

# RELATIONSHIPS REALLY MATTER! DOING YOUTH WORK IN A CONTESTED SOCIETY (Northern Ireland)

## Personalising this work

In undertaking youth work in a contested society, such as Northern Ireland, relationships are a fundamental building block for the thoughtful practitioner, whether it is in them maintaining a vision of an interdependent society in the midst of segregating and rivalrous political dynamics, or promoting change and developing hope in young people who have been dominated by hurtful relationships and the dynamics of rivalry.

Relationships are foundational elements for each of us, from our conception. We are created out of relationships and cared for in different relationships, for good and ill. The extent to which our parents were at ease with each other, subsequently stayed together, or became divorced, separated or drifted apart are fundamental elements in who we have become.

The character of the relationships we have been in, and those who cared for us, influence us deeply. Who we are today, and what we are open to do from today on, is shaped by the relationships we have had and those we now experience.

As adults who usually meet young people in their free and associative time, through the quality of their relationships with young people, and in the quality of the informal meeting spaces they create, youth workers have an opportunity to enable people to grow in confidence and openness to others.

## People are founded in relationships

“We draw heavily on those relationships we are at ease in, those where we feel accepted. Day in and day out, these very relationships give us the potential to accept others, to show compassion, to understand, to be patient and even to forgive and start again.

There also are some relationships that are uneasy or deeply uncomfortable for us. These can be deep in our past yet still trouble us or interfere with our present day life. When we get upset it can often be that the unease we feel has to do with the legacy of these past hurtful relationships. These relationships count because they continually get in the way, they hold us back or have us go round old circles of argument, regret or anger. They matter also because, if acknowledged, they remind us of the need to attend to others, seek help or find ways to clear things up.”

## RELATIONSHIPS MATTER FOR THOUGHTFUL YOUTHWORX PRACTITIONERS

One fundamental tool in thoughtful youth work practice is our ability, as youth workers, to be open to those we work with, the ability to be completely present in the moment with the young person or group of young people, open to their needs. This demands that we understand ourselves in some depth, able to acknowledge those relationships that trouble us, and set them to one side.

**Relationships can live on in people in a positive manner.** Relationships ‘where others have given me my place’ and ‘where I have given others their place’ are building blocks for each of us to work hopefully, working as if change is possible. Such relationships are of a character that supports, gives ease and even cuts, or dissolves, other relationships that leave hurt and unease, that undermine or disempower.

**Relationships matter** because those relationships associated with feelings of hurt or unease those where a worker has felt demeaned or dis-empowered can get in the way of our good practice unless they are acknowledged, understood and integrated into who we now are and what understandings we now bring to our practice.

## Do relationships really matter? Most certainly!

In a contested society many people distrust others different to them. Young people need brought into experiences where new relationships with those different to them bring them into a more open and hopeful way of living.

A thoughtful worker will not be afraid to speak about new, trusting relationships with different others being an influence in whether young people find ways forward together, rather than continue with distrustful or fearful ones. Workers need to be prepared to confront people with the potential of open and trusting relationships in a personal manner, inviting young people to reflect on, and learn from them. This means being prepared to take the argument to them, inviting them to examine their different relationships at times of love, celebration, stress, grief, being acknowledged or being diminished.

*If you have ever been or still are in love! Of course relationships matter!  
If you have ever given birth or been present at the birth of your child. Of course relationships matter!*

*If you have ever stood at the burial of a loved one and been at peace in yourself for all that passed between you or been choked with grief or overcome with regrets at what was never shared between you or what was never healed. Of course relationships matter!*

*If you have ever felt the elation and comfort of being valued by friends at difficult points in life. Of course relationships matter!*

*If you have ever been hurt and know how that hurt gnaws at you and the people associated with that hurt when you meet them, avoid them or think of them. Of course relationships matter!*

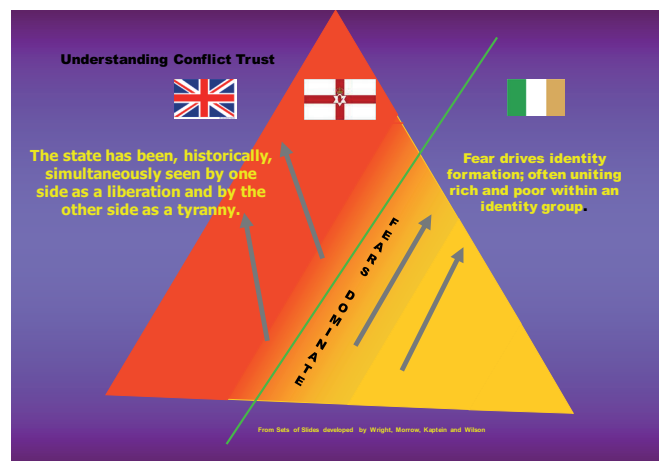
## 1. THE CONTEXT WE WORK WITHIN

### **Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland, is a contested society, an ethnic frontier.**

A contested society is one where there are groups firmly opposed to one another, owing their loyalties to different, competing, national identities. People from different, often opposed traditions, have few experiences in common that unite them across the traditional political / religious divides. People do not see themselves as equal citizens and are often organised around their secondary loyalties as groups and traditions.

