of top-down targets and to retrieving workers' sense of professionalism is the need to generate spaces for young people to influence the direction of the work, and thus influence agendas for change from the bottom-up (Nicholls, 2012). This involves practitioners partnering with young people and having genuine conversations about what they want in life and issues that matter to them (Spense, 2008; Buchroth and Connolly, 2019).

However, young people, youth workers and youth work organisations do not always accommodate the needs of the government and have refused, subverted, and occasionally

defied the governments measures imposed upon them. This was evident when youth work organisations went against British government plans to introduce anti-social behaviour orders (ASBO'S) legislation in 2005 (Garrett, 2007). In 2013 a brief attempt to create a platform for the collective voices of Irish youth workers resulted in the establishment of the Irish Youth Work Association. One of the objectives of this association was to offer a counter narrative to the top-down demands imposed on youth workers. So far, however, the association has had little action since its inception (Melaugh, 2015). In the UK, the ability of publicly funded youth work services to speak out against the government was constrained by the introduction of a no-advocacy clause that stipulates no publicly funded service can speak out on issues in the run-up to elections with the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act, 2014. This steers youth work services away from being critical of the state towards becoming an arm of the state (Buchroth and Husband, 2015). However, government departments or state agencies are not the only actors that decide how youth work practice is shaped: they interact with a range of non-government organisations (NGOs), voluntary youth work organisations, practitioners, academics, advocacy groups and other concerned actors who all contribute their own ideas (Kiely and Meade, 2018).

An emotional commitment to the work and to young people is seen as an 'almost mandatory' element of youth work (de St Croix, 2013, p.43). Abramovitz and Zelnick (2010) explained because of social policy reform that workers experienced ethical dilemmas in trying to meet the requirements of governments rules as well as respect their own professional values, as the state was no longer interested in their professional practice. They also feared reprisal if they questioned the reforms. This led to stress, demoralisation and burn out due to a loss of compassion for their clients. The effects of disempowerment are not only experienced by young people but also by practitioners with a lack of voice, confidence, and connection (de St Croix, 2013). Some youth workers manage to maintain a strong ethos and values within their practice by striving to stay connected. However, prioritising the care of others over themselves can also lead to burn out (Hallam et al., 2021). Youth workers may aim to facilitate empowerment but at the same time feel a sense of disconnection and powerlessness in their attempt to carry out youth work aligned with their values and anti-oppressive practices (Hughes et al., 2014). As youth work becomes more regulated, expressions of care and concern for young people can increasingly 'feel like resistance' (de St Croix, 2013, p.43) and due to the increasingly challenging nature of the work, youth workers are at high risk of 'occupational stress' (Hallam et al., 2021, p.848).

Having space for youth workers to share feelings and experiences with other youth workers, as well as to identify issues and act, could boost well-being and prevent burn out. However, this space is lacking in the community and youth work field. It is suggested that universities could provide a forum for practitioners in partnership with academics to discuss how to debate such issues and to devise strategies as well as alternative possibilities for youth work (Hughes et al., 2014).

2.7 Youth justice and youth work practice

In this section, literature on the influence of state involvement more specifically related to the youth justice sector and YDPs will be examined. Literature on previous research on YDPs is discussed. The tensions experienced by youth workers upholding voluntary participation in a youth justice setting is also examined. An overview is provided of the influence of governance, the risk framework prevention paradigm, standardised procedures, accountability measures, targeted approaches and programmatic interventions have on youth work practice in YDPs and youth justice settings. Finally, a model containing a set of principles in the UK is identified which offers an alternative approach to the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm used in Ireland.

2.7.1 Governance of justice services

Rose (2000) explains how advanced liberal democracies have seen significant developments in crime control regimes that allow governments to govern from a distance, define individuals as responsible for their offending behaviour, and categorise young offenders through risk management. Governments can govern from a distance by creating alliances with a range of organisations and professionals (Rose, 2000). This provides a network of microsites of governance across a range of locations (Gray, 2013). The state moves from being the sole provider of security for society to a facilitator and partner of other agencies; therefore, the focus is on 'steering and regulating rather than rowing and providing' (Rose, 2000, p.324). The young offender is constructed as an active agent in their own ethical reconstruction (Rose, 2000) with youth workers focused on empowering young people to make positive behavioural changes in their own life (Siurala, 2017). However, Garland (2002) warns, without coexisting approaches to tackle the structural barriers faced by those individuals, it often results in further exacerbation of inequality and injustice- the prudent young offender will choose to accept and conform to the current socio-political and economic environment, resulting in enduring economic marginalisation (Gray, 2013).

However, this could provide an opportunity for a critical social educational model of youth work to complement the work done in the current YDPs. The critical social educational model is used to raise the social awareness of young people around the values systems that can exacerbate inequality and oppress certain groups of people in society (Nicholls, 2012). With this approach, young people are encouraged to critically analyse these social relations and search for changes in political and social structures (Hurley and Treacy, 1993).

Youth justice work is utilised by the state to inculcate desirable behavioural expectations in young people who are not meeting society's standardised norms (Ilan, 2010). The explicit focus on reducing offending suggests that 'youth justice work' is identified as being different to youth work in general because of the focus on helping young people to deal with the issues surrounding their offending and the need for behavioural change (Ó' hAodáin, 2010). Social control within youth work can result in compromising the empowerment of young people and altering the relationship between the young person and the youth worker (Barrett, 2004). Seeking to achieve a degree of balance, youth workers in one research study said they aimed at both changing behaviour (suggesting a social control agenda) and empowering young people (Scanlon et al., 2011).

2.7.2 Previous research on Youth Diversion Projects

In addition to the analysis of state influence on youth work, a limited number of research studies examine YDPs specifically. Bowden (2006) presents an exploration that closely dissected the functioning of two YDPs. The study reveals a compelling contrast: the two projects, while addressing similar concerns, exhibited notably different approaches. Specifically, the personnel within one project displayed resistance to being utilised solely as crime prevention agents, while in the other project, the staff members embraced a clear agenda focused on social control. A baseline analysis was also carried out by the IYJS (Redmond, 2009) on all YDP projects in the country: this analysis was stimulated by the Youth Justice Strategy and outlined the necessity of diverting young people from offending and criminal behaviour more effectively. It was not a research study, but a comprehensive information gathering process as the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS) implemented change to the YDPs to meet the goal of the youth justice strategy. The baseline analysis viewed youth workers/practitioners as consultants and experts to contribute suggestions on improving the effectiveness of YDPs.

Swirak (2013) completed a doctoral thesis and subsequent publication (Swirak, 2016) that developed a genealogy of YDPs and analysed Irish youth crime prevention policy.

This research examines the influence policy discourse has on youth workers and JLOs, specifically the 'Agenda for Change' reforms. The findings show that YDP workers and JLOs responded to these changes through various strategies and practices that champion, accommodate, or resist the reforms. The research finds that the discourses and practices within YDPs moves away from the fundamentals of youth work that traditionally informed practice.

Donnelly (2017) explores the experiences of young people that participated in Youth Diversion Projects and the Diversion Programme. The findings show that the project was not thoroughly explained to young people when they first commenced in the YDP, however the young people felt they were listened to while in the project. Most participants also had a positive experience with staff and felt they were all trained appropriately.

A further study was carried out on the role of the Big Brother Big Sister mentoring programme in Youth Diversion Projects (Murphy, 2018). Foroíge (the national youth work organisation in Ireland) operates the Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) programme (Foróige, n.d.) which was provided to young people in YDPs. The research examines the benefits and challenges associated with the provision of the youth mentoring programme in a youth justice setting. The study identified a range of benefits for young people such as pro-social attitudes replacing anti-social beliefs. The young people also gained clarity in terms of life direction as well as improved well-being and mental health. Although there isn't a high amount of external research on YDPs, it does suggest that young people benefit from their engagement within the projects, but that there are constraints and conflict in terms of intention and design.

The Department of Justice has carried out regular evaluation reports on YDPs, most recently in 2023 (DoJ, 2023). This report profiles staff and the activities in YDPs, noting the influence of youth work through the presence of youth work methodologies, processes and the youth work organisations as CBOs. The report concludes that 'the projects are performing well in many areas that have been shown to positively impact on reducing crime' (p.154).

The 2018 YDP conference brought together a range of stakeholders to discuss the YDPs, including youth workers, funders, politicians, and researchers (Bamber, 2018). Throughout the report, there are several mentions of youth work and the youth workers within the projects, in particular the power and importance of the relationship that exists between the youth workers and the young people. During the conference, some of the issues raised by youth workers were around the requirements for a range of additional

training and support due to the complex nature of the young people's lives and circumstances that they were working with. The importance of the 'relationship' was stressed and the time that is required to build it. Youth workers also noted the constraints of some of the procedures in this process (Bamber, 2018). The flexibility of the project was cited as key success noting the ability of a youth work approach to go beyond what many of the statutory services were able to do. Egan (2022) recorded at the recent YDP virtual conference, how attendees and presenters strongly welcomed the rights-based approach in the new youth justice strategy and the broadening of practices in YDPs to include working with families and the possibility of extending the age range of participants. Interestingly the term youth worker or youth work did not feature in this report.

A consultation with young people who attended YDPs was carried in 2018 by the Irish Youth Justice Service and Department of Children and Youth Affairs (IYJS and DCYA, 2018). The young people predominantly reported positive experiences in the projects with credit being paid to their youth workers. Some negatives were also noted including high levels of staff turnovers and limited access. The report outlined the methodology used for the consultation and presented the findings, but did not offer any further discussion or recommendations. Where quotes are made available from the young people, they refer to project staff as their 'youth workers' although formally within the report, project staff were referred to using the title of 'youth justice workers'. The 'best' things the young people noted in the projects included the staff, activities, drop-ins, meeting new people and educational/employment opportunities. Table 1 below, taken from the report, highlights the key findings from consultations and 'findings are listed from the most to the least frequently mentioned by young people' (IYJS and DCYA, 2018, p.5). This is an important report as it captures the voice of the young person.

What works well in projects	What does not work well in projects
• Youth Justice Workers: youth-centred, friendly and *non-judgmental*, listen and provide support and advice • Activities and trips • Programmes: based on choices and solutions, citizenship programmes and programmes on the impact of crime • Meeting new people and making new friends: Drop-ins and "open sessions • Education, training and employment supports: educational and learning supports • Opportunities, e.g. Youth Exchanges • Having something to do and somewhere to go • Drop-ins: important for Youth Justice Workers to be present and suggest should be available at weekends • Garda Juvenile Liaison Officers (JLOs): considered "a positive influence • Food available	• Project times: one meeting a week was not enough, more set times per week and drop-in sessions, should be open at weekends • Youth Justice Workers, e.g. not youth-friendly, lack of male workers • Facilities: no facilities, far from home, youth cafés suggested • Lack of trips and activities • Young people's retention in projects • Negative relationships with workers from other organisations • Negative impact of having a drug user in a project • Negative interactions with Gardaí • Mixing younger and older age groups • Stigma and stereotyping • Leaving projects at 18 years old and how this is communicated • Courses • Unhealthy and poor food availability

Table 1: What works well and does not work well in projects to help young people avoid being in trouble
Source: IYJS and DCYA (2018, p.5)

2.7.3 The principle of voluntary participation

The voluntary participation of young people in youth work is well established, in legislation, literature and practice (Ó hAodáin, 2010) despite 'the dynamism and fluidity of the voluntary relationship between youth workers and young people' (Spence, 2008, p8). There is a growing concern that the voluntary principle is being undermined more and more as youth work methodologies are incorporated into many different settings (for example in schools or the youth justice sector) in order to achieve targeted access (Devlin and Gunning, 2009). Adams (1988) outlines the dilemma faced by youth workers working in more formal settings such as schools, where they experience a dual identity, caught between the custodial and formalised role of the teacher and youth work's concern with the experience of the young person. This dual identity can make the youth worker's role feel uncomfortable at best and unsustainable at worst. Corney (2021) acknowledges youth workers' need to consider the level of participation in the context of where it is taking place, the limits to decision making and the level of participation that may be possible or realistic, particularly in settings in which attendance is compulsory. Helpfully, Corney (2021) presents a rationale for making

difficult decisions with young people based on the UNCRC 'best interests' principle. He highlights the necessity to consider the benefits for all young people, the direct outcomes or consequences for those involved in the decision-making process, and who will be impacted—whether the effects are moral, ethical, legal, political, or developmental (Corney, 2021). However, critics assert the professional discretion and autonomy of practitioners has been significantly reduced due to the introduction of new managerialist practices within the youth justice sector in particular. They also suggest that it has dehumanised approaches to youth crime by replacing professional discretion with technocratic managerialism, void of principles or independent rationale (Stephenson et al., 2007), potentially undermining the voluntary principle.

Coburn and Gormally (2019) argue that although youth workers are working in different settings in which the voluntary principle cannot be upheld, the methodology of youth work can still be practised, grounded by values of equality and social justice. Davies (2005), however, maintains that the voluntary principle is such a fundamental aspect of youth work practice that non-voluntary activity cannot be classed as youth work. The principle of voluntary participation may be inconsistently applied within YDPs due to differing levels of coercive pressure placed on young people by both youth justice workers and JLOs (Swirak, 2013). It is well argued that young people should have the freedom to attend or not attend youth work services without recourse or incrimination (Jeffs et al., 2019). Jeffs et al. (2019) warn that withdrawing youth work practice from settings where the voluntary principle is compromised will limit the use of youth work practice in collaborative partnerships. However, if the other values of youth work are maintained, young people may still benefit from the experience of youth work practice even though the voluntary aspect has been undermined-the emphasis is on the type of youth work practice being carried out rather than the setting (Jeffs et al., 2019).

2.7.4 Programmatic interventions

The reforms introduced by the IYJS to YDPs favoured programmatic interventions that were evidence-based and provided a clear logic between the problem and desired outcomes. The interventions promoted were approaches that sought to change the perspective of young people by enhancing their ability to challenge pro-criminal beliefs through reflection and empathy (Swirak, 2016). The obligation to provide standardised programmes can be at odds with the traditions of the voluntary youth work sector where youth-led and youth-centred approaches are fundamental: activities and interventions with

young people do not always have explicit measurable outcomes (McMahon, 2018). Tilsen (2018) warns that standardised curriculum-based approaches fail to be responsive to young people and consequently suits no one in the final analysis. The unstructured and responsive nature of informal education is at risk of being misunderstood and unappreciated by the state in favour of evidence-based programmes (Spence, 2008). Managerialism, as well as the demand funders place on youth workers to achieve outcomes, creates a pressure to introduce a curriculum into the educational process (Ord, 2008). Ó' hAodáin (2010) notes that targeting specific young people 'to achieve *"hard"* outcomes' through programmatic interventions challenges existing principles that underpin youth work, such as the importance of the relationship.

2.7.5 The risk framework prevention paradigm

O'Mahony (2009) explains that the major discourse around juvenile justice across the UK and Ireland is the Risk Framework Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) and this has a significant influence on policy and practice. Risk factors are identified and used to predict the probability of young people getting involved in anti-social or criminal behaviour. O'Mahony (2009) argues the predominance of this paradigm creates a barrier to a more comprehensive understanding of how to deal with offending behaviour. This is due to the oversimplifications and inflated assertions in RFPP literature when presenting its findings for policy makers and practitioners. RFPP is popular with politicians and others that are tasked with the challenge of solving youth crime without addressing the root problem of social and economic inequality. This model seems convenient as it identifies specific risks that may lead to crime, which can be then, in theory, prevented (a 'practical' approach to youth crime). It can also target a small group of individuals at risk of criminal behaviour who may benefit from preventative programmes, making it more cost-effective (O'Mahony, 2009).

Once a young person is engaged in a YDP, a risk assessment is conducted by the youth justice worker using a standardised tool called the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI). This tool is a quantitative survey that assesses the attributes of offenders and their situations (Swirak, 2013). 'The Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory–Screening Version (YLS/CMI-SV) is designed to provide a preliminary estimate of the level of risk for antisocial behaviours, as well as indicate areas for intervention with young offenders, it is one of the most widely used structured risk and need assessment measures across many jurisdictions' (Chu et al., 2014). Maidment (2007) states actuarial assessments are popular in the youth justice sector as they align with the neo-

liberal agenda, placing responsibility on the individual as well as holding practitioners more accountable. Paylor (2010) argues that the science of understanding the causes of offending behaviour has been replaced with actuarial calculations in which potential offenders are categorised and then allocated to the required programme of risk management. The IYJS/DoJ have been criticised for taking a very narrow interpretation of how educational programmes can address crime and have decided to adopt a standardised approach to risk assessments and centralised control over setting targets (Forde and Swirak, 2023). The IYJS/DoJ measures the success of these programmes by examining crime statistics, risk assessment figures and documented behavioural outcomes (Neves, 2013, p.116), and places little emphasis on the pedagogy. Cowen (2002) argues that risk assessments have resulted in critical reflection and visionary alternatives being eroded from educational practice to a more 'fragmented, technocratic and pragmatic approach due to market driven demands' (Cowen, 2002, p.71) which 'measures education in quantitative terms' (Cowen, 2002, p.68).

Swirak (2016) believes the introduction of risk assessments used in YDPs focused on deficit-based and individualising explanations of young people's behaviours with interventions employed based on the principles of 'reconstruction.' The reforms were underpinned by the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) that places the responsibility on young people to become active and autonomous agents in control of their own behaviour (Swirak, 2016). Swirak states that the IYJS defined the issue of youth offending in quantifiable ways so that new public management techniques could offer measurable and visible results. When the issue of offending was broken down into individual risk factors the logical solution was to address the individual deficits of each young person rather than taking on broader social challenges that lead to offending behaviour, such as a focus on psychological interventions. The dominant discourse is that young people, rather than broader structural issues within the social order, are responsible for their own insufficiencies (Giroux, 2013). This presents a significant conflict for youth work practice as its intention has been moved from a pedagogical practice that empowers young people, to programmes that address individual problematic behaviour (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Nicholls, 2012).

The completion of the risk assessment is based on the professional judgment of the practitioner, and as they are deficit-based tools they focus on the negative aspects of an individual's life (Shepherd et al., 2013). These practices can influence the dispositions of practitioners as they describe young people in the institutionally approved discourse of cognitive deficits (Riddle et al., 2024). The emphasising of risk factors may result in inadvertently 'criminalising' young people for non-criminal risks such as dropping out of

school or being from a single parent household (Graham, 2012). This problematising of young people may lead to practitioners overusing negative terms (such as troubled, deficient, disaffected, delinquent and perverted). This type of discourse has been so prevalent that it has shaped modern youth services, education systems and juvenile justice processes (Barry, 2006). This negative terminology may skew practitioners' perceptions of young people and even cause young people's behaviour to fit the label (Deaken et al., 2022), resulting in further marginalisation (Barry, 2006). According to Davies (2005), the problem-orientated approach of the risk prevention model does not align with the potentiality model which should be the guiding principle of youth work.

The label of 'at-risk youth' or 'young offender' tends to blame the young people rather than the justice system or inequality (Deakin et al., 2022). Youth justice policy concentrates on the behaviour of the offender rather than their circumstances; policy tends to be based on psychology that concentrates on the individual rather than sociology that concentrates on the broader socio-economic factors, as eradicating poverty and inequality would come at a much greater cost to the state (Phoenix and Kelly, 2013). The management of these disadvantaged groups is a more cost-effective option (MacLeod et al., 2012) and focuses on social control and risk management. Collective responsibility is diminished, and young people are now held individually responsible for issues such as unemployment and poverty (MacLeod et al., 2012). The rise of managerialism has seen an increase in inequalities, moving from a welfare state to a punishing state with the criminalisation of social problems (Giroux, 2013). These issues are seen as a dysfunction of the individual as opposed to a structural issue in the contemporary social order (Giroux, 2013).

2.7.6 An alternative approach

The most common approach to preventative youth justice in Ireland is dominated by the risk-focused paradigm which perceives young people from a negative perspective and individualises the causes of crime, viewing the young person as solely responsible for participation in criminal behaviour, as outlined above. This focus on correction and responsibility is a formula for labelling, stigmatisation, marginalisation, and adult-centric control (Swirak, 2016). The Youth Justice System in England and Wales has moved from a risk-focused approach to a 'child first' model (Bateman, 2020). The Youth Justice Board's 2021–2024 Strategic Plan prioritises this perspective, changing the name of the previous model from 'Children First, Offender Second' to *'Children First'* to address concerns that the "offender" label was stigmatising. This marks a shift towards a more youth

-centred approach (Day, 2023).

The risk-focused paradigm measures success based on the absence of negative behaviours/outcomes although this absence does not mean the existence of positive behaviours (Case and Haines, 2014). Measuring success on the absence of negative behaviour can be quite challenging and difficult for workers to operationalise and may result in confusing and disengaging young people (Case and Haines, 2014). '*Children First'* reframes this approach and focuses on the promotion of measurable, demonstrable, and achievable positive behaviours and outcomes. It also views young people in a positive way as active agents, part of the solution not the problem and promotes engagement and participation. Adults, not young people, are the responsible agents who ensure children gain access to and realise their entitlements and rights (Case and Haines, 2014). The *'Children First'* approach also takes a holistic, individualised focus on a child's welfare, emphasising their strengths and future aspirations (Day ,2023).

Swirak (2016) outlines that many youth justice workers align more with the child first principles rather than the current Irish policy which follows advanced liberal rationalities. For Irish youth policy to be more aligned with young people's needs, the emphasis of policy discourse would need to be transformed to include positive narratives of young people, diverse methods of measuring outcomes, and relationship-based practice led by young people (Swirak, 2016). Youth workers, as a result, need to navigate a system that negatively depicts young people and undermines the young person's potential (Hughes et al., 2014). More recently, the DoJ has implemented the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027, which aims to establish a youth justice system underpinned by international children's rights (Forde and Swirak, 2023). Positively, the new strategy outlines a set of core principles that reflect the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child's (UNCRC) requirements, highlighting the significance of protecting and advocating for the rights of young people within the youth justice framework (Forde and Swirak, 2023). This shows a positive step within the Irish youth justice system for children and young people to gain access to their entitlements and realise their rights.

2.8 Chapter summary

The literature review initially presents an overview of youth work practice. This was achieved by viewing the features, principles and values of youth work such as a young person-centred approach, voluntary participation, informal education, relationship, empowerment and participation. The concepts of professions, professionalisation and

professionalism and their significance in the context of youth work were also presented. Evetts's framework of occupational and organisational professionalism as two forms of discourse was outlined, and it will be revisited later in the context of discussing and interpreting the findings of this research. The influence of the state on youth work practice was also explored. The increase in state funding for youth work services has resulted in heightened expectations and oversight, guiding youth work towards aligning with the state's priorities. The influence of policies and procedures within the youth justice sector and YDPs on youth work practice were examined. In particular, the impact of the explicit objectives of social control, evidence-based programmes, voluntary participation and the risk framework prevention paradigm (RFFP) were considered. Finally, a model taken by the UK government named '*Children First*' was highlighted as an alternative approach to the RFPP, and the positive step taken by the Irish state with a new rights-based Youth Justice Strategy was noted.

Chapter Three: Research Design

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design used to answer the two research questions guiding the current study:

1. What are the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs)?

2. What are the implications for youth work as a profession?

The first section provides an overview of the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm was chosen as it allowed the personal experiences of the research participants to be analysed (Scotland, 2012). Semi-structured interviews, that engaged the participants in conversational partnerships (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) were also deemed the most suitable research method as it followed an interview schedule and allowed the research participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016). A follow up focus group was then conducted for further discussions on key areas of interest that arose in the interviews. The following section presents the influence of axiology and ideology on the research process. Axiology refers to the philosophical considerations relating to the personal perspectives and values of the researcher and theirs influence on the research process and outcomes (Lincoln et al., 2011). Ideology signifies the worldview, philosophical orientation, and lens with which the researcher views the subject of study (Lincoln et al., 2011). Following this, a detailed description of the phases taken through thematic analysis using the approach devised by Braun and Clarke (2006) is outlined.

3.1.1 Social Research

Social scientific research is a strategic process which interrogates and informs our understanding of social reality (Lawal, 2019). Social research is on a broad spectrum, with diverse definitions and characteristics. It is an approach to verify or generate theories through collecting data and analysing it (Williams and May, 1996). Social research is a combination of 'social', and 'research' (Lawal, 2019) exploring the relationship between social life and social systems and can play a significant role in investigating social problems (Khan and Moshin Reza, 2022). Social research positions itself between 'science and philosophy, knowledge and ethics' and as a result is in a position to creatively and comprehensively address key social questions and concerns (Love, 2012). This allows the researcher to 'learn new things, relearn what is assumed to have been known and unlearn

things he/she assumes to be correct' (Lawal, 2019, p.2).

Social science seeks to explore and interpret social phenomena and should not be confused with philosophy or belief systems (Williams and May, 1996). It is recognised that due to the complex nature of social science that it cannot be value free and social science researchers are urged to practice systematic reflexivity to ensure values with the research process and associated decision making are made explicit (Schwandt and Gates, 2021). This research aims to align with a social science that is dedicated to 'social justice, equality, non-violence, peace and human rights' (Denzin and Lincon, 2011 cited in Creswell, 2018, p.23).

3.2 Axiology and ideological considerations of the research

Within interpretive research the social scientist can never fully detach from their own values and beliefs, which will inevitably influence how they collect, interpret, and analyse data (Gichuru, 2017). A reflexive approach was taken in this research to ensure researcher's assumptions and bias were reduced. Reflexivity and reflective practice, in line with youth work values were central to the practice of the researcher, with a 'critical gaze turned towards the self' (Koch and Harrington, 1998). The analysis is based on the researcher's interpretation; therefore, it is important that the researcher clearly outlines their agenda and values system openly from the outset of the research (Scotland, 2012). This section outlines the axiology and ideology of the study. Axiology refers to the philosophical consideration of values and ethics as well as the researcher's personal standpoint that might influence the research process and outcomes. It involves reflecting on the researcher's own beliefs, biases, and values, and the potential impact on the studies design, data collection, interpretation, and overall research approach (Lincoln et al., 2011). The ideology signifies the worldview, philosophical orientation, and lens through which the researcher views the subject of study. The axiological and ideological beliefs of researchers can exert a powerful influence on the decisions they make throughout the research process (Jussim et al., 2015).

