

# Building Relationships through Effective Interpersonal Engagement:

## A Training Model for Youth Workers

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### Abstract

This paper outlines the changing context for youth work and suggests that the relationship between the practitioner and the young person has been, and continues to be, a unique and defining feature of youth work practice. On the basis that training and education for youth work should reflect the core elements of youth work practice, the paper presents a model of youth work training that enables students to increase their knowledge, develop self-confidence and self-awareness and build their skills towards engaging young people in meaningful and purposeful relationships. The model presented adopts and advocates the 'person-centred approach' with a central focus on self awareness through the use of personal and professional reflective journaling, experiential learning and opportunities to practise. It also provides significant opportunities for students to demonstrate a clear understanding of, and commitment to, equality and diversity and the importance of choice, freedom, responsibility and justice.

### Keywords

Youth work training; knowledge, skills and values; person-centred approach.

### Introduction

'The role of the youth worker is to create relationships of trust and respect with young people and work with them in ways that combine enjoyment, challenge and learning. Successful outcomes will largely be dependent on the relationship between the youth worker and the young people.'  
(Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 2005:13)

In recent years community youth work has been increasingly under pressure to 'organise practice around outcomes, curriculum and delivery' (Jeffs and Smith, 2008), and become more target driven with an emphasis on measurable outputs. This has led to practice being problem-orientated, focused on accreditation and often responding to externally imposed curricula. This is at odds with a profession that is historically young person-led and embedded within process-orientated approaches emphasising 'togetherness' and the 'interpersonal voluntary relationships' between the practitioner and young person (Smith, 2003).

Contrary to this, more recent policy discourse refers to the necessity to include, consult and involve young people in the decisions that impact on them. These policies, in general, acknowledge the role of those engaged with young people at a community level in ensuring this can happen. As such youth work is perhaps now, more than ever, in a position to ensure that through a relationship of mutual respect, young people can be involved in a more meaningful way in their own communities and beyond.

This paper outlines the changing context for youth work and suggests that the relationship between the practitioner and the young person has been, and continues to be, a unique and defining feature of youth work practice. It also contests that the most valuable resource in youth work is the practitioner themselves. As such, practitioners need to be highly skilled communicators, to be confident, competent and self-aware individuals. They also need to be genuine and transparent in all interpersonal interventions and relationships with young people.

Finally, this paper presents a model of youth work training that enables students to increase their knowledge, develop self-confidence and self-awareness and build their skills towards engaging young people in meaningful and purposeful relationships as opposed to the target driven climate which has the potential to undermine the importance of 'relationship' in youth work.

## The Context

Youth work in Northern Ireland is in a peculiar position whereby it has increased in popularity and demand in a range of settings and yet those things which make it definable and distinctive as a profession are becoming less secure. It could be argued that youth work in Northern Ireland on the ground has been subject to an increased managerial (top down) approach. Davies and Norton made reference to this 'new managerialism' as early as 1996 in their 'critical response to competence based approaches' in Northern Ireland (Davies and Norton, 1996:195). Here they refer to five key points that they considered to be manifest in the youth work context. These included: short term funding, top down objective setting, performance related management; contracting out, evaluation and quality assurance mechanisms imported from the business and commercial world. They warned at this time that the above would mean the dilution or even the possible end of community youth work as a profession.

In recent years there has also been a sizable shift towards accredited training. This 'relatively' new slant to youth work practice has potentially greyed the lines between the formal and informal educational approaches within youth work. The increasing pressure on community youth workers to deliver accredited outcomes has potentially undermined the importance of the relationship and the significance of purposeful conversation between youth workers and young people.

A wider social policy trend which has persistently moved the approaches of youth work towards social problems away from the political back to the personal is now evident (Morgan and McArdle, 2009). This individualistic approach has been reinforced in Northern Ireland by the 'peace' agenda. Morgan and McArdle (2009: 235) cite an example of this referring to the major influx of money arriving in the community and voluntary sector of Northern Ireland from the European Special

Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation bringing with it a new vocabulary of targets, outputs, outcomes and beneficiaries. The money was welcome but the 'managerialism' that came with it led to a decline of those youth work approaches with less clearly defined outcomes, namely 'process' driven practice.