### **In an ethnic frontier<sup>1</sup> the contesting traditions are in relative balance with one another and each is unable to finally dominate the other.**

Northern Ireland is one such frontier area. We represent it as having this shape:



**Diagram 1: The Ethnic Frontier where groups and traditions dominate**

### **Each tradition communally deters the other**

Each tradition has rich and poor within them readily united in the face of fear. Right /Left politics is not a strong reality and all politics is subject to the pull of the competing traditions. In an ethnic frontier, the violence of the other side, real or potential, dominates the views of all people on that side. This is, as the late Frank Wright called it, ‘communal deterrence’.

### **The Assumption of ‘Cultural Good Reason’ is used to legitimise inhuman actions**

In an ethnic frontier everyone has ‘cultural good reason’ for their actions, although this does not excuse their violence. Just as the on-looker sometimes has distance and discernment, those caught up in a conflict often do not have these capacities.

It is difficult to develop a coherent open practice across lines of tradition and belief in an ethnic frontier society, but it is imperative that professional workers do so, being led by professional values and ethics. Working in an ethnic frontier does mean that many people are even unaware of how they can buy in to opposed traditions and buttress these, when they work with young people.

Relationships matter in direct youth work practice because a Community Youth Worker facilitates relationships in the activities they organise, and the clubs or premises they frequent. The base of thoughtful youth work practice is to foster personal and social education and this base cannot be built unless relationships are easy and enjoyable. They also matter in the work of managers, Board Member or Policy Makers because such people determine the resources, support and facilities the workers can draw on.

This text seeks to draw on some of the best practice in relationship work in youth work practice in Northern Ireland since 1965 while, at the same time, trying to make such practice learning relevant to staff working today, locally and internationally. Such a practice is committed to enhancing the potential of young people in a wider Europe and a more global and diverse world. Ethnic frontier characteristics are now present in many modern cities as they become more and more diverse. Ethnic frontiers are hard places for newly arrived people, and they demand a new openness from those already there.

Relationships really matter because the thoughtful youth worker is interested in strengthening a diverse civil society and creating a less fearful environment. He or she wishes to equip young people to be more at ease with difference and wants to promote shared values around dignity, respect, trust, rights and living interdependent lives<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. THE CONFIDENCES YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO DEVELOP

### **Personal and Social Education cannot be peripheral work**

To make relationships freely and responsibly, to cross lines of difference with greater ease, to be open to others, regardless of their identity, are gifts that each person needs in the modern world. Promoting personal and social education with young people is a central, not a peripheral, educational task, because relationships are essential to each individual's human growth and possibilities in this life.

The boundaries within which young people are at ease are laid down in the quality of relationships they have had. The unwillingness young people exhibit to enter some types of relationships or go to spaces where there are strangers is, in part, anchored in the history of relationships they have had to this present moment.

In a much more diverse society, and a more global world, the need for adolescents to have confidence and ease in relationships is a new imperative, otherwise many young people will limit their life chances.

Overcoming hostility and dissolving enmity are practical, daily, reconciliation tasks for all people. Being at ease in relationships is at the heart of the reconciliation that human beings continually need, and not just in divided societies. In the experiences of thoughtful youth and community work practices with young people over the last fifty years in Northern Ireland, there have been programmes and experiences<sup>3</sup> that have built such confidence and ease. Whilst these experiences have not always been multiplied across all work and informed youth policy as much as they should have, these experiences are important. To hear others experiences, to build understanding, to develop shared respect and shared values, are key experiences for laying a basis for a fair, open and continually reconciling society<sup>4</sup>.

### **Strong Social and Personal Education practice lays foundations for a reconciling society**

Such social and personal education work develops skills essential to healing and reconciliation. To experience ‘others’ is at the very root of the Greek word for reconciliation, “allos”, ‘the other’. Reconciliation means to overcome hostile otherness and is a task that, in the Greek, carries with it both relational and structural dimensions<sup>5</sup>.

It requires that the other is taken seriously, accorded respect and dignity, and so it not only carries within itself hints of improved relationships but also notions of rights and safeguards, requiring that ‘each different other’ has their place.

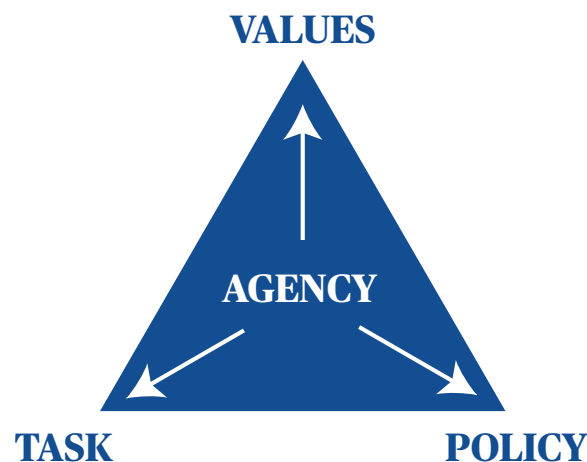
In this society (NI) no wonder that such a term is often denied significance or demeaned! To accept reconciliation in its relational and structural dimensions of safeguarding everyone, means that it challenges the separatist and exclusive identities most of us too readily fall into when the inter-communal fears of an ethnic frontier grow.

