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Young people - Youth workers – Process & Relationships

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There are conceptual frameworks for making sense of how we are as humans. There are practical strategies for working with groups or individuals. There are ideological perspectives and political stances. All have a place in work with young people. But underneath and supporting all this is a relationship, whether over a years of minutes. And it is the nature and quality of the relationship between a young person and someone trying to assist them (call this person a person youth worker , if you will) which is 'of the essence.'

It is this relationship which creates a process within which a young person can explore things which interest, disturb, mystify or inspire them. But the characteristics or elements of such a relationship are a little hard to nail down. Words like 'respect', 'genuine' and 'empowerment' may spring to mind, but what do they mean in practice? So I'd like to have a go here at identifying what some of these elements might be and how they might be experienced in the way a young person and a youth worker relate.

First a couple of thoughts about things which seem fundamental to this discussion.

First thought. Young people are, by definition, young! They are growing, finding out who they are, what they think, what inspires, what excites, what scares or distresses them.

If this time in life is coupled with anger, sadness, a feeling of alienation, bitterness or confusion, this 'growing up' time can become intense, perhaps difficult or distressing.

Second thought is to do with the way you people are 'located' in our society. They seem to occupy a somewhat odd place. At least in this country and at this point in our history, they seem to be on the one hand adored and courted and on the other marginalised. They are played up as a 'buying market' yet oddly disenfranchised.

My third thought is a bit more like a worry really. Certainly a question. It may be easiest to voice this by giving some examples. I walk into a centre and I see a young man seemingly intimidating another. In a way, it is a simple request for a cigarette. But the language is abusive and threatening and so is the physical stance associated with it. Is this just young men relating to each other in ways which fit for them? I see a young woman speaking to a youth worker. Her language is rich with swearing and she constantly spits at the feet of the worker. Perhaps the worker is afraid, perhaps this is crisis management. In a different setting I see a young person lying on a beanbag. A worker is physically distorted by her attempts to carry on a conversation with the young person who is at right angles to her. Elsewhere a group of young men come regularly to a centre; yet others stop coming because of the way they are treated by this group. I am told 'this is a place where they can just be themselves.' But I worry. Is this acceptance of who these young people are, or some quiet support of destructive behaviours?

Hmmm...?

I hear a young woman saying: 'this is the sort of drug education we young people want. This is what helps us. We should know, we are young people.' Except massive amounts of research tell us that the approach she is talking about tends to be at best unproductive, at worst, counterproductive.

In each of these situations there are many are of course many reasons why workers may decide not to comment or intervene. The timing is wrong, the young person's behaviour may be for them, quite reasonable; perhaps there is some bigger picture not obvious to the casual observer. There is no question as to whether or not to accept the young people involved in each of the settings. And it is often particularly within the role of youth work to engage with those who are on the outer of our community. The question for me, becomes one of how we accept a person while simultaneously being perhaps less accepting (perhaps challenging) of their views or actions.

For years I have asked young people what makes a good teacher, and two elements, expressed in many ways, have emerged over and over again. And you are not going to be surprised to read this. One is often expressed as something like: 'Someone who can control us.' The second is: 'Someone who you can relate to.' There seems to be some combination of providing direction, structure, or containment; together with some sense of justice, fairness, humour, compassion and humanity; some blend of acceptance, challenge and humanness. A relationship which creates a sense of ongoing process within which a young person can experiment, push the boundaries, find out 'stuff' and yet be safe, supported and contained. Teachers are not youth workers, but these are useful ideas to consider. And I remember too, the words of a 17 year old woman who told me that she was tired of people being nice to her, just so that they could help her. She said she thought that helping a person didn't necessarily mean making sure they are comfortable. Another interesting idea.