Furthermore the youth sector as a whole has increasingly come under pressure to justify its existence and contribution particularly towards a sustainable society in Northern Ireland (Morgan and McArdle, 2009: 239). This may have influenced the direction of practice as 'hard' outcomes can be more easily justified than those which are deemed 'soft'. This may also have led to substantial practice aimed at solving problems, namely a 'fix it' or 'deficit' approach to young people, which responds to externally imposed curricula, for example projects aiming to reduce teenage pregnancy or reduce anti-social behaviour and practice that results in and focuses on accreditation. Consequently there has been a move from community based youth work practice towards more targeted intervention.

The changing climate within community youth work practice can be seen further afield than Northern Ireland. Devlin (2008) refers to the 'paradoxical' position in which youth work in the Republic of Ireland finds itself, as 'just one of a proliferation of types of policy and provision aimed at young people'. He goes on to suggest that 'youth work struggles to maintain its key principles in a climate where substantial funding is available to support work with young people and where youth organisations must compete to secure it whether it is strictly "youth work" or not.' (Devlin, 2008: 52). Devlin concludes that 'a central challenge (for youth work and youth workers) will be to retain a core sense of vision and purpose regarding the relational, educational and associative mission of youth work in a climate of increasing managerialism and outcome focused accountability' (Devlin, 2008: 53).

Taylor (2009) in an open debate 'In Defence of Youth Work', goes as far to suggest that youth work is abandoning its distinctive commitment by accepting the terms of the state rather than those of young people, siding with a state agenda. Taylor argues that this change has been coming for some time and that youth workers are now 'cajoled' into what he describes as the 'antithesis of youth work process, predictable and prescribed outcomes'. He contends that we need to 'reaffirm our belief in emancipatory and democratic youth work' one of the cornerstones of which he refers to as the 'essential significance of the youth worker themselves, whose outlook, integrity and autonomy is at the heart of fashioning a serious yet humorous, improvisatory yet rehearsed educational practice with young people' (Taylor, 2009). This discussion is currently gathering momentum in England with a number of conferences organised to give voice to the debates.

However, Northern Ireland has seen significant changes over the last number of years with the emergence from conflict towards a more peaceful and sustainable society. As part of these changes and the devolution to local government there have been significant shifts in politics and local government policy and a growing concern to ensure that all, including young people, have their part to play. For example, one of the three principles outlined by the Department of Education's *Model for Effective Practice* (DENI, 2003) is young peoples' participation. This participatory emphasis is evident at many levels of policy development.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) places particular duties on statutory bodies to take account of the impact of their services and policies on children and young people. As a result public bodies must consult children and young people to find out their views on how policy may affect them and take into consideration their needs. Following the Belfast (“Good Friday”) Agreement the Northern Ireland Act of 1998 established the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission with duties in relation to developing a Bill of Rights. It is likely that a new Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland will emerge in the coming years which will give strength to a humanitarian rights based framework of work with young people. One of the central aims of ‘A Shared Future’ (OFM/DFM, 2005) is to create a society where everyone, including children and young people, are treated as equals (OFM/DFM, 2005: 08). Finally a ten year strategy ‘Our Children and Young People: Our Pledge’ (OFM/DFM 2006) states that the government will obtain views of children and young people on matters which impact upon them and sets out a shared vision that all children and young people living in Northern Ireland will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future. As such the ‘will’ is there in policy directives to involve young people wholly in shaping their present and future.

The youth sector has been attempting to respond in a number of ways. In 2004 the Youth Service Liaison Forum (YSLF) identified the lack of a co-ordinated strategy for taking youth work forward in Northern Ireland. This forum carried out a consultation with those in the youth work field and as a result a draft strategy was drawn up in 2005. Aim 2 of the strategy states that the youth sector should ensure that ‘young people have the skills, knowledge and opportunities to make informed choices about their lives, are at the heart of designing, managing and evaluating youth work policy and practice, have opportunities to address issues they are interested in and can make meaningful contributions within their communities and within public and political decision making processes’ (DENI, 2005).

The Review of Public Administration (RPA) was launched by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2002. Within this review significant changes are proposed which would result in new structures for governance and delivery of the Youth Service. The delay in progress of the first Education Bill has meant that the changes did not go ahead as planned on the 1st January 2010. However the RPA presented an opportunity for leaders in the youth work field to influence future departmental policy. A paper was produced by the Youth Services Sectoral Partnership Group (YSSPG, 2009). This paper was an attempt to contribute to the formulation of youth policy in Northern Ireland articulating a vision of the social contract between government, its agents and young people whilst demonstrating the purpose and value of youth work. YSSPG notes that the starting point is that ‘young people have the power in the youth work relationship’ and that the present context presents opportunities for creativity, reflection and making a difference to the life of every child and young person in Northern Ireland. The importance of building relationships with young people which are embedded in these principles cannot be overstated.