To develop work that underpins personal and social education: through each giving the other their place; each securing and maintaining the boundaries that ensure respect and dignity for all is assured; are major contributions to community understanding in this society. Such youth work practice is a platform on which to build a good relations agenda open to people of different religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groups<sup>6</sup> as well as underpinning the reality of treating all people on a base of equality and fundamental human rights. Where this is experienced relationally in groups, clubs, sports, music, cultural and artistic groups young people will grow tall and know, in their being, something about the human need for dignity between people, with respect and worth being accorded to all.

### **A Values-Led Profession must embrace the reality that Relationships Really Matter**

In a conflicted society it is easy for youth workers and teachers to get busy within the competing traditions, and even serve these traditions uncritically, without being held, or holding themselves, accountable to some wider and agreed professional values. It is important to remember that some social workers in Germany before 1939 ‘did their job’, but did not work to a value base and so simply equipped the state with an ability to take away many ‘different people’ to the camps and the gas chambers; people with disabilities, Romanies, Gay and Lesbian people and the large Jewish population<sup>7</sup>. The explicit leadership of German Governments, to teach young people about this history, post 1945, needs acknowledged<sup>8</sup>.

Community Youth Workers belong to a values-led profession whose work originates in a value of ‘well-being’. Each worker and agency should be advocating for the relational dimensions ‘of association, meeting and engaging’ between different young people to be given primacy. Each agency should be continually negotiating the relational tension between the values they hold, the policies they work within and their task to assist the development of young people.



**Diagram 2: The competing and complementary tensions to keep workers, managers and agencies centred.**

### **Having a Value that works for a shared and interdependent future**

It will be an important challenge to face all in the coming years when people ask “*What did you do in ‘the war’, mummy, daddy, uncle, aunt, older colleague?*” When people look back on these recent years in Northern Ireland, will they be able to see that present day workers have left a clear imprint within youth work agencies and schools working to a wide value base and vision and that paid policy makers, managers and fieldwork staff worked to a vision of a ‘Shared Future’<sup>9</sup> or will they see a practice that served partisanship<sup>10</sup>?

Reconciliation needs to be at the centre of personal and social education in a contested society, it is not an optional add-on, so often dropped or let slip because of time or budget constraints! To engage with the central theme of meeting difference in a contested society is to equip young people and adults to more confidently move across other relational differences more easily, differences of origin, sexual orientation, disability- the full equality agenda.

Young people, many perhaps not cognisant of much of the early years of the violence in Northern Ireland, still need to find their ways forward in an atmosphere that adults and contesting cultures have established. Sometimes it has been a relational chaos, with everyone unsure where to turn and many seeking to blame ‘only the other side’, never acknowledging the circular and reciprocal nature of our many violent exchanges.

Youth workers who deny the relational dimensions of their work, put back the possibilities for people to meet across lines of difference and create a society where fragile relationships, between people associated with different traditions, are established and nurtured. Where risks in relationships are more freely taken, people understand how central such risks are to finding new ways forward together. Where the groups, organisations and institutions a contested society depends on for promoting the civic and public good take their internal staff relationships and external working relationships seriously, such institutions promote and sustain trust building.

### **3. UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS**

Relationships become important building blocks to transcend enmity in contested societies. Acknowledging, building and sustaining ‘a shared future’ (endnote 9) is now a core public sector policy task in Northern Ireland. It is a must for the voluntary, community and faith sectors who access public money, a positive option for independent funders, and an essential tool for the private and trade union sectors, if we are to grow a sustainable economy here.

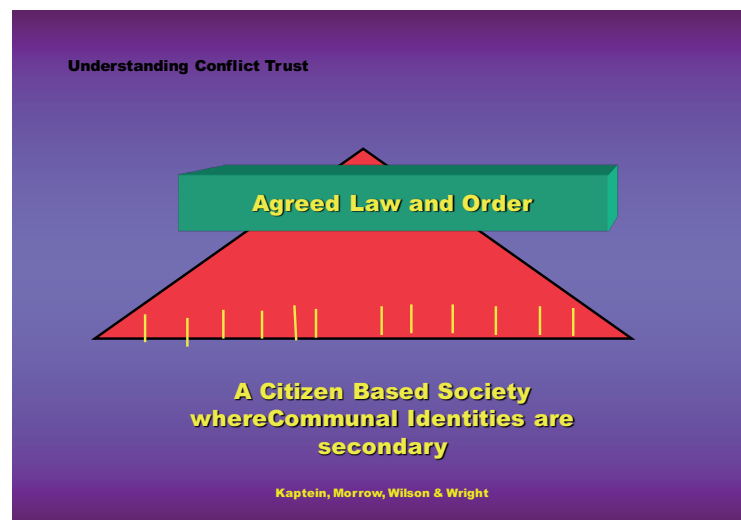
This theme of relationships is also becoming more important in an emerging literature that argues that modern societies are now relationally impoverished places. The emerging discourse<sup>11</sup> over the ‘politics of well being’ is a debate about why more successful societies are becoming increasingly less happy places.

For me, the models outlined below are part of the explanation of this relational impoverishment. In both contested, and more stable, societies people are more and more involved in relationships that exhaust and destroy the very qualities of trust, openness, reciprocity, sharing and mutual values that a society needs embedded in the experience of its people. We may need to re-skill people, rich and poor, to be more at ease in relationships with people very different to them and so the quality practice developed by community youth workers in a contested society has something to offer on this wider social canvas also.