3.2.1 The researcher's world view

Lather (1986) suggests that a research paradigm inherently reflects the researcher's perspective on the environment they inhabit and seek to engage with. It consists of the fundamental principles and ideas that influence how a researcher understands, interprets, and interacts with their field of study. When we say a paradigm defines a researcher's

worldview, we refer to the core values and beliefs that guide their perception of the research context and shape their interpretations and actions within it. Rowland (1995), from an interpretive standpoint, offers a valuable argument that any research study embodies a specific worldview shaped by three key philosophical layers: ontological beliefs, epistemological assumptions, and methodological choices. Ontological beliefs refer to our views about the nature of reality—what it is. Epistemological assumptions concern how we acquire knowledge about the world, or how we interpret reality. Specific ontological beliefs influence the epistemological assumptions we make, meaning that our understanding of how people come to know the world is shaped by our beliefs about the nature of reality. Similarly, these epistemological assumptions guide our selection of methodologies, as we tend to choose methods that align with our assumptions about how humans acquire knowledge (Rowland, 1995). Interpretations, or interpretive research, involve researchers explaining various aspects of their study by incorporating their subjective beliefs and perspectives. Interpretive researchers believe that exploring human language allows meanings to be understood and shared within qualitative research (Myers, 2008; Carey, 2012). It is crucial to understand who is doing the interpreting, why they are interpreting, and how they are going about the interpretation process. Methodological choices involve the approaches we select to achieve the desired outcomes in research. The term "interpretivism" refers to approaches that highlight the importance of individuals' personalities and their involvement in social and cultural life (Elster, 2007). This perspective is philosophically linked to a researcher's worldview (Yanow, 2006), as it aligns with a chosen paradigm that carries specific assumptions about reality (Hathaway, 1995).

The researcher self-identified as an ‘insider researcher’ (Breen, 2007) and an experienced youth worker. The researcher’s values and worldview are aligned with, and influenced by, the professional values of youth work, including the empowerment of young people, equity, participation, and critical reflective practice (NSETS, 2021). The researcher worked in a Youth Diversion Project for seven years and experienced the introduction of the reforms by IYJS/Department of Justice (DoJ) known as the ‘Agenda for Change’. The researcher felt that these reforms provided both benefits and constraints to his practice. For example, the use of standardised risk assessment provided direction and clarity to the practice, but the narrow focus on risk limited the practice, as it failed to fully consider the young people’s social circumstances, personal strengths and interests. This experience of the reforms was a key motivation to carry out this research and positioned the researcher as an ‘insider researcher’. Throughout the research project, an acute awareness was required to

ensure that personal reflections and beliefs did not bias the analysis of the data, to avoid aligning personal experiences. The researcher was aware that one's values, assumptions, and prejudices could easily sway the interpretation of the data. So, to mitigate against this, a practice of reflexivity throughout the research process was maintained. Reflexivity turns a critical gaze towards the self (Palaganas et al., 2017). Therefore, throughout the research process a reflexive journal was kept managing this space. Interestingly, one of the assumptions identified within the journal was that youth work was viewed as the most beneficial practice to young people. As a result, any procedure or policy that did not promote or constrained youth work practice was viewed as being negative and ineffective. Identifying this assumption allowed the researcher to examine the benefits of policies and procedures that did not align with youth work practice. There were also incidents discovered of becoming negatively biased towards research participants whose views did not align with the researcher's personal beliefs around young people and practice. The naming of these assumptions and bias allowed the data to be revisited and viewed differently, to see how it could complement youth work or provide a different approach that was valid. The reflexive journal allowed a deeper level of objectivity, to ensure what was being inferred was stated in the data, rather than allowing previous experiences to influence (mis)interpretations.

3.2.2 Interpretive paradigm

This research project adopted an interpretive paradigm. The purpose of interpretive research is not to confirm or refute previous theories but to advance interpretive theories that are rooted in the lived world. Interpretive research supports the study of how people experience certain phenomena (Scotland, 2012). A key and obvious difference between natural and social sciences is that within natural science the researcher must observe and interpret natural processes, whereas within social sciences the researcher needs to observe phenomena in the social world and understand the meanings people have already placed on them (Pulla and Carter, 2018). It is important to recognise that interpretive methods do not dominate the research participants but aim to understand their motivations and their behaviours from their own perspectives (Chowdhury, 2014). The interpretive paradigm emphasises the importance of mutual interaction in the methodological design, treating respondents as partners in generating insights (Irshaidat, 2022).

Interpretive research takes into consideration how human situations, behaviours and experiences construct their subjective view of the world (Brooke, 2013). The ontological claim of the interpretive paradigm is to embrace relativism in the construction of meaning,

which leads to the complete rejection of a static reality (Schwandt, 1994). Goldkuhl (2012) states that interpretivism is reliant on a constructivist ontology, as the social world is not given, but constructed through human social interactions. Consciousness interacting with the world creates meaning, people construct meaning in different ways and truth is a consensus formed by co-constructors (Pring, 2000). Interpretivism aims to bring into consciousness the hidden social forces and structures that influence behaviour and practice (Scotland, 2012). The interpretive paradigm provided a lens to examine how social forces and structures influenced youth workers' practice in YDPs.

The interpretive paradigm also allows researchers to achieve greater depth by exploring their experiences and perceptions within a specific social context (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Interpretivists recognise that their research issues exist within a social context, which is a human construct with numerous aspects that cannot be observed or measured quantitatively. As such, this reality can only be understood through social constructs like language, consciousness, and shared meanings. Unlike positivist research, interpretive studies do not predetermine dependent and independent variables; instead, they emphasise the complexity of human sense-making as situations unfold. The interpretivist paradigm relies on the perspective of the individual, so a relativist ontology is anticipated (Brooke, 2013).

A relativist ontology proclaims that multiple truths exist, and that no universal truth can be uncovered (Denzin and Lincon, 2008). Reality is individually constructed so there are as many realities as there are individuals (Scotland, 2012). However, this research did not aim to uncover multiple truths but to identify common experiences and perspectives through the discovery of common patterns in the data to provide a composite reality experienced by the research participants. With an interpretive approach the purpose of research can be quite clear based on the type of methodology chosen such as ethnography or hermeneutics, although not all research questions need to fit into one methodology. Interpretive research has the flexibility to examine phenomena in a range of ways through the characteristic of language to patterns and regularities in the data (Ferguson, 1993). The methodology chosen within this study is based on the philosophical underpinning of interpretivism and the common patterns and regularities in the obtained data.

The interpretive epistemology is one of subjectivism based on real world phenomena; this view highlights that the world does not exist without our knowledge of it (Scotland, 2012). This approach establishes a clear connection between the research and its subject, based on the assumption that humans cannot be separated from their knowledge

(Saunders et al., 2012). Interpretivism involves a complex process in which people interpret the meanings of their own actions and those of others in their everyday lives. Additionally, it is the goal of the social scientists to understand this process and reconstruct the self-understandings of individuals engaged in specific actions (Chowdhury, 2014).

Unlike positivism, the interpretive researcher aims to provide detailed, subjective descriptions rather than generalisations (Pulla and Carter, 2018). An interpretive researcher establishes reliability through constant comparison of findings. The validity of an interpretive argument is supported by the accuracy with which behaviour is thoroughly described and the ability to account for a wide range of behaviours within the studied community. Qualitative research is used to examine specific issues or phenomena within groups, locations, and contexts; thus, generalisability is not possible in this type of research (Pulla and Carter, 2018). This research provided qualitative descriptions of the practices used within the specific professional role of youth workers in the context of a YDP.

3.3 Data Collection

Within this section, the recruitment process for the research participants, detailing the criteria for selection and the rationale is outlined. The reasons for a qualitative approach and the use of semi structured interviews and focus groups are provided. The ethical considerations are also outlined, detailing the measures taken to ensure the research participants were comfortable and protected throughout the research process. The ethical implications for insider research are examined as are the arrangements taken to mitigate any negative effects. Finally, providing clarity and transparency for the research participants is also emphasised.

3.3.1 Recruitment of research participants

Data is collected based on theories, categories, and strategies, with research sites, interviewees, or cases selected according to theoretical considerations, with regard to their relevance to the concept being studied (Frechette et al., 2020), such as understanding the experiences of youth workers in YDPs and how these experiences impact their ability to achieve their goals. Participants possess specific qualities or characteristics that make them particularly suitable for research. Thus, in interpretive research, carefully chosen samples are crucial, but their importance diminishes if they do not align with the research's objectives and nature (Frechette et al., 2020). A purposive sampling technique was utilised to recruit research participants, to ensure alignment to the research objective (Campbell et al., 2020).

The research participants had to meet two criteria outlined in Table 2. A clear rationale informed each criterion to ensure its relevance to the topic being researched.

Criteria	Rationale
1. A minimum of 5 years' experience of working in a YDP	Participants needed a minimum of five years' experience to qualify to participate in this research. Five years was deemed an appropriate threshold to allow for the youth worker to experience the full extent and breath of the conditions of a YDP. This time also ensured that the youth worker had been through several planning and reporting cycles. It was also envisaged that this time was significant enough to allow for practices to be critiqued and adapted. Five years was also considered sufficient to allow for continuous critical reflection and to develop a confidence and an expertise on their practice, as there was opportunity within this time to develop long term relationships with the young people and within the community. Youth workers did not need to be currently employed in a YDP, just to have that breadth of experience.
2. To identify as a youth work practitioner	YDPs employ 'youth justice workers'. This is a term/position that has been created by the DoJ to reflect the bespoke nature of the work and approach in YDPs. As the focus of the research was youth work, it was important for the research participants to identify as such, as it would reflect a knowledge and a commitment to the practice. It was important that the research participants could articulate their youth work practice in the context of the YDP and be able to decipher possibilities and constraints that they encountered in their practice.

Table 2: Criteria for research participants

The research participants were selected based on their own self-identification as a youth worker, and not on their academic and professional qualifications in youth work specifically. The decision to recruit based on this criterion was a deliberate one, reflecting the composition of the youth work workforce in Ireland. Employers of youth workers in Ireland do not always require a professionally endorsed qualification in youth work but they do generally stipulate a professional youth work qualification or a degree in a related social or educational field of study. This has resulted in a workforce that is a mixture of people with youth work and other qualifications, which informed the decision in this study to seek participants who *self-identify* as youth workers. Self-identification as a youth worker may be based on an initial professional qualification, employment within a youth work organisation and/or through various factors such as continuous professional development training, socialisation with colleagues and engagement with young people. Three of the nine research participants did not have a youth work qualification.

An invitation to participate in the research, based on the criteria, was advertised on a

dedicated/moderated Facebook group for Irish youth workers. A copy of the advertisement can be viewed in Appendix 1. Any potential participants who did not meet the criteria were thanked for their interest but not invited to participate. Nine experienced youth workers were recruited to take part in the study. The research participants were selected from several different youth work organisations to provide a variety of perspectives, which included national organisations such as Foróige, Youth Work Ireland, Crosscare, and local independently run projects. The research participants were also selected based on their geographical area to provide a balanced variety of regions around Ireland. This included large urban, small urban and rural areas. Four male and five female research participants were recruited to ensure a gender balance within the research. All interviews were carried out via Microsoft Teams due to the Covid 19 pandemic government guidelines. All nine research participants that took part in the semi-structured conversational interviews were also invited to participate in the focus group, and five accepted the invitation. The focus group was also carried out via Microsoft teams.

Semi-structured interviews				Focus Group		
9 participants (4x male and 5x female)	Youth work organisations 3x Foróige 3xYouthwork Ireland. 2x independent projects. 1x Cross care	9 different locations in the Republic of Ireland		5 participants (4x female and 1x male)	youth work organisations 2x Independent 1x Foróige 1x Crosscare 1x Youth Work Ireland	5 different locations In the Republic of Ireland

Table 3: Breakdown of representation of research participants

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews and conversational partnerships

In this section the reasons for using a qualitative approach and a semi-structured interview, framed within a conversational interview, is outlined. The rationale for the interview schedule is also explained. When attempting to answer the research question, a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable option, as getting detailed information about the personal experiences of the research participants' practice in a YDP was required. Qualitative research focuses on how people interpret and perceive their experiences to make sense of their social reality (Zohrabi, 2013). It also aims to understand how a specific social phenomenon or programmes function within a particular context (Polkinghorne, 2005). As

this research question was focused on the specific context of YDPs, qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate approach. A semi-structured interview was viewed as the best method for this research due to its ability to cover both anticipated or specified topics and topics that might arise spontaneously in the interview. While structured interviews follow a formalised and limited set of questions, semi-structured interviews are more flexible, allowing new questions to arise during the interview based on the interviewee's responses (Flick, 2002). Within the semi-structured interview, it was also decided to incorporate 'conversational partnerships' (Rubin and Rublin, 2005) where a relationship is developed with the research participant, which in turn influences the interviewing process.

Many researchers recommend that interviewers prepare an interview guide, an informal collection of topics and questions that can be posed differently to various participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). An interview guide was prepared for this research and is presented at the end of this section. This guide helped the researcher to stay focused on the topics while not being restricted to a specific format. Such flexibility allows interviewers to adapt their questions to the context of the interview and the individuals being interviewed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The topics within the interview schedule were not always discussed sequentially and often arose naturally within the conversation even before the interviewer introduced them. Given the researcher's background as a former youth worker, Rubin and Rubin's (2005) insights on defining research roles and managing boundaries offered valuable guidance. This approach helped the researcher intentionally foster empathy, connection, and understanding with the participants and ensured that the structure remained fluid to allow for more natural dialogue to occur (Cridland et al., 2015). Qualitative interviews are like quotidian conversations; the researcher may devise an impromptu question based on the previous answer, making each interview unique and unpredictable (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Each interview took its own path as a result of this method, as the train of thought of the research participants was allowed to be followed based on their reflections and discussion.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) advise to recognise the role of the researcher's personality in the interview process, highlighting the constraints that could present if a personality was too strong, or equally too passive, advising researchers to 'balance' their personality with the situation. In this instance, the researcher was acutely aware of his personality, but also of the small size of the youth work sector in Ireland, where many youth workers know, or know of, each other. In conversational partnerships, it is advised that the researcher pays close attention also to their own anxiety and how this can inhibit 'hearing' the voice of the

interviewee. To manage this, the researcher actively practised empathy to fully understand and connect with each research participant (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and to ensure integrity in the partnership of the dialogue. Rubin and Rubin (2005) warn that this does not necessarily involve expressing agreement with the research participants, whether you do or not, but enables the researcher to state their own position in a careful manner to cultivate trust. This can help to alleviate any vulnerability that research participants are feeling after disclosing sensitive or controversial insights, and respectively acknowledges the potential emotional impact of the interview (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). With this in mind, the researcher did share his own insights and experiences, respecting and welcoming differences in opinion and perspectives. This approach was not only effective in supporting an insightful and meaningful partnership within the interview process but was rooted in a key youth work value, reinforcing and supporting the research subject matter.

The researcher was mindful to reflect both his experience as a youth worker and his trustworthiness as a researcher, so that the participants were confident that their experience and story would be received correctly and presented accurately (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Recognising the debate on the best approach of insider or outsider research, the researcher in this instance presented honestly to the participants as an insider researcher. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest that this can be advantageous as participants feel that their language and context is understood. The conversational partnership created with the participants helped to validate their position and gave attention to their work and contribution, which allowed them to become part of the solution to the challenges that they described in their story (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

One of the prerequisites for semi-structured interviews is a thorough knowledge of the topic so the researcher can ask appropriate questions (Dilley, 2000) and that participants can be confident that their input will be understood (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This precondition was met in the design of the interview schedule due to the researcher's experience of working as a youth worker in a YDP, coupled with the completion of an extensive literature review. It was deemed most suitable to have a reasonably narrow schedule, closely aligned to the research questions. By narrowing the range of topics discussed, richer descriptions can be attained, as it allows more time for the participants to tell the breath of their experiences (Dilly, 2000). A rationale for each of the topics is available in Appendix 2. See the interview schedule outline below in Table 4.

Topic	Possible prompt
1. **Background**	How did you got involved in this line of work
2. **Youth work**	What was your experience of practising youth work in a YDP
3. **Policies and Procedures in YDPs**	What was your experience of working within the policies and procedures of a YDP
4. **Experience of working with young people in YDPs**	What was your experience of working with young people in a YDP
5. Thoughts/reflections	Invitation to discuss areas not explored through the semi-structured interview

Table 4: Interview schedule

3.3.3 Focus group

This section will present the rationale for using a focus group and discuss how it benefited and complemented the semi structured interviews within the research design. Details of the topic schedule designed for the focus group will also be presented.

The combination of focus groups with the semi-structured narrative interviews in this research allowed follow up on specific areas within the interviews that needed further clarity and/or discussion. The versatility and user-friendly nature of focus groups make them suitable for widespread application in various contexts and combinations alongside other techniques (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). The focus group provided clarity particularly when research participants found certain policies and procedures constrained one aspect of their practice yet offered possibilities in another, highlighting a tension or even a contradiction, and allowed for further exploration. Schedules for focus groups (as for semi-structured interviews) are often loosely structured, typically consisting of a fluid arrangement of topics to be addressed. Frequently the discussions organically develop a momentum of their own, ultimately influencing or dictating the sequence in which various issues are covered (Nyumba et al., 2018).

Unlike interviewers, focus group leaders assume the role of a "facilitator" or "moderator." In this capacity, the researcher's primary role is to guide and moderate the group discussion among participants rather than interacting with them as a member of the group (Krueger, 2014). This is a skill and practice frequently employed by youth workers. It was important to ensure that all participants engaged in the discussion and had an opportunity to contribute to various aspects and issues raised. For example, during the focus group, the researcher noticed that one of the research participants was particularly quiet. Being proactive in this regard, the researcher facilitated greater participation by directly inviting that participant to comment on specific topics, which was effective.

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus group was carried out

online in adherence with government guidelines. This online approach was convenient for the research participants as it eliminated travel time and costs. A common limitation to focus groups are that participation is normally restricted to individuals residing near the allocated venue of the focus group (Woodyatt et al., 2016). However, in this case, the online sessions allowed the research participants to attend from different parts of Ireland. Interestingly too, they all noted their developing level of comfort with online meetings and discussions (due to the increased use of online platforms for meeting due to the Covid 19 pandemic). One of the key benefits to including a focus group in research, is that participants ccould interact with each other within the focus group. These interactions added a critical dimension to look at specific issues, as it allowed different perspectives to be taken into consideration within the group (Agyemang et al., 2009). The individual setting of a semi-structure interview can be more suitable for providing full personal accounts of their experiences, while the group setting allowed the development of thoughtful discussions about both shared and unshared beliefs (Farnsworth and Boon, 2010). Focus groups also foster constructive discussions and debates due to the varied perspectives (Rodriguez et al., 2011). The discussions presented an opportunity to delve into issues that were not well-understood or had limited prior research. This is because discussions--unlike individual interviews--leverage group dynamics to explore these issues in a contextual, in-depth, and detailed manner without imposing a predetermined conceptual framework. This process of sharing and comparing understandings and views often result in more valuable insights than those gleaned from a similar number of individual interviews (Gill et al., 2008). The synergistic dynamic of the group discussion was utilised to attain information that would not have been captured through other methods (Barbour, 2014). The varied opinions on the topics outlined in the interview schedule provided insights into the complex interactions between occupational and organisational professionalism.

Within focus groups, opinions might be aired that might not have appeared in a one-to-one interview setting (Guest et al., 2017). Focus groups can take unexpected directions which can challenge the prior assumptions of the researcher and create data that might not have been previously considered (Munday, 2006). For example, the theme of navigating youth work practice started to become more understood due to the broad discussions on how they maintained their values, adapted administrative procedures, and balanced their youth work agenda with the agenda of the Department of Justice (DoJ). This data was available through the transcripts in the interview but was further developed and made explicit within the focus group.

One of the limitations of a focus group is the influence of culture within the group which may impact the participants' opinions: it may not be clear if a speaker is expressing a definitive individual view or aligning with the group consensus (Moore et al., 2015). Focus groups can cause individuals to self-censor their opinions (Kitzinger, 2013). This pressure to align with the consensus was evident on some occasions with one of the research participants justifying why she felt different to the others in the group on a particular topic. Nevertheless, she still gave her opinion despite this dynamic.

The data gathered in the interviews were reviewed, and key areas were chosen that warranted further exploration. These were areas that were deemed relevant to the research question and appeared across all the nine interview transcripts. The topics discussed were often viewed as both beneficial in some aspects of their practice but also constraining in other areas. The focus group offered a good way to explore these topics by gaining insights into the varied experiences and perspectives of the research participants on the same topic. Based on these topics, a schedule was developed for the focus group as illustrated in table 5. Nine topics of interest were selected for further discussions in the focus group. For example, the first topic was the promotion of youth work practice, as a lot of the research participants named this as having both possibilities and constraints. In the interviews, they described feeling undervalued as youth work practice was not endorsed in the projects. However, no other practice was promoted, therefore they had the freedom to practice youth work. This absence of a named practice warranted further discussion in the focus group. Full details on the rationale behind each topic is available in Appendix 3.

Topic
1. The promotion of youth work in YDPs.
2. The values that inform their practice (e.g. trust, honesty and genuineness appeared strongly in the previous interviews).
3. Administrative procedures influence on practice.
4. The impact of broader social issues on young people and their practice (such as inequality, poverty and social disadvantage).
5. The professional relationship with young people.
6. How an outcomes focused approach influences their practice.
7. Explore the times in a young person's life when they are more open to making positive changes.
8. Support for youth workers to carry out their role.
9. The voice of youth workers in influencing practice.

Table 5: Focus group topic schedule

3.4 Ethical considerations

It was a basic ethical requirement that all research participants were comfortable and protected throughout the research process. The values of youth work were reflected in the approach and offered integrity, partnership and meaningful participation (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) to the research participants. The ethical guidelines set out by Maynooth University were met and monitored throughout the research. Ethical governance plays an important role in oversight to ensure that a university's ethical protocols are followed (Vanclay et al., 2013). A comprehensive ethics application was completed highlighting the ethical considerations of the research project. The ethics application was submitted to the Social Research Ethics Subcommittee in Maynooth University and was approved. A copy of ethical approval for this research is available in Appendix 4.

The researcher must also ensure the respondent's identity remains confidential and guarantee anonymity (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). This assurance extends beyond protecting their names to include avoiding self-identifying statements and information. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is essential to protect participants from potential harm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). All the research participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity within this research. The foundation of ethical research is "informed consent" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Participants must be fully informed about what will be asked of them, how their data will be used, and any potential consequences. They must provide explicit, active, signed consent to participate in the research, including understanding their rights to access their information and the right to withdraw at any time. The participating youth workers were emailed a copy of a consent form (see Appendix 5) and an information sheet (see Appendix 6).

3.4.1 Insider researcher

As previously highlighted, the researcher in this instance is an insider researcher and this needs to be considered from an ethical perspective, noting the strengths and weaknesses of insider research. During an interview, researchers are usually required to maintain neutrality and avoid sharing their own experiences. However, in insider research, participants can ask questions of the researcher as they would in everyday conversation, prompting the researcher to share their own experiences. This was explicitly sought and offered through the conversational partnerships (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) created in the semi-structured interview. This interchange can help build trust and rapport with the participant (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Two of the research participants discussed the project

the researcher worked in and asked about his own practice. Another research participant inquired about the organisation that the researcher was employed with. These conversations built a positive rapport and created a more open and honest environment (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). During the interview, greater familiarity can result in less probing and leaving assumption unchallenged, or conversely, it can enable deeper lines of questioning, resulting in richer descriptions and details (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Insider researchers are typically familiar with the language, jargon, and acronyms used by participants, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). However, Mercer (2007) likens insider research to "wielding a double-edged sword", where the benefits of extensive knowledge and familiarity with the context may be offset by the difficulty of making the familiar seem strange. Premature conclusions based on preconceived ideas and a desire for positive outcomes are not unique to insider research, but the risk is heightened due to the researcher's close connection to the subject. Drake (2010) cautions that the validity of insider research requires reflexive consideration of the researcher's position, as the same data can lead to different interpretations based on personal relationships, expectations, and motivations. Premature conclusions were something that had to be actively managed, through awareness and reflection as the researcher often assumed he knew what the research participants were speaking about, as he had a similar experience when working in a YDP, often conflating his experience with their experience. To avoid such distortions a commitment to a critical reflexive approach underpinned this research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Fundamentally however, as advised by Rubin and Rubin (2005), the research participants became conversational partners who were respected and engaged with honestly and fairly.

3.4.2 Power dynamics within the research

The influence of power occurs in many relationships, including between the interviewer and interviewee (Randall et al., 2013). The researcher needed to be mindful of how power dynamics influenced the interviews and focus group (Rubin and Rubin, 2005), and how this impacted the data. The researcher was aware of how power skews interviews and took appropriate measures to reduce power imbalances, such as putting interviewees at ease by sending the questions prior to the interviews and building rapport at the start of the interviews and focus group (Doody and Noonan, 2013). Some research topics are looked at more favourably than others, particularly ones aligning with current policies (e.g. evidence-based) and approaches (e.g. educational effectiveness) that can support

researchers' careers. Alternatively, questioning the status quo and challenging the social injustices faced by people with less social power may not be supported by employers and research funders (Sikes, 2007). This research was at risk of challenging the beliefs, policies, and procedures within the Department of Justice and YDPs. As a former worker in a community-based organisation (youth work service), the researcher may have been subtly influenced to be less critical of such organisations. Another issue might have been that the research participants could have hesitated to critically examine the weaknesses in practice since they are mandated by their funder and may feel obliged to support these practices. The research participants have limited control over the research as they are powerless to prevent the researcher from imposing interpretations upon the data (Scotland, 2012). This lack of control over how the data is analysed may make participants uncomfortable in taking part in the research. Thus, the researcher had to be clear with participants about the purpose of the research prior to carrying out the study and ensure the research accurately depicts the views of the research participants.

3.4.3 Confidentiality

In this research, pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity (Lahman et al., 2023). With their confidentiality assured, participants were more at ease during the interviews and felt free to provide their honest opinions. In the following chapter the participants' profiles are presented under their pseudonyms. All data protection procedures were followed in accordance with the Maynooth University guidelines. Due to the confidential nature of the data, it was stored securely with a clear timeline of when and how it will be safely disposed (Vanclay et al., 2013).

