

7. Group work as a method in open youth work in Icelandic youth centres

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Abstract

This paper will discuss group work as an important part of the work being carried out in Icelandic youth clubs. I will look at this work in a historical context and examine the creation and the history of youth clubs.

*Ever since youth clubs in Iceland started operating in the year 1957, group work has been an integral part of the work. At the beginning the aim of the group work was to provide practical knowledge and prepare young people for work. The year 1971 marked the beginning of a new era with new ways of working and a theoretical approach started to be used in the field. This was due to the introduction of a specialised curriculum for youth workers that was based, amongst other things, on the theories of Danish social psychologist Sjölund. Although Sjölund is not as widely used today, his influences can be seen in today's youth work. Today group work is based on a different foundation and is more in line with the approach developed by the pedagogue Laxvik and covered in his book *Supportive Relationships (Bärande relationer)* from the year 2001.*

However, it must be noted that in a short paper like this there is only scope to cover firstly the beginning of the use of group work in youth work in Iceland and secondly the theoretical influences of Sjölund on the group work of that time period. When covering Sjölund a case sample will be given. Thirdly Laxvik's approach and the theoretical basis of modern group work in Iceland will be covered.

Keywords: youth work, group work, theoretical framework, historical context.

Introduction

Youth clubs and group work in Iceland, a short historical exposé

The idea of youth clubs first emerged in 1942 in Iceland. However, the first actual youth clubs were not established until 15 years later, in 1957 (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). It wasn't until Iceland was occupied in the Second World War that the matters of youth came to the forefront of public discussions. This was mainly because of concerns around perceived negative effects of the occupation on children and young people. The two teachers Aðalsteinn Sigmundsson – who was also an influential person in the Icelandic Youth Movement – and Ágúst Sigurðsson both expressed their view that young people needed a youth hall in the ever-expanding city of

Reykjavík. They stated that the youth were neglected in terms of venues and positive attention and that these conditions would only create settings in which negative behaviour would increase. This, the two teachers believed, would lead to harmful risk-taking behaviour among young people (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007).

Sigmundsson and Sigurðsson were both teachers but they did not represent the view of the educated society. They were first and foremost humanists that worked with the welfare of the youth in mind. The education society and head teachers in general were negative towards these ideas on entertaining the youth and felt that youth centres encouraged negative attitudes and that young people should rather focus on homework in their free time (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). It was in this climate that the ideas around the first youth clubs were heard and subsequently it was agreed by Reykjavík city council that a youth hall should be built in the year 1942. That same year, Sigurðsson presented, on request from the city council, a fully formed plan on how to meet the specific and wide-ranging needs of the youth. This, he proposed, should be done by building a youth hall in Reykjavík. A report written by him covers a diversity of topics such as what kind of facilities are needed for the youth hall, what kind of youth work should take place as well as professional ways of working with young people. In this report Sigurðsson cites the most up-to-date knowledge at that point in time in terms of what constitutes good youth work (Ágúst Á Sigurðsson, 1943). Regardless of the high quality of the report, it took over 15 years to execute

these ideas and when the time came the execution was different and simpler than the ideas first presented in the report. The youth hall at Lindargata, which was the first youth club in Iceland, started operating in 1957.

There was a shortage of schools in this era. Sports venues were also of poor quality up until the year 1960. In addition to this, there were no cultural venues for young people until the youth club Tómsundarheimilið að Lindargötu was created in 1957. After this there was a rapid development in terms of youth venues; the first increase in the number of youth venues was after 1960 but the largest increase was after 1970. The Association of Youth Clubs in Iceland was founded in 1985. Today there are 130 youth clubs in Iceland and 95% of these youth clubs fall under this association (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007).

When analysing the data (interviews with youth workers) for my book *The History of Youth Clubs in Reykjavík 1942-1992* it became evident how prominently group work featured in the thoughts of participants. This especially applied to professionals working with young people in and after 1970. At the time of my interviews, most of the pioneers were still working in the field, but in their view their role had changed rapidly over the years. At the beginning the youth clubs were open to all young people and they were free to take part in everything that was on the agenda. Group work was initially the most important and most relied-upon method of working with the youth. In the first youth club, Tómsuheimilið, there

was a great emphasis on practical and work-related group work, i.e. that the group work prepared the participants for different roles within the workforce. An example of this was the group work around making fishing nets and other tasks related to working on a fishing boat: crafts, sewing etc. Seamen were role models for young men in these years and this was evident when it comes to themes that were present in the group work. Different themes for men and women were also present, mirroring different gender roles in the society.