**LEARNING ‘AS IF’ CHANGE IS POSSIBLE****‘Belonging to our own’ or ‘belonging together’?**

In quality community youth work practice in Northern Ireland people have learned that the slender strand of learning together, across lines of inter communal fear in the midst of conflict, is an experience to value. In the history of community relations practice in Northern Ireland we have seen people and organisations often moving between two worlds, depending on how high their fears are.

- World 1 is the experience of belonging to a group or tradition before all else. This means that the different groups see some, like themselves, who are either loyal (Unionist) or nationalist (Irish Nationalists/ Republicans) and the others as disloyal or anti-national. Common and equal citizenship is not a primary reality. In a contested society most people give their primacy of identity to one or other of the opposed identities or nationalisms, craving certainty rather than change. (See Diagram 1 above)
- World 2 is the civil society model, where people aspire to being within a more agreed society with left- right politics. This means that we see each other as equal and different citizens, members of one society. (See Diagram below)



**Diagram 3: World 2-A Representation of a Citizen based society**

**Taking Risks for relationships with People Different to Yourself**

There are many women and men, young and old, who in spite of being injured or bereaved have wished to move beyond this conflictual experience together, meeting those people and members of groups they previously thought of as enemies or threats<sup>12</sup>. In their fragile experience these people demonstrate that ‘living as if change is possible’ between people is still one-way forward in a contested society<sup>13</sup>.

Without making such behaviours only the domain of ‘exceptional people’, their actions carry the essential elements of acknowledging one another as equal and different citizens of one place. Their steps are both challenges to build a shared civic space and also invitations to be open to those who are more recent arrivals here.

Such experiences of ‘living as if change is possible’ are invitations away from old certainties and many, understandably, do not wish it. To live ‘as if change is possible’ is the challenge in contested societies and an emerging challenge for many modern ‘stable’ societies, as each has their citizen base become more diverse.

These experiences of meeting different people who are understood to be threats will only come into being through taking risks in relationships. In such relationships people experience something of the challenge of living as equal citizens that are necessary prerequisites for an agreed society. For a time these may only be experienced in small meetings and groups until a wider momentum develops in the wake of an agreed political settlement. However, at all times they are essential to honouring the hope before, and the promise after, such a final settlement.

Such experiences of meeting across lines of difference are carried by groups and in the actions and voices of many people who have given this society models of risk taking across traditional lines of fear and threat. These people have changed their views and invited others to do the same<sup>14</sup>. Such practice is at the core of thoughtful youth work practice here.

Whilst the literature around these people and their meetings and engagements is only developing, this slender strand of work<sup>15</sup> has been around since the late 1960’s. It is within the experience and histories of people and many small and medium sized voluntary and community organisations, some specifically established around the reconciliation task e.g. Corrymeela, International Voluntary Service, Holiday Projects West, Peace People, ISE, Glencree, Peace Farm, Intercom, Quaker Peace

and Service, Witness for Peace, Counteract, The Cross Group, Community Dialogue and numerous victim and survivor support groups. Others have been primarily focussed on work such as community development, mutual understanding education, the women’s movement, trades union education, inter-church and inter-faith work<sup>16</sup>.

### **Consistently Learning and Building New Habits and Patterns**

Such people and groups are not people set apart but rather people, just like the rest of us, subject to the pressures and foibles of daily life. In the **events** they initiated they mostly have been unaware of the new patterns they helped create. Their efforts contributed to **accumulating patterns and structures** of diverse reconciliation practice being patiently built up over years, work that, at least, has been a counterpoint to hopelessness. Such work offers points of contrast, places where **assumptions** about people being able to change have been laid down; spaces where the potential of relationships between unexpected people has released creative responses rather than closed them down. Looked at through these eyes one can discern how individual actions can, often without realising it, accumulate and build something more substantial. This knowledge about the potential of individual actions bringing change must be a fundamental understanding informing youth work practice in a contested society.

### **The Building Blocks of a Contrast Culture<sup>17</sup>**

The accumulation of this relationship work is significant in terms of building a more open civil society. The traditions and experiences people come from are diverse and, for a significant number, these meetings across divides have given them, and others, new possibilities to be with those they have been fearful or suspicious of.

The fact is that these people’s experience often sets them on the edge of the family, tradition or community organisations they belong to. Although they can be readily isolated from these groups, this does not diminish the important strand of learning that these people keep alive around reconciliation and meeting across boundaries<sup>18</sup>.

In their best moments, and with the freedom that comes with having been in open and respectful relationships<sup>1</sup> with those different to them, these people have experienced foundation blocks that are essential to building a more secure society. They have met as equal citizens, they have learned that each is important and different, they have experienced a degree of interdependence with that ‘other’ and ‘others’ like them.

Such a form of interdependence is what Mc Donagh (see (5) above) explores when he argues that reconciliation demands that the ‘other’ is taken seriously, not just in improved relationships but also in safeguarding their rights whereby their place is secured.

## **4. SOME FUNDAMENTAL MODELS OF RELATIONSHIPS**

Many workers I met in youth and community work practice (1970-73 and 78-85), as well as in programmes of initial professional training I was responsible for (78-85), readily succumbed to a culture of despair if they could not see a value in their work, surrounded by so much fear and violence<sup>19</sup>. Out of such personal challenges a small group of people, associated with the Corrymeela Community of reconciliation, searched for understandings about relationships and reconciliation work that would inform relational and structural work for change and enable people working with young people in residential and community based programmes. We drew heavily on the work of (the late) Rene Girard, based in Stanford University, with an interest in rivalry and conflict, as well as freedom in relationships and structures.