3.4.4 Clarity and transparency

The research participants were given clarity on the purpose of the research. Sikes (2012) warned against manipulating relationships in an attempt to gain quality data. It is essential to maintain the human element within research and outlined that researchers must be mindful their informants are people with emotions and to take care that they do not feel objectified after the research is completed (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). In this study, research participants were provided with the questions and a consent form (containing a grievance procedure to report and correct any ethical issues) prior to the interview, to support the clarity and transparency in the whole research process. Participants understood their rights around consent and that that they could withdraw from the research, without prejudice, up

to the point of write up. The research participants will also be provided with a copy of the research after the submission of the dissertation.

3.5 Data analysis

In this section, the cyclical inductive and deductive approach taken within this research is outlined. The six phases of thematic analysis that was applied to the data is also examined. Details of how the transcripts were coded and the process of developing five themes is outlined. Finally, details of the analytic report on the data findings are presented.

3.5.1 Inductive and deductive approach

An important aspect of coding and theme development is the source and manner of identifying meaning. This process can range from inductive (data-driven) to deductive (researcher- or theory-driven). These two orientations are more of a spectrum than a dichotomy, and it is important to note that coding within a data set can incorporate both types (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In this research the two orientations were incorporated to develop the codes and themes. In qualitative analysis, the inherently subjective nature of the process makes achieving a purely inductive approach challenging. Researchers inevitably bring their own perspectives to the analysis, resulting in the engagement with the data never entirely inductive. Our own identities also influence what we observe in the data and the narratives we construct around them (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The researcher's background as a youth worker would have had an impact on how the data was viewed. However, a reflexive approach was adopted to reduce this effect (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The deductive approach involves a more researcher- or theory-driven method, where the data set serves as the basis for coding and theme development. The research questions posed—and the resulting codes—reflect the theoretical or conceptual ideas the research seeks to explore through the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The use of interview schedules demonstrates a deductive approach, as data was gathered on areas of interest. However, an inductive approach can still be used in thematic analysis to some extent, as the analytic process can be guided by the meanings within the data. Braun and Clarke (2021) state that if your research leans towards an inductive approach, ask yourself some simple questions: am I interested in the experiences, perspectives, and meanings of the research participants? If the answer is yes, you are orientated to an inductive approach along the spectrum. In this case, the articulated experiences within the data set formed the foundation for coding. This inductive approach is evident within this research design with the use of an interpretive

paradigm, as it explores the experiences and perceptions of research participants within a specific social context (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). The interview methods also blended the use of both semi-structured interviews and conversational partnerships. In conversational partnerships, the interviewer places the research participants at the centre of the research process, emphasizing the meanings they attribute to their stories (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This balance of both inductive and deductive analysis has allowed new insights to be drawn from the data while also allowing specific areas of interest within the data to be sought and examined. This has allowed both approaches to complement the research process and the development of interesting themes.

3.5.2 Thematic analysis

The data in this research was analysed using the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87) as outlined in Table 1. However, the researcher has also taken on board more recent work by Braun and Clarke (2024) that includes reflexivity. In reflexive thematic analysis (TA), themes are meaning-centred and are produced through deep engagement with data coding, rather than being predetermined. Themes do not exist independently of the analysis but are interpretive narratives shaped by the researcher's subjective, thorough reading of the data. Thus, themes cannot be coded for in advance but are constructed as part of the analytic process (Braun and Clarke, 2024). Thematic analysis should employ more subjective and dynamic language to highlight the creative process themes are developed, produced, crafted, created, and constructed, rather than identified, found, discovered, or seen as simply emerging from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2023). Through the six-phase approach of thematic analysis as outlined in Table 6, five themes were created, and a scholarly report was completed on the analysis of the themes. Braun and Clarke advise to write about this process in the first person (Braun and Clarke, 2023).

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 6: Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis

3.5.2.1 Phase 1: absorbing the data

The data arising from the interviews and focus group was transcribed by a professional transcription service. Each transcription was read, and audio recordings listened to several times. The initial reading of the transcripts was with the intention of simply becoming familiar with the content. As the different transcripts were read, a broader picture of the entire data set started to develop. Notes were made on the margins of the transcripts on areas of the data that were interesting, such as empowerment and creating a safe environment for the young people within the youth project.

The researcher also started to identify patterns across the data transcripts; these initial patterns included common youth work practices and constraints experienced by the research participants such as the limiting focus of the risk paradigm and the use of dialogue with young people. On further reading of the transcripts, the process of engaging with the data in a more critical manner began, posing deeper questions about the data such *as, why did they perceive the topic in this way?* Throughout the process, how the data related to the research question was continuously examined. By the end of the process, the researcher familiarised himself with the data to the extent that the broad content of each transcript was

remembered. At this point, it was clear that it was time to move onto the second phase of coding the transcripts.

3.5.2.2 Phase 2: generating initial codes

Each data transcript was systematically worked through, while being coded. Segments that seemed relevant and partially relevant to the research question were coded. At times, a code might apply to just a few words within a data item, while at other times, an entire paragraph might be affixed to a code. The codes were written into the comment boxes in Microsoft Word. As the transcript was being coded, it was necessary to consider if an already existing code could be used, or if a new code needed to be developed. In this research the data was analysed on both a semantic and latent level. Semantic codes capture explicitly expressed meaning, often staying close to the language used by participants or the 'blatant' meanings presented in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2023). In contrast, latent codes focus on a deeper, more implicit or conceptual level of meaning, which can sometimes be quite abstracted from the obvious content of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2023). Semantic and latent codes represent the two ends of a continuum, and coding can be positioned at numerous intervals across this continuum. An example of a semantic code was 'support for youth workers' as it relates explicitly to what the research participants were referring to within the data and was relevant to the research question. However, an example of a latent code was 'informal education' as the research participants did not explicitly name informal education, but the researcher's knowledge of youth work literature was used to identify this practice in the data. This means that codes varied from being more summative or descriptive to being more interpretative or conceptual (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The use of semantic and latent levels of analysis aligns with the inductive (data driven) and deductive (research driven) approaches used in this research. As coding continued across the entire data set, it was observed that some of the codes were worded too narrowly and did not facilitate this code to be used across the entire data set. This resulted in changing the wording of some of the codes, so that it took a broader meaning that could encapsulate more data segments. One example of this was instead of using the code 'cleaning the local park', the code was changed to 'community work', thus allowing for this code to be used for several community initiatives outlined within the transcripts. Conversely, some other codes were made narrower, as they were too broad, and did not allow a range of meaning related to the overall concept of the code. For example, instead of the broad code of 'conversation' more detailed codes were provided, so specific data segments could be identified. These codes included:

'reflective conversations', 'open conversations', 'upfront conversations', 'genuine conversations', 'planned informal conversations', 'Activities to enhance conversations', and 'using music to inform conversations'. When the entire data set was coded, it was systematically worked through again to refine and finalise codes. Five hundred and ninety-eight (598) codes were created across the nine semi-structured interviews and focus group, which were entered onto an excel sheet (see attached in Appendix 7).

3.5.2.3 Phase 3: searching for themes

Phase 3 in the thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006) is presented under the following three headings to illustrate the process of searching for themes.

a) The development of candidate themes, followed by
b) The development of sub-themes, and finally
c) Developing themes from sub-themes.

a) <u>The development of candidate themes</u>

This phase saw the initial development of candidate themes. Candidate themes are part of the theme development process as you shift from smaller meaning units such as codes to clustering potentially connected codes creating themes. A theme encapsulates a patterning of meaning throughout the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). Patterns were looked for in the data and codes were grouped around core ideas. Each code represented a different facet of the core idea. Braun, Clarke and Rance (2014) refer to this core idea as the central organising concept. These patterns can often be evidenced on a semantic/descriptive level and other times it can be on a more latent/conceptual level (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The extracts were then collated to ensure they captured the essence of the theme. Table 7 illustrates three examples of how codes were clustered to create the candidate themes *Targeting*, *Safe Space* and *Informal education.*

Pattern identified in initial codes	Assigned Codes (Column 1 in excel sheet)	Candidate theme name (Column 2 in excel sheet)
Targeted Youth Work	Risk factors, accessibility, managing the dynamics of high-risk groups, labelling, categorising risk, age limit, challenging groups, profile young people, the right young people get the service, stigma with the project, one to one sessions, managing a high risk group can be hard work, individual work, targeted work made you better.	Targeting
Creating a secure environment for young people	young people feel secure, space to develop their identity, create a positive environment, develop their identity, new environment, positive environment in the project, out of their community environment, peer influence, bonded as a group, she saw herself, it helped her to like herself, creating a space to reflect, identity, she does not wear a mask with youth workers, opened up about talking about crime, weekends away, positive group dynamic were developed, shared trauma in group, they got to be somebody else, free to display their true identity, more freedom, free to display the positive sides of their identity.	Safe Space
Conversations as an educational tool	informal approach to working with young people, open conversation, activities to enhance conversations, dialogue more natural, reflect on experience, learn from experience, build on development from trip, reflective conversations, sensitive topics discussed, genuine conversations, reflect on experience, planned informal conversations, using music to inform conversations.	Informal education

Table 7: Clustering codes to create candidate themes

b) <u>The development of sub-themes</u>

Through analysis of the candidate themes, sub-themes were then created (in column 3 in the excel sheet, see Appendix 7). This was achieved by clustering the candidate themes that shared a central organising concept. The central organising concept is the idea or meaning that unites a theme (Braun and Clarke, 2023). The full list of 27 subthemes is presented in Appendix 8. Three examples are also provided below to illustrate the process in Table 8.

Central organising concept	Clustering of candidate themes (column 2 in excel sheet)	Name of Sub-theme (column 3 in excel sheet)
Merging candidate themes based on the idea of the limitations of individual risk factors	The narrow focus on reducing risk, individual risk factors, focus on individual behaviour change, Narrow focus on risk assessment, deficit approach, focus on crime, holistic approach constrained by risk, protective factors.	The Constraints of Focusing on Individual Risk Factors.
Merging candidate themes based on idea youth work was not being promoted in YDPs.	disconnection with youth work, freedom to practice, management follow IYJS, IYJS governance.	Youth work practice not acknowledged by the funder.
Merging candidate themes based on the idea of youth workers looking after their mental health in the projects.	navigating boundaries with parents, boundaries in relationship with young people, support for youth workers, burn out.	Navigating of self-care.

Table 8: Clustering candidate themes to make sub-themes

c) Developing themes from sub-themes

This section outlines how five themes were developed from the sub-themes. The sub themes were reviewed to find patterns and ideas to define a central organising concept to connect the subthemes together to create broader themes. Through this process five themes were developed. This process was supported by drawing out a graph of the themes and subthemes as illustrated in Figure 1. The subthemes named: background, role model, relationship with Gardaí, policy focus and holistic approach were not used at this stage as they did not fit with the current themes. They were labelled miscellaneous and set aside at this phase of thematic analysis.

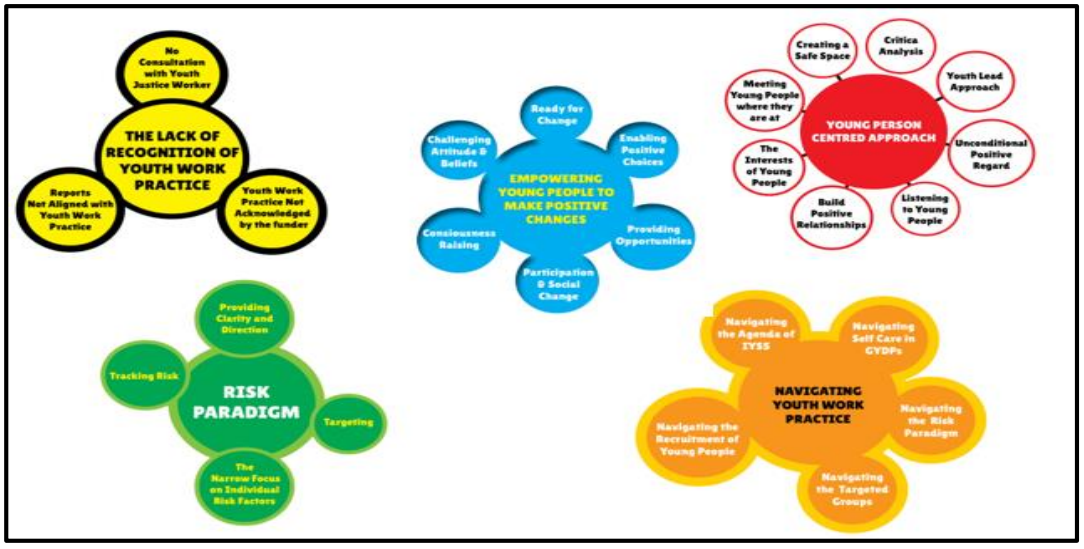

Figure 1: An initial mapping of themes and sub themes

As illustrated in Figure 1, initial themes were developed underpinned by the relevant sub-themes. This process mirrored the previous strategies of reduction from codes to candidate themes and candidate themes to subthemes. The five initial themes crafted at this point in the process, are detailed in Table 9 alongside the associated central organising concepts.

Initial Themes (phase 3)	Central organising concept
1. Young person-centred approach	In reviewing the sub-themes, a pattern was identified across the data where the research participants practice placed a strong focus on prioritising the needs, interests and concerns of young people over other procedures and agendas.
2. Empowering young people to make positive change	In creating the next theme, another pattern was identified within the data in which the research participants aimed to positively influence the attitudes and beliefs of the young people. This was done by appealing to their intrinsic motivations, as opposed to instructing them what to do.
3. Risk paradigm	In developing the third theme, a number of sub themes were influenced by the focus on the individual risk factors. This focus on risk had a significant impact on their practice with research participants experiencing both benefits and constraints.
4. The lack of recognition of youth work practice	In developing the fourth theme, a number of sub-themes outlined how youth work practice was not recognised by the funders.
5. Navigating youth work practice	In developing the fifth theme, a number of subthemes were based around the youth workers using their discretion to develop strategies to navigate their practice around the policy and procedures in YDPs such as the risk paradigm, targeting and recruitment.

Table 9: Initial themes (phase 3)

3.5.2.4 Phase 4: reviewing themes

The five initial themes developed in phase 3 were reviewed to examine if they appropriately represented the data and accurately answered the research question. Further significant changes were made to the themes and subthemes through Braun and Clarke's (2006) fourth phase, 'reviewing themes'. The changes made are detailed in the following section. The themes are presented alongside a descriptive rationale for the changes made, noting the movement and allocation of sub-themes during this process.

Theme 1: changes to the initial theme 'young person-centred approach'

When reviewing the theme 'Young person-centred approach' it became clear that the central organising concept across all the subthemes was about creating an environment that would encourage the young people to meaningfully participate in the project. It was decided to re-name the theme 'Cultivating the participation of young people'. This renaming of the theme resulted in some of the subthemes no longer being viable under this theme including 'listening to young people', 'unconditional positive regard', and 'critical analysis'. The subtheme 'listening to young people' was moved to the theme 'empowering young people for positive change' under the subtheme 'processing personal issues with young people'. The sub theme 'Meeting young people where they are at' was renamed 'Working in collaboration with young people'. The subtheme 'critical analysis' and 'unconditional positive regard' were moved to a new theme 'Developing a youth work praxis in YDPs' outlined in the next section. The subtheme 'The interests of young people' was also renamed 'Designing programmes based on the interests of young people' as it more accurately represented the extracts. See theme 1 and subthemes outlined below in Table 10.

Initial theme 1: Cultivating participation of young people.
Sub themes • Creating a safe space for young people • Designing programmes based on the interests of young people • Working in collaboration with young people. • A Youth led approach. • Build positive relationships with young people

Table 10: Cultivating participation of young people (theme and sub-themes)

Theme 2: the development of a new theme named 'developing a youth work praxis in YDPs'

This new theme was created based on a cluster of subthemes that shared a similar pattern. The central organising concept of this theme was based on the research

participant's analysis of the young person's behaviour and how this informed their practice. The subthemes within this theme included 'Personal background', 'Critical analysis of young people', Commitment to young people, 'Partnership approaches' and 'Consciousness raising' and 'Participation for social change'. The subtheme 'unconditional positive regard' was also renamed to 'The commitment to young people'. The sub theme 'Participation and social change' was moved from its previous position under 'Moral education' to this theme. This sub-theme was also renamed from 'Participation and social change' to 'Participation for social change'. This subtheme fit this theme as it illustrates how the research participants viewed the young people as active agents of change. See theme and subthemes outlined in Table 11.

Initial theme 2: Developing a youth work praxis in YDPs
Sub-themes • Personal background of youth workers • Critical analysis of young people • The commitment to young people • Partnership approaches • Consciousness raising • Participation for social change

Table 11: Developing a youth work praxis in YDPs (theme and sub-theme)

Theme 3: The changes made to 'Empowering Young People to make Positive Changes'.

The theme 'Empowering Young People to Make Positive Changes' was renamed 'Moral Education'. In reviewing the extracts, the research participants engaged the young people in conversations with a moral focus that influenced their attitudes, beliefs, decision making and actions. They also made young people aware of positive opportunities they could avail of in their lives. A number of the subthemes were also renamed so that they were more accurate, such as:

- 'Enabling positive choices' to 'Enabling positive decision making'
- 'Listening to young people' to 'Processing personal issues'
- 'Ready for change' to 'Responding to young people when ready for change'.

The theme and subthemes are outlined in Table 12.

Initial theme 3: Moral education
Subthemes • Challenging attitudes and beliefs. • Enabling positive decision making • Processing personal issues with young people. • Responding to young people when they are ready for change. • Providing opportunities.

Table 12: Moral education (theme and subtheme)

Theme 4: Merging 'Risk Paradigm' with 'Navigating Youth Work Practice'

When reviewing the themes, 'Risk paradigm' and 'Navigating youth work practice' were merged, as both themes shared how the youth workers navigated the policies and procedures in YDPs. When merging the two themes, a new name was developed: 'Navigating youth work practice within the policies and procedures of YDPs'. The subthemes of 'Tracking Risk', 'Narrow Focus on Individual Risk Factors' and 'Providing Clarity and Direction' were merged into the subtheme named 'Managing the risk paradigm'. The subtheme 'Targeting' fit within the subtheme 'Navigating the targeted approach'. The theme and subthemes are outlined in Table 13.

Initial theme 4: Navigating youth work practice within the policies and procedures of YDPs
Subthemes • Navigating the agenda of the DoJ. • Navigating self-care in YDPs. • Navigating the risk paradigm. • Navigating the targeted approach. • Navigating the recruitment of young people.

Table 13: Navigating youth work practice within the policies and procedures of YDPs (theme and sub-themes)

Theme 5: Changes to the theme named 'The Lack of recognition of youth work practice'.

A number of changes to the wording of the theme and subthemes were made with theme 5. This included changing the theme title from 'The lack of recognition of youth work practice' to 'Youth work practice not recognised by the Department of Justice' as it more accurately depicted the subthemes. 'No consultation with the youth justice workers' was renamed to 'Top-down youth justice approach to governance' as it more accurately represented the extracts that detailed the style of governance used by the DoJ that failed to recognise youth work practice. The sub theme 'Youth work practice not acknowledged by the

funder' was changed to 'Youth work practice is not named in policy' as it more accurately described the extracts. Finally, 'reports not aligned with youth work practice' was renamed to 'Administrative procedures and reports do not align with youth work practice' as it more accurately represents the range of extracts used. The theme and subthemes are outlined in Table 14.

Initial theme 5: Youth work practice not recognised by the Department of Justice
Subthemes • Youth work practice is not named in policy. • Top-down youth justice approach to governance. • The administrative procedures and reports do not align with youth work practice.

Table 14: Youth work practice not recognised by the DoJ (theme and sub-themes)

Phase 4 of the thematic analysis process resulted in significant changes to the themes outlined in phase 3 above. This phase allowed several of the themes and subthemes to be merged, renamed and also the creation of a new theme. This process created richer themes that more accurately represented the breath of the data. In phase 5 the naming of the themes is refined, and the final list of themes and subthemes is presented.

3.5.2.5 Phase 5: defining and naming the themes

During this phase a need for further refinement in the naming of the themes and sub-themes was required. The wording of the majority of the subthemes was changed to more accurately represent the extracts. However, significant changes to the names of four of the five themes were made.

The theme 'Developing a youth work praxis in YDPs' was changed to 'Critical holistic analysis, perspectives and responses' to more accurately describe the sub themes. The core concept of this theme is based on the research participants' personal perspectives and critical analysis on young people this position informed their practice response that took a holistic approach to working with the young people.

The theme 'Cultivating the participation of young people' was changed to 'Providing safe, attractive and welcoming spaces for young people' to more accurately represent the subthemes. This theme's core concept was about creating the conditions so young people would meaningfully engage in the project and the new theme name more accurately described this.

The theme 'Moral education' was changed to 'Enabling young people to find direction and take positive decisions, opportunities and actions'. This new title more

accurately depicted the sub themes. The core concept of this theme was to support young people to take a positive direction in life. The theme 'Moral education' was too specific to cater for the diversity of extracts and subthemes. The term also has a meaning in youth work history that is different from what is intended here so it was considered better not to use it.

'Navigating youth work practice within the policies and procedures of YDPs' was changed to 'Youth Workers managing the policy and procedures in YDPs'. It was considered that the word 'navigating' was too conceptual and the word managing described how the research participants more practically worked with and within the policies and procedures of YDPs. Tables 15-19 provide a summary of the changes made to each of the five themes and associated sub-themes during phase 4 and 5 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase model of thematic analysis.

Phase 4: **Theme 1: Developing a youth work praxis in YDPs**	**Phase 5:** **Theme 1: Critical holistic analysis, perspectives and responses.**
Subthemes • Personal background of youth workers • Critical analysis of young people • The commitment to young people • Community responses • Partnership approaches • Consciousness raising • Participation for social change	**Subthemes** • Perspectives on youth offending • An understanding of behaviour. • Community responses. • Interagency approach. • Raising the conscious awareness of social circumstance

Table 15: Theme 1 (modifications from phase 4 to phase 5)

Phase 4: **Theme 2: Cultivating participation of young people.**	Phase 5: **Theme 2: Providing safe, attractive and welcoming spaces for young people.**
Subthemes • Creating a safe space for young people • Build positive relationships with young people • Working in collaboration with young people. • A Youth led approach. • Designing programmes based on the interests of young people	**Subthemes** • Creating safe spaces for young people. • Building positive relationships with young people. • Working in partnership with young people. • Responding to the immediate needs and concerns of young people. • Designing programmes based on the interests of young people.

Table 16: Theme 2 (modifications from phase 4 to phase 5)

Phase 4 **Theme 3: Moral education**	Phase 5 **Theme 3: Enabling young people to find direction and take positive decisions, opportunities and actions.**
Subthemes • Processing personal issues with young people. • Challenging attitudes and beliefs. • Enabling positive decision making • Responding to young people when they are ready for change. • Providing opportunities.	**Subthemes** • Processing issues to gain clarity and direction. • Challenging antisocial attitudes and beliefs. • Enabling positive decision making in life. • Aware of opportunities in life • Role Models • Ready for change from a life of crime

Table 17: Theme 3 (modifications from phase 4 to phase 5)

Phase 4 **Theme 4: Youth work practice is not recognised by the Irish Youth Justice Service.**	Phase 5 **Theme 4: Lack of recognition of the youth work as a profession.**
Subthemes • Youth work practice is not named in policy. • Top-down youth justice approach to governance. • The administrative procedures and reports do not align with youth work practice.	**Subthemes** • The youth work profession not named in policy. • Top-down youth justice approach. • Reports not aligned with youth work practice. • The narrow focus of the risk paradigm • Manualised programmes and informal education

Table 18: Theme 4 (modifications from phase 4 to phase 5)

Phase 4 **Theme 5: Navigating youth work practice within the policies and procedures of YDPs**	Phase 5 **Theme 5: Managing policy and procedures in YDPs.**
Subthemes • Navigating the agenda of the IYJS. • Navigating self-care in YDPs. • Navigating the risk paradigm. • Navigating the targeted approach. • Navigating the recruitment of young people. • Navigating self-care	**Subthemes** • Managing the agenda of the DoJ with youth work practice. • Managing administrative and reporting requirements. • Managing the risk paradigm. • Managing the targeted approach. • Managing self-care in YDPs • Managing the partnership with the Juvenile Liaison Officer.

Table 19: Theme 5 (modifications from phase 4 to phase 5)

3.5.2.6 Phase 6: producing the report

When producing the report, clear examples were provided of the data and interpreted based on the broader research questions. The report is presented over the next two chapters, chapter four and five, entitled 'Findings' and 'Discussion'. Initially, to introduce the report, in the first section of chapter four, a short synopsis on each of the research participants is provided. This is followed by a detailed presentation of each of the five themes, in the second section. The findings and discussion were separated out into different

chapters, rather than integrating them. This format is common in applied research. The discussion section of the report also used broader scholarly work to add to the analysis of the report. Careful consideration was taken into the selection of extracts which best conveyed the essence of the respective themes. The report includes extracts to support the analytical claims, enabling the readers to evaluate the alignment between the data and interpretations (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Finally, the practice of reflexivity throughout the research process allowed the researcher to examine his assumptions and beliefs, to reflect thoughtfully and critically on how these influenced him to provide a more unbiased perspective throughout the analysis.

3.6 Limitations of the study and possibilities for future studies

This section presents the limitations of the study and the possibilities for the future. In this study the research participants were recruited based on the criterion that they identified as 'youth workers'. It is possible that youth justice workers employed in YDPs may identify with other professions, often dependent on their educational background. There may be value in conducting a broader research project on 'youth justice workers' regardless of what practice they identify with, that would simply examine practice in YDPs. There is also scope to conduct further research on youth justice workers who identify as youth workers to examine any difference between those with youth work qualifications and those with alternative third level qualifications, exploring the implications for the profession, professionalisation and professionalism of youth work. This research also only examined youth work practice from the perspective of the youth workers and not from the perspectives of the young people, youth work managers, Juvenile Liaison Officers or the civil servants within the DoJ. Their perspectives may give a more holistic understanding of how youth work is understood and how the practice is influenced by these key stakeholders. This research only provides a limited perspective from a small group of research participants. A larger scale quantitative study might provide additional insights into the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice.