Youth work continued to mirror societal changes and after the year 1968 further changes also emerged. Western countries in general were undergoing significant changes in regard to acknowledging the concept of youth. This led to more freedom and the youth of this time also had more power than before. For the first time in Icelandic history there was also a focus on the youth. This shift in emphasis was mirrored in the work carried out in youth clubs. The focus shifted from activities being determined by the youth workers to being determined by the clients or users of the youth club in collaboration with the workers. The agenda for the group work changed from being practical to discussions around self-image, e.g. what shapes self-image, along with a focus on other interpersonal topics (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). Later, in and after 1985 the methods would change further and a new way of working was introduced, i.e. the implementation of “Youth Decision Making” (Böhler, 1983) in which teenagers had the opportunity to exert significant power over important decisions related to the youth club. Throughout this development there were two important

factors present. Firstly the group and the group work, which was a constant factor in the work, and secondly group work mirroring, what was occurring in the society at that point in time.

Group work becomes an important method

My main focus in this paper is on discussing the origins of group work in youth clubs and what method of working was used. Before this is discussed, it should be noted that formal higher education in this field in Iceland did not start until the end of the last decade. The first generation of youth workers (those that started after 1957) therefore did not have any specialised education. Around 1980, specialised youth workers, educated first in Sweden and then later in Denmark, started working in youth clubs. With increased and more diverse education, the work in youth clubs in Iceland has become more professional in recent decades.

My interviews revealed a common theme. The majority of the pioneers in the youth work field in Iceland had considerable knowledge about groups, group work and the importance of group work in youth work. However, they were not able to give thorough definitions of previously mentioned phenomena, nor were they able to cite research or theories. Interestingly, the pioneers used similar definitions even though they had not necessarily worked together (Bragi Friðriksson og Haukur Sigtryggsson, 2002; Guðmundur Þ.B. Ólafsson, 2003;

Haukur Sigtryggsson, 2002; Hermann Sigtryggsson, 2003; Hinrik Bjarnason, 2003; Kolbeinn Pálsson, 2003). They had all undergone various short courses on topics related to their work throughout their years in employment and initially it was my theory that their way of approaching and defining group work was built on the knowledge gained from these different courses in combination with their extensive work-based experience and tacit knowledge (knowledge passed on between colleagues). This, however, appeared to be only partially correct.

During my interview with Reynir Karlsson, who had been the director of the Youth Council of Reykjavík for a number of years and later department manager for the Youth and Sport Department at the Ministry of Education, the picture became clearer (Reynir G Karlsson, 2003). Karlsson stated, when he was appointed director of the Youth Council in Reykjavík in 1964, that there was a need for more youth work-based knowledge and professionalism in the field. In his view, this especially applied to workers in youth clubs. After familiarising himself with education material in this field in Scandinavia he came across a 100-page book dedicated to the subject. This book was used by the Danish Youth Councils (Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd, DUF) and by the Danish Youth Movement to educate their workforce. This short book could also be used to base 20–40-hour long short courses on. Karlsson applied for and was given permission by the Danish Youth Movement to translate the book and the Ministry of Education allowed him to publish the book and organise

courses as part of his work (Æskulýðsráð Ríkisins, 1975). In the next few years the Youth Council held several courses throughout the country with 6,000 participants in total. In addition to these courses there were courses at the Teachers' University for teaching students as part of their education. Sjölund himself came to Iceland on several occasions to hold lectures at the Teachers' University (Reynir G Karlsson, 2003).

Sjölund's theories

Sjölund's theories and methods are pragmatic. His theories are a child of their era. In his book *Gruppepsykology or Group Psychology* (Sjölund, 1965) Sjölund theorises on group formation, group types, group action or collective action, influences of groups on individuals within the group as well as on other groups, leaders, effects of leaders, social norms and social environment, among other things. In the education material from the Youth Council they mainly focus on the different roles of leaders, communication within the group, roles within groups and peer pressure. In addition to this there are numerous exercises aimed at group building and gaining insight into the nature of groups.