### **A Learning Theory that Underpins a Relational Approach to Personal and Social Education in a Contested Society**

Deep learning is a dynamic and relational experience, shaped by the quality of relationships we enjoy with those we learn with or live amongst. Girard emphasises that the nature of mimetic change<sup>20</sup> in human relationships is not, primarily, a matter of conscious imitation but occurs between us, irrespective of whether we know it and wish it.

For Girard, in old culture, many of the ‘models’ on whom people based their lives and their wants were outside their world, distant and far apart from daily life. The relationships were externally mediated.

Girard suggests that within modern society, other human beings more and more mediate people’s desires. These mediators are people like themselves, no longer distant, no longer external and ‘removed’. We are internally mediated. The modern predicament is that other people increasingly mediate our wishes and desires. When relationships between people are not clear, people can become rivals or obstacles for each other, and that is quickly conflictual.

In another manner, people can be reciprocal models of freedom for one another. Each one of us needs some of this experience in our lives. Here I locate the task of the informal youth work educator, in the midst of potentially rivalrous relationships with the potential to bring young people into relationships that give freedom, space and ease. Their task is to give relational space, and model a relational freedom, that dissolves or erodes other conflictual relationship patterns.

The following models have been used to assist community youth workers, and others, to reflect on and analyse the relationships they are in. People are invited to reflect on the nature of their rivalry, conflicts and freedom to learn with

1 I refer to these relationships as being ones where “Each person has their place”. See text below on model -model relationships explanation.

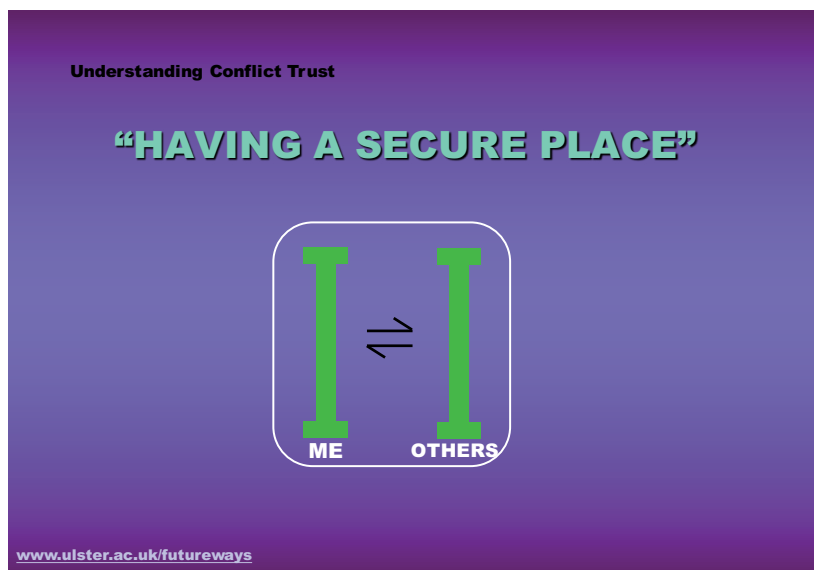
people, and within groups and organisations. In different ways, and through the mediums of story telling, personal reflection, creative activity, role play, music and art, they have been used with ‘end of primary school’ children, adolescents who are high flyers and those who have deeply problematic relationship patterns, adults in management, adults in political, community and religious conflicts, and adults just trying to gain some space and clarity in relationships with their children and relatives!

**RELATIONAL MODELS THAT ASSIST PEOPLE LEARN IN A CONTESTED SOCIETY**

***Where ‘Each gives the Other their Place’ (A Model-Model relationship)***

When people are in relationships with others with whom they do not rival, they model freedom with each other. Each gives the other their place. They are in, what Girard calls, *a model-model relationship, where each trusts the other and is at ease. Each is mimetic with the freedom and ease the other has.*

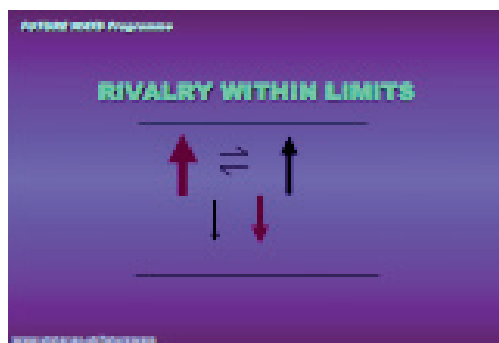
In such a relationship, people learn without fear or threat. It is the basis for real learning about trust and freedom, change and growth. It has the character of securing the place and rights of the other. (See Mc Donagh earlier)