3.7 Chapter Summary

This research adopted an interpretive paradigm that allowed the researcher to explore the experiences and perceptions of the research participants within a specific social context (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). The two key methods used to collect data included

semi-structured interviews founded in conversational partnerships and a focus group. Semi-structured interviews were used as they allowed the research participants to speak freely about their experiences in YDPs. The focus group facilitated a process of sharing and comparing stories and perspectives, providing valuable insights that complemented individual semi structured interviews. The power dynamics within the research complicated the process, particularly the potential reluctance of the research participants to criticise their employers openly. The impact of being an insider researcher was identified and the influence it had on the research process. In addition to this the researcher outlined the importance of maintaining a reflexive journal to limit conflating his experience with that of the experiences of the research participants. To analyse the data, the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adhered to. Ethical considerations relating to clarity/transparency, confidentiality, and data protection informed the entire research process. The findings themselves are presented and discussed in the next two chapters of the thesis.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, a short profile of the nine research participants is provided. The names used are pseudonyms, each profile provides information on the participant's project such as location and governance structure. The profiles also provide a small insight into aspects of the research participants' background or perspectives that may shape their practice such as their education, personal experience or perspective on YDPs.

In the following section, the five themes developed through the six phases of thematic analysis are presented and analysed.

4.2 Profiles of research participants

4.2.1 Mel

Mel worked as a youth worker for eight years in a YDP in a major city in Ireland, the YDP project was part of a broader youth service that was located in the community. Mel outlined that having the YDP situated within the youth service provided her with support and supervision she needed to carry out the role. Mel also holds a professional post graduate qualification in youth work. Mel described how growing up in a low socio-economic area provided her with an understanding of the lack of awareness young people have of the possibilities available to them in their lives. She reflects on how the educational support services in her school raised her awareness of the possibility of attending a third level education institute.

> *I went to a university [name of university] actually and, you know, I was completely taken out of my life in (name of home place). But it wouldn't have been something that like I would have been aware existed* (Mel).

Mel outlined how this experience informed her practice of making young people aware of the possibilities in their lives.

4.2.2 Una

Una worked in a YDP for eight years in a major city in Ireland. During her employment, she gained a professional post graduate qualification in youth work. Una's project was not a stand-alone project but was integrated into a broader youth service that was based in the community. Una's experience of growing up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood gave her an understanding of the challenges faced by the young people

attending YDP projects. She explained how the principal in her school did not believe the students were capable of doing well in life. This experience motivated her to become a youth worker, as she knew what she was capable of despite what others believed.

> *Like she thought we were worth nothing. You are from this... and some people like that made me believe, well I knew what I was capable of, I knew what my family was capable of, and that's why I went into the work I went into. So, I would have that broader sense already. And then I suppose through college and through more learning, understanding that at a higher basis* (Una).

4.2.3 Richard

Richard worked in a YDP for over five years. The project was managed by a major youth work organisation. Richard holds an honours degree in outdoor education and a diploma in digital youth work. Richard previously worked in an outdoor education centre and felt he always gravitated towards working with the more challenging young people in this role; this tendency motivated him to seek work in a YDP. Richard remarked on how his upbringing in a disadvantaged community provided him with insights into how young people are negatively perceived by society. This insight informed his youth work practice in which he often challenged the negative misperceptions of young people.

> *Even local guards do it there now like if there's a group, they won't call them a group of lads sitting on a wall, they will call them a gang. You know, and they will bring the negative connotation first {…}my approach has always been working off a positive* (Richard).

4.3.4 Sophia

Sophia worked in a YDP for over nine years. Her educational background was in social care with a particular focus on the rehabilitation of offenders. Her project was managed by a major youth work organisation. Sophia believed that a lot of the behaviours displayed by the young people were coping mechanisms to deal with trauma they experienced in the past. Sophia explained how changes in the procedures of the project moved from group work to more individual work. Sophia highlighted how this shift in focus suited her style of practice and interest in psychology:

> *So, in our Project, there were a lot of group work happening and in practice, the guidelines changed a little bit, shifted to focus more on individual support work and*

my passion is all about child psychology and kind of counselling, therapeutic skills as well (Sophia).

4.3.5 Gary

Gary completed his undergraduate honours degree in Outdoor Education. Gary also completed a professional post graduate qualification in youth work. He worked in a YDP for over seven years. The project is managed by a major youth work organisation. Gary was attracted to the role of Youth Justice Worker as he wanted to do developmental work with young people over a longer duration of time to bring about more lasting changes in the young people. Gary supported young people to find, define and go after their own goals for the future:

Well, I don't think there is any point in me setting the goal for someone because that would be very short-lived (Gary).

4.2.6 Ann

Ann worked in a YDP for more than thirteen years. The project operated in a rural area. Ann's project was managed by a major youth work organisation. Ann completed a degree in health promotion and trained as a life coach. Ann experienced a traumatic event in her childhood that caused her to lose interest in school. This is what motivated her to work with young people so that she could support them to achieve their full potential in life. She states:

It took me a long time to cop this on that I'm back trying to save other teenagers (Ann).

She worked with young people to support them to find their passion, interests and direction in life.

4.2.7 Pat

Pat has worked in a YDP for more than five years. The project operates within a rural area. Pat's project is managed by a national youth work organisation. Pat has attended a YDP when he was a young person. This experience has had a significant influence on his life, studying criminal justice in third level education and attaining a professional post graduate qualification in youth work. Pat focused his practice on reducing the eight risk factors identified by the DoJ.

So, what we do is we would look at the criminogenic needs and then look at what we need to put in place to bring down the overall number that reduces that risk. So, when we reassess in six months' time we can see, literally based on a numerical figure, has that come down from 24 to 10 or whichever (Pat).

4.2.8 Sarah

Sarah worked in a YDP for five years. Sarah completed a professional post graduate qualification in youth work. The project is run in a major town in Ireland and managed by a major youth work organisation. She worked in several generic youth projects before but finds the YDPs more structured and focused at achieving its objectives. Sarah has also found working with the Juvenile Liaison Officer a positive support to get the young people to engage in the project.

If we try to call and they are not engaging and they are just not willing to come, we bring that up then with the JLO and say look, we tried phone calls, we tried house visits. But sometimes people just won't engage. So then the JLO will follow it up with them (Sarah).

Sarah has used critical negative incidents within the young people's lives as a catalyst for them to choose a better path in life.

4.2.9 Aidan

Aidan has worked in YDP for over eight years. While working in the role, Aidan decided to do a professional postgraduate qualification in youth work which he described as a *"game-changer for me"* since it provided him with a broader understanding of the theory of youth work and provided him with the confidence to ask more critical questions. Aidan is interested in how broader social structures have created the conditions for antisocial and offending behaviour.

I had always had that real passion, for kind of that, structural social thing, but around the actual work practice that I have been involved in would be very much on an individual, kind of personal level stuff and I guess I had always said I was a little bit frustrated by how you could connect up those dots (Aidan).

Aidan believed that the role of the YJW should not be only focused on individual responsibility, but the social circumstances also needed to be taken into consideration. Aidan aimed to make young people aware of how their social disadvantage unfairly impacted their lives and encouraged them to find ways to overcome and navigate these social barriers.

Summary

The profiles provide an understanding of how the participants' personal background, education and work in a YDP influenced the formation of their identity as a youth worker and informed their youth work practice. Six of the nine research participants in the sample had a professionally endorsed post graduate qualification in youth work, whereas the other three held alternative third level qualifications in the areas of outdoor education, social care and health promotion.

4.3 Presentation of Themes

4.3.1 Theme 1: Critical holistic analysis, perspectives and responses

This theme was crafted by the researcher based on the interpretation and collective meaning of a number of sub themes. The youth workers were aware of how the young people's social circumstances significantly impacted every aspect of their lives. This holistic perspective provided the youth workers with insights into how their social circumstances influenced their behaviour, resulting in a more empathetic and committed approach to working with the young people. This understanding also widened the scope of the interventions to address young people's social circumstances, through community initiatives and interagency work. The youth workers also took a critical educational approach to youth work by making young people aware of how social structures and systems in society, such as poverty and discrimination, could negatively impact on their lives. The youth workers aimed to provide young people with the agency to navigate, overcome and change these oppressive social structures and systems. However, they admitted this was challenging due to the high needs of the young people.

4.3.1.1 Perspective on youth offending

The research participants had a shared perspective on how they viewed young people and their offending behaviour. They believed that the young people should not be solely held responsible for their behaviour, but that their social circumstances also needed to be taken into consideration. Aidan's perspective was that young people would reduce their antisocial behaviour if positive changes were made to their personal circumstances.

> *So, my personal interpretation or whatever would be, you know, young people will reduce their offending if their personal circumstances are improved* (Aidan).

Many of the research participants explained how the social environment had a major impact on the behaviour of young people and how they should not be held solely the responsible for their behaviour,

> *Like you are putting forward that idea that okay, you are in this situation, but you didn't necessarily create this situation. Your offending behaviour is not just down to your individual choices, it's affected by your surroundings, your environment* (Mel).

The research participants believed a holistic youth work approach is important, that considered both the young person and their social environment:

> *But I feel like on all levels. So, on the individual level, on a community level and on a societal level. I think for me the youth work approach it is all levels at all times* (Aidan).

Gary outlined a range of social and environmental factors that impacted on the lives of young people that were not caused by their personal actions, and that they should not be held responsible for.

> *If they are coming from a community experiencing poverty, you know, that's not that individual's fault, that's not the communities fault let's say, there is a history of maybe, I don't know, government policies that have led to that as well, be it the housing policy, be it employment or health policies, you know, that are impacting on a community* (Gary).

Una highlighted how many of the Gardaí in the community had no understanding of the level of poverty and inequality experienced by the young people.

> *The amount of guards that had absolutely no idea of the kind of areas they were put to work in, the kind of poverty, inequality that those community and whatever amount of young people and their families individually, the communities on a whole, were dealing with it. It just wasn't spoken about (Una).*

The research participants were aware that the social conditions the young people were living in had a major influence on their behaviour and this informed how they worked with the young people, analysed and understood the issue of anti-social and offending behaviour.

4.3.1.2 An understanding of behaviour

The research participants analysed the causes behind the young people's antisocial and criminal behaviour. They believed that their social circumstances caused underlying issues and frustrations which were the root cause of their negative behaviour. This understanding contributed to the existing commitment to working with the young people even when it became quite challenging. The research participants understood that there could be an issue that occurred at home on a particular day that impacted on the young person's behaviour, this understanding separated the behaviour from the young person, embedded in a curiosity that avoided judgement,

> *Recognising where they are coming from and that, you know, behaviour on a day might reflect something going on at home and not the young person* (Gary)**.**

Through Sophia's analysis, she found that on many occasions' trauma during childhood development was the underlying cause of negative behaviours, as the behaviours were a way to protect them from any further harm:

> *'The acting out and behaviours, they are the source of trauma in, you know, the early years of ongoing trauma. I strongly believe that it's just the coping skills they had to come up with to kind of block it and survive it* (Sophia).

Una recalls on how a member of An Garda Síochána began to understand how the disadvantaged social circumstances of one young person contributed to their involvement in criminal behaviour:

> *And one guard said to me, oh do you know what like I can kind of see, one day I arrested that young fellow's Mam […] she had a bottle of vodka in her hand. He said, but I do think she was on drugs as well and that was 10 o'clock in the morning, he said, and we had to bring her in, whatever we had to do, and he goes, I keep thinking of that young fellow often. I think oh God if that's what he is growing up in* (Una).

This understanding of underlying issues gave the research participants an acceptance of negative behaviour and a willingness to work with the young people irrespective of their conduct:

> Y*ou understand that you are in this project because of ongoing issues and therefore we don't expect you to be absolutely perfect or your behaviour to be brilliant, but we will be there to pick you back up from the floor* (Mel).

Many of the research participants tried to retain the young people in the project no matter what incident had occurred,

> *There was still a no bar policy. Like it was like if you are willing to sit down and work through what happened with us properly, we will do that. There was no problem. Regardless of what it was* (Una)**.**

The research participants understood that underlying issues and social circumstances that drove these behaviours: this motivated them to work with young people unconditionally and in good faith.

4.3.1.3 Community responses

The research participants believed that the young people were often negatively stereotyped in their communities. To address this issue, they got the young people to get involved in community initiatives to improve the area and change the negative perceptions imposed by the community on these young people:

> *Any projects that we did we tried to make them community-based…. it's the opportunity for the young people to put themselves out there in a positive light, which can be very difficult for a lot of young people like that* (Richard).

Mel developed programmes that addressed community issues that impacted on young people such as underage gambling,

> *We did this whole community responsibility around gambling. You know, it wasn't to do with crime if you know what I mean, but it was a community issue that suddenly it was okay for 13/14-year-olds to be in a Betting Shop when they shouldn't have been, you know (Mel).*

The research participants found that one of the main differences between young people in a YDP and young people in a generic youth project was how they were negatively perceived by the community. Pat delivered community-based programmes to overcome these negative perceptions, and gave young people the opportunity to contribute positively to the community and shift those negative perceptions:

> *Getting the young people involved in the community. Getting them, active in their community, getting them contributing into the community and that would have a dramatic effect in a very short space of time on how the community will view, you*

know, the young lads for example, or young people that they might have been labelled before in the past (Pat).

The research participants were aware that working only with the individual young people was not enough to address to meet the needs of the young people and address the issue of youth crime, they needed to make an impact on a community level.

4.3.1.4 Interagency approach

All the research participants explained the importance of working in partnership with other professionals. They viewed this as an essential part of their role, as it provided a more comprehensive service to meet the needs of the young people. Many of the research participants collaborated with the local schools to enhance the young people's participation in education:

We would look at supporting them in education and linking in with the school. Seeing how we can support better school engagement (Pat).

The research participants also highlighted the importance of building professional relationships within the community:

The relationship that you would have with a specific Education Welfare Officer or a Social Worker or the lady down in the Family Resource Centre or the local crèche. You know, that can be very undervalued, but I think in the project. I think it's the personal touch of that in a project and that community level that is really important, you know (Richard).

The research participants believed by sharing the resources of the various services in the community, it more effectively addressed the high needs experienced by the young people.

So, I was aware of that, so we tried to work with family support, with the guards, together, to kind of maximise the impacts on all the areas. So, address all the areas of, you know, what was needed for the young person (Sophia).

It also provided a wider range of professional expertise that the YDP staff did not have,

We try and link in with services as much as possible. Still, there are gaps there between different services […] just being able to have a relationship with another service to even just, it just smooths things over (Gary).

The research participants admitted that there were limitations to their own professional expertise, and they needed to partner with other services to meet the needs of the young people,

> *If I feel the young person needs to be referred onto a community drugs worker, being able to sit with the young person and say look you are talking to me about x, y and z of drugs and I actually don't know how to help you, but here's a service that can, would you be open to looking into this service* (Richard).

The research participants found that working in collaboration with other professionals allowed them to more adequately meet the needs of the young people they were working with.

4.3.1.5 Raising the conscious awareness of young people on their social circumstances

The research participants believed that the young people's social disadvantage had a major impact on all aspects of their lives such as education, employment and other potential opportunities. They believed that the young people needed to be consciously aware of their social and economic circumstances, as it would allow them to navigate, overcome and possibly make changes to these social barriers. Mel supported young people to critically analyse their personal circumstance:

> *It is absolutely essential that there is work done on the young people in understanding their socio-economic disadvantage and that the project is involved in the fight for changing that (Mel).*

The research participants supported young people to analyse social issues from a broader social perspective,

> *Develop an analysis and a consciousness for young people around all of those issues* (Mel).

Aidan not only looked at the young people's personal behaviour in school but also encouraged young people to be aware of the broader educational system and the impact this had on their education:

> *You can work on the messing and improving kind of behaviour and figuring some stuff out, but you can also help to create an analysis for that young person around the bigger school system. (Aidan)*

The research participants also found supporting young people to make social change in their communities a real challenge, as their immediate needs were so high:

> *Me talking about, you know changing something in the community is so far removed from their needs at that moment (Gary).*

Many of the research participants also found that young people getting their voices heard on issues that affect them in society was a difficult due to the lack of opportunity to provide the structures or a suitable a public platform for them to speak about social issues:

> *Because I think from what I experienced with the Youth Diversion young people are not participants in those collective spaces where the young people have a voice. You know, initiate young voices and things like that. It's just... it's been very difficult I think for young people in the kind of chaos that a lot of young people kind of live in, to really participate in some of those kind of spaces. I mean that's a failing on youth workers or diversion Project in some way but, you know, it's a reality I kind of guess* (Aidan).

The youth workers predominately concentrated on the personal liberation of the young people, as they found it too challenging to empower them to bring about social change in their communities and society.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Providing safe, attractive and welcoming spaces for young people

This theme was developed by the researcher, as the research participants continually tried to create the ideal conditions in the project for young people to feel comfortable, free to express themselves and actively participate in the programmes. This was achieved by the research participants focusing on building positive and trusting relationships with young people and creating a safe environment for the young people in the project. They also worked in partnership with the young people and were responsive to their needs and concerns. They also made the projects attractive by creating programmes based on their hobbies and interests. Within this theme, five sub-themes are presented in this section to outline how they created safe, attractive and welcoming spaces in the projects.

4.3.2.1 Creating a safe space for young people

The majority of the research participants emphasised the importance of creating an environment where young people felt comfortable to openly speak their minds and express

their identity. Sophia outlined how she removed a young person from one group to another to allow her to be her authentic self rather than having to portray a tough image of herself,

> *When we removed her from that group and took her where nobody knew her, oh my God, she completely changed. It's like she was so relieved actually, she said to me that she doesn't have to do that anymore because it was all an act* (Sophia).

The research participants also noticed that the young people felt free to reveal truer aspects of their character when away from their community environment rather than the tough exterior they felt they had to display in their own communities. Based on this knowledge, the research participants regularly organised trips and overnight stays out of the community. Mel described how the young people expressed other aspects of their personality on trips away:

> *The boys got to identify some of the nicer parts of their lives…one of the other lads was like a super footballer and, you know, he identified in all of that, and the other fellow went back to his little bit of his acting career and what he wanted out of that and stuff. They got to concentrate on those sides of their lives rather than the lads who were selling drugs on the street (Mel).*

The security of this safe space created by the research participants allowed the young people to openly express their identity with confidence. Gary used the outdoor environment to create a comfortable space for young people to be relaxed and more open. He explained,

> *Like the outdoors can be very relaxing and promote, you know, a space of calmness and joy even, and sometimes it's just a change in the environment* (Gary).

The research participants also highlighted the importance of a young person finding a space where there was someone (such as a youth justice worker) to believe in them. The importance of this space was outlined by Ann:

> *If a young person hates school, but if they have somewhere in the evening that they can go to with somebody, it doesn't matter what it is, but they have an hour with somebody that does believe in them* (Ann).

The research participants placed a lot of time and attention in creating a safe space so that young people felt free to open-up in a positive, non-judgmental environment:

Give the young people the space where they can actually talk about their involvement in criminal behaviour without feeling that you are going to pick up the phone and rat on them, do you know what I mean? (Mel).

The research participants also wanted to create an environment where the young people felt free to talk about the issues and concerns that burdened them:

It's a chat. It's a conversation. It's a safe space for them to talk about what they want (Sophia).

Ann explained by creating the right conditions in the project it would allow a space for something to happen:

If they go away feeling heard or if they have had that space in their head to reflect, then I suppose you are opening up space for other stuff to happen. It's like creating a space for it to happen (Ann).

These safe spaces created by the youth workers created the ideal conditions to empower young people and enhance their personal, social and moral development.

4.3.2.2 Building positive relationships with young people

Building positive relationships with the young people created an environment of trust and openness in the project. Pat believed every interaction with a young person was important as it contributed to building the relationship:

With us it's everything you do. It's you know a wave when you see them passing, that to us is part of the intervention because that's all building up that relationship (Pat).

Sophia had developed many strategies to build relationships that were based on the young people's interests. She found she was able to build strong relationships with the young people particularly during excursions:

We done … outdoor education centres, and they love that as well and that's a game-changer again with building the relationship. We are best buddies after that usually (Sophia).

The building of the relationship overtime was cited as the main reason young people continued to attend the project. The relationship created a connection that enhanced the young people's participation and engagement in the programmes. The research participants

noticed when the relationships were established the young people would start opening up to them, sharing their thoughts and reflections, as conveyed by Gary:

> *Having a good relationship, they might be more open to expressing something. Or, you know, maybe more open to reflecting on something (Gary).*

Similarly, Ann believed that when young people were at ease, they were willing to have a more open conversation:

> *Because, again, with all the best programmes and with all the best plans, if a young person doesn't feel comfortable, you can't really talk, then no, it's not going to work. So that is important* (Ann).

Building positive relationships with young people was a central part of cultivating trust in the project and connection with the youth workers.

4.3.2.3 Working in partnership with young people.

The research participants emphasised the importance of working with young people collaboratively. While trying to achieve positive outcomes, the research participants were always mindful to achieve this in partnership with the young people:

> *I have to be careful as well that I'm working with them where they are at and not where I want them to be* (Ann).

The research participants also found there was a pressure to complete programmes even when the young people no longer wanted to complete the programme. Una recalled a funded programme (involving building electronic model cars) that resulted in the partnership with the young people becoming compromised:

> *They soon copped on this isn't about collaboration anymore, they need to get this done. They need to finish these cars, and they need to put a report in to say these cars are finished* (Una).

The requirement to complete the programme became the main goal and the alliance with the young people got distorted. This conflicted with the partnership principle of youth work and negatively impacted on the young people's participation in the programme.

4.3.2.4 Responding to the immediate needs and concerns of young people.

The research participants often responded to immediate needs and concerns of the young people over the planned programme or session for that day. The research participants allowed for this flexibility in the planning of their programmes and did not stick rigidly to the standardised curriculum:

> *You know, if you set out to do a drug awareness programme and there are lads coming in and, you know, there's a lot more going on for them, you have to kind of respond to that as well {…} you plan as best as you can and you respond to what's going on at the time* (Gary).

The research participants often responded to issues faced by young people in the moment and set aside planned programmes. This was articulated by Sophia:

> *Sometimes it's hard to use the whole complete programme for twelve sessions because you might have a planned session, okay we do today, I don't know, anger management, and the young person bursts through the door, upset or I don't know, something happened. So, we just put back everything on the side and we talk* (Sophia).

In this scenario, Sophia demonstrated the importance of flexibility and responding to the young people. Richard explained how responding to the young people can take precedence over the goals set within the individual case plan for that young person:

> *So, yeah, I suppose for me it's just kind of about sometimes the goal is never met. It's not achieved. But the young person has led the sessions because there is other stuff going on for that young person at that time* (Richard).

This approach places a priority on the needs of the young people, as the research participants place the young person's concerns over their own planned agenda. This approach creates a welcoming and attractive environment for the young people, as they know the youth workers will respond to their needs and concerns.

4.3.2.5 Designing programmes based on the interests of young people

The research participants developed programmes that appealed to the young people because they were based on their interests. For example, Aidan states:

When we see a young person for the first time, we kind of have a good enough kind of open chat about predominantly where their interests are… with a view to trying to identify activities that we could maybe do with them (Aidan).

The programmes and activities often responded to the current interests of the young people, as well as issues in the community such as appropriately looking after horses:

Unfortunately, as much as actually, it wasn't in any bad way, they just didn't know how to take care of them properly. So, we did a number of horse programmes. So again, they were weeks of things that we thought out, that we planned out, you know. So, we did a number of horse programmes…But it was very real for what was going on for them in their life (Una).

This focus on developing programmes based on their interests was effective in enticing the young people into the project. The research participants also took into consideration both the interests and the criminogenic needs of the young people.

So, if we just did programmes that were based around their interests, we might not necessarily end up hitting that aim of reducing the risk of offending behaviour (Pat).

This approach shows how reducing crime was taken into consideration alongside the interests of the young people. Una also explained that the successful programmes were more relevant for the young people, such as a bike maintenance programme in response to an up rise in bike crime:

Yeah, and that was what was going on for young people at the time and it was very relevant to them (Una).

This programme also emphasises how the agenda of reducing crime and the interests of the young people were used to develop appealing programmes for young people.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Enabling young people to find direction and take positive decisions, opportunities and actions

This theme builds on the groundwork of the previous theme, in which the young people feel safe to open-up and discuss their lives with the youth workers. Through these honest discussions the young people find clarity and direction in their lives, gain peace of mind, question their attitudes and beliefs and make more informed decisions in their lives. The young people are also made aware of opportunities and possibilities available to them

in their lives, particularly for certain young people who have come to a point in their lives in which they are ready to make positive changes.

4.3.3.1 Processing issues to gain clarity and direction

The research participants provided time and space to the young people to process the various issues on their mind:

> *There is probably a lot of stuff to figure out. So, you know, I suppose they have to work through, and this is what I have learned I suppose that it's just listening and patience* (Ann).

This time to talk to the YJWs allowed the young people to talk through their feelings and unburden themselves from all the issues that occupied their mind.

> *I need to give that space to the young person to process emotions, to offload it, and this is the most important thing (Sophia).*

The research participants believed they needed to process all the issues that occupied their mind before the young person could gain clarity on what they wanted in their lives.

> *Their head is full of everything that's wrong… the process is about getting underneath that and allowing them, and it takes a bit of space and time for them to say, well, what is it that I do want, you know, what is it that I am interested in* (Ann).

Participants also outlined the tension that occurred when there was a pressure to achieve objectives within a set time frame rather than allowing time for the young people to work out what they want before developing a goal and taking action:

> *That's where I think the struggle is coming in sometimes. There's no focus to what we are doing and that's okay because that thing will arise with time, it has to be driven by the young person* (Gary).

This highlighted the importance placed on providing time to allow the young people to work through their thought processes to gain clarity and direction in their lives.

4.3.3.2 Challenging antisocial attitudes and beliefs

The research participants used conversations to challenge negative attitudes and beliefs. The conversations occurred both spontaneously in the moment and planned based on previous observations, the youth worker discussed negative attitudes or beliefs held by

the young people. The conversations occurred in a constructive manner that sometimes resembled a fun debate and other times a nonjudgemental curious discussion. The research participants explained how using this collaborative style to questioning young people was useful as it did not come across as being too authoritarian:

> *There are ways of challenging them and there are ways, you know, making them think about their choices and their decisions like without being so like school teachery* (Sarah).