The driving principles and underpinning values of youth work are increasingly contested. Examples include: the power and control of practice determined by young people versus targeting young people’s anti-social behaviour with pre-determined outcomes; the process orientated nature of youth work versus an increasingly product

orientated approach; youth work as a distinct profession versus youth workers operating in a range of 'professional' settings such as schools, alternative education projects and youth justice.

These tensions can serve to undermine the youth work profession both internally and externally and are arguably resulting in a profession that is at odds with itself. The increasing pressure on community youth workers to articulate their practice in a particular way, specifying measurable outcomes for young people has potentially undermined the importance of the relationship and the significance of purposeful conversation between youth workers and young people and the context within which youth workers 'meet' them. As youth work becomes increasingly contested youth workers are finding it more difficult to retain a core vision and purpose and communicate their own professional distinctiveness (Davies, 2005; Spence *et al.*, 2006; Devlin, 2008)

So, youth workers may find themselves in a position that they either respond to the dominant culture and deliver practice accordingly, thus potentially undermining and compromising youth work values, principles and methodology; or find ways and a voice to affirm and defend the values, principles and methodology traditionally central to youth work practice. This necessitates the centrality and focus being firmly placed on the young person and the relationship between themselves and the youth worker.

### The Challenge

This paper posits the view that the core principles of the practice must be protected and retained within the training of community youth work practitioners. As Rose (2008) suggested with regard to the future of the Youth Service in Wales, 'there should be a resistance to redefining its roles to meet particular funding streams as there should be a resistance by those training staff for the youth service to creating generic "workers with young people" (Rose, 2008: 61). However, whilst recognising the centrality of the interpersonal relationship and the process, youth work needs to indicate more clearly the intended or possible outcomes of the work, recognising that processes do culminate in an end point rather than a fixed destination. 'Process is not ever decreasing circles; rather it is a development that generates negotiated outcomes. Youth workers need to know what works; yet young people also need to be able to recognise the benefit they derive from engaging in the youth work process, and funding agencies need to know the value they get from their investment (Rowley, 2007).

The role of relationship is widely acknowledged and accepted both in rhetoric and practice as central to the youth work intervention as successful outcomes are largely connected to the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and the young person and relationships are a primary source of happiness and learning (DENI, 2003:13; Jeffs and Smith, 2008). The relationship whilst being valid in its own right is also a means to an end as the 'engagement provides a stronger focus on the exchange between young people that goes beyond just relationships' (YSSPG, 2009:13).

In order to build these relationships of trust and respect the practitioner must be a highly skilled communicator and be a confident, competent and self-aware individual. They also need to be genuine and transparent in all interpersonal interventions and relationships with young people. As Spence *et al.* (2006) suggest, relationships with

young people, in youth work terms, are most often established through the art of listening. Indeed they go on to argue that listening is the 'most important youth work skill' and is 'primarily present orientated'. For example conversation that can 'move rapidly from the light and chatty to the serious' taking place 'within defined spaces and places but operates in structured as well as unstructured situations' requires practitioners to have 'the ability to listen and interpret the words and behaviour of young people as individuals and group' (Spence *et al.*, 2006: 135)

Therefore when training youth workers to build relationships with young people through effective interpersonal engagement the premise remains that youth work is 'young people centred'; the power balance is tipped in favour of the young people, whereby they set the agenda; there is recognition of variable contexts and starting points of the young people engaged and appreciation of diversity and equity; the approach is bottom up rather than top down; young people enter the relationship voluntarily – in other words 'choose to be involved' – and youth work itself is primarily based within the community. Finally, young people are viewed as contributors and as assets within their communities and society, with the youth worker themselves as the main resource in the practice of engaging and working with young people.

### **Training Community Youth Work Practitioners: Building Relationships through Effective Interpersonal Engagement**

The training presented in this paper has been developed in the University of Ulster and is delivered to students across the whole spectrum of community youth work courses. The training is based on the necessity for meaningful, purposeful and effective relationships with young people. Central to youth work is the relationship between the practitioner and young person. This is underpinned by an acknowledgement that the youth worker is the main resource through which this can happen.