**Diagram 4: A Model-Model relationship-Each models trust and security with ‘the different other’**

***‘Rivalry with Limits’ (A Model-Rival Relationship)***

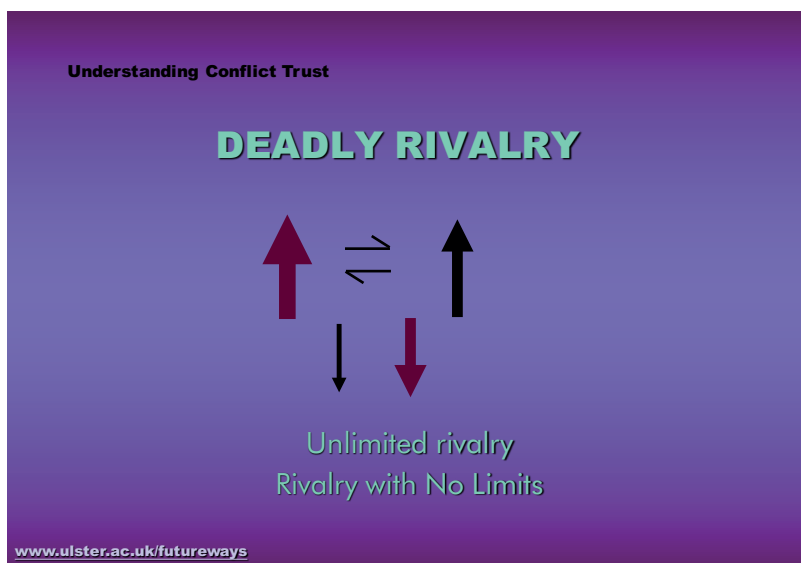
When people are in relationships where they are rivals with those they think they can beat or win over, they model rivalry. This is what is called a ‘model-rival’ relationship, within limits. In such relationships they are mimetic with rivals that stand in the way of what they understand to be their desires. A ‘rivalry with limits’ is more easily contained with agreed rules such as with gaming and competition structures.



**Diagram 5: Rivalry within Limits  
A Model-Rival Relationship**

**‘Deadly Rivalry’ itself**

As people increasingly rival beyond assumed boundaries, the reason for their quarrel is soon forgotten. Each only is rivalling, and perhaps fighting with the other, in ‘deadly rivalry’. In such a rivalry without limits, rivals see only the other and become totally fascinated by the other, eventually becoming doubles with the other and even physically acting alike.

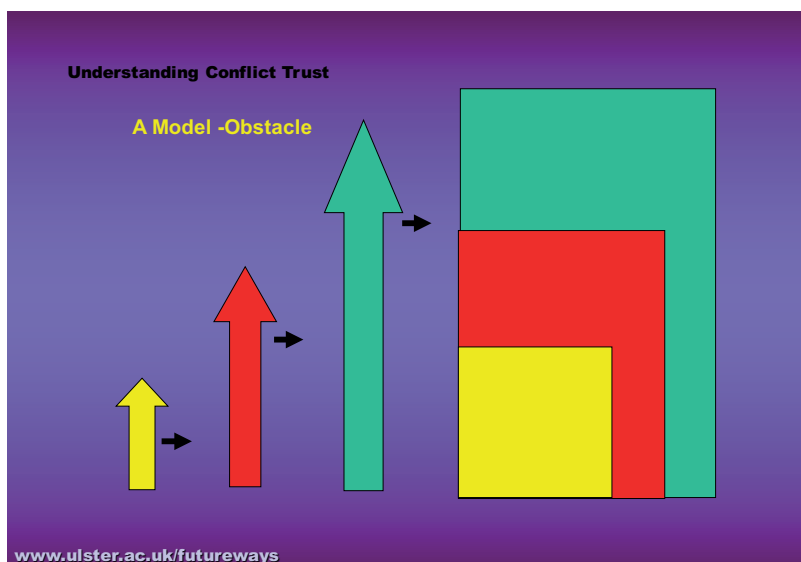


**Diagram 6: Deadly Rivalry**  
**A Model-Rival Relationship-with No Limits**

Those who rival lose more and more of their differences; they become more and more alike. They end up in the equilibrium of a power-game, using all their energies to maintain it, they destroy the other or they end up in chaos<sup>21</sup>.

**Seeking the Impossible Dream (A Model-Obstacle relationship)**

When people come into rivalry with unattainable goals (such as living forever, impossible standards, perfection or ethnocentric beliefs in a diverse world) or rival with people who are impossible to beat, they model rivalry against impossible odds. They seek ‘the impossible dream’.



**Diagram 7: Seeking the Impossible Dream**  
**A Model-Obstacle relationship**

In such a relationship people are mimetic with standards or images it is impossible to attain. They are in what we call a ‘model-obstacle’ relationship. In such relationships people continually strive to attain what is impossible and become increasingly frustrated in their continual striving and eventually depressed. One of the few ways out of such relationships is to ‘simply’ walk away, leaving the impossible standards behind them<sup>22</sup>.

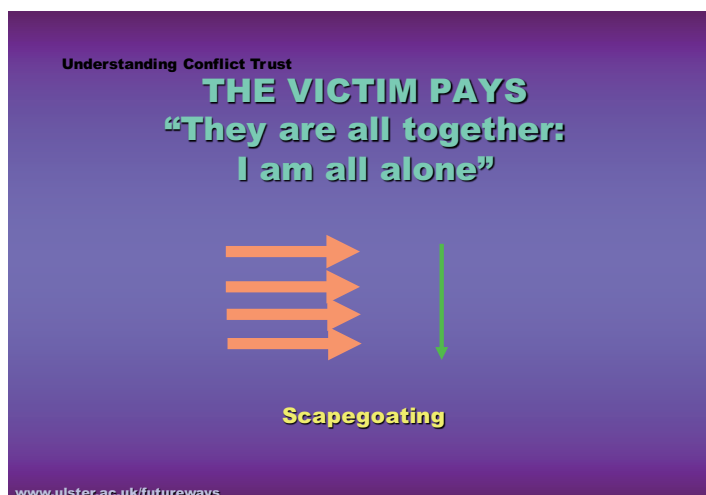
When parents set the highest standard for their children to attain in examinations they can establish a model-obstacle for the student to rival with. For example, parents expect a student to attain four ‘A’ grades without reference to their abilities, and their child struggles to attain this impossible standard, because the parents are their model. When the student ‘only’ attains, say, 3 ‘A’ grades and a ‘B’ grade, still belonging to the highest achieving group, he/she becomes depressed, even though this is an excellent result.