Many of the research participants questioned the self-defeating beliefs of the young people and challenged them to see the possibilities and opportunities that were available to them. Mel described how she challenged a young person that had a self-defeating attitude:

> *I am tired of the constant, I live in a ghetto, everyone's a criminal, everybody's life is messed up and I am like, no, no, you know. It is there, but there are other options there too (Mel).*

The research participants also outlined how they had planned certain conversations to initiate positive change. Richard used music to confront negative attitudes on gender inequality by analysing the lyrics in songs enjoyed by the young person:

> *If there was a lot of kind of sexist attitudes within a song and that was maybe one of the interventions is how the young person actually speaks to females.* (Richard)

The research participants also used opportunities that arose naturally in conversation to debate antisocial attitudes. Una gave an example of this when young people suggested stealing bicycles on one of their outings. She remained non-judgmental and open to discussing the topic which allowed the young people to learn from the conversations:

> *So, it ended up in a really good conversation around, but they didn't lock that so I can take it…If you kind of went, no, that's disgraceful and don't be talking about bikes without locks, that would have been the end of the conversation. You know, rather than bringing in what we were talking about then, in relation to cultures, areas, class. They didn't know that particularly but that's what we were talking about, do you know what I mean?* (Una).

The research participants engaged young people in conversations that created opportunities for the research participants to challenge their attitudes and beliefs. This supported the young people to question their held beliefs and view them from different perspectives.

4.3.3.3 Enabling positive decision making in life

The research participants aimed to empower young people to make positive decisions in their lives. Ann aimed to stimulate young people to realise they have the power to control their own lives:

> *I suppose taking responsibility but realising that they have the power within themselves to make an impact, to create the life that they want to live (Ann).*

They focused on empowering young people to make their own positive decisions. The research participants were mentors for young people willing to discuss arising issues faced by the young people. Pat acted like a mentor to support young people to make informed decisions:

> *That whole angel on the shoulder side comes out on this because instead of just going, well you can't go out drinking on Saturday night, that's illegal…. You know, you have that option then to explore that one thing further and I suppose you are not making the decision for them. You are encouraging them to come to the conclusion themselves (Pat).*

The research participants believed the young people would make more sustainable changes in their lives if they came to the decision themselves, rather than being told what to do.

4.3.3.4 Aware of opportunities in life

Several of the research participants aimed to raise the young people's awareness of the possibilities available to them in their lives. Many of the young people were described as having quite a limited perspective of the world, so raising their awareness of opportunities provided them with more options in their life:

> *You want them to open their eyes up a little bit to the world out there because they might have a very truncated view because of their family dynamics or community dynamics* (Gary).

The research participants also made them aware of possible employment and educational paths they could choose in their life*:*

*Giving them the opportunity to think Jesus, yeah, maybe I could do that. Like us all, you know, we can only achieve in life what we feel is possible or what we know (Ann)***.**

Making young people aware of possible avenues they can take in life allowed them to choose something they were interested rather than choosing the only thing they know about,

We always say about the girls is that they want to be either usually hairdressers or childcare workers and again, some of them might genuinely want to be hairdressers or childcare workers but we have a strong feeling from our experience over the years is that it's often they don't know what else to do (Ann).

The research participants found that by raising their awareness of possibilities in life the young people could find a path in life they are really interested in, promoting concepts of equality and challenging stereotypes.

4.3.3.5 Role Models

The research participants realised the importance of the young people having a positive role model in their lives. Sarah strove to keep young people on the right track in life:

So, I think it's important to have a positive adult in their lives. Someone to keep them on the right path or someone to keep you focused on challenging your behaviour as well and that's what we try to do in the project (Sarah).

The research participants outlined that a positive male role model was important for many of the young people in the projects, as they come from a single parent household where do not experience having a father figure in the home.

I do feel that a lot of them in our project or in (project location) the majority of referrals are male and the majority of them don't have a father figure or their father is not involved with them or they don't see him or they only see him every so often. So, I really feel that that's something that's not explored enough, is the lack of a male role model in their lives. (Ann)

Participants emphasised how many of the young people in the YDPs grow up with no positive role model in their lives and having a positive adult in their lives was important.

Those young people, as you know yourself as well, they usually don't have many positives role models and positive good adult who would be willing to listen to them.

90% of them come in from difficult homes and they have difficulties within their childhood and things, you know. So, I think even that modelling of positive and good adult for them, I think it makes a difference (Sophia).

Many of the research participants found that the Gardaí acted as role models to the young people even though they portrayed that they disliked the Gardaí.

I think it's beneficial because young people, while they will all say how much they hate the guards, they actually really love if they are getting one to one attention from a Garda, they love it. They really do love it. And I suppose that is kind of a recognition in a nice way where they are getting to know the guard and they might be playing pool with them, but it makes them feel 10ft tall. So, there's definitely a benefit to that as well (Ann).

The research participants create many opportunities so the young people can interact with positive role models,

Another way is: I suppose intergenerational projects are good. Being interested in these and with varying degrees of success, I have tried to set different things up, you know, that idea of the older wiser man that maybe has a skill to share but also has time and has a wisdom, that's important. So, things like that are good or you know maybe that will happen in their workplace or with a teacher at school. (Ann)

The research participants availed of a range of opportunities for young people to interact with positive role models in the project, as they realised the positive impact it had on the young people.

4.3.3.6 Ready for change from a life of crime

One of the key conditions for personal change to occur was readiness on the part of the young person. The research participants understood that change could not be imposed on young people and if change was to happen ethically and meaningfully, it had to come from the young people themselves, they had to be ready for that change. Interestingly the research participants found on numerous occasions that the young people had experienced a major incident that made them question the direction their lives had taken, like a catalyst for change. The death of a friend for a group was common example of this spur to action. Mel explained how the incident made the young people want to make changes in their lives:

It was a shared experience of none of them wanted that life. They were all working and saying come on, there has got to be more. The programme was about making more of your life... The boys were in a place where they were ready to change (Mel).

Sarah was also able to use the distressing incident of the murder of a young person in their community to discourage the young people from going down a similar route in life:

So, you sort of flip it on the coin to sort of try and channel them down another route in life rather than being put down the road [young person's name] went down (Sarah).

Sarah also explained another critical incident which made a young person question the direction he was taking in life:

*What woke him up really was when his family were threatened. You know, he just was like I'm getting away from all this (Sarah)***.**

The young person's new frame of mind allowed Sarah to offer him the opportunity to engage in an employment programme as she knew he was ready to engage with:

He did the employment programme two years ago. Then he got a job…So he got a starting chance with this (Sarah).

Pat outlined the different stages young people can work through in relation to their readiness for change. Some of the young people are still liking the life and do not want to change while others are at a stage when they want to change.

The one that has it, that wants to keep it, you are trying to encourage them and show them the benefits of change. Whereas the other person that does have it but wants to change, they are already at a stage where they want to change (Pat).

All the research participants believed that for the majority of young people, this desire for change also comes with age and maturity:

Yeah, they were that bit older and, yeah, probably criminality wasn't for them anymore. Like this time, the next time they get caught they were going to Mountjoy [a prison in Dublin]. You know, that is where they were at (Mel).

Within that context, all the research participants found the age restriction of 12-17 years counterproductive. The research participants observed that when the young people matured there was potential to make substantial change:

> *Then they are gone from the project because they are 18. Yeah, that's something that we could focus on more or that there's, you know, it naturally happens with age, and then they don't have our support anymore when they could actually make a big change* (Ann).

The readiness for change on the part of the young people often occurred when they matured, however, the age restriction of the YDP hindered the youth workers working with the young people to support this change.

4.3.4 Theme 4: Lack of recognition of youth work as a profession

This theme was crafted by the researcher, as the research participants felt undervalued and frustrated that youth work was not named in policy nor considered in the design of the procedures and guidelines of the YDPs. The governance was deemed one sided and top down: the research participants felt they were only told what to do rather than being consulted with as a professional cohort. They also felt that the reports did not focus on the development of the young people, but focused more on quantitative measures related to crime. They argued that the policy approach took a narrow approach that placed too much responsibility on the young people and failed to consider wider social factors such as poverty and inequality. The DoJ introduced reforms designed to professionalise practice with the aim of making it more effective and efficient. However, this form of professionalisation created tensions for the research participants in their efforts to uphold the values and apply the principles of youth work.

4.3.4.1 The youth work profession not named in policy

The research participants stressed that the youth work profession should be recognised in policy in YDPs. They also felt youth work organisations should be requesting that youth work be recognised as the preferred profession within YDPs, as it has been operating through youth work organisations for such a long time (since 1991) and it is the youth work approach that has been so successful in this setting,

> *So, I think youth work needs to be standing up a little bit more for itself when it comes to youth justice work. I think youth work needs more of a grab on it at this stage (Una).*

This lack of acknowledgment of the youth work profession has made the research participants apprehensive about the safeguarding of the practice into the future. The research participants believed if youth work was named in policy the practice could be protected from forthcoming reforms that may have a negative impact on youth work practice:

> *Unless you have the knowledge and the understanding of youth work and the policy kind of written into kind of back that up, it's difficult to kind of have an argument about resisting some of those changes that you don't feel are positive* (Aidan).

They believed that policy acknowledgement would support youth work organisations in becoming the exclusive provider of YDPs:

> *I would say it does need to come into the policy and into the conversations around it because what we have seen in recent years is projects being given to non-youth work organisations but to organisations that have a social work focus to what they do* (Mel).

The research participants felt the move away from youth work organisations would compromise the distinctive and effective youth work approach to reducing offending in YDPs. Although the IYJS/DoJ did not name youth work in policy, they did not prohibit youth work from being practised either. As outlined by Mel:

> *IYJS never made us work from a particular model. They always allowed us to find the way that suited us to do the work* (Mel).

They agreed there was a freedom to practicing youth work, but it was not promoted by the funders, and this created a challenge to practicing certain aspects of youth work:

> *But on a YDP level, I don't think there are any barriers defined kind of that way. But I absolutely think there is the invisible barrier where there is a lack of support and promotion [for youth work practice].* (Aidan)

This overall lack of recognition of the youth work profession has left the research participants feeling undervalued as professionals, misunderstood and insecure about the future of their practice.

4.3.4.2 Top-down youth justice approach

Many of the research participants found that the changes made to YDPs were imposed upon the youth worker and were carried out in a top-down manner,

> *So, any of the changes that have been made in the eight years that I have been in the project, in all of these, they have all been very top-down. So there has been very poor Youth Worker consultation in kind of any of it..., even when there is huge resistance there isn't even like a recognition of oh maybe this is not the right thing, maybe we will pull back and ease up and do a bit of consultation* (Aidan).

This top-down form of communication left research participants feeling frustrated that their professional opinion was not sought. This was experienced by Una when attending training provided by the IYJS/DoJ,

> *Like I would say 99% of the time I was told what to think and being told what to do and I might as well not have been sitting in the room. So, there wasn't consultation* (Una).

The research participants believed they had professional knowledge and experience that they could contribute to the design and practical use of the procedures in the project. However, the research participants felt that the IYJS/DoJ were not up for discussions or alterations to how the projects operated.

> *If that's what they want [IYJS/DoJ] then that's what we have to give them, and we are not here to discuss* (Ann).

Increasingly the research participants felt their professional opinion was being ignored which led to increased frustration and powerlessness. The research participants felt that their professional knowledge as a practitioner was not recognised,

> *Can you not just listen to the professional expertise here of the services who are here all the time?* (Una).

There was also a feeling from the research participants that their voices needed to be heard on a governance level, as they felt they were excluded from these spaces**:**

> *You need to have a voice at decision-making tables …and a lot of the time youth workers are excluded from those kinds of spaces* (Aidan).

This left research participants feeling that their profession was undervalued and that their

practice was at risk of being compromised by decision makers that had no understanding of the profession of youth work or the reality of practice on the ground in YDPs.

4.3.4.3 Reports not aligned with youth work practice

The research participants found the reporting procedures were not designed with youth work in mind. Several research participants found that what was required in the reports was quite different to the reality of their practice.

> *I always thought that the work on the ground that was done in the Diversion Project was often quite different to the work that you were reporting* (Una).

One of the constraints of the annual plan was the focus on the quantitative measures that examined crime statistics and numbers, rather than the qualitative analysis that focused on the young people.

> *So, you were given the bare bones, the statistics, or numbers or if it was their score on the YLS. You don't write about the person or what the person was about or, you know, what they had been through* (Una).

The research participants argued the reports needed more flexibility to allow youth workers to account for practice they rate:

> *It's very prescriptive in the reports and maybe just a bit more leeway around that to help us include some of the valuable work that we are doing, that maybe is not an actual programme or isn't in the actual programme, but maybe the programme is the vehicle to start a discussion. But it's the ability, our ability, to listen, to actively listen, to encourage, to support that can really get the outcomes* (Ann).

Aidan believed the focus of the reports limited the broader potential of youth work practice, as youth workers had to align their practice with the reporting criteria:

> *So, if the reporting that you are asked to fill in only asks about a,b and c and not d,e and f, then it is normal for a worker in the project to just do a,b and c (Aidan)*.

The limited practices that were held to account in the reports created a disincentive to carry out practices outside of this narrow remit. The research participants also complained that the plans and reports never sought the youth worker's expertise.

It doesn't ever look to the expertise or the professional skills of the worker kind of that much and in that way, you know, I think it sends a message that workers are disposable (Aidan).

This failure to seek the professional expertise of the youth workers may be due to that fact the youth work profession was not recognised by the funder. This left the youth workers feeling that their professional knowledge was not appreciated. Ann felt constrained by the timelines to achieve outcomes within the reporting procedures, as they did not always fit with the readiness of the young people to make changes:

There is a stream of work dictated by external forces that want to report in a certain month… but the non-linear work with young people doesn't reflect that. So, I suppose there is sometimes a pressure between those two that don't always matchup (Ann).

Aidan outlines how the reports short term focus distracted youth workers away from longer term aims such as inequality to address the roots causes of youth offending.

The pressure on workers to meet short term kind of outcomes completely distracts and lose the focus away from the actual causes of the kind of problems like equality and poverty (Aidan).

The research participants felt the reports do not capture the reality of their practice on the ground and the research participants just write the reports in a manner that satisfies the funder.

4.3.4.4 The narrow focus of the risk paradigm

The research participants believed that a young person's social circumstances (such as poverty, discrimination, inequality) could have a significant influence on the likelihood of their involvement in anti-social or criminal behaviour. The research participants complained that the risk paradigm approach was too limited, as it only stressed changing the individual and ignored the social circumstances that contributed to their anti-social/offending behaviour. Una outlined how the policy in YDPs viewed the issue:

The problem is the young person and once we get the young person changed the problem will stop. It doesn't take into account what's going on outside of that (Una).

This individualistic approach to addressing youth crime created a tension with research participants that viewed the issue of crime from a broader social perspective. There was

consensus from the research participants that the risk paradigm placed too much responsibility on the individual young people in the project and did not take into consideration the socio-economic situation they were living in:

> *I think ultimately you are doing a bit of a disservice by essentially responsibilising them for all the problems that kind of come their way* (Aidan).

This failure to consider the wider social factors such as poverty and inequality was evident in the design of the risk assessment:

> *I think in the risk assessment the word inequality or poverty doesn't really exist… I think there's a lot of the GYDP stuff comes down to individual responsibility rather than societal breakdown and societal shortcoming (Mel).*

This narrow approach to reducing offending did not take into consideration the more holistic aspects of youth work practice.

4.3.4.5 Manualised programmes and informal education

The research participants found it challenging to get young people to engage in manualised programmes and found the young people were more engaged with informal conversations.

> *They don't want to come in to do an intervention or a manualised programme. Like if you gave them a list of ten things you are coming in for, manualised programme is probably on the end of it because they get a sense of what that actually is, no, but they want to come in and they want to have a chat, do you know. They want to feel like they are having a chat, a genuine chat* (Richard).

The research participants commented how it is not the programme that is beneficial to the young people but the informal conversations that occur during the programmes.

> *So, I can list, I did ten programmes, but the reality is the benefit of those ten programmes was the informal conversations that you had whilst delivering those kinds of programmes. Not necessarily the programme itself* (Aidan).

The research participants explained how they blended conversations with the short sections of the manualised programmes.

> *I have found this over the years like it's about not even telling them you are doing the programme work really. Do you know? Because the last thing they want to do is*

sitting down bored and oh, school, school. It's about like them informal conversations and maybe sticking in a bit of programme work (Sarah).

The research participants believed that you could not complete the programmes from start to finish but you could use short segments of the programmes, as that approach did not work with the profiles of the young people attending YDPs.

Yeah. Ah we would have dipped in an out of them; Tom and I'm being honest with you it wasn't like here you go; you have to do all this…Yeah. It just didn't work. I mean you know that yourself. And if it did work, you were working with the wrong young people. That's being honest with you (Una).

The youth workers adapted the manualised programmes by blending it with informal conversations and the delivery of short sections of the programme to meet the needs of the young people.

4.3.5 Theme 5: Managing policies and procedures within YDPs

In managing the policies and procedures within YDPs the research participants often developed strategies to ensure their youth work practice aligned with the procedures within YDPs, so youth work practice was not compromised. This allowed them to realise, as fully as possible, the values and principles of youth work practice, such as rationalising how their youth work practice aligned with the agenda of the DoJ. Ensuring trust was maintained when completing formal paperwork with parents. They also accompanied the risk assessment with other assessment that mitigated the limitations of the official risk assessment. The research participants also took steps to manage their own self-care due to the challenging nature of the role. The youth workers sought to to align and reduce the tensions experienced between organisational and occupational forms of professionalism, by integrating youth work values and principles into the YDP procedures.

4.3.5.1 Managing the agenda of the DoJ with youth work practice

The research participants found that their motives for doing the work was different to the DoJ. The DoJ wanted to reduce crime statistics to ensure the safety for Irish society, this approach was perceived by the research participants that the DoJ viewed these targeted young person as a threat to a safe society. Whereas the research participants wanted to reduce offending to improve the lives of the young people. The research participants rationalised their motives with the agenda of the DoJ as it achieved the same outcome:

I was doing it for the young person and DoJ was doing it for the safety of society…So

that's how I managed to join up my values or my principles with continuing to do the job, because fine we wanted the same results, we just wanted them for different reasons (Una).

The research participants were able to bring into line their values by realising both they and the funder wanted the same result—although their motives were for different reasons. The research participants' main motive was to improve the lives of young people, so they did not get involved in crime rather than focusing on reducing crime for the safety of the public. Although, not against this objective it was not their primary focus.

I don't want them to get into trouble because that's better for the community, the reason I don't want them to get into trouble let's say is for themselves and for their quality of life (Gary).

Participants were able to take a youth work approach while also addressing their offending behaviour this equilibrium was maintained by providing an equal level of attention to both agendas:

I think the balance is what you want. I think it needs to be, you are in this because you are involved in criminal behaviour, but you are more than just a criminal. We are going to work with you on the bigger stuff like in your community and in your world (Mel).

The research participants strived for more than merely reducing their offending they wanted to work with them in a holistic way to improve their lives. They believed if they enhanced the young person's social circumstances, they would reduce their risk of anti-social and offending behaviour. Therefore, they were able to align the objective of their youth work practice with the youth justice agenda of the DoJ.

4.3.5.2 Managing the administrative and reporting requirements

The research participants had to ensure their practice met the requirements of the administrative procedures of the DoJ. However, they believed that getting parents to complete a consent form on their first interaction created a formal atmosphere and acted like a barrier to forming a positive relationship:

The reality is you are handing over a very daunting kind of forms the first time you meet somebody, and it sets a certain tone (Aidan).

Many of the research participants were able to overcome this difficulty by introducing the forms after they got to know the parents.

> *We didn't bring the consent forms on the first visit to the family, we never did* (Mel).

The research participants prioritised building trust and relationships with the parents over the immediate signing of the consent form.

> *I know there was talk there about the forms and what you bring with you on the first day and consent form and all that like but that's probably things that we should never do because it's about building a relationship first and foremost* (Ann).

The youth workers were subordinating administrative requirements of initially getting consent to nurture an environment of trust and to build a positive relationship with the parents.

Many of the research participants felt it was difficult to achieve the intended outcomes before the reporting deadlines; however, they overcame this issue by rewording the outcomes in a way that pleased the funders and allowed them to achieve realistic outcomes within the set time period. They worded their outcomes in a more measured manner that did not overstate what was achieved but described accurately how their interventions contributed to reducing offending through minor improvements*:*

> *I suppose it's often maybe about rewording that as an outcome as opposed to getting frustrated by trying to tick off the perfect outcomes. And maybe that comes with experience* (Ann).

Many of the research participants found the level of reporting required in YDPs was excessive and interfered with the service provision to young people. Una explained that other projects stopped working with young people so the reports could be completed in time:

> *It was over the top, compared to the level of work. Like staff shouldn't, no service should be stopping working with young people to do reports (Una).*

Una did not stop her service to complete reports as she felt the progress she made with the young people would be undone:

> *The kind of young people you were working with if you didn't see them for a couple of weeks, honest to God, you would be nearly starting again with them (Una).*

She completed the report by working extra hours and maintained the same service for the young people.

4.3.5.3 Managing the risk paradigm

Many of the research participants explained that the focus on reducing risk factors provided clear targets to address with young people, as working towards lowering these risks could provide clear objectives:

> *I find it focuses my work in terms of creating specific goals for young people in certain areas of their life* (Richard).

Many of the research participants found the introduction of the risk assessment brought youth workers into line with the core focus of reducing offending in the project:

> *I think it made us better youth workers, for that role, for what we were supposed to be doing (Mel).*

The assessment scored risk in eight key areas (also known as criminogenic needs) and youth workers designed interventions based on the highest scoring risk factors. This provided research participants with a guide on where to focus their resources:

> *It gives us the scope to steer the interventions. So, what is the most kind of prevalent needs and it's all based around eight criminogenic needs (Pat).*

The scoring mechanism also provided the research participants with an indication of how much support the young person needed in the project. So, if a young person scored quite high in the risk assessment, they would require more intensive supports (such as contact 2-3 times a week including one-to-one work) whereas if someone scored quite low, they may only require minimal contact (once a week). This guidance supported the research participants to organise their work plan:

> *It categorises high risk or medium risk or low risk and then based on that how much supervision they need* (Sarah).

This focus on risk provided the research participants with a direction to their practice that was well received.

The risk assessment's ability to measure risk and track how it fluctuated was seen by some youth workers as a positive for youth work practice.

> *When we reassess in six months' time we can see, literally based on a numerical figure, that it has come down from 24 to 10 or whichever* (Pat).

This ability to map progress allowed the research participants to assess if their interventions were effective in reducing offending. Youth workers found tracking progress could support them when evaluating if an intervention was having an impact on young people.

> *So, you are able to review that every six months and see what was achieved from the last plan, what wasn't achieved, what else needs to be done, and you do the scoring every six months. Definitely, now it's very focused* (Sarah).

However, others found the tracking of risk as an unreliable indicator of a young person's progression or regression, firstly due to the multifaceted nature of youth crime, and secondly due to the pressure to please the funder.

> *You know, I don't see upping and downing the YLS [risk assessment inventory] as any reflection on the work or the young person necessarily* (Aidan).

Aidan explained that the causes of youth offending were more complex than the risk assessment tool could capture:

> *It goes way beyond is the young person having problems with their teachers (Aidan).*

Gary also described how it was difficult to tell if his interventions had an impact on the young person:

> *I don't know, I think there's a whole multitude of things going on for a young person that like I might have to give a young person an hour to three hours a week. I am sure it plays some part, but it could be the tiniest part in a very bigger picture of that person's life* (Gary).

The research participants found that the risk assessment provided a limited perspective, as it only examined the young people from a negative perspective. Many used their own professional perception of the young person to provide a more holistic view of the young person. To minimise the negativity Richard developed a separate file to document the positive traits of the young person:

> *After filling out that form, which might take half an hour to an hour, I straightway take out a little sheet of paper and write down as many positive things as I can about that young person, because I find I can get into a negative headspace, when you are doing a YLS* (Richard).

Thus, Richard maintained his youth work approach of viewing the young person from a holistic perspective. The research participants also found the risk assessment was not designed to be completed in partnership with the young people, an approach valued in youth work practice. To overcome this problem, Sophia sourced and modified an additional risk assessment so that it could be completed in partnership with the young person:

> *We have another tool to kind of look at the risk factors which are influencing a young person's behaviour. We kind of adapted it a bit, so I can do it with them, because we want to involve them as well. If we are planning, if we are setting the goals for them, it's very important that they are a part of it because that's their life as well* (Sophia).

The research participants also did not allow the risk assessment to dictate their practice but viewed it as a support to their youth work practice. They did not allow the risk assessment to shape and define their youth work practice excessively:

> *So, where I'm at now is that I see it as, you know, one small tool in my general youth work arsenal. Not as the sole defining thing that everything comes through and is defined by* (Aidan).

The research participants demoted the risk assessment from its original prominent position to a supportive role. Richard explained how the risk assessment supplemented his youth work practice.

> *I think you have to bring the general youth work practice to it and then use the YLS [risk assessment] to help you identify other considerations you need to make in the choice of work that you plan on doing with the young people, do you know (Richard).*

The Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) was a fundamental mechanism used by the DoJ to reduce offending in YDPs in which the youth worker utilised for their benefit, but also found constraining to areas of their practice, however, the youth workers endeavoured to find ways to minimize these constraints.

4.3.5.4 Managing the targeted approach

The risk assessment was also used as a screening tool to assess if young people being referred on to YDPs met the required risk threshold. Young people that do not score high enough in the assessment are not considered for inclusion into the project. The research participants found that this targeted approach was beneficial for youth work practice, as it ensured they were working with young people who needed the service the most,

> *I think the risk assessment pulled projects into shape a little bit…. that made a bit of a difference in terms of making sure that the young people who need the service get it* (Mel).

Aidan maintained that one of the fundamental benefits of YDPs was the capacity to provide time and resources to engage the most marginalised young people,

> *It's not even just a strength, but it is one of the defining strengths of Diversion Projects I think is that you have the time and capacity to really focus on the kind of harder to reach young people, you know (Aidan).*

The research participants believed the screening of young people was beneficial to their youth work practice. However, a number of research participants found the targeted approach too restrictive, as it could be difficult to engage young people if their friends (that do not meet the required level of risk) could not accompany them into the project. The use of the risk assessment also took away the autonomy of the youth workers to decide who should get access into the project; this over reliance on the assessment left some feeling frustrated that it took precedence over their professional judgment.

> *There was very little space for your professional opinion. So, if the young person wouldn't fit into this [risk assessment] or this box, and you knew that the young person needed our service, and I felt as the years went on that got significantly reduced* (Una).

They believed a balance was required within the groups and suggested friends of targeted young people should be let into the project to improve engagement and retention levels:

> *So, for example if there's one lad that's come in, and it will happen every couple of months with the new referral or that, they will say can my friends come in as well* (Richard).