Training to build relationships through effective inter-personal engagement requires the balance of three components; knowledge acquisition; skills development and self awareness raising (knowledge, skills and values). It is important that the principles, purposes and processes used within the training mirror, or are congruent with, those used within the practice itself. To ensure that these are adhered to, the training adopts and advocates the 'person-centred approach'. There is a central focus on self awareness; the use of personal and professional reflective journaling is embedded in the assessment process; experiential learning and opportunities to practise are threaded throughout and personal reflection and feedback from others increases the development of interpersonal skills. The training also provides significant opportunities for students to demonstrate a clear understanding of, and commitment to, equality and diversity and the importance of choice, freedom, responsibility and justice.

#### ***The Person-Centred Approach***

'Youth and community work as an applied academic subject is characterised by its attention to values, principles, purposes and processes'. (Quality Assurance Agency, 2009)

The person-centred approach developed by Carl Rogers aims to facilitate a person's 'actualising tendency' (Kirshenbaum and Henderson, 1997:137). Rogers strongly believed that there were certain qualities, attitudes or core values, which, if present in a facilitator (in this case, a youth worker) would enhance nurturing practice. He termed these qualities, attitudes and values 'the three core conditions' and said that these were 'necessary and sufficient' for growth and change to occur.

The first condition is realness or genuineness (Rogers, 1983: 34–35) which features congruence and transparency of appropriate communication (Wilkins, 1997: 36:41). This congruence of the youth worker demonstrates that there is no professional façade. Natiello (2002) argues that 'the ability to maintain congruence is reinforced by intense self-awareness, self-acceptance, vigilance and the courage to be transparent i.e., to allow the true self to be seen or communicated' (Natiello, 2002:8). However, she also warns that in her involvement in person-centred training it is the most often ignored or controversial of Rogers' three core conditions and the one which requires persistent, self-confronting personal work. Within a target-driven climate it is therefore likely that this area could be viewed as being less important.

The second condition is unconditional positive regard and Rogers (1995: 20) emphasises that this involves the youth worker valuing the 'worth and significance of the person'. Smith (2007) describes it as 'a caring for the person, but a non-possessive caring ... . What we are describing is a prizing of the person. The facilitator's prizing or acceptance of the person is an operational expression of his/her essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism' (Smith, 2007: 2). Mearns and Thorne (2000:62) suggest that a 'contamination' of prizing can occur whereby the young person begins to experience the same attitude towards him/herself and that this self-valuing can enhance growth and learning.

The third condition is the young person's perception of the youth worker's capacity for empathy (Rogers, 1980: 149) which involves the person feeling fully understood, valued, cared for and accepted. Rogers' daughter Natalie (1993:198) argued that empathy promotes 'personal strength, self-esteem and empowerment'. Smith (2007:2) noted how this condition (in an educational context) establishes a climate of self-initiated experiential learning and growth:

When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased ... . [Students feel deeply appreciative] when they are simply understood – not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher's. (Smith 2007:2).

Whilst critics of the person-centred approach might argue that it is too unstructured for a youth work context, it could also be claimed that the opposite is true and that it is highly empowering and sits comfortably alongside the key youth work principles of participation, inclusion, democracy and social justice:

Practice described as person centred may be highly political in content and by any criteria, the outcomes sought radical. Equally it should not be assumed that person centred approaches are defined by an allegiance to one to one work. It is a mode of thought which places the quality of

relationships at the centre of activity, whether that activity is with a group, crowd or individual. (Holmes, 1981, cited in Jeffs and Smith, 1989: 63)

Stuart (2006) identified numerous implications for practice based on a 'Gandhian' approach to youth work and building relationships with young people. He prioritised five of these implications which ultimately focus on both individual and social transformation. He clearly states that in adopting a Gandhian *modus operandi* the youth worker should work from a position of 'power with' (based on equity) rather than 'power over' (based on domination and control). On the issue of power in relationships this Gandhian approach shares many of the same principles and values as Rogers' (1980) person-centred approach within which two paradigms are identified. The first paradigm centres on institutional power: 'Our schools, our government, our businesses and corporations are permeated with the view that neither individual nor group are trustworthy. There must be power over, power to control. This hierarchal system is inherent in our whole culture'. The second paradigm takes the opposite view: 'Given a suitable climate, humankind is trustworthy, creative, self-motivated, powerful and constructive – capable of releasing undreamed-of-potentialities'.

Rogers made a plea for society to see the effectiveness of the second paradigm and claimed that it appeared to be the only hope for survival. This second paradigm is clearly compatible with the principles, purposes and processes inherent in community youth work practice.