Peace, itself, can also be made into a model-obstacle when it becomes something to be gained for its own sake, rather than as something viewed as an outcome of people living together successfully.

### ***Scapegoating and Victimage – “They are all together and I am all alone”***

Girard suggests in “Violence and the Sacred” (Girard, 1977) that the threat of escalating rivalries in the human community would have reached the point where all would have died unless some cultural mechanism checked this process in some way. For him this is the scapegoat mechanism, where the escalating feelings associated with ‘all rivalling with all’ is replaced by the unanimity of ‘all against one’.



**Diagram 8: They are All Together and I Am All Alone  
The Experience of the Scapegoat**

For Girard all human culture flows from this action, an action rooted in arbitrary, often violent expulsion or death. He argues that all human cultures seek to hide and deny this foundational truth.

People sometimes speak in the mixed tradition groups my colleagues and I facilitate about experiences of intimidation and threat. Being scapegoated is easier if people are left alone, readily isolated. Sometimes to merely stand with the scapegoat unmasks, and disempowers, the mechanism’s power to isolate.

*“I am the trade union shop steward in a mixed firm. Our boss was killed; he was shot down in his office by terrorists. The car used by the killers was found some time later. Because it was near to where some employees live some of the work force turned on them. I took it upon myself to drive them home every day after that, for some time. I know they had nothing to do with it” (A Shop Steward-Wilson, 1994)*

Girard<sup>23</sup> argues that modern society now has to find relational forms of living together without the scapegoat mechanism.

*... human beings must become reconciled without the aid of sacrificial intermediaries or resign themselves to the imminent extinction of humanity...There can no longer be any question of giving polite lip-service to a vague ‘ideal of non-violence’. There can be no question of producing more pious views and hypocritical formulae. Rather, we will more and more often find ourselves faced with an implacable necessity. The definitive renunciation of violence, without any second thoughts, will become for us the condition sine qua non for the survival of humanity itself and for each one of us”*

### ***Relationships repeated over time and relationships experienced in one space together now.***

One way people learn is through doing and repeating actions and developing skills. People do what they do in the present because of skills and ways they have acquired and honed through repetition over time. This is temporal learning, ‘learning over time’.

Another form of learning is the learning that comes from meeting people ‘in this space at this very moment’-this is ‘spatial learning’. If the relationships are open, people can make new decisions about what they wish to repeat and what they wish to change. With support, even hurtful relationships can be dissolved; with support, people can make life changing directions, such as establishing a new way of speaking or thinking or becoming more at ease with strangers.

One task of the thoughtful youth worker is to develop relationships marked by openness that enables young people, over time, to grow in ease and confidence. Another task is to give opportunities for young people to make new choices and make a cut in those relationship structures that often have bound them to hurtful actions and practices. For both levels of work the establishing of relationships where there is freedom, not rivalry, is central (Wilson, 2015).

## 5. WORKING IN THE PRESENT-THE TASK OF THE COMMUNITY YOUTH WORKER

The possibilities for change in people's lives, for better or worse, are always in the present moment. This is why youth workers are charged with ensuring that the relationship spaces they create in activities, discussions and meetings are as free of rivalry and as open as possible to all. In such spaces, where relationships between people are relationships of respect and acknowledgement, people may become informed about others or gain new insights and understandings through which they change.

Youth workers, in the very spaces they create, either make new choices possible, or reduce them for others, for themselves and their colleagues. In this moment their task, for better or for worse, is to seek to create some reflective space and open engagement between everyone that people might learn something new, gain some new insight or even just choose to be a little more open to others they have previously ignored or judged for years!

In the present moment people can be in relationships that give space or possibilities, space in which they exercise a choice. In the present moment all that has gone before can be replicated or, in a small or large manner, changed, cut or dissolved.

### RELATIONSHIPS AND CHANGE

#### Change can be liberating

*A man spoke of: “having never trusted ‘the other side’ until I met John here, (referring to a person beside him). Over the past two years my life has changed and my attitudes too. To work together, to see young people enjoy each other’s company in our small, often bitter, town has changed me.”*  
(Staff in a community relations agency learning course, Wilson, 1994)

These theoretical perspectives on relationships can give the personal and social educator practical help in understanding and unraveling the lines of rivalry being spoken about in meetings, and groups, in this contested society. All these forms of relationships are endlessly intertwined in the lives of everybody, and of every group or nation. Meeting together, acknowledging differences and sharing stories about their own lives and the choices people have made and had made for them, is one basis on which to develop education that informs citizenship and that contributes to a more open and accepting civil society.

To enable these models to be understood and applied to the relationships and structures people belong to in a contested society is an important element in assisting people learn, exercise choices and make changes.