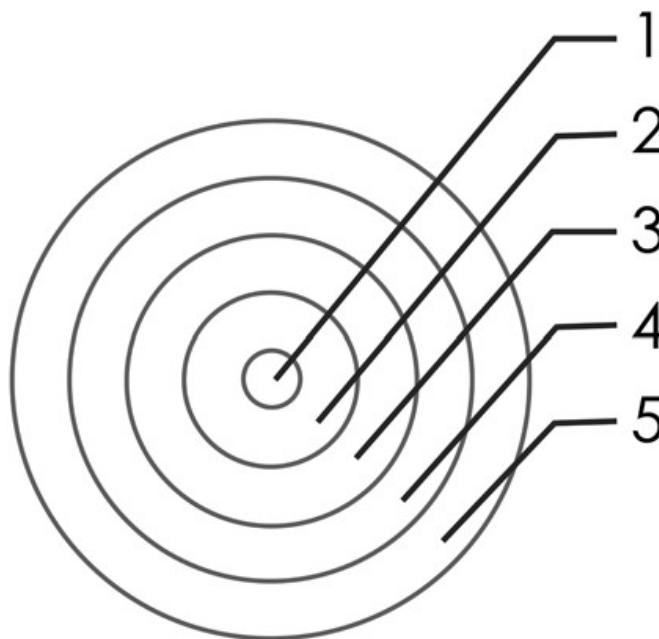
He bases his work on the theory of symbolic interaction, a theory that came to the forefront in 1900. He also uses and builds on Moreno's sociogram theory (Moreno, 1932). A sociogram is considered a very effective analytical tool. When using the tool, confidentiality and respect towards

group members are at the heart of the process. The questions and approach need to match the age and maturity of the group members. In my view, the popularity of Sjölund stems from how accessible and easily understood the model is. This has both positives and negatives. The positives are that background and education do not have as big a role as they do in more complex theories. The basics can be taught in short courses for youth leaders, both non-professionals and professionals in the field. Using this model deepens understanding of group processes and how to work with groups and improve the quality of this work. The negatives are that when the models are taught in short courses they are not covered in depth, leaving students with superficial knowledge of the model. Sjölund is covered in depth in the leisure studies at the University of Iceland and more complex ways of interpreting the results are taught as opposed to what is covered in short courses for non-professionals.

The short courses come with downsides as the method is not covered in detail. This often leads to non-professionals making errors, e.g. not having adequate skills to interpret the group structure and poor understanding of inter-group conflicts and subgroups. Poor analysis and understanding can lead to an inappropriate intervention being recommended. The short courses that were held in Iceland by the Government Youth Council from 1975 to 1985 were aimed first and foremost at equipping participants with understanding of groups and different roles within groups as opposed to performing complex analysis (Reynir G Karlsson, 2003; Sjölund, 1965).

One of the basic ideas in Sjölund's theories is group analysis and analysing the roles group members play. The status of individuals within groups can be determined by many different factors. Sjölund uses two factors in his analysis, i.e. power and popularity, which can show different standings or statuses within a group. It is also possible to analyse groups using appropriate questions based on other factors such as trust, reliability, compassion and empathy. Sjölund emphasises the importance of focusing on roles within groups (Sjölund, 1965).

Roles within groups – Sjölund



Power

1. Leaders
2. Assistants (helpers)
3. Followers
4. Those that are inactive
5. The outsiders
 - a. The sinner
 - b. The black sheep
 - c. The clown
 - d. The unintelligent one

Popularity

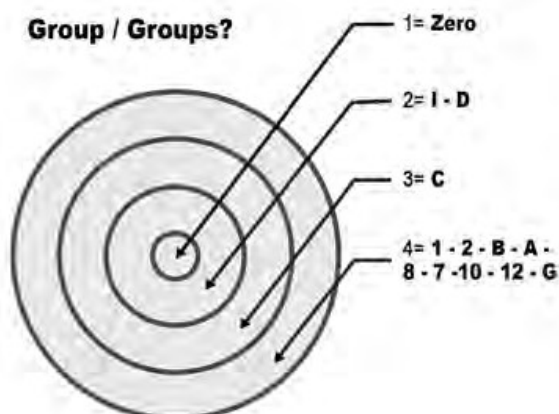
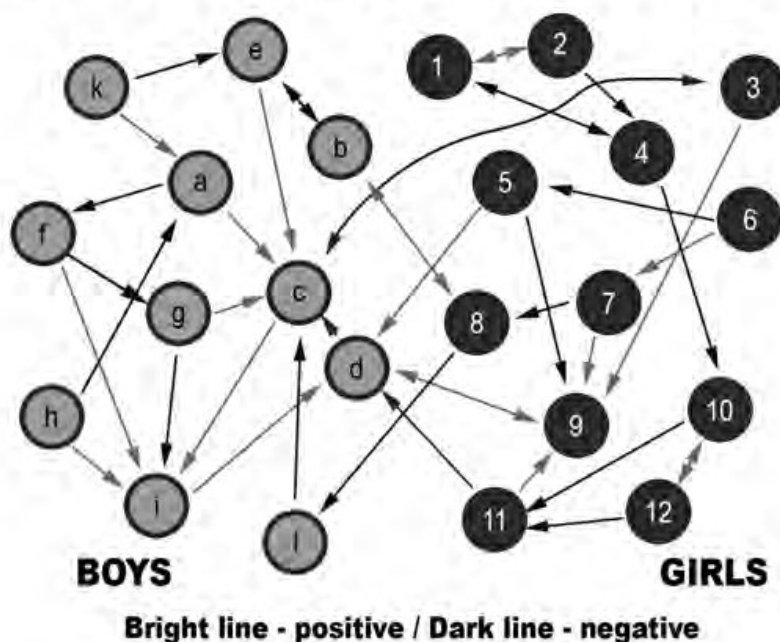
1. The popular people – The stars
2. Those that everyone likes
3. The respected – popular with most
4. The respected
5. Those that no one likes
 - a. Those that are trying to make themselves bigger in the eyes of others
 - b. Those that are rejected
 - c. Stubborn – not adaptable
 - d. Those that are isolated (Sjölund, 1965)