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2002) note how the person-centred goal of empowerment can be linked to the ethical principle of autonomy which involves 'respect for the young person's right to be self-governing'. Schmid (2002) also emphasises that the person-centred approach involves 'an ethical stance which is founded on empowerment', whilst Mabey and Sorensen (1995:25) argue that in a youth counselling context the person-centred approach is particularly suited to young people. However it can also be applied to community youth work and it is highly beneficial to young people when practitioners can apply this approach in practice.

## Self-awareness

*'This above all, to thine own self be true.'*(*Hamlet*, Act 1. Scene 3)

Self-awareness refers to the gradual and continuous process of noticing and exploring aspects of self, whether behavioural, psychological or physical, with the intention of developing personal and interpersonal understanding (Burnard, 1995). Hayes (2002) notes how awareness of self is closely linked to the ability to read the behaviour of others, construct courses of action and deliver an effective performance as a practitioner, teacher, doctor, youth worker (and so on) in the everyday working environment. Burnard (1995) also suggests that increasing self-awareness provides the means for students to integrate skills into their own personal and professional development and into their practice.

Maslow (1950) clearly identified the linkage between self-acceptance and self-awareness and Natiello built on this idea by suggesting that 'intense self-awareness, self-acceptance, vigilance and the courage to be transparent' are necessary ingredients



of professional development (Natiello, 2002: 8). In the classroom context and in practice itself the importance of self-awareness is predicated on a number of key factors which will ultimately impact on the student's (and ultimately the youth worker's) interventions with young people.

Without self-awareness students/youth workers can be 'blind' to their own actions; it can help students/youth workers be clear about boundaries; it can help students/youth workers be clear about problems that belong to others and those that belong to themselves; it can help students/youth workers take better 'lines of action'; it can help students/youth workers take better care of their physical and mental well-being; the better a student/youth worker knows himself/herself the more likely he/she will be able to help others know themselves; increased self-awareness helps students/youth workers loosen their defences, become less inhibited, more fully functioning and interconnected; students/youth workers will take more responsibility for what they do; increased self-awareness can help students/youth workers overcome stress; intense self-awareness will help students/youth workers maintain congruence and the courage to be transparent (Burnard, 2007; Natiello, 2002).

Providing opportunities for students to increase self-confidence, develop self-awareness and create student-centred conditions legitimises experiential and reflective learning in the classroom. Personal and professional development will follow and ultimately these very same characteristics and approaches will naturally transfer into practice and in direct contact with young people.

It is also important to recognise that while the processes within training may reflect those used in practice there remains a formal and assessed aspect. In the University of Ulster programme the interpersonal skills training is assessed using a combination of personal and professional journaling and a classroom-based skills performance task.

## The Assessment Process

The two-fold assessment process of journaling and skills performance enables the student to reflect on their learning and demonstrate, to a considerable extent, their ability to practice. Assessing the development of the students' knowledge, skills and values regarding interpersonal communication is the central task in this process. Students are expected to identify key development areas under each of the headings and determine what specifically has been learned, achieved or improved upon in terms of knowledge, skills and values.

### *Knowledge*

Knowledge refers to information, theories, facts, themes and issues that have been gathered throughout the teaching on the modules. Under the area of knowledge students are asked to identify specific areas of reading, specific theories or information they have investigated.. Students are encouraged to think conceptually and to understand the impact of theory on practice and vice versa.

### *Skills*

Skills refer to the ability to perform effectively within the community youth work setting and within interpersonal interaction, including the ability to communicate clearly and with efficacy. Students are asked to identify specific 'macro' and 'micro'

skills which are being developed through attendance at university, with colleagues, tutors, practice teachers and young people. An emphasis is placed on the ability to 'actively listen' on a one-to-one basis using Nelson-Jones's (2010) ten skills of active listening and also group facilitation (Benson, 2010).

### *Values*

Values refer to the moral principles, standards and beliefs which students hold about people and the world, in general. The students are taught that these values tend to be learned from others including parents, teachers, peers and one's community. These principles, standards, and beliefs play an important role in shaping their lives and it is therefore important to get students to explore and question their origin. This includes the student's own attitudes to themselves in terms of confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness as well as their views and opinions of others. One of the effects of learning and exploring is that values and attitudes of learners tend to change. Students are asked to identify specific values from group work, individual work and all other teaching which are relevant to their personal and professional development and which they would like to take time to explore. Exploration of these will clarify personal thinking around specific values and the impact of holding them, and it will thereby increase self-awareness.

The above three areas of learning are particularly evident in the journaling but also implicit in the skills performance exercise.