Richard devised a strategy to get around this problem by developing a peer relationship programme that allowed the targeted young person to bring their friends into the project:

> *Trying to find ways around that, right... so written into their plan is developing positive peer relations and whatever else, right. So, like actually by allowing them to bring two of their peers into a place that they respect, and they are kind of hosting them and giving them space, do you know what I mean* (Richard).

The high-risk young person hosted their low-risk friends as part of the programme. This enabled Richard to invite other young people in the area into the project and improve engagement of the young people initially selected. Gary also included the friends of targeted young people in the project, even if they did not meet the criteria to get in, as they could have a positive influence on the original participants.

> *It would be a great thing if a fellow came in with a buddy who was a positive influence on him* (Gary).

Gary used his own professional discretion to permit additional young people into the project, as he saw the benefit of their involvement for the overall project, although this was outside of the knowledge of the DoJ. The research participants also highlighted the YLS scores could be manipulated to meet the required threshold for risk to gain access into the project. Ann admits she could be tempted to increase the scores to meet the requirements of the funder to engage young people into the project.

> *If the YLS's are too low then you have management coming to you saying, should they be in the Diversion project, and we are not working with the right people. So, then the temptation then is to beef them up as opposed to take them down. So, on both sides of the equation, you can, yeah, there could be an interest in manipulating them a little bit* (Ann).

The research participants explained that a lot of the young people that attended the YDP were negatively labelled by the community, as they were perceived to be involved in criminal behaviours:

> *The stigma around being involved in a Youth Diversion Project. It's a huge thing, right. And by default, sometimes the workers become the workers that work with the bold boys* (Richard).

The targeted approach of the YDP exacerbated the problem in this case, as it was the only youth work service in the town. Stereotyping can be a problem for participants in YDP projects:

> *Especially projects that don't have generic youth services in the area and they are the only youth service in the area* (Gary).

These negative perceptions from the community are one of the knock-on effects of only targeting young people at most risk of criminal behaviour.

The targeting of young people aged between 12-17 years of age was viewed as a significant constraint in the projects. Most of the research participants found this limited the potential of what could be achieved with these young people. They felt that as young people mature, they are more ready to make significant changes in their lives.

> *That might be the biggest criticism of Youth Diversion Projects is the eighteen rule. They are still only kids…I think we need to keep going with what we are doing in the project up until I would say 24* (Mel).

Mel kept young people in the project over the age of eighteen but kept them out of the official reports so that the funders did not know about them:

> *So, we had quite a number of older young people that we were still working with that we probably weren't keeping on the books anymore (Mel).*

The youth workers used their professional discretion to override standardised procedures to mitigate against negative implication for the young people or that limited their ability to respond to the needs of the young people.

4.3.5.5 Managing self-care in YDPs

The research participants highlighted how they looked after their own self-care to carry out the role. They emphasised how the role in YDPs was challenging and required appropriate supports*:*

> *It's a harder job and, you know, some of the young people in Youth Diversion would have… really complex challenging young people and it needs everyone to really heavily be supported in that* (Mel).

The research participants believed supports around self-care were important to work effectively with young people. Working with young people in distressing situations had an emotional impact on the work:

> *A young person I worked with for four years said really very hurtful things to me. And I was crying for three days (Sophia).*

Sophia emphasised the importance of having supports standardised across YDPs:

> *There should be certain supports there for it. Yeah, because I've seen the breakdowns in workers over the years (Sophia).*

This highlights the emotional impact of the work in YDPs. The research participants developed a range of ways to gain support based on their own initiative. Sophia was able to avail of supports from her co-worker daily:

> *Sometimes when, you know, we have a heavy session I just come out after the session and without revealing the details about just what I talked about, even someone else, to another human being that is just kind of personalised. I just need the contact with someone* (Sophia).

The research participants believed that a high standard of supervision was required across YDPs to support youth workers to carry out their practice. Although Mel herself operated in a broader youth service, she highlighted the lack of support for some of the other youth workers working in stand-alone projects:

> *There are so many of the projects where youth workers get left to carry too much, you know, and I really think the reason we were able to be as strong as we were, was because we weren't alone (Mel).*

Mel outlined the challenging nature of the work in a YDPs and the need for support. Ann felt the provision of supervision was dependent on the various organisations running YDPs:

> *Good supervision I think is something that would be beneficial. I know it probably depends on what organisation you are in and all the rest of it as to the quality of it* (Ann).

The youth worker highlighted the need to look after their own self-care and provide appropriate supervision due the high needs displayed by the young people.

4.3.5.6 Managing the partnership with the JLO

When working in partnership with the Juvenile Liaison Officer (Member of the Garda Síochána) they often had little understanding of the young people's right to voluntary participate in the project. Often the Juvenile Liaison Officer (JLO) instructed the young person to attend the YDPs as part of their caution, implying that participation was mandatory. Youth work practice, on the other hand, values young people having the power to choose to voluntary attend the project. Voluntary participation was also explicitly named within the guideline of YDPs. This was an issue that the research participants responded to in different ways. Aidan resolved any misperceptions around mandatory attendance by talking directly to the young person, rather than questioning the JLO's approach:

> *It's something that we prefer to manage ourselves because they [the JLO] have enough to worry about what was or wasn't said or how it was or wasn't perceived* (Aidan).

This approach seemed to allow the JLO to do his job unchecked while also providing clarity for the young person. Richard took a slightly different approach, asking the JLO to verify if the young person wanted to attend:

> *I would be saying to the JLO to ask them, like if you are going out to them to follow-up, ask him does he want to engage* (Richard).

However, some research participants used the JLO's involvement to enhance engagement in the project. Ann explained that throughout the referral process voluntary participation may not always be made clear, and admitted she was not explicit with this information to enhance the likelihood of young person engaging in the project. This approach also allowed the young person time to experience the project and then to voluntary choose to participate the project.

> *So, yeah, technically speaking, it's completely voluntary no young person has to get involved but over the years there's been a bit of a little grey area at times that you create always with the best interest of the young person* (Ann).

The research participants sometimes used the threat of sanction from the JLO to improve engagement.

> *But, yeah, they can be the hammer if I need them to be the hammer I suppose* (Richard).

This approach brought into question the voluntary nature of the project, given the coercive means used. Sarah interpreted attendance as mandatory, as it was part of their caution from the JLO:

> *Look this is part of your caution or this is part of your plan, to link in with the project. Really, they have to follow it up then if they are not engaging with you after three or four attempts. They have to, you know, call them out on it…Yeah, put the foot down (Sarah).*

Sarah's understanding was that their attendance was a requirement of their caution:

> *The caution is nearly a chance that you are not going to court, you know. It's giving you a chance or whatever. So, you have to really stick to it (Sarah).*

The findings suggest that the nature of the referral procedure and the role of the JLO may influence the application of the voluntary principle of youth work practice in the context of YDPs. But the background of the workers may also be relevant. It appears that the research participants in this study without a qualification in youth work were less likely than those who did possess such a qualification to inform young people of their right not to participate in the project, when initially referred by the JLO. This pattern warrants further study into how youth workers with a qualification in youth work and those with alternative qualifications approach the application of basic youth work principles. However, the small and non-representative sample for the current study means that it is not possible to generalise to the broader contexts of youth justice or youth work services.

4.4 Chapter summary

In the start of this chapter, I begin with a brief introduction to the profiles of the nine research participants, using pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. The profiles offer glimpses into the participants' backgrounds and perspectives.

The first theme was **'**Holistic analysis, perspectives and responses to young people'. This theme highlighted the research participants' understanding of youth offending in the context of their social and economic circumstances.

The second theme 'Providing safe, attractive and welcoming spaces for young people' reflects participants' commitment to creating an environment in which young people felt safe and secure to express their identity. It also reflects the youth centred practice that

took into consideration the needs, interests and concerns of young people in the projects.

The third theme of 'Enabling young people to find direction and take positive decisions, opportunities and actions' captures participants' support for young people to take a positive direction in life. This was achieved by positively influencing attitudes and beliefs and making them aware of opportunities in life.

The fourth theme was 'Lack of recognition of youth work as a profession'. The research participants felt the youth work profession was not recognised in the policy and the procedures in the project and their professional expertise was ignored by the DoJ.

The fifth theme of 'Managing the policies and procedures of YDPs' identified how the research participants managed their practice within the policies and procedures of the project.

In the next chapter, the findings will be discussed using Evetts (2009) model of occupational and organisational discourses of professionalism.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) and considers the possible implications for the profession of youth work. It is clear from the findings detailed in the previous chapter that vibrant youth work practice is happening in YDPs, where the youth workers in this research share a commitment to diverting young people away from a life of crime through a sophisticated and responsive youth work practice. Throughout this chapter examples are provided of the deftness displayed by the youth workers in navigating and negotiating the requirements of the Youth Diversion Projects (YDP), while remaining committed to the young people and their youth work values and principles. The characteristics of the practice identified in the findings align with contemporary youth work approaches internationally (Cooper, 2018): it is a young person centred and relational practice that takes a holistic approach to working with young people and aims to enable and empower through a process of critical dialogue. The youth workers blend both non-formal and informal approaches within their practice, while aiming to adhere to the policy and operational requirements of the YDP and adeptly managing the mandates of the Department of Justice (DoJ) to ensure key values and principles of youth work are not compromised. This highlights their strong commitment to their profession and determination to uphold their practice values. However, the DoJ does not recognise the profession of youth work in policy and as a result does not hold the young person central to their processes and procedures, in the same way a youth worker does. In the YDP guidelines, the DoJ are specifically focused on the reduction of risks associated with offending behaviour (DoJ, 2022) whereas the youth workers focus on the young person in a more holistic way that considers their social circumstance, needs, interests and agency to address their antisocial and offending behaviour. These two contrasting approaches can create areas of misalignment between youth workers' and the DoJ's priorities. However, the resulting tensions are skilfully navigated and negotiated by the youth workers to effectively address the policy requirements while engaging in youth work practice. In contrast, Swirak (2013) explicitly pointed to a distinct model of 'youth justice work' as different from youth work, since the introduction of the reforms by the IYJS /DoJ in 2009. Additionally, Bowden (2006) carried out case studies on the practice carried out in two YDPs. He concluded

> 'that practice in this domain is confronted with a choice between (i) the active engagement in constructing youth discipline through the participation in panoptic network governance; or (ii) the conscious and active contestation and resistance to

> the greater disciplining and surveillance of young people. In the latter form, youth work may survive intact as a distinct practice whilst in the former it has already hybridised and adapted to the emergence of a more punitive social order' (Bowden, 2006, p. 25).

In this research, the findings show that the youth workers use their professional discretion to manage the policies and procedures through the skilful application of youth work practice within YDPs. However occasionally certain procedures are resisted based on the best interests of the young people, such as using their discretion on what young people access the project. This deviates from Bowden's (2006) interpretation that youth work could only be maintained in YDPs if youth workers' resisted the social control agenda or Swirak's (2013) interpretation of the practice in YDPs being a distinct model of youth justice work different from youth work. The youth workers in this research, assert that they practice youth work and not a hybrid form of youth work or an alternative practice. Youth workers can work within the current structures, with the intention of using it to meet the needs of the young people. This approach involves navigating a path between liberation and control, and balancing the needs of the funders, organisations and young people (Bright and Pugh, 2019).

Evetts's (2004, 2005, 2006, 2009) concept of contrasting professional discourses, though not mutually exclusive, namely organisational and occupational (as introduced in the literature review and summarised in Table 20), frame the discussion that follows. Evetts stresses that these two discourses are 'ideal types': neither one can necessarily be seen to apply in the totality of its elements and to the complete exclusion of the other in any specific instance. Faulconbridge and Muzio (2008) use the term 'hybridity' to describe how different aspects of professional discourses can coexist and interact within a profession, with each aspect affecting the other. Evetts herself (2018, p.46) acknowledges that 'organisational and occupational professionalism...might not always be opposites and mutually exclusive but could instead be mutually reinforcing'. They do however rest on different and – at least potentially – competing assumptions and ideas about the nature of professions and the role of professionals.

	Organisational professionalism	Occupational professionalism
1	Discourse of control used increasingly by managers in work organisations.	Discourse constructed within professional groups.
2	Rational legal form of authority.	Collegial authority.
3	Standardised procedures.	Discretion and occupational control of the work.
4	Hierarchical structures of authority and decision making.	Practitioner trust by both clients and employers.
5	Managerialism.	Controls operationalised by practitioners.
6	Accountability and externalised forms of regulation, target setting and performance review.	Professional ethics monitored by institutions and associations.

Table 20: Two different forms of professionalism in knowledge-based work

Source: Evetts (2010, p.11)

Each horizontal line in Evetts's summary table identifies an element or aspect of how professions are envisaged (and by implication should be practised) according to the two alternative discourses. Examining the overall element of 'authority' or 'procedures' in an institution or workplace, according to this approach, involves being alert to the question of whether one discourse seems to dominate or whether both can be found to exercise an influence, in which case there will be possible - even probable - tensions. For the purposes of this study and taking account of the nature of the data that it was practicable to collect and analyse, four elements in Evett's framework are grouped under two broader thematic headings, as listed below.

1. Elements 4 (hierarchies/trust) and 5 (managerial/practitioner controls) are grouped under 'Governance and management'.

2. Elements 3 (standardisation/discretion) and 6 (locus of accountability/regulation/ethical monitoring) are grouped under 'Procedures, practice and judgement'.

Throughout this discussion the dynamic between the elements of the organisational and occupational discourses and their influence on youth work practice will be examined. The first element in Evetts's framework (location of construction of the discourse) and the second (the prevailing form and source of authority) feature less obviously in the findings of this study but will be commented on in the general remarks on the applicability of Evetts's

approach towards the end of the chapter. Each of these groups of elements will be discussed further.

5.2 Governance and management

This section on governance and management reflects elements 4 (hierarchies/trust) and 5 (managerial/practitioner controls) of Evett's framework, across both occupational and organisational dimensions. Underpinning this section is the explicit absence of youth work's recognition, and as a result its role, in YDP policy. Examples of the findings will be presented to discuss this further and interrogated under the areas of the limitations of the accountability measures, top down-decision making and the voice of the youth worker, and the constraints of the risk factor prevention paradigm (RFPP).

5.2.1 Hierarchical governance structure and the voice of the youth worker

As noted, youth work is not named in YDP policy (DoJ, 2022), which has resulted in the research participants in this study expressing concern that youth work is not being recognised for its contributions to the educational processes practiced, and the outcomes achieved in YDPs. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) acknowledge that while it is encouraging and fitting that national policies and strategies adopt a holistic approach to achieving positive outcomes for children and young people, it is equally important to explicitly acknowledge, recognise, and support specific sectors and professional fields, such as youth work (NYCI, 2023). The youth workers in this research felt the profession of youth work needed to be specified in policy. They believed the DoJ had little understanding of youth work practice and warned that if youth work was not valued or named in policy then it would be difficult to counter future reforms that would further constrain youth work practice. As outlined by Aidan:

> *Unless you have the knowledge and the understanding of youth work and the policy, kind of, written into, kind of, back that up, it's difficult to, kind of, have an argument about resisting some of those changes that you don't feel are positive* (Aidan).

Since the establishment of the IYJS in 2006, the state has implemented reforms to YDPs that have impacted on the daily practice of youth work (Swirak, 2016). Swirak (2013) asserted it introduced a new professional field in Ireland: Youth Justice Work. Youth justice work has been named as a unique practice (although not conceptualised), different to youth

work, in the Youth Diversion Project Guidelines, due to its focus on promoting behavioural change and addressing youth offending (CSER, 2003). However, these projects hold considerable importance in the practice of youth work for several reasons such as their focus on young people aged between 12 to 17, utilisation of youth work methods, voluntary participation (albeit with a strong focus on encouraging young people to engage in the projects) and the employment of youth work professionals (O'hAodain, 2010). Additionally, the community-based organisations (CBOs) hosting YDPs are predominantly youth work organisations (Government of Ireland, 2024). The youth workers in this research emphasised that the profession of youth work needs to be recognised for its significant contribution to its work in YDPs and that the youth work sector needs to be more assertive about claiming youth work as a significant factor in the design and success of YDPs.

> *So, I think youth work needs to be standing up a little bit more for itself when it comes to youth justice work. I think youth work needs more of a grab on it at this stage (Una).*

Where there were opportunities for other voices to be heard, a different discourse emerged around the experience in the YPDs, and what the professionals working in these projects were referred to as. At the opening of GYDP conference in 2018, Minister of State, David Stanton commended the work of the '*Youth Workers'* in projects around the country and throughout the conference proceedings there were several references to youth work and the work being carried out by youth workers (Bamber, 2018). An evaluation of Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) was carried out in June 2023 by the Department of Justice. The overall purpose of this evaluation was to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the structure, conduct and impacts of the YDPs. Within this review a section of the literature review was devoted to youth work and youth justice work. When examining the philosophical underpinning of the work, the evaluation concluded that there was a range philosophies including youth work, welfare and justice approaches. Interestingly, the literature review on YDPs summarised that the predominant practice in Youth Diversion Projects as youth work practice (DoJ, 2023). This is commensurate with this research that shows despite the youth work profession not named in policy or recognised for its contribution to the projects, youth work is certainly and evidently practised in these projects. This has resulted in the DoJ fully benefiting from youth work practice within this partnership, without recognising the profession used to achieve the objectives in the YDPs. This has

negative implications for youth work, as it is only views youth work as a mere method rather than a profession (Coburn and Gormally, 2019).

Evetts (2018) described professionalisation as the process of achieving professional status. However, others have pointed out that youth workers do not receive the same level of recognition as their counterparts (Devlin, 2012), and youth work continues to be viewed as a 'sub-profession or para-professional occupation' (Nicholls, 2012, p.104). The failure to recognise the profession of youth work results in a limited understanding of the practice and does not recognise the full capacity of the practice within the project, such as the values informing the practice, creating and maintain trusting relationships with young people and engaging young people in non-formal education and informal learning. The IYJS credited the reforms made to the YDPs for the success and outcomes achieved. According to the IYJS's Progress Report on GYDP Development 2009—2011, which captured the impact of the reform measures, the data gathered suggests that there has been a marked decrease in youth crime. This success has been largely credited to the improved operating systems (IYJS, 2011). Undoubtedly, these reforms have made a positive contribution to the practice but failure to name the profession and practice of youth work gives the impression that any professional could achieve this success provided they attend the training and follow the operational requirements and procedures provided by the Department of Justice (DoJ, 2022). The youth workers felt that their professional expertise was not sought or recognised and left them feeling undervalued.

> *It doesn't ever look to the expertise or the professional skills of the worker, kind of, that much and in that way, you know, I think it sends a message that workers are disposable* (Aidan).

The youth workers in this research were frustrated by their inability to share their practical experiences from the project with the DoJ, not only through the accountability measures as outlined above, but also that they were prevented from contributing to decisions on matters like operating procedures. The youth workers explained that voices were not heard on a governance level.

> *You need to have a voice at decision-making tables …and a lot of the time youth workers are excluded from those kinds of spaces* (Aidan).

This was due to the hierarchical governance structure, which restricted such input. The youth workers felt the approach of the DoJ was directive with no room for consultation.

This form of governance reflected the DoJ's approach made the youth workers feel frustrated that their expertise was not taken into consideration.

> *Can you not just listen to the professional expertise here of the services who are here all the time* (Una).

This form of governance can result in workers, subjected to terms and conditions they have no say in, removed from the decision-making process that often veers away from practices informed by their professional values, personal beliefs, and experiences (Ball, 2003). When strategic policy decisions are made without the inclusion of youth workers, there is a lack of understanding regarding the nature of their work, leading to the marginalisation of its values (de St Croix, 2017), again contributing to further challenges for the profession. These decisions are often made by a select group, leaving little room for the meaningful inclusion of youth work perspectives leaving a 'disjuncture between the informal and process-oriented nature of youth work, and requirements for prescriptive monitoring and evaluation' (de St Croix and Doherty, 2022). The research participants felt that the DoJ were not open to discussions or changes regarding the operation of the projects.

> *If that's what they want [IYJS/DoJ] then that's what we have to give them, and we are not here to discuss* (Ann).

As youth work practice has been identified in this research as the core practice in YDPs, this is worrisome considering that providing opportunities for voice is a core principle of youth work practice. It is concerning that practitioners themselves were not granted opportunities for their voices to be heard and considered in the decision-making processes (Hughes et al., 2014). There is also an apprehensiveness expressed by the youth workers in this research, that directives and future reforms may lead to further constraints to their practice, as they do not have any input into the governance decisions. However, outside of the formal operational structures, another structure does exist that is concerned with practice in the YDPs, but not explicitly focusing on youth work. The new Youth Justice Strategy (DoJ, 2021) outlined the establishment of a new YDP Research & Development Team, which is an amalgamation of the Best Practice Development Team (BPDT) and the Action Research Project team (ARP) under the management of REPPP (Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice). The Best Practice Development Team (BPDT) was formed as a multi-agency initiative consisting of team members from YDPs including Foróige, Crosscare, Youth Work Ireland Galway, and the Independent Network supported by the DoJ

(Restorative Justice, 2024). The intention of the BPDT was to provide a mechanism for workers in YDPs to get their voices heard and to inform policy and practice. Although, this was not the experience of the youth workers in this research, there is evidence of it in the Garda Youth Diversion Office annual report (Garda Youth Diversion Office, 2018) in which the BPDT conducted a literature review on 'Anger and Young People' based on feedback from YJWs on the needs of the young people in their projects. Another example was when surveys were distributed in 2019 and 2021 by the BTDT to gather information on the current practice within YDPs on early interventions. Based on this feedback, and consultation with BPDT, the Department of Justice and the National YDP Advisory Committee introduced early intervention for young people aged 8-11 into the operational requirements and is underpinned by the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 (DoJ, 2021). The BPDT's work was also overseen by the National YDP Advisory Committee, which serves as a platform for collaboration between the Department of Justice, the University of Limerick, An Garda Síochána, and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) on the strategic development of YDPs (Garda Youth Diversion Bureau, 2022). These are useful examples that illustrate some changes that were made in response to specific issues such as anger management or age criteria. However, they do not address the broader issues outlined by the research participants in this research, such as the lack of recognition of the youth work profession in policy. The structure of the governance in YDPs is hierarchical and there are no mechanisms or systems to allow the youth workers to have an influence in the development of YDPs or to gain recognition for the profession of youth work. This results in the discourse of organisational professionalism being the dominant force shaping policies and procedures. For youth workers to get their voices heard and their profession recognised, Corney et al. (2009) suggests organising collectively through a professional association or trade union. This would increase youth workers' power and influence over their working conditions and over the form(s) of professionalism that prevail in their workplaces. Such representative groups may not be welcomed by the state, as already discussed, because the organisational discourse of professionalism is more in line with the state's interests and objectives. The lack of official support and encouragement may be one of the factors that has contributed to the fact that a professional association or trade union for youth workers has not been established in Ireland to date, even though the idea of an association was mooted in the National Youth Work Development Plan (DES 2003).

5.2.2 Limitations of the accountability measures

Through this research a vibrant and responsive youth work has been evidenced in

Youth Diversion Projects. However, without recognising youth work, the accountability measures, namely the standardised reporting tools, do not attempt to capture it either, which highlights a significant limitation. Within the YDP annual reports, the projects were expected to outline, in a tabular format, how each of their intended project activities contributed to specific outcomes related to the reduction of crime (Swirak, 2016). Biesta (2010) proposes that such evidenced based approaches to values-based practices, such as youth work, contain significant deficiencies and don't fully capture the complexity of practice on the ground. This approach has faced criticism for prioritising outcome assessments while neglecting the educational process and professional expertise of practitioners (Brady et al., 2016). As a result, there was a difference between what was happening in the projects and what was being reported on. This discrepancy was highlighted by the research participants.

> *I always thought that the work on the ground that was done in the Diversion Project was often quite different to the work that you were reporting* (Una).

To address this deficiency, the youth workers recommended providing more qualitative sections within the reports to capture these practices as the current system was limited. The failure to do this to date reflects the lack or absence of youth work understanding by the DoJ, particularly in areas of practice not captured within the reporting measures such as the relational, informal and non-linear aspects of youth work practice (Cooper, 2018).

The practice in YDPs is named as youth justice work. However, this research has found the practice in YDPs to be youth work, not a hybridised or another type of practice working with young people. Therefore, as advised in the National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services (2024-2028) it is important youth work is evidenced with 'tools to measure outputs and outcomes' (DCEDIY, 2024, p.13) and this should be applied also in YDPs to fully capture the practice. Procedures and frameworks for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting—both within organisations and between organisations, funders, and policymakers—should be designed to closely reflect the nature of youth work (NYCI, 2023). Accountability measures within YDPs were focused on outcomes and statistics related to the reduction of risk associated with crime (Swirak, 2016), resulting in a limited aspects of the practice being accounted for in the projects. The research participants complained that the reports focused on quantitative measures and not on the young people, as outlined by Una:

> *So, you were given the bare bones, the statistics, or numbers or if it was their score on the YLS. You don't write about the person or what the person was about or, you*

know, what they had been through (Una).

Slovenko and Thompson (2016) argued that youth work is not well-suited to quantitative forms of evaluation and that qualitative approaches are more appropriate. Unsuitable modes of measurement have been criticised for not capturing the true nature of youth work, and further confusing and distorting its meaning (Slovenko and Thompson, 2016). This presents a real concern and would have limiting implications in terms of the future design of policy and procedures, as it will be based on an incomplete, and therefore inaccurate description of what is working and why. This presents a significant constraint for youth work practice and the profession, evident in various iterations from reporting, and respect and value for the professionals.

5.2.3 The constraints of the risk factor prevention paradigm

The policy approach of the DoJ focused on the application of the risk factor prevention paradigm (RFPP). By implementing the RFPP (a form of managerialism) the work could be quantified and measured (Swirak, 2013). Managerialist practices have been criticised in youth work settings as they are seen to be 'alien to youth work's process driven heritage' (Taylor, 2009 in Hampson and Howell, 2018). Through this paradigm the DoJ defined the problem of youth offending through the use of deficit based and individualising explanations of young people (Swirak, 2016). A youth work approach meets a young person where they are at and works from a strengths-based perspective (Devlin and Gunning, 2009). In managerial contexts, youth work is considered to be misunderstood by many funders, and Hampson and Howell (2018) urged caution to managers to be mindful of this and to take care not to undo the pedagogy of the profession. Importantly, however, the completion of the risk assessment in YDPs relies on the professional judgment of the practitioner. Since these tools are deficit-based, they emphasize the negative aspects of an individual's life (Shepherd et al., 2013). Using their professional judgement, the youth workers in this research actively sought to minimise the negativity of the risk assessment and developed methods to ensure a balanced perspective was gained on the young person.

