**A relationship framework for Youth work practice**

**Abstract**

This article outlines the theoretical underpinnings and the resulting relationship based conceptual framework devised to provide a foundational context, parameters and purpose to youth work. The basis for the framework is supporting young people to build, develop and maintain positive relationships within the social context of their lives. This approach blends positive youth development (Benson *et al.*, 2006) and socio-ecological theories (Mcgregor, 2015) of youth work. It is viewed as appropriate for young people particularly those living in communities facing multiple challenges such as low socio-income status, high crime rates, illegal drug use, low educational achievement and high levels of social vulnerability. This article documents the theoretical underpinnings of this conceptual framework and details its constituent components.

**Introduction**

Developing positive relationships has long been a bastion of youth work with the relationship between youth worker and young person receiving considerable attention (Davies, 2010; Young, 2005). But two youth organisations are taking this a step further and building a conceptual framework for youth work based on the principles of young people building positive relationships not just with their youth workers, but also with themselves, their peers, their wider networks, and their communities. This article reviews this conceptual framework and make a case for how it is underpinned by established theoretical conceptualisations of youth work and youth work practice. Devoting a paper to this offers an opportunity to document and share the thinking more widely, gives space to think about the potential for the framework, embedding it in practice and the possibilities for evaluation.

The idea for the *relationship framework* originally came from Paul Oginsky, a youth sector influencer and leading character development specialist with over 30 years in the sector. Currently the framework is being operationalised by two organisations: Vibe based in the Northwest of England and Youth First based in Lewisham, London. Both organisations work in deprived areas where young people grow up having often experienced trauma, adversity and negative influences and often live in very chaotic environments. Youth services in these areas like many parts of England have, in the main, offered a neo-liberal model of youth work practice to young people (Taylor *et al.*, 2018) that is frequently restricted and governed by funding criteria in addition to the local and national, political and policy context. Youth work organisations across England find themselves working in a context of delivering outputs and outcomes of funders, services, and Government priorities within often a very challenging local context of funding cuts, deprivation, child poverty, increasing knife crime and mental ill-health and a national context of changing employment patterns and the international context of a global pandemic. However, youth workers within both these organisations have taken on a challenge to re-imagine the way they undertake youth work and in doing so develop an underlying framework for their practice that has the potential to underpin future programmes, service delivery and inform all new work.

This relationship framework did not emerge from a particular theoretical perspective but rather is rooted in many as explained below. It is an experiential, culturally relevant, grassroots response to the lived experience of being and working with young people in deprived and challenging circumstances. The ‘theory of change’ that articulates the vision and values within the conceptual framework is a strength-based youth development model that draws on young people’s positive characteristics and develops emotional competence by supporting and enabling the building, maintaining and managing of positive relationships in all aspects of life. A body of research exists that supports the case that positive relationships with caring adults, peers and social connectedness contribute to a number of positive outcomes for young people, including improved wellbeing, positive development, mental well-being, academic attainment and sense of self whilst also protecting young people from poor health and social outcomes (Fullerton, Bamber and Redmond, 2021; Green, Mitchell and Bruun, 2013). It is relationships that are regarded as the golden principle that underpins this conceptual framework, and the development of these relationships that gives the youth work its context, parameters, and fundamental purpose.

This theory of change is congruent with both a social and emotional learning model (Riley, 2019) that seeks to build emotional competence defined as emotion-related skills (Lau and Wu, 2012) and with the National Youth Agency (2022) youth work values; particularly those of ‘*Seeking to develop young people’s skills and attitudes rather than remedy problem behaviours*’ and ‘*Helping young people develop stronger relationships and collective identities’*. Fundamentally the framework blends together elements of positive youth development and socio-ecological theories of youth work. Positive youth development is an umbrella term that covers a number of different approaches (Benson *et al.*, 2006), although all positive youth development approaches generally emphasise strengths, developmental assets or protective factors with a clear focus on individual development as the key to producing desired outcomes and optimal development (Dickson, Vigurs and Newman, 2013; Damon, 2004). This type of strengths-based youth work is about building relationships and trust with young people to instil hope and belief in moving forward and increasing their sense of agency (Dickson, Vigurs and Newman, 2013; Mcgregor, 2015). A socio-ecological model believes that youth work needs to reflect and address the myriad of relationships that young people have with others within the wider socio-geographic context of their lives focusing on their ‘multiple selves’ within these contexts (Mcgregor, 2015).