In my own youth work I have used this model. To cast more light on how this can be used I will use an anonymous case sample from around 2000 when I was asked to deliver an intervention for the student council in a school in Iceland. The aim of the intervention was to work with a group that was not cohesive and not functioning well. Without going into detail as to what the work conducted was, I will present a rudimentary analysis of the group based on Sjölund's theories. I want to emphasise the importance of not placing children and young people in difficult situations as a result of this kind of analysis. The sociogram's foundation is the trust between the

researcher and the participants and that anonymity is secured by coding the results and never showing these to group members. The research questions that are implemented can never be extremely positively or negatively value laden. The graph can only be created from indirect research questions aimed at participants such as positive statements like “if you had tickets to see your favourite band, who in the group would you invite with you?” You could say that there are more than two tickets and the order in which a person offers the tickets indicates the order of significance of the people in the group to that person. All personal identifiable characteristics have been taken out of the analysis.

The student council consisted of two members from each class. In this analysis, trust is the factor being examined, while Sjölund also states that power and popularity factors make for good research. There were two questions, the first a positive statement and the second a negative statement. “If I was having difficulties, which person in the group would I be likely to go to?” and “If I was having difficulties, which one in the group would I be least likely to go to?” The figure below shows the results, which indicate that there is a lack of trust within the group and those that should be considered the leaders of the group, i.e. the chairman (E), the secretary (5) and the treasurer (K), are all named as untrustworthy individuals.

Student board - School X - 23 students / 2 from each class
Roles - (E) is chairman / (5) is secretary / (K) is treasurer



This analysis indicates that there are difficulties within this group. The first results show that the chairman, secretary and treasurer are considered the least trustworthy. This evoked questions around why these individuals were in these positions. A bit more research indicated that a school professional who was responsible for working with the student council on behalf of the school had handpicked these

individuals as opposed to democratic election. He had picked them in the belief that having a responsibility like this would strengthen their social standing, which unfortunately did not happen. This sociogram was created two months into the work of the student council and gives a clear picture of what was going on. This will not be covered in more depth other than to point out that although the model has its flaws, this type of analysis can give a lot of information and inform how to work with the group. Other information gained can be, for example, on bullying, social isolation and other factors that need to be worked on in order to create a cohesive group. This example of an analysis using Sjölund's theories shows the practical knowledge gained and how powerful this knowledge can be. It also needs to be highlighted that work of this kind needs to be carried out in accordance with high scientific and ethical standards and with the informed consent of those taking part or of their parents or guardians.

Sjölund's theories today

Group work in youth clubs has evolved over the years. Sjölund's theory on groups is still in use but the input or analysis that is needed and the nature of the work have changed because society has evolved and so have its needs. In 1960, the nature of the job was mainly working at venues when there were events and making sure everything went well and that the young people were safe. In 1974, youth workers worked on a peer-to-peer basis, giving guidance, and in 1995,

youth workers focused on introducing youth participation in decision-making in youth clubs in Iceland (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007). The development of group work was shaped by this and if we look at modern times, group work is built on more diverse foundations and theories than Sjölund's methods and theories. As mentioned previously, Sjölund's theories are a child of their era. The methods and theories have become classical and respected but today other approaches are more widely used. In typical group work youth workers would not categorise young people such as Sjölund recommended doing using a sociogram (and definitions such as the unintelligent one would not be used).