> *After filling out that form, which might take half an hour to an hour, I straightway take out a little sheet of paper and write down as many positive things as I can about that young person, because I find I can get into a negative headspace, when you are doing a YLS* (Richard).

The use of the YLS framed the problem in quantifiable terms, allowing new public management techniques to provide measurable and visible outcomes (McMahon, 2018). Many of the research participants did like this element of it, acknowledging the focus it brought to their practice.

> *I find it focuses my work in terms of creating specific goals for young people in certain areas of their life* (Gary).

However, by reducing the issue of youth offending to individual risk factors, it runs the risk of assuming the logical solution to be addressing each young person's deficits instead of tackling the broader social challenges contributing to such behaviour (Swirak, 2016). O'Mahony, (2009) argues that the prevalence of the RFPP hindered a more comprehensive understanding of how to effectively address offending behaviour, as it ignores the underlying issue of social and economic inequality. The youth workers agreed with this position and argued that the design of the risk assessment overlooked broader social factors, such as poverty and inequality.

> *I think in the risk assessment, the word inequality or poverty doesn't really exist… I think there's a lot of the YDP stuff comes down to individual responsibility rather than societal breakdown and societal shortcoming (Mel).*

The risk paradigm, not recognising the young people's social context, constrained aspects of their practice in this research. However, the youth workers were able to effectively develop strategies to navigate and negotiate the paradigm to align with the values and principles of their youth work practice. The DoJ developed the procedures in YDPs that align with discourses of organisational professionalism. These procedures were designed to efficiently and effectively meet the core objective of reducing risk factors associated with the onset of criminal and antisocial behaviour. Drawing on the sociological theory of professions, Metz (2017) describes this imperative towards effectiveness and efficiency as 'objective rationality'. She argues that the focus on objective rationality can create tensions with youth work values because it reduces practice to the supervision of the individual learning process at the expense of the pedagogy and social context. This is evident in the use of the risk paradigm that is not designed to facilitate the values and principles of youth work and forces youth workers to conform, adapt or reject such procedures. This can create a resistance on the part of the youth worker towards this form of professionalisation. However, youth workers in this research demonstrated professional discretion and an ability to develop

strategies to adapt the risk paradigm in such a way that they could uphold the values and apply the principles of youth work.

5.3 Practice, Procedures and judgement

The youth workers in this research developed their practice based on key youth work values and principles that worked best within the context of YDPs, recognising that descriptions of youth work in its social and educational contexts are numerous and sophisticated (Nicholls, 2012, p. 40). This consisted of a youth centred practice that worked in partnership with young people to empower them, building their capacity for positive action by helping them define and pursue their chosen priorities (D'Arcy, 2016). It used critical youth work to raise awareness of oppressive structures and encouraged young people to overcome and change them, to achieve their goals in life, connecting the lived experience with the social and cultural context of the young people (Young 2006; Batsleer 2010). Their engagement with young people was largely dialogical (Hammond and McArdle, 2023). The values and principles also acted like a guide for the youth workers (Young, 2006; NSETS, 2013) to navigate and negotiate certain procedures within the projects that constrained their practice. Evetts (2012) argues that a shift toward organisational professionalism could undermine traditional occupational professionalism and possibly lead to de-professionalisation. In this context, she emphasises the importance of preserving occupational values like professional judgment and discretion. However, within this research the youth workers were able exercise their professional discretion, driven by their commitment to youth work. This reduced the impact of constraints through the youth workers' ability to adapt to, override or mitigate the standardised procedures in the project, as required. Youth work is an ethical practice committed to young people through the integrity of practitioners committed to the values of youth work (Banks, 2011; Nicholls, 2012; Cooper, 2018). This type of youth work practice effectively achieved the core objective of the project to divert young people away from criminal and anti-social behaviour, while also maintaining the core values and principles of the practice.

The type of youth work practiced is specifically discussed in the first two sections, highlighting a young person-centred approach and the values that informed the practice. The final section is concerned with procedures and judgment, and outline while the youth workers ensured the outcomes of project were met, they used their professional discretion and expertise to adapt, mitigate and resist procedures within YDPs to align with their profession.

5.3.1 A young person-centred approach

The youth workers in this research maintained the principle of a youth centred approach (Jenkinson, 2000; Davies, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Kiely and Meade, 2018) that was committed to a youth led practice that informed the type of programmes, activities and conversations based on the emerging needs, concerns and interests of the young people (Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Ord, 2016). The youth workers also took time to establish trust with the young person through positive professional relationships (Nicholls, 2012) and ensured young people felt safe and comfortable in the project (Young, 2006, Spence, 2008).

The youth workers aimed to create the ideal conditions for young people to enhance their personal and social development. McKinney (2012) found that youth workers tried to establish an environment where the participants felt safe, where their opinions and beliefs were respected, and they were viewed as individuals who could make a positive contribution. Safe spaces provide the freedom to experiment and the opportunity to shed old identities and adopt new ones (Nolas, 2013), and gain knowledge about themselves (Young, 2006). The impact of creating a safe space was emphasised by Sophia when she moved a young person from one group to another as she felt she would be more comfortable in this new group.

> *When we removed her from that group and took her where nobody knew her, oh my God, she completely changed. It's like she was so relieved actually, she said to me that she doesn't have to do that anymore because it was all an act* (Sophia).

The intention of youth work as an informal educational practice is to 'enable young people to develop holistically' (NSETS, 2021) and create 'safe spaces' for young people where they feel welcome and supported in a setting that is non-judgmental and fun (Young, 2006; Spence, 2008; Devlin and Gunning, 2009). Central to youth work practice is the relationship between the youth worker and the young person (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Podd, 2010). Framed within the relationship, the youth workers in this research placed a strong significance on the trust between themselves and the young person, which is reflected in the occupational discourses as outlined by Evetts (2010). These conditions enhanced the success of the interventions, as without, trust, engagement in the programmes would be less effective and outcomes less achievable (Smith, 2001; Kiely and Meade, 2018). Ann highlighted the importance of the creating the right conditions were the young people feel comfortable to meaningfully engage in the programmes and talk to the youth worker.

> *Because, again, with all the best programmes and with all the best plans, if a young*

person doesn't feel comfortable, you can't really talk, then no, it's not going to work. So that is important (Ann).

This aptitude and capacity of youth work practice was identified at the GYDP conference in 2018, where the conference rapporteur praised the 'fluidity of youth work' in balancing programme-based work and the relationship with young people (Bamber, 2018), identifying one of the exemplary strengths of youth work. The research participants outlined how the relationship underpinned their overall practice.

W*ith us it's [the relationship] everything you do. It's you know a wave when you see them passing, that to us is part of the intervention because that's all building up that relationship* (Pat).

Interestingly, the 'relationship' is now being recognised by the DoJ in YDPs through a joint initiative with the University of Limerick, Ireland (University of Limerick, n.d). This recognition of the relationship and other practices associated with youth work have also appeared in the current YDP policy (DoJ, 2022) perhaps reflecting the influence of youth work occupational discourses in YDPs.

5.3.2 Social justice and inequality

The youth workers in this study were highly aware of social injustices experienced by the young people such as inequality, social disadvantage and poverty. This resulted in the youth workers taking action to provide a more holistic approach to the problem of youth offending underpinned by the values of social justice and equality. The youth workers acknowledged the influence of ecological and structural factors on young people.

If they are coming from a community experiencing poverty, you know, that's not that individual's fault, that's not the communities fault, let's say there is a history of maybe, I don't know, government policies that have led to that as well, be it the housing policy, be it employment or health policies, you know, that are impacting on a community (Gary).

Youth workers are advised to go beyond supporting individual change and encompass the broader social environment in which young people live (D'Arcy, 2016). The youth workers aimed to provide interventions to enhance the social circumstances of the young person which included engaging with their family, community and with other

professional services in the community. This was evident with all the research participants working collaboratively with a range of other agencies.

> *So, I was aware of that, so we tried to work with family support, with the guards, together, to kind of maximise the impacts on all the areas. So, address all the areas of, you know, what was needed for the young person* (Sophia).

Maunders (1990 cited in Corney 2004) refers to Max Weber's (1964) conception of 'value-rational' (as opposed to 'instrumental') action and suggests that it is exemplified by how youth workers are driven primarily by core values rather than expectations of specific outcomes. The youth workers' commitment to values of social justice and equality compelled them to take such a holistic approach.

> *Like you are putting forward that idea that okay, you are in this situation, but you didn't necessarily create this situation. Your offending behaviour is not just down to your individual choices, it's affected by your surroundings, your environment* (Mel).

The National Youth Council of Ireland in their 10-year vision for youth work stress the importance of the social and economic context of young people (NYCI, 2023). Youth workers engage with young people within their specific contexts, acknowledging the influence of factors such as place, culture, family, peer groups, community, and society (Nicholls, 2012). Many of the research participants emphasised that the social environment significantly influences young people's behaviour and that they should not be solely held responsible for their actions.

> *"So, my personal interpretation or whatever would be, you know, young people will reduce their offending if their personal circumstances are improved"* (Aidan).

This means that youth work practice must be aware of the personal contexts of young people and, when appropriate, strive to impact them positively (Petkovic and Zentner, 2017). Since the data was collected for this research however, it is important to recognise that a new Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 has been published and has gone further than previous strategies in broadening the work to include working with families, community-based work and the development of approaches to 'encompass the effects of disadvantage and diversity issues' (DoJ, 2021, p. 24), which is welcome.

The youth workers used dialogue with young people due to its ability to respond to the young person in the moment and its egalitarian approach that empowers young people

to voice their perspective and actively engage in a conversation (Coburn and Gormally, 2017; Hammond and McArdle, 2023), aligning to their professional values. True dialogue seeks common ground, with the youth worker enhancing the young person's power and position to create greater equality and support their agency (Young, 2006; Podd, 2010; Nicholls, 2012). This was evident in the collaborative manner taken by the research participants.

> *There are ways of challenging them and there are ways, you know, making them think about their choices and their decisions like without being so like school teachery* (Sarah).

Through this dialogical process the foundation for emancipatory learning is established (Hammond & McArdle, 2023). During conversations the youth workers were conscious of not telling the young people what to do but enabling them to make their own decisions. Youth work becomes meaningful when the young people are motivated to resolve their own problems or driven to take on major challenges in life (Siurala, 2017). The youth workers utilised conversations to support the young people's decision-making processes,

> *That whole angel on the shoulder side comes out on this because instead of just going, well you can't go out drinking on Saturday night, that's illegal…. You know, you have that option then to explore that one thing further and I suppose you are not making the decision for them. You are encouraging them to come to the conclusion themselves (Pat).*

Youth work must support young people to develop their abilities to reflect on their values and analyse the principles that guide their judgment to make informed decision followed by committed actions (Sercombe, 2010). The youth workers tried to positively influence the young people through ethical discussions. According to Young (2006), young people involved in youth work participate in a process of moral reflection that aids in shaping their identity and broadening their ethical outlook. The youth work process, therefore, is committed to helping young people learn from their experiences and make sense of their lives (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Una provided an example of this when, during one of their outings, the young people suggested stealing bicycles.

> *So, it ended up in a really good conversation around, "but they didn't lock that so I can take it"…If you kind of went, no, that's disgraceful and don't be talking about bikes without locks, that would have been the end of the conversation. You know, rather than bringing in what we were talking about then, in relation to cultures,*

areas, class. They didn't know that particularly but that's what we were talking about, do you know what I mean? (Una)

The youth worker's practice was informed by critical social education, through dialogue to raise awareness of the oppressive social structures in society (Batsleer, 2008; Coburn and Gormaly, 2017). Critical youth work emphasises a social justice and social change approach (Coburn and Gormally, 2017). It leverages professional resources to advocate for systemic change and to empower young people to attain their own liberation within society by fostering critical consciousness (Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo, 2013). However, in this study the youth workers felt to get young people engaged in active participation for social change was too challenging due to high needs and lack of participation structures in the project, so the focus remained on raising conscious awareness for their own personal empowerment and liberation.

Me talking about, you know changing something in the community is so far removed from their needs at that moment (Gary).

This experience was shared in research carried out by Scanlon et al. (2011) where critical social education was not always deemed suitable for some young people, as they were often not ready to take on social issues in their communities/society as their own personal issues took precedence. However, the youth workers supported them to understand that some of the challenges they were facing in life were caused by broader social and political factors.

You can work on the messing and improving kind of behaviour and figuring some stuff out, but you can also help to create an analysis for that young person around the bigger school system (Aidan).

Smith (1982) argued that the personal troubles of young people such as unemployment cannot be solved unless they are fully understood as public issues. Dialogue 'links young people's personal agendas with wider social and political agendas and forms the bond between informal learning' (Batsleer, 2008, p.21) which the youth workers did. This awareness of the social circumstances, enabled the young people to understand, navigate and overcome oppressive forces holding them back from achieving what they want in life.

5.3.3 Navigating procedures using professional discretion

On occasion, the youth workers found some procedures constraining to their practice and developed strategies to overcome such constraints, and several examples are discussed in this section including the implementation of the consent form, the intake process, voluntary participation, standardised programmes and setting outcomes. These acts of professional discretion were guided by the values and principle of youth work practice. de St Croix (2013, p.45) highlights in her own research and within other youth work literature, how youth workers' integrity and commitment to their practice can result in acts of resistance where 'their words and actions might be seen as enactments of personal and professional ethical integrity (Banks, 2004; Batsleer, 2008; Cribb, 2011), or as acts of resistance or rebellion (Collinson and Ackroyd, 2005; Thomas and Davis, 2005)'. For example, many of the research participants outlined how they refused to get parents to complete detailed consent forms on their first interactions with parents, as advised in the YDP guidelines, as it acted like a deterrent to establishing trust.

> *We didn't bring the consent forms on the first visit to the family, we never did* (Mel).

Bright and Pugh (2019) encouraged youth workers to align to the profession's purpose rather than merely adhering to state objectives. They encouraged youth workers to engage in "trickery," portraying the trickster as someone who uses covert knowledge to challenge powerful systems and defy conventions. The trickster understands the rules of the game but is prepared to bend them when necessary (Bright and Pugh, 2019).

There were several examples of the use of 'covert knowledge' or 'trickery' amongst the research participants using their professional discretion such as manipulating the scoring system on the risk assessment tool, to warrant a young person's admission into the project, when they deemed them suitable for the project.

> *If the YLSs are too low then you have management coming to you saying, should they be in the Garda project, and we are not working with the right people. So, then the temptation then is to beef them up as opposed to take them down. So, on both sides of the equation, you can, yeah, there could be an interest in manipulating them a little bit* (Ann).

The admission procedure constrained the professional opinion of the youth workers, as outlined by the research participants. One of the positive arguments for targeted youth

work services is that youth work is a form of positive discrimination that provides resources to young people most in need of them (Barrett, 2004). However, many of the youth workers felt that the set criteria (risk assessment score and age requirements) limited their influence to decide who should be admitted into the project. This adherence to the assessment left some feeling frustrated, as it took priority over their professional judgment.

> *There was very little space for your professional opinion. So, if the young person wouldn't fit into this [risk assessment] or this box, and you knew that the young person needed our service, and I felt as the years went on that got significantly reduced* (Una).

However, using their professional discretion, the youth workers developed ways that provided young people access into the project that they deemed suitable based on the needs of the young person, not necessarily captured by the admission criteria. The youth workers were able to subvert the operational requirements of the project (DoJ, 2022) through covert tactics such as manipulating the scoring system on the risk assessment, as previously noted or keeping them off the official books.

> *So, we had quite a number of older young people that we were still working with that we probably weren't keeping on the books anymore [……] That might be the biggest criticism […]I think we need to keep going with what we are doing in the project up until I would say 24* (Mel).

Using their professional discretion, the youth workers intentionally acted in this 'complex and dynamic' (Fusco, 2012, p. 217) manner committing to an ethical youth work practice based on their integrity as a youth worker (Banks, 2011; Cooper, 2018) that prioritised the young people based on their needs rather than the criteria. The extension of the age restriction is something that the DoJ have partially addressed in the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 with the services available to 18- to 24-year-olds on pilot initiatives. This was a significant issue highlighted by the research participants due to the significant potential of working with young people over that age of eighteen.

Another example from this research is the youth workers explained that on occasion the young people were under the impression that their attendance in the YDP was mandatory due to a stipulation of their caution by the Juvenile Liaison Officer. This belief was often presented by other stakeholders. The youth workers predominantly made it clear to the young people that their attendance was voluntary. Instead of questioning the JLO's

approach, Aidan addressed any misunderstandings about mandatory attendance by speaking directly with the young person.

> *It's something that we prefer to manage ourselves because they [the JLO] have enough to worry about what was or wasn't said or how it was or wasn't perceived* (Aidan).

Interestingly, however, one of the youth workers believed that it was a requirement of their caution, explaining that if they did not attend the project there would be negative repercussions from the JLO, while others used this misinformed belief as a way to engage certain young people in the project they believed would not attend otherwise, based on the rationale it was for the best interests of the young person. Regardless of their own understanding, each of the youth workers used their professional discretion as they perceived was required, and always in the best interests of the young person.

> *So, yeah, technically speaking, it's completely voluntary no young person has to get involved but over the years there's been a bit of a little grey area at times that you create always with the best interest of the young person* (Ann).

Corney (2021) outlines a rationale for navigating difficult decisions with young people, grounded in the UNCRC's 'best interests' principle. He emphasises the importance of weighing the overall benefits for all young people, assessing the direct outcomes for those participating in the decision-making process, and considering who will be affected—whether the impact is moral, ethical, legal, political, or developmental. It could be argued that Ann's approach limited the agency of the young person in the short term by not providing clarity on their rights not to engage in the YDP, to create longer term and enduring beneficial impacts of increased agency through opportunities, and personal and social development gained through their involvement in the project. This also provided time for the young people to experience the project, reflect on their experience and make an informed decision as to whether they want to continue to engage in the project. Ann felt this approach prioritised the best interests of the young people, as it maximised the possibility of their engagement in the project, which she felt would be beneficial to their lives. The alternative is to respect the young persons' immediate 'agency' not to attend but possibly thereby increase the likelihood of a reduction in their agency over the long term, through incarceration due to further involvement in crime. Youth work enables young people to engage with "a personally committed participation" rather than just complying with attendance (Kiely and Meade,

2018), based on building a relationship with the young person, which takes time, and the process is one of empowerment and transformation (Podd, 2010; Nicholls, 2012).

Coburn and Gormally (2019) contend that even when youth workers operate in environments where the voluntary participation principle cannot be maintained, youth work methods can still be applied if they remain rooted in values such as equality and social justice. In contrast, Davies (2005) argues that the voluntary principle is so central to youth work that any practice lacking it should not be considered genuine youth work. Nevertheless, Jeffs et al. (2019) suggest that if the core values of youth work are upheld, young people can still gain from the experience, even if the voluntary element is compromised—the focus should be on the nature of the youth work being delivered.

A grey area has emerged in terms of the voluntary participation of young people in YDPs, recognising the role and influence of the police in referring young people. The youth workers seem to have engaged with this in a variety of ways, some being quite explicit while others are more circumspect about ensuring the young person is aware of the right to voluntary participation. The principle of voluntary participation can create ethical dilemmas for youth workers concerning how to support meaningful participation for young people. In responding, some youth workers are drawn towards a 'rights based' approach by clearly informing young people of their right to voluntarily participate from the outset while others lean towards a 'best interest' approach to enhance engagement for the longer-term benefits of the young people.

The official position of the Department of Justice is that attendance is voluntary (DoJ, 2022), but the principle of voluntary participation is inconsistently applied within YDPs due to differing levels of coercive pressure placed on young people by both Youth Justice Workers (YJWs) and JLOs (Swirak, 2013). Some argue that young people should have the freedom to attend or not attend youth work services without negative consequences or incrimination (Coburn and Gormally, 2019). Most of the research participants in this study did make the principle of voluntary participation clear to the young people but some utilised what was presented as an element of 'compulsion' to encourage the initial engagement with the project. Interestingly, the research participants who explicitly mentioned choosing not to highlight the principle of voluntary participation so as to maximise initial engagement, did not have a professionally endorsed qualification in youth work practice. This could have implications for the professionalisation of youth work, with some values and principles less likely to be upheld in circumstances where workers are not professionally trained and educated. This could create a varied and confused practice with youth work understood and

articulated from different perspectives. It could also result in the acceptance in some contexts but not others of policies and procedures that contradict youth work values and principles, unintentionally creating a hybrid youth work practice. However, as noted previously, it is not possible to generalise from the nine participants in this study to the broader YDP service and the pattern discerned here may not be replicated with a larger and representative sample. This study does however suggest that further research is warranted into the educational backgrounds of youth workers in YDPs and the implications for youth work practice.

Some of the research participants did use the threat of the JLO to get the young people to attend the project, applying their professional discretion with the young people too.

> *Look this is part of your caution or this is part of your plan, to link in with the project. Really, they have to follow it up then if they are not engaging with you after three or four attempts. They have to, you know, call them out on it…Yeah, put the foot down (Sarah).*

This could also reflect the influence of organisational discourse on the professional youth worker, perhaps 'co-opting' practices from a justice perspective, reinforced with their title of the 'Youth Justice Worker'. In YDPs, the DoJ does stipulate the requirement of voluntary attendance within the project guidelines (DoJ, 2022). Therefore, the young people should not be misled that their attendance is mandatory but voluntary, which most youth workers in this research did. The annual report by the Garda Youth Diversion Office (2018) reported on the development of a guidelines document named 'Together Stronger: Guidelines for Effective Partnership between Garda Juvenile Liaison Officers and Garda Youth Diversion Projects'. A series of workshops are delivered to JLOs and YJWs based on the document by the YDP Best Practice Development Team. Their goal is to enhance effective collaboration between Garda Juvenile Liaison Officers and Youth Diversion Projects (Garda Youth Diversion Bureau, 2022). This is a positive step to providing a consistent and ethical approach when the JLO and YJWs are working in partnership with young people.

The policy approach adopted by the DoJ also prioritised evidence-based practice and interventionist programmes with young people (Swirak, 2016). In this research, the evidence-based programmes restricted youth workers' ability to address the immediate needs and concerns of young people, as each session was based on a set curriculum. Using

another example, the youth workers used their professional discretion to implement short sections of the programmes rather than running the whole programme consecutively to respond to their immediate needs and concerns. This issue was articulated by Sophia.

> *Sometimes it's hard to use the whole complete programme for twelve sessions because you might have a planned session, okay we do today, I don't know, anger management, and the young person bursts through the door, upset or I don't know, something happened. So, we just put back everything on the side and we talk* (Sophia).

The set curriculum with pre-set objectives is not always appropriate for the dynamic process of youth work (Ord, 2008). Tilsen (2018) cautions that a standardised curriculum-based approach may fail to address the diverse needs of young people and ultimately serves no one effectively. However, the youth workers in this study were able to balance the provision of standardised programmes with the ability to respond to the diverse needs of the young people.

The youth workers believed that working at the same pace as the young people was a fundamental skill of youth work practice (Jeffs and Spence, 2007). However, accountability and target setting are used to control the work settings (Evetts, 2013) which resulted in youth workers in this study, at times, pushing to achieve outcomes and complete programmes rather than meeting the young person on their own terms, which constrained the youth work process. The youth workers often felt an urgency to achieve outcomes within the set time frames of their reporting schedules. The aspiration to achieve outcomes by tight deadlines can shift the power dynamic and is at risk of compromising the partnership between the young person and the youth worker (Swirak, 2013), a dynamic experienced by the youth workers in this study. The youth workers were able to resolve this issue, by rewording the outcomes in a way that was more realistically achievable within the timeline and still met the requirements of the funder, while working at a pace comfortable for the young people. The youth workers were able to navigate this space meeting the requirements of the funder, without compromising their partnership approach to the youth work process.

> *I suppose it's often maybe about rewording that as an outcome as opposed to getting frustrated by trying to tick off the perfect outcomes. And maybe that comes with experience* (Ann).

In this research, strategies are developed in the application of procedures, to align to professional youth work values, these were often carried out covertly outside the

knowledge of the funders. This approach was successful in meeting the needs of young people and sustaining the values and principles of youth work; however, it may limit the professionalisation of youth work, as these strategies are carried out undetected by the DoJ, with no understanding of the imperative of the values and principles of youth work for the practitioner. If these practices were documented, it could be beneficial in advancing professional youth work. Strier and Breshtling (2016), for example, highlights the need to validate practices through empirical research by examining different types of resistance and assessing their effectiveness in promoting the values and goals of the profession. This research could create an avenue for these covert actions to be made more explicit so they can be validated for their effective use in YDPs and thus inform policy and practice.

The youth workers in this study were guided by the values and principles of youth work practice in navigating and making complex decisions within their practice in YDPs. This was achieved in a context in which the Irish state does not recognise or require an official code of ethics for youth work. However, codes of ethical practice can support youth workers in making challenging decisions when working with young people (Corney et al., 2009). The recognition of a code of ethics by the state could provide an explicit rationale and guide to support decisions taken by youth workers within the complex environment of YDPs, while also enhancing the recognition of the values and principles of youth work in youth justice contexts.

5.4 Reflection on the use of Evetts' discourse of professionalism

Evetts (2012) claims that the discourse of organisational professionalism is redefining professionalism and limiting aspects of occupational professionalism such as professional discretion and autonomy. She notes, however, that this ascendency of the organisational discourse of professionalism also brings new opportunities that can also bring benefits to professions despite the challenges (Evetts, 2010).

Evetts's conceptual framework of contrasting discourses of organisational and occupational professionalism has been found useful and relevant in understanding both constraints and opportunities facing youth work in the context of YDPs. For example, the hierarchical approach to the design and implementation of policy and operational procedures in YDP failed to consider the profession of youth work or the youth workers' perspectives. This resulted in certain procedures constraining or creating tension with certain values and principles of youth work such as youth centred, partnership and holistic

approaches to practice. This could appear to have significantly defined the priorities of the role, suggesting a strong influence of the organisational discourse. However, as the youth workers in this research are significantly influenced by the values and principles of youth work practice, occupational discourse is sustained.