Furthermore, a growing body of research has linked social and emotional learning and the development of emotional competence to positive outcomes for young people including regulating emotions, increasing pro-social behaviours, reducing problem behaviours and decreasing internalised problems (OECD, 2015; Riley, 2019). Emotional competence as conceptualised by Lau and Wu (2012) is transactional with both self and others and is gained through the development of skills and knowledge acquired by both contextual, cultural and relational related experiences with others. Learning and developing emotional competencies are key to this approach and are based on the belief that these skills and competences can be learnt and practiced in a safe setting. These learning experiences can be offered to young people through comprehensive experiential learning programmes designed to offer opportunities for participants to learn to manage their own emotions, to develop relationships with others and persevere despite the challenges they may be facing.

The following conceptual framework has been developed by drawing on these theoretical underpinnings and clarifies how relationship building and maintaining is at the heart of the framework.

**The framework**

The conceptual framework is a combination of the following zones: 1) Relationship with self; 2) Relationship with others; 3) Supporting the relationships of others; and finally, 4) Relationships with and within the community. However, it should be noted that it is recognised that youth work is not a linear process; it is a dynamic and complex process that starts where the young person is, is voluntary and does not have a pre-defined end point (Davies, 2010). It is expected therefore that the journey young people embark on will be complex and they are likely to travel back and forth as they negotiate these zones.

The first zone of the framework relates to developing a sense of self(Dickson, Vigurs and Newman, 2013). Within this zone young people will be supported to build a positive relationship with themselves through the relational experience they have with their youth worker (Davies, 2010). Young people will participate in experiential learning and self-execution of tasks designed to enable them to understand themselves better, improve their self-esteem, their self-awareness and start to learn how to regulate their own emotions and develop understandings of their own emotional competence. They are encouraged to explore their own beliefs and value base and develop understandings of how their actions are aligned to these beliefs and values. Importantly they will be encouraged to address any difficulties or challenges to emotional growth including identifying personal barriers or ‘baggage’ as conceptualised by Davies (2010 p5). This includes understanding any triggers to certain behaviours and learning techniques for managing stress and emotions.

*Relationships* *with others* is the second zone of the framework; still focusing on self but also providing space and activities for young people to develop, build and maintain positive and meaningful relationships and constructive interactions with others (Dickson, Vigurs and Newman, 2013). Young people are supported to further develop their emotional competence with a particular focus on empathy and developing critical thinking and effective communication skills, including active listening and reflective practice (Taylor *et al.*, 2018). Confidence is built through social interactions, social bridging and developing, and building and maintaining positive relationships with peers and family members. Young people are challenged and supported to exchange and explore opinions, co-operate, negotiate, compromise and deflect pressure whilst also building trust and accountability. Developing the ability to notice change in relationships, to give and receive feedback and understand and interpret the actions of others whilst managing tensions within relationships (Abdallah, 2017).

The penultimate zone is about *supporting the* r*elationships of others;* this relates to those relationships around young people that are not necessarily directly with them. The young people are supported and encouraged to identify the importance of relationships around them, for example how their peers relate to each other; analysing what these relationships mean, the impact they have and what role the young person plays or can play within them. Learning at this level relates to how to build and maintain a positive culture and mediate these relationships around them, become a critical thinker and recognise the agendas of other people. Young people are encouraged to help those around them, to build and maintain positive relationships with each other and to develop higher level skills around working together.

Finally, on the framework is r*elationships with and within the community.* In other words, the relationships individuals have with the world around them; locally, nationally and globally. Young people develop the skills to connect with local people, places and organisations in their local community and start thinking about wider issues and what the global community means to them. A sense of belonging and purpose and playing a central role in creating strong and vibrant community networks is key to this advanced level.

