



“Youth work spaces enable young people to encounter and engage with diverse others while finding their own place to belong” (p. 11).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about *open youth work* (a practice of informal education that operates in a range of spaces, such as community centres), its valuable contribution to young people’s lives, and how open youth work settings are created and curated by those involved.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in eight youth work settings in England.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about youth workers and young people.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The research comprised a three-year *qualitative* study (describing qualities, characteristics, and processes), which focused on the perspectives of both young people and youth workers in eight settings selected to represent different geographic regions, approaches (e.g., a purpose-built youth club), and types of organizations (e.g., a charity).

The study included 87 **interviews** and **focus groups** (some of which incorporated 73 sessions of **participant observation**) with 58 young people and 59 youth workers. The interviews, focus groups, and participant observations were designed to be flexible, relational, and responsive to pay attention to the physical spaces and young people’s comfort in participating. For instance, three young people opted to participate in a focus group outdoors. The researchers also toured the eight youth work settings to understand how these spaces were experienced.

Data was analyzed using a *collaborative thematic inductive coding* method (deriving meaning and creating themes from data without any preconceptions).

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

A concept map was constructed in answer to the research question. **Five key themes** emerged from this concept map:

i) Youth work creates safe spaces.

Youth work spaces can foster a welcoming, comfortable, and fun environment. This curates the feeling of a *third place* – a place outside of home and school where young people intentionally come together for informal, lively conversation and to connect with peers.

Young people noted that they value the non-judgmental support they receive in these spaces, which gives them a sense of freedom and protection from external negative forces in their lives. They are also allowed to grow at their own pace, unlike in classroom settings.

ii) Safety supports creativity (and wellness!).

Youth highly value spaces with activities like music or arts and crafts, as these pursuits allow them to indulge in their creativity and to make things that they may not be able to afford otherwise (for instance, art supplies can be costly, and one young person described being able to make a birthday card for her mother with the materials provided). Arts-based activities, which are grounded in personal expression, may also support youth to cope with their mental health.

iii) Safety is experienced unequally, and youth work must address inequities beyond these spaces.

Third places facilitate opportunities for youth to connect with people who have different lived experiences and to co-create a sense of belonging and ‘ownership’ of the space, as all participants can access it freely. This may be especially beneficial for youth who do not feel that sense of belonging or ownership in other spaces in their neighbourhoods; for example, participants explained that consistent policing can intimidate young people, particularly Black youth, and bring them into unwanted conflict with the police. This

suggests that some youth might find refuge in these third places.

Although third places can offer safety and support emotional expression, physical spaces are not enough to combat the oppression that youth may be experiencing in their day-to-day lives. Youth workers should engage young people in reflection and take action to combat inequities outside of these third places to challenge real-world oppression.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research demonstrates the need for youth work spaces, or third places, that allow young people to connect with diverse peers and find a place to belong. Young people can communicate, receive and provide support, learn, partake in expressive activities, and pass the time in safe and supportive environments.

These spaces should be characterized by *relationality* (allowing associations between diverse young people and youth workers), *openness* (enabling youth to attend freely), *informality* (looking and feeling more relaxed than educational and more formal settings), and *curatorship* (intentionally co-developed by youth workers and young people). Third places are beneficial to all youth, but particularly those who experience marginalization.

de St Croix, T., & Doherty, L. (2023). [‘It’s a great place to find where you belong’: Creating, curating and valuing place and space in open youth work](#). *Children’s Geographies*, 1–15.