Having voiced some concerns, it seems only fair to stick my neck out here and give an example of what I think is good youth work practice. While youth work might be a chat in the street, a game of pool, painting a mural, a rap workshop, or a music performance, I only have access to the written word at this moment, so this is what I will use to try and give you an example of a process which I hope is both respectful and useful. I shall ask you 'dear reader' a series of questions. If you feel like answering them here and now you might want to do so with a pen and paper handy. Okay... first think of a time when you were terrific... when you did something noble, generous, kind, decent, compassionate, or considerate... it might have been a major event or something quite small....Once you have it in mind... draw a picture, something to represent the event....do this fairly quickly. In response to this question a young man produced the image below:(Thanks to 16 year old Jacob who drew this, and what follows.)



Okay that's it. This activity has tried to couple the two ingredients mentioned earlier some combination of structure with respect and freedom. You will decide if it has achieved this. Let me try and balance some of the specific elements which I feel might helped it achieve this balance.

There's choice: You decide what event you bring to mind

There's privacy: There is no need for anyone to ever know what you thought of or have drawn, unless you decide to tell them.

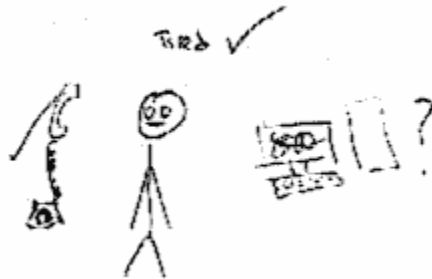
The topic is a bit interesting: It's your life, and you may have chosen something of genuine interest to you. People often do. The process is a bit interesting: Drawing quickly is a bit of fun. And we often access a part of ourselves when we think with a pen in our hand, and our thoughts and feelings start to emerge in front of us on the paper. The activity assumes you are an able person: It assumes you can think through an event and subject it to a little analysis. It demonstrates that you can actually do this. There is acceptance of you as a person. Not blind acceptance of all that you might do, but the questions are

respectful and there is a focus on your qualities and capacities as a human being.

In this case, part of the intention is to highlight a quality or strength. This can be important for a young person (for any of us) who may have forgotten their qualities or has lost touch with their own humanity. On another occasion it might be useful to be more 'challenging' of a person, to ask them to extend themselves in some way. I could ask you to think of a time when you were cruel to someone; or to a time when you were frightened, or angry, and we could explore what was happening at that time.

By way of an example, our conversation might go like the following, but let me remind you that if you decide to actually answer these questions you might just remember that this is just an article and you might not want to think of anything that would actually distress you.

Having said that, draw something to represent yourself, who you are. It may be just a stick figure, or a face or a symbol. Draw this in the centre of a page... and now think of a time when you didn't act well, when you did something which was less than noble... and draw all those things which were happening around you at that time; things which may have contributed in some way to you acting as you did...*(Thanks again to Jacob for this picture)*



Look and see which of these things were the most important, the most powerful. Note these. And now look at all of them and work out which of these things were in your control and which weren't. Tick the ones which were and put a cross against the ones that weren't. And one final thing, you have thought back to an event where you didn't act well. Write down how you know that you didn't act well; what tells you this...

Because i got into trouble.
guilt
started to think that i should do
something because dad was freakin

We could develop all sorts of conversations from here. Are the things that contributed still present in your life? What sort of difference do they make to how you act now? What control do you have or want to have in relation to each of them? And thinking of the time which came into action when you acted well, is this quality as strongly present in your life now as you would like it to be?

This activity has all the elements mentioned above but here there is some element of 'challenge', some questioning, a spirit of accepting the person but not necessarily everything they do in the world. There is a sense of asking a person to review and reflect. We could discuss with a person just what they might do with these reflections, but reflection may be enough now. Of course what happens next each person will decide for themselves.

That's it for the example. You'll decide whether or not it was successful. And of course, there are numerous other elements you may wish to name in a relationship: trust, democracy, admiration, a sense of adventure or discovery. I have chosen to highlight some ingredients which seem important to me.

Youth workers come into contact with young people at a time when those young people are developing their thinking about the world and their place in it. Perhaps also at a time when they are finding life, in some way, difficult. Whatever the circumstances, we owe it to the young people we have contact with to think carefully about what we offer them and the nature of the contact we have with them.