**Where to next?**

A comprehensive evaluation will of course help to determine over the longer term the value of this framework. However, in the meantime it will be useful for organisations thinking of adopting the framework to consider how it could work across the youth sector for example in detached settings, street-based projects, open access, anti-oppressive and fixed length programmes. In addition, some thought needs to be given (by organisations) to how young people can connect and make relationships with their communities bearing in mind how they are frequently negatively labelled and stigmatised by adults (de St Croix, 2016). To enable young people to connect with and have a relationship with adults in their communities there needs to be space for young people in those communities. The delivery of this framework needs to interconnect with community organisations and members who are committed to opening up spaces for and having conversations with young people. Some thought also needs to be given to children’s and young people’s voice; who decides what a good relationship looks like? Is it youth workers? Other adults? Or the young people themselves? Consideration needs to be given within the framework to how genuine democratic voice is integrated and that sessions and evaluation are not controlled and directed by adults.

**Conclusion**

This article has presented a conceptual framework that draws on existing youth work theory and practice, but also clarifies how the relationship framework can underpin youth work. These zones are based on the principle of building, developing and maintaining positive and meaningful relationships. By sharing this thinking more widely it is hoped that other youth workers, academics and researchers will consider the value of this way of working. The next step is grounding this conceptual framework in youth work practice and adapting existing programmes and services to embed the conceptual framework and to use the relationship framework to develop new programmes and services. A process that has already started.

**References**

Abdallah, S. (2017) 'Struggles for success: Youth work rituals in Amsterdam and Beirut'.

Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. F. and Sesma, A. (2006) 'Positive Youth Development: Theory, Research  and Applications', in Lerner, R.M. (ed.) *Handbook of child psychology*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 894-941.

Damon, W. (2004) 'What is positive youth development?', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of political and social science,* 591(1), pp. 13-24.

Davies, B. (2010) 'What do we mean by youth work', in Batsleer, J. and Davies, B. (eds.) *What is youth work*. Exeter: Sage Publications, pp. 1-6.

de St Croix, T. (2016) *Grassroots youth work: Policy, passion and resistance in practice.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Dickson, K., Vigurs, C.-A. and Newman, M. (2013) *Youth work: A systematic map of the research literature*: Lenus: The Irish Health Repository (1406427489. Available at: <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/306851/YouthWorkFinal260613.pdf.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed: 24/05/2022).

Fullerton, D., Bamber, J. and Redmond, S. (2021) *Developing effective relationships between youth justice workers and young people: a synthesis of the evidence, REPPP review*: University of Limerick, School of Law. Available at: <https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/10045/Developing_Effective_Relationships_May2021.pdf?sequence=4> (Accessed: 24/05/2022).

Green, R., Mitchell, P. and Bruun, A. (2013) 'Bonds and bridges: perspectives of service-engaged young people on the value of relationships in addressing alcohol and other drug issues', *Journal of youth studies,* 16(4), pp. 421-440.

Lau, P. S. and Wu, F. K. (2012) 'Emotional competence as a positive youth development construct: A conceptual review', *The Scientific World Journal,* 2012.

Mcgregor, C. (2015) *Universal Youth Work: A Critical Review of the Literature*: University of Edinburgh. Available at: <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/1112/youth-work-literature-review-final-may-2015.pdf> (Accessed: 20/05/2022).

NYA (2022) *What is Youth Work?* Available at: <https://www.nya.org.uk/career-in-youth-work/what-is-youth-work/> (Accessed: 06/0602021 2021).

OECD (2015) *Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills*: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Publishing (9264226141. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/skills-for-social-progress-executive-summary.pdf> (Accessed: 01/05/2022).

Riley, A. (2019) 'Social and emotional learning in practice: A resource review', *Journal of Youth Development,* 14(3), pp. 212-216.

Taylor, T., Connaughton, P., de St Croix, T., Davies, B. and Grace, P. (2018) 'The impact of neoliberalism upon the character and purpose of English youth work and beyond', *The SAGE handbook of youth work practice*, pp. 84-97.

Young, K. (2005) *The Art of Youth Work.* 2nd edn. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.