Other methods are currently more widely used and when groups need to be analysed other methods are used such as observations, field studies, general interviews etc. The Swedish scholar Torstein Laxvik, who wrote, among other things, the book *Bärande relationer* or *Constructive Relationships*, created methods aimed at ensuring constructive interactions between youth workers and their clients and sets the tone for what constitutes good practice in the field. Laxvik emphasises that the foundation for interaction between youth workers and their clients is a process that gradually develops and is influenced by time. He stresses that the relationship and the communication between a worker and a client is resilient in the face of adversity, that clients are met on equal grounds, that the relationship holds an equal value for both participants and that there is reciprocity within the relationship and that it is based on respect and mutual trust

(Laxvik, 2001).

The job files for youth clubs in Reykjavík and beyond in Iceland have adopted Laxvik's theories although Laxvik is not specifically mentioned as influencing this. Another widely used theory is Gladding's theory on groups, and their nature and goals are kept in mind when working with groups, i.e. what the goal of the group work is and the nature of the group one is working with that is used as a benchmark (Gladding, 2003). When modern theories are reviewed it becomes evident that Sjölund's approach, which uses sociograms to categorise individuals, does not fit as well into modern times and practices as it did when it was created. Sjölund, however, is an important contributor to the field and was very influential at one point in the Icelandic history of youth work and is important for the development of professional practices in youth work in Iceland.

Regardless of these changes in roles, the main theme remains, i.e. the tools that the worker has in his toolbox. What has remained static is first how the worker serves as a role model, secondly his knowledge of working with groups and the group processes and thirdly the subject that is the focus of the work or projects that the worker takes on with the group at any given point in time (Árni Guðmundsson, 2007).

Discussion and conclusions

A common thread throughout the history of youth work in

Iceland is group work – first as practical and applied activities well suited as a preparation for actual work roles and later as an important tool used to educate and contribute to the personal development of participants. Youth clubs have therefore been educational centres, in the widest sense of that word, whose aim is not to quantify success and categorise students based on achievement but to improve their life skills, show them how to work with others in a democratic way and help them to become equipped to deal with life itself and the various challenges it brings.

Taking part in activities in youth clubs can, on people's own terms and based on their skill set, have the potential to increase social skills, personal maturity and growth and improve self-image. Being a youth club client offers opportunities to deepen one's understanding of oneself through unique eye-opening experiences. It offers deeper social understanding because the experience of working with others makes one understand other people better and the rationale for their actions. And it offers deeper knowledge of the environment because the experience creates understanding that enables new ways of deducting, interpreting and assimilating with the society as a whole. This creates real value, the opportunity to become a better person via interpersonal education. Lastly, empowerment can be gained by involving oneself in youth participation in the decision-making process. In addition, this can deepen understanding of the democratic society and what it means to be a citizen or a valuable member of a society.

My research indicated a clear theme around specialised youth worker education. This applies to both formal and informal education. In the beginning, knowledge went from one man to another as some sort of tacit knowledge and there is actually still evidence of this taking place today in some educational settings. The first generation of youth workers, i.e. after 1957, did not have specialised youth worker education, but in my interviews with this generation it transpired that many of these workers were familiar with theories around youth and self-image etc. (Mead, 1913). In and after 1970 it became more common for workers to have at least minimal knowledge and to have undergone a short course based on Sjölund's theories that was run by the Youth Committee at the Ministry. Formal youth work education was not established in Iceland until the end of the last century. Around 1980, youth workers that were educated in Sweden and later on in Denmark arrived on the scene. With increased and more diverse university education, the youth work in Iceland has evolved significantly. In 2001, at the Teachers' University of Iceland (which later merged with the University of Iceland), an undergraduate course in leisure studies was founded. This strengthened youth work and increased professionalism in the field. This course was created to meet a need, but before its creation sport and youth councils had been offering short courses on youth work for their youth workers to increase the knowledge of workers (Þorsteinsson, 2014).

To summarise the results, it should be noted that increased education of professionals working in the field had an

important effect on group work – from the will to teach the youth methods used in different professions of this time to multifaceted group work that aimed to meet the needs of different groups of the more diverse society; group work that used the most influential theories of that time. Sjölund's theories significantly shaped this development in Iceland and his method served the role of a predecessor as well as being a very influential force in shaping how group work in youth work in Iceland was structured and analysed at the beginning and for a number of years thereafter.

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