The practice evidence in this research was dynamic and ethical, guided by the youth worker's adherence to the values and principles of their profession. This resulted in a situation whereby practices associated with occupational professionalism (such as professional discretion and autonomous deployment of youth work expertise) were used to navigate and negotiate policy and procedures associated with the discourse of organisational professionalism (for example relating to admissions and risk assessment). This ability of the youth workers to navigate and negotiate the policies and procedures in the project ensured that organisational professionalism did not completely dominate or distort their practice.

The discourse of occupational professionalism identified in this research also added depth to the role that included a value-based approach informed by social justice, equality and empowerment to inform the practice and influence how the procedures were utilised and placed them into perspective, providing a broader purpose to the practice rather than just reducing risk factors associated with offending behaviour. Overall, Evetts's framework of professional discourses – and the interaction between them - proved to be an effective tool to interpret the findings of this study, allowing the researcher to make sense of both possibilities and constraints facing youth work practice, and the relationship between them. However, Evetts's conceptualisation of professional discourses has some limitations. One of them may be its inability to account for what drove and sustained the youth workers' commitment to the values and principles of their profession. This notion of a commitment to a set of principles and values is central to the approach of other writers, including Sercombe (2010) who builds on Koehn's (1994) notion of professional ethics and sets out an approach built on two key foundations: a specific definition of youth work and a distinct understanding of what it means to be a profession. From this point of view, a fundamental consideration in the study and practice of any profession is the question of what its practitioners profess: what is the nature of their 'promise or vow'? (Devlin 2012, p. 178). This central ethical question, in combination with insights derived from frameworks such as Evetts's, could provide an avenue to examine how youth work values and principles are sustained in various contexts, including YDPs.

A recommendation of this study is to use the values and principles stated by the youth workers in this study as an ethical framework to facilitate discussions within peer

learning networks using a process of reflective practice. This will be discussed at greater length in the concluding chapter.

5.5 Chapter Summary

The youth work practice evidenced in YDPs in this research, was influenced by the values and principles of professional youth work. The youth workers were guided by the values of social justice, equality and empowerment and the principles of young person-centred practice, voluntary participation, partnership, and informal and non-formal education. The practice was also influenced by a critical form of youth work grounded in dialogue that aimed to raise the awareness of the young people to enable them to overcome oppressive social structures in society and to find a positive direction in life. Many of the youth workers argued that youth work practice should be acknowledged and named by the DoJ in policy. Without youth work being named or recognised, the youth workers complained that their expertise was not valued and or sought in the design or application of the operations in the projects. It also fails to fully capture and reflect what is happening in YDPs. This resulted in the youth workers navigating and negotiating the policy imperatives in the project. The youth workers used their professional discretion to mitigate, adapt and occasionally resist the procedures to meet the needs of the young people and sustain key values and principles of the youth workers practice that they were committed to realising in YDPs.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This research sought to address two key questions: 'What are the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in YDPs? and 'What are the implications for youth work as a profession'? Chapters One and Two, detail the context of YDPs in Ireland and explores youth work and youth justice, nationally and internationally. Chapter Three and Four present the methodology including the research design and research findings, respectively. Chapter Five interrogates these findings in detail, utilising Evetts' model of professional discourse and relevant youth work literature to address the research questions. This final chapter outlines the possibilities in YPDs for youth work, and the benefits of these for each of the stakeholders, namely the Department of Justice (DoJ), the project staff, the community-based organisations (primarily youth work organisations) and particularly the young people involved. The constraints for youth work lie primarily in the fact that it is not specifically recognised in the YDP structure and associated policies and procedures. The full extent of the possibilities can only be realised if youth work is named, recognised and supported within the official policies and procedures of the DoJ. A rationale for this recommendation is outlined in the following sections. Firstly, the creation of a mechanism to address the constraints evidenced in this research could offer enhanced value to YDPs, such as the establishment of peer-learning networks as recommend by the Department of Justice (DoJ, 2023). This would allow the wealth and expertise of the practice that currently exists and remains undocumented in YDPs to be captured. Secondly, if youth workers across the youth work sector in Ireland were to collectively organise themselves and establish a professional association, it would strengthen their ability to gain official recognition for the profession of youth work. This could have a knock-on effect across funded services provided by youth work organisations including YDPs, and might lead to the explicit recognition of youth work in the policies of the DoJ. The professional association could also be used to promote the development, formal recognition and implementation of a code of ethical practice for youth work in Ireland.

6.1 Creating a balance between occupational and organisational professionalism

The discussion in the previous chapter focused on key elements taken from Evetts's (2010) framework of organisational and occupational discourses of professionalism and dealt with them (for the purposes of this study) under the broader headings of 'governance and management' and 'practice, procedures and judgement'. Tensions were found to exist between the two alternative discourses and their approach to the various elements of professionalism. For example, from the point of view of the youth workers, there was an over-emphasis on 'managerial controls' and 'regulation' with limited space for 'practitioner control' and 'ethical monitoring' over practice.

It is not the argument of the researcher, nor would it appear to be the view of the research participants, that what Evetts describes as occupational professionalism should completely dominate practice settings to the exclusion of organisational professionalism. As highlighted in this research, the appropriate amount of regulation within YDPs can support practice by providing clarity and direction, but too much can constrain the professional expertise and autonomy of youth workers and compromise the experience of, and outcomes, for young people. Youth workers need to be able to maintain their professional discretion to make ethical decisions when navigating the diverse and dynamic field within YDPs. The DoJ aims to control the practice in YDPs centrally through policy and operational procedures, with little regard for the professional expertise of youth workers to inform policy or the design of the operational procedures in YDPs. Within this study the youth workers devised various ways to navigate and negotiate their practice, including strategies that adapted, mitigated and even at times possibly overruled certain organisational procedures based on their commitment to the values and principles of youth work practice. These methods were carried out covertly and went undetected and unrecognised by the DoJ. However, providing a space where these could be discussed openly without sanction could enable poor practices to be identified and addressed, valuable practices to be recognised and inform policy and the design and implementation of the operational procedures in YDPs.

One way to enhance the elements of occupational professionalism mentioned earlier ('ethical monitoring' and 'practitioner control') and provide a balance to

organisational professionalism ('managerial control' and 'regulation') is through shared reflective practice for youth workers in YDPs. This could be achieved by creating and supporting peer learning networks, as recommended in the 2023 DoJ evaluation of YDPs. Peer networks are commonly used in community-based social programs to promote consistent delivery and foster peer learning and support. Establishing peer networks could offer additional mutual support, experience sharing and deepen understanding of what is happening in YDPs and better understand what is working well, or not so well, and develop alternative approaches, thus contributing to the evidence base. These peer learning networks can provide a space to support the youth workers navigate the complexities of their practice. This process would enhance practice in YDPs and provide support to youth workers, identify needs, inform policy and operational requirements and be used to problem solve practice-based issues in YDPs. The values and principles professed by youth workers in this study could be used as an ethical framework to facilitate discussions within peer learning networks using a process of reflective practice. This could support youth workers to discuss their practice using the values and principles of youth work as an ethical guide. Codes of ethical practice (CEPs) are based on the core values and principles of a profession and define the ethical standards of the profession. Rannala et al. (2024) proposes that CEPs can be used as a focus for discussion using reflective practice with peer groups to enhance consistency of practice, integrity of the profession and professional consensus to enhance the professional status. Peer learning networks could enhance the elements of occupational professionalism outlined earlier by supporting youth workers to 'ethically monitor' (Evetts, 2010) their practice through identifying needs, sharing practice, problem solving, and creating consensus within their practice. It could also allow more 'practitioner control' (Evetts, 2010) if peer learning networks could provide a set of recommendations on a regular basis to the DoJ to inform policy and operational procedures in YDPs.

6.2 Youth workers collectively organising

In this research it is evident that youth work is not explicitly recognised in policy by the DoJ. To help to address this issue, it is recommended that youth workers in Ireland collectively organise themselves and establish a representative organisation. Corney et al. (2009) view collective action as a viable way to gain recognition for professional status and working conditions. This recognition could result in the profession of youth work influencing the design of the policies and procedures that guide youth work services. To attain this impact, the broader youth work sector needs to advance the recognition of youth work as a profession. If the wider youth work sector was successful in gaining increased recognition

from the state this would have a knock-on impact on all funded projects within the youth work sector including YDPs. Corney et al. (2009) stress that this collective organisation of youth workers can be challenging to establish, as youth work organisations compete for government funding, which undermines long-term collaboration across the youth work sector. The short-term nature of most funding further curtails the development of consistent professional practices, sustained networks, and enduring outcomes that could strengthen the sector collectively over time. Through an organised body of youth workers, further professionalisation could be progressed through the establishment of a professional association and/or the establishment of a youth workers' trade union (Corney et al., 2009). The two approaches of professionalism and trade unionism have different sets of assumptions and orientations. Professional associations can place an emphasis on the quality of the practice and the standard of the service, whereas trade unions can challenge the power and vested interests of employers (Davies, 1988). However, Davies suggests integrating these two approaches to create a comprehensive approach under one representative body (Davies, 1988). Corney et al. (2009) also promote the idea of joining the 'professional' with the 'industrial'. This conception of integrating a professional association with trade unionism in Ireland would certainly be a progressive step towards recognition of the professional status of youth workers as well as enhancing the working conditions of youth workers in Ireland. However, the core issue within this research is the lack of recognition of youth work as a profession in the policies and procedures of YDPs. Therefore, within the Irish context the establishment of a professional association would be paramount to gain recognition for the profession of youth work and when established expand its remit to take on industrial issues faced within the youth work sector such as short-term funding. A professional association could be also used to advance the recognition of a code of ethics by the Irish state. This would allow the values and principles of youth work to be explicitly named and considered in the design of policies and procedures. Cooper (2018) suggests that a code of ethics can contribute to creating appropriate settings for youth work and strengthen public appreciation for the profession's role, skills, and expertise. More important, however, is the explicit commitment that this would make to the young people in the projects, as it would provide a positive youth-centred framework guiding how they are perceived, welcomed and described as participants in the work, thereby enhancing the prospects of a range of positive outcomes for young people (Fusco, 2012).

6.3 Final comments

This research explored the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) in Ireland. The youth workers who participated in this research evidenced a dynamic and professional youth work practice within YDPs that is committed to young people and the values and principles of youth work, although constrained at times by the YDP policies and procedures. A flexible and responsive youth work practice was revealed, where synergies between the occupational and organisational spaces were exploited, tensions navigated, and opportunities pursued. The youth workers displayed a strong commitment to their profession, strengthened by the value of social justice and equality which enabled them to navigate and negotiate the possibilities and constraints inherent in the YDP context. Recommendations are made for the DoJ to recognise the contributions of the youth work profession to YDPs and this recognition to be reflected in their policies and procedures.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Advertisement on Facebook

Invitation to Youth Workers to take part in research on Youth Work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects

My name is Tom Cluskey, I am a Doctoral student in the Department of Social Science, Maynooth University. I am undertaking a research study` under the supervision of Dr Hilary Tierney and Prof Maurice Devlin. The study will focus on the possibilities and constraints for Youth Work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs). I am currently a project leader of a youth service in Dublin. I have previously worked in a Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) for seven years and this experience has motivated me to research this topic.

Is this for you?

If you identify as a youth worker and have worked or are currently working in a GYDP with a minimum of 5 years paid professional youth work experience**,** I would like to invite you to take part in an interview and/or focus group.

*In consideration of the Covid 19 restrictions, this may be online using Microsoft Teams.

The focus of my research

· your knowledge and experience of working in a GYDP

· the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in GYDPs

· the influence of the policies and procedures in GYDPs on your youth work practice

· your knowledge and experience of working directly with young people in GYDPs

If you are interested in taking part or would like to find out more about the study, you can email thomas.cluskey.2020@mumail.ie or phone 0852347137.

Please share this with anyone you think might be interested.

Looking forward to hearing from you!

Appendix 2: Rationale for topics in the interview schedule

1. Topic: Background

The first topic within the interview schedule was based around the research participants' unique personal background. This provided an opportunity to learn about their personal history, previous employments, education, motivations, and pathways into the role of Youth Justice Worker. Understanding their personal background provided insights into the development of their occupational professionalism and how they experienced and perceived the organisational professionalism within YDPs.

2. Topic: Youth Work

The next topic explored how the research participants experienced practising youth work within YDPs. Youth work practice was fundamental within the research question which examined the possibilities and constraints of youth work practice in YDPs. Discussing youth work provided an understanding of how youth work was practiced in the projects, how it was utilised and constrained within these projects.

4.Topic: Policies and Procedures

The policies and procedures within the project were also discussed in the interviews. This was another key area to discuss as professional practice can be heavily influenced by organisational professionalism.

5.Topic: Development of YDPs

Research participants were invited to consider the future of YDPs by asking them if there were any areas for improvement. This allowed the identification of areas that require development in the projects.

Topic: 6 Thoughts and reflections

To close the interview, the research participants were asked if they had anything else to say that had not been said in the interview. This allowed them to provide any further information that they did not get an opportunity to say.

Appendix 3: Rationale for topics in the focus group

The first topic was the promotion of youth work practice, as a lot of the research participants named this as having both possibilities and constraints. In the interviews, they described feeling undervalued as youth work practice was not endorsed in the projects. However, no other practice was promoted (apart from the procedures in the project) therefore they had the freedom to practice youth work. This absence of a named practice warranted further discussion in the focus group.

The second topic was the values that informed the Youth Justice Workers practice. The most frequent named values in the interviews included trust, honesty, and genuineness. I wanted to examine further how values influenced their professionalism.

The third topic was the impact of the administrative procedures in the project. These procedures seemed to provide clarity and direction for youth workers, but also presented various constraints due to their misalignment with youth work practice. This warranted further exploration with the focus group to gain a deeper understanding of this dichotomy.

The fourth topic discussed was the research participants' concern for the broader social issues experienced by the young people, such as poverty and inequality. As YDPs primarily focus on eight individualised risk factors, it was important to explore how the broader social factors deemed important throughout the interviews influenced their practice.
The fifth topic explored the professional relationship Youth Justice Workers had with young people, as this was central to all the research participant's practice. Within the focus group the intention was to further understand the nature of this relationship and how it benefited their practice.

In the sixth topic, I explored was the influence of achieving outcomes within set timelines on practice. Throughout the interviews some research participants found these outcomes rushed the educational process and were often not relevant to the young people. Further discussions in the focus group could provide more clarity around the impact this has on practice.

The seventh topic looked moments in a young person's life when they wanted to make significant changes. These were moments when young people were spurred on to make

positive changes in their lives. This seemed to be an interesting phenomenon that arose across the data that warranted further exploration in the focus groups.

The eight-topic looked at the provision of support for youth workers. Many of the research participants discussed the challenging nature of the work and the lack of support to carry out their role in their interviews.

Finally, the ninth topic examined if Youth Justice Workers were getting their voices heard by the people governing and making decisions about YDPs. Many of the research participants in the interviews felt they had a high level of expertise within YDPs, but they were not being listen to. The impacts of this warranted further discussion.

Appendix 4: Ethical approval

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,
MAYNOOTH, Co. KILDARE, IRELAND

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

03 February 2021

Thomas James Cluskey
Department of Applied Social Studies
Maynooth University

Re: Amendment to application for a Project entitled: What are the constraints and possibilities for youth work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects? (RIS reference SRESC-2020-2409650)

Dear Thomas,

The amendment to the above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 process, expedited review and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 30/06/2022.

Kind Regards,

Dr Carol Barrett
Secretary,
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

C.c. Dr Hilary Tierney, Department of Applied Social Studies
Professor Maurice Devin, Department of Applied Social Studies

Reference Number
SRESC-2021-2426948

Appendix 5: Consent form – interview

Consent Form for Interview

I… ……agree to participate in Thomas Cluskey's research study titled 'What are the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my face to face interview with Thomas Cluskey to be audio recorded/ ☐

If my interview with Thomas Cluskey is online through Microsoft teams, I give permission to be video recorded ☐or only audio recorded ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to submission of Thesis ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I agree for my data, once anonymized, to be retained indefinitely in the IQDA archive ☐

I am willing to be contacted to participate in a focus group. Yes ☐ No ☐

Please provide email address to contact about participation in focus group _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Participant Name in block capitals: _____

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed……. Date…….

Researcher Name in block capitals ……..

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix 5a: Consent form – focus group

Consent Form for Focus group

I……agree to participate in Thomas Cluskey's research study titled 'What are the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects'.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.

☐

I am participating voluntarily.

☐

I give permission for my face to face focus group with Thomas Cluskey to be audio recorded

☐

If my focus group with Thomas Cluskey is online through Microsoft teams, I give permission to be video recorded ☐ **or** only audio recorded ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.

☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to submission of Thesis

☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

☐

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐
I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

I agree for my data, once anonymized, to be retained indefinitely in the IQDA archive
☐

I am willing to be contacted to participate in an Interview. Yes ☐ No ☐

Please provide email address to contact about your participation in an interview

_____

Signed… ……. Date…….

Participant Name in block capitals ……..

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed……. Date…….

Researcher Name in block capitals ……..

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix 6: Information sheet – Interview

Information Sheet for Interview

Purpose of the Study.

My name is Thomas Cluskey, I am a Doctoral student, in the Department of Social Science, Maynooth University. I am currently a project leader of a youth service in Dublin. I have also worked in a Garda Youth Diversion Project for seven years and this experience has motivated me to research this topic. As part of the requirements for a Doctoral Degree, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Hilary Tierney and Prof Maurice Devlin. The study is concerned with the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve an interview no longer than 90 mins. The questions will focus on your experience and knowledge of working in a Garda Youth Diversion Project to get an understanding of the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in GYDP projects. The interview will take place face to face but may take place online if required. The online platform used will be Microsoft Teams. There is also an option to take part in a focus group as well as an interview, if you would like to take part in the focus group a separate information sheet and consent form will be emailed to you.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked to take part in this research because of your experience and knowledge of working as a youth worker in a Garda Youth Diversion Project. This knowledge and experience will support me to address my research question which states, 'What are the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects?'

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in a one to one interview. It is entirely up to you to decide whether you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy of an information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until publication or until the data is anonymised. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships (if any) with Maynooth University. The data you will provide will remain anonymised and you will be given a

pseudonym for the purpose of the research. The research will be written up and presented as a doctoral thesis (summary report), discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences and may be published in scientific Journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request. I will seek permission for secondary use of data from you in the consent form. The purpose for secondary use of data would include the quotation and publication of data extracts or the data to be used for future research projects.

What information will be collected?

I will be asking youth workers how they experienced practising youth work in GYDPs and focusing on specific practices that youth workers feel are fundamental to their practice. I will ask youth workers about their successes and failures when working with indivdual young people and groups in GYDPs. I will also examine the posibilities and constraints of youth work practice when engaing in the practices, tools, programmes and procedures unique to GYDPs to reduce and divert young people away from antisocial and offending behaviour.

I will also ask specific questions around how youth work practice operates in GYDPs examining key principles of youth work such as voluntary participation, working in partnership with the young people as well as the centrality of the relationship within practice. I will also need your contact details such as email address and phone number.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected about you during the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. All hard copy information can be scanned onto the Maynooth University server and all originals will be deleted, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on Maynooth University, PC or servers and will be accessed only by the researcher Thomas Cluskey and Supervisors Dr Hilary Tierney and Prof Maurice Devlin.

We would like to place an anonymised version of the data on the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) so that other researchers may benefit from access to it if you agree to do so. The Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) is a central access point for qualitative social science data generated in or about Ireland. The archive frames the parameters and standards for archiving qualitative data within the Irish research community. We would also like to use the data for secondary purposes such as the presentation of a summary report on the research, the research to be discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences and published in scientific Journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request. I will seek permission for this secondary use of data from you in the consent form provided.

Confidentiality cannot be upheld in certain circumstances this includes if any information is given that may harm the research participant or anybody else, any information related to illegal action and any information that is of concern to the social welfare and protection of young people. It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

What will happen to the information which you give?
All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the Maynooth University server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten.

What will happen to the results?
The research will be written up and with your consent presented as a doctoral thesis discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences, and may be published in scientific Journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request. I will seek permission for this secondary use of data from you in the consent form. The purpose for secondary use of data would include the quotation and publication of data extracts or the data to be used for future research projects. As mentioned above, an anonymised version of the data will be placed in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) so that other researchers may benefit from access to it if you agree to do so.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?
Confidentiality cannot be upheld in certain circumstances this includes if any information is given that may harm the research participant or anybody else, any information related to illegal action and any information that is of concern to the social welfare and protection of young people.

What if there is a problem?
If there is a problem, you can contact me by email thomas.cluskey.2020@mumail.ie and I will aim to resolve any issue. You may also contact my Supervisors Dr Hilary Tierney Hilary.tierney@mu.ie or Prof Maurice Devlin maurice.devlin@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Thomas Cluskey on my mobile 0852347137 or via email thomas.cluskey.2020@mumail.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Appendix 6a: Information sheet – focus group

Information Sheet for Focus group

Purpose of the Study.

My name is Thomas Cluskey, I am a Doctoral student, in the Department of Social Science, Maynooth University. I am currently a Project leader of a Youth Service in Dublin. I have also worked in a Garda Youth Diversion Project for seven years and this experience has motivated me to research this topic.

As part of the requirements for a Doctoral Degree, I am undertaking a research study` under the supervision of Dr Hilary Tierney and Prof Maurice Devlin. The study is concerned with the possibilities and constraints for Youth Workers in Garda Youth Diversion Projects.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve taking part in a focus group no longer than 120 mins. The questions will focus on your experience and knowledge of working in a Garda Youth Diversion Project to get an understanding of the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in GYDP projects. The focus group will take place face to face but may take place online if required. The online platform used will be Microsoft Teams. There is also an option to take part in an interview as well as the focus group, if you would like to take part in the interview a separate information sheet and consent form will be emailed to you.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked to take part in this research because of your experience and knowledge of working as a youth worker in a Garda Youth Diversion Project. This knowledge and experience will support me to address my research question which states 'What are the possibilities and constraints for youth work practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects?'

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in a focus group with up to seven other youth workers working in GYDPs. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy of the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until publication or until the data is anonymised. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your

relationships (if any) with Maynooth University. The data you will provide will remain anonymised and you will be given a pseudonym for the purpose of the research. The data may be used for secondary purposes with your consent such as the presentation as a doctoral thesis (summary report), discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences and published in scientific Journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What information will be collected?
I will be asking Youth Workers how they experienced practising youth work in GYDPs and focusing on specific practices that youth workers feel are fudamental to their practice. I will ask youthworkers about their successes and failures when working with young people and groups of young people in GYDPs. I will also examine the posibilities and constraints of youthwork practice when engaing in the practices, tool, programmes and procedures unique to GYDPs.
I will also ask specific questions around how youth work practice operates in GYDPs examining key principles of youth work such as voluntary participation, working in partnership with the young people as well as the centrality of the relationship within practice. I will also need your contact details such as email address and phone number.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?
Yes, all information that is collected about you during the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. All hard copy information can be scanned onto the Maynooth University server and all originals will be deleted, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on Maynooth University, PC or servers and will be accessed only by the researcher Thomas Cluskey and Supervisors Dr Hilary Tierney and Prof Maurice Devlin.

Confidentiality cannot be upheld in certain circumstances this includes if any information is given that may harm the research participant or anybody else, any information related to illegal action and any information that is of concern to the social welfare and protection of young people. There is also a risk that information within focus group will not remain confidential due to the nature of a focus group were all participants in the group are privy to the information discussed. The research participants are asked to keep all information discussed confidential although the researcher is unable to control this variable and members of the focus may not keep this information confidential.

It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or during investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

We would like to place an anonymised version of the data on the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) so that other researchers may benefit from access to it if you agree to do so. The Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) is a central access point for qualitative social science data generated in or about Ireland. The archive frames the parameters and standards for archiving qualitative data within the Irish research community. We would also like to use the data for secondary purposes such as the presentation of a summary

report on the research, the research to be discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences and published in scientific Journals. I will seek permission for this secondary use of data from you in the consent form provided. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What will happen to the information which you give?

All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the Maynooth University server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Manual data will be shredded confidentially, and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and with your consent presented as a doctoral thesis (summary report), discussed at internal group meetings, presented at National and International conferences, and may be published in scientific Journals. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request. I will seek permission for this secondary use of data from you in the consent form. The purpose for secondary use of data would include the quotation and publication of data extracts or the data to be used for future research projects. As mentioned above, an anonymised version of the data will be placed in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) so that other researchers may benefit from access to it if you agree to do so.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Confidentiality cannot be upheld in certain circumstances this includes if any information is given that may harm the research participant or anybody else, any information related to illegal behaviour the researcher deems appropriate to report and any information that is of concern to the social welfare and protection of young people. This information will be passed on to the appropriate authorities. There is also a risk that information within focus group will not remain confidential due to the nature of the focus group were all participants in the group are privy to the information discussed. The research participants are asked to keep all information discussed confidential although the researcher is unable to control this variable and members of the focus may not keep this information confidential.

What if there is a problem?

If there is a problem, you can contact me via email thomas.cluskey.2020@mumail.ie and I will aim to resolve any issue. You may also contact my Supervisors Dr Hilary Tierney Hilary.tierney@mu.ie or Prof Maurice Devlin maurice.delvin@mu.ie if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Thomas Cluskey on my mobile 0852347137 or via email thomas.cluskey.2020@mumail.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Appendix 7: Excel sheet

See link below to access excel sheet:

Codes to sub-themes final.xlsx

Appendix 8: full list of subthemes

List of sub-themes

1. Perspectives on youth offending
2. An understanding of behaviour.
3. Community responses.
4. Interagency approach.
5. Raising the conscious awareness of social circumstance
6. Creating safe spaces for young people.
7. Building positive relationships with young people.
8. Working in partnership with young people
9. Responding to the immediate needs and concerns of young people.
10. Designing programmes based on the interests of young people.
11. Processing issues to gain clarity and direction.
12. Challenging antisocial attitudes and beliefs.
13. Enabling positive decision making in life.
14. Aware of opportunities in life
15. Role Models
16. Ready for change from a life of crime
17. The youth work profession not named in policy.
18. Top-down youth justice approach.
19. Reports not aligned with youth work practice.
20. The narrow focus of the risk paradigm
21. Manualised programmes and informal education
22. Managing the agenda of the DoJ with youth work practice.
23. Managing administrative and reporting requirements.
24. Managing the risk paradigm.
25. Managing the targeted approach.
26. Managing self-care in YDPs
27. Working in partnership with the Juvenile Liaison Officer.