### *Journaling*

Good youth work can be seen as having some of the same contradictory qualities as great jazz. It is well prepared and highly disciplined, yet improvised. And, while responding sensitively to the signals of others, it continues to express the worker's own intentions, insights, ideas, feelings and flair (Davies, 2010: 6)

The virtues of writing and keeping journals have been extolled by many academics involved in education and training (Moon, 1999; Holly, 1989; Rainer, 1978). Klug (2002) provides a useful definition of journaling as 'a tool for self-discovery, an aid to concentration, a mirror for the soul, a place to generate and capture ideas, a safety valve for the emotions, a training ground for the writer and a good friend and confidant' (Klug 2002:1).

The use of self-reflection and exploration in community youth work practice has been emphasised since 1960 (Goetschius and Tash, 1967) and it has been heavily influenced by Schon (1983). The real benefits of journaling flow from the sustained use over a number of weeks or months. This training model provides students with guidance and criteria for journaling (again using knowledge, skills and values as the drivers) usually over a twelve-week period or for the duration of the module.

The criteria for assessment in the knowledge section include: students' understanding of the underpinning theories; evidence of reading beyond set texts; insights or reflections; students' ability to articulate and explain how theories can be used in practice. In the skills section the criteria for assessment include: knowledge of the macro and micro skills of 'active listening'; an understanding of how these skills can

be used; an understanding of the impact of using these skills and finally a 'mapping' of students' own skills development. The criteria for assessment in the values section include: evidence of increased self-awareness; students' ability and willingness to explore and analyse the values and attitudes they hold; students' understanding of the influence and impact of self on others. A midway review of journals is put in place and students are provided with formative verbal and written feedback. Summative feedback is provided as part of the final module assessment and a mark is awarded which is then combined with the skills performance mark, providing an overall module mark.

### ***Skills Performance***

During the Skills Performance task students are tutor and peer assessed on a listening exercise with one of their colleagues. An emphasis is placed on the micro skills used in 'active listening' (Nelson Jones, 2010; Hayes, 2002). Students are encouraged to pay attention to: creating a relaxed environment; voice and body messages; appropriate use of questioning; paraphrasing and overall respectfulness, congruence and empathic understanding.

Students are then tutor and peer-assessed while co-facilitating a group (key readings include Benson, 2010; Burnard, 1995; Corey and Corey, 1992) and the criteria for assessment include: layout of room; use of icebreakers/energisers; verbal and non-verbal communication; leadership styles; co-facilitation relationship and attention to group dynamics and process.

In all assessments students are encouraged to provide their peers with both verbal and written feedback (Hayes, 2002); a percentage mark is awarded by peers and this mark is aggregated on a 40:60 percentage basis with the tutor's mark.

While not guaranteed to directly impact on youth work practice, observing students in action within a controlled environment enables students to gain constructive feedback and insight into their performance. Finally, writing about interpersonal skills and experiencing them helps to maintain a stronger focus on the importance of 'relationship building'.

## **Conclusion**

At a time when youth policy is in a state of flux and policy makers are enforcing an emphasis on targets with predetermined outcomes the time has surely arrived to reconsider our approach to young people. Since the political will has been expressed in a number of official documents to involve young people wholly in shaping their future in Northern Ireland there may be an opportunity to place person-centred approaches and process-driven relations to the top of a highly competitive agenda. Community youth work practice can then and only then ensure its outcomes are negotiated with and owned by young people as a result of the interactions and negotiations between youth worker and young person. Without such ownership of outcomes it is questionable if what is being delivered is actually youth work. All of this can only happen if there is a commitment to train workers in person-centred ways and approaches which bring transparency to youth work relationships, and if the clear principles and values of community youth work practice are adhered to and stay at the forefront of the minds of workers.

These driving principles and values are increasingly contested by a product-orientated emphasis in Government youth policy. Contemporary literature in the community youth work field includes lively debate about this issue as well as about the youth work profession's ability to articulate its purpose and benefits. The issues raised in this debate are not fundamentally new but what is becoming clearer is that if youth work is to stand up and be counted it must always resort to what it knows and does best. And what is at the heart and soul of effective youth work is the need to build relationships with young people. This can only be achieved if youth workers are able to know themselves and the impact of their interventions with young people and not get caught up in the 'fix it' approach but ensure the conditions are right for young people to grow and develop and own the outcome of their own destiny. As Harris (2005) argued:

Our task is to convince policy makers of the value base and effectiveness of a humanistic, person-centred conception of young people that sees them as full beings (rather than things) and more than passive objects responding to uncontrollable change.

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