#### Finding relationship structures which give possibilities; cutting those structures that enslave

Three fundamental personal and social education tasks are:

1. To find relationships and structures where people can find ways to be together that free one another. Where they learn to be open to difference and trust those who are strangers to them.
2. To find ways that limit, or eliminate, the escalation of conflictual and destructive rivalry.
3. The need for people, and groups, to get space to identify those relationships where they are in rivalry with impossible standards, ethnocentric ambitions or caught up in the dynamics of interminable scapegoating.

Escalating rivalries can only be avoided if people find ways to limit rivalry getting out of bounds and live without becoming locked into the scapegoat mechanism. These rivalrous and scapegoating dynamics have less power when they are unmasked or named in daily life.

When people and groups identify these dynamics in their relationships, and get some distance and freedom from them, then they are able to exercise other, more liberating choices, if they wish to.

*“I held on to a policeman who was dying, he had been shot. I even went with him in the ambulance. I could not leave him there; there was no one else around, until the ambulance came. Some time later the spouse of the policeman contacted me to thank me. There was one question she wished to know the answer to, ‘had he died instantly or was he in pain?’ I said instantly, there was no pain.”*

*“The picture of the scapegoat you drew there brought this back to me. He was a scapegoat, all alone. I stayed with him, not to leave him there alone and exposed. (Community Group member speaking about scapegoats)”*  
(Wilson, 1994)

The ability of young people and adults to develop such insights is central to a new practice of ‘learning for citizenship’ and ‘building a more open civil society’. In the example below people spoke of moving into rivalry and being able to get free of it.

*“When a close relative was killed by a paramilitary group, I could feel myself moving away from the mixed friendships I had, and move more towards my immediate family circle. The unanimous way they all condemned the action, those in church and all I had known for many years, was a comfort to me. They were such a strong support for me. I even began to agree with the sectarian comments they made, which I would never have associated myself with before.*

*Through this all, my Catholic friends kept in touch; they visited my relatives and me. They were not put off by the hardening in my attitudes, or the strong feelings against Catholics that developed in the area after the shooting. They saved me from becoming bitter and, in the end, I moved back to them again and away from remaining extreme. Some of my Protestant friends moved this way too and they're grateful the Catholic friends stuck by us.” (An adult cross-community group member-Wilson, 1994)*

### **“I am more than my beliefs”**

When people and groups take the step of meeting those they have been fearful of, they create the possibility of coming into model-model relationships that cut, or at least dissolve, some of the old rivalries. This is the hopeful reality for human beings. In relationships where they are given their place, they can exercise a different choice and direction and they have more freedom.

That is not to say that these meetings are automatically soft and warm spaces. Rather, in such a relationship, often initially safeguarded by trusted friends or third parties, hard realities can be spoken about in a more open and respectful manner.

Often conflicts tend to narrow the space for meeting. In conflicts people are reduced to their core beliefs whereas in these new spaces people experience that they are more than their beliefs.

*In my own personal history I was born at different times and in different places to you; I lived with different people. I had different relationships with my brothers, sisters, cousins and other relatives to all other people around me. I learnt to walk, talk and think through meeting and being with a whole range of people. In my home and community around me there were many different types and conditions of people, some able bodied; some with learning disabilities; some lonely people, some funny people, some characters. In my life I have experiences of being an infant, a child, an adolescent and perhaps even an adult-these all carry different memories for me and make me different. In the people I have met and the places I have frequented and the views I have heard and agreed with or argued against I am different to others too.’*

In such meetings reflective cultures can be created, where people respond to what the other says and how they say it more than the mere reaction, or riposte, characteristic of more rivalrous or obstacle laden relationships.

### **Relationships where people learn freedom, cutting old rivalries**

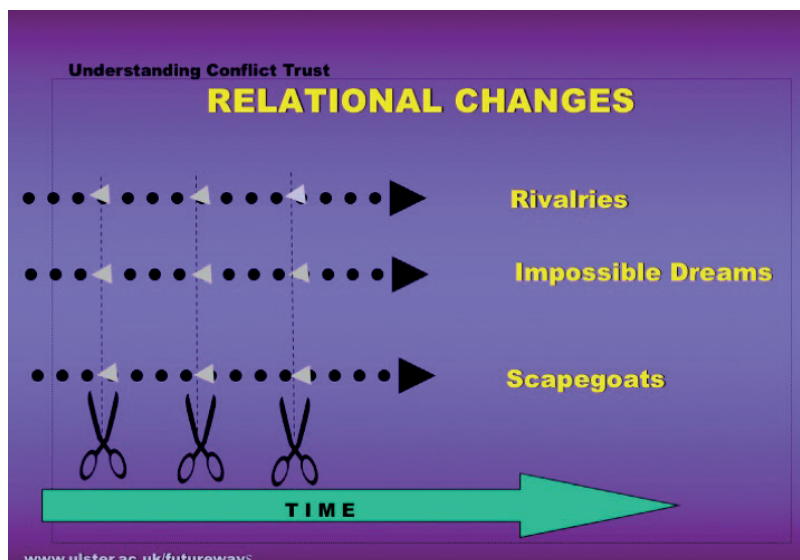
In the absence of open relationships between estranged people only insults and accusations are traded. In an open meeting, hard and difficult experiences can eventually be spoken about and acknowledged, unexpected responses can be made and understandings evolve about the rivalry people have been caught up in, or the scapegoating people have been the object of.

Meeting together, acknowledging differences and sharing stories about their own lives, hearing the choices people have felt forced to take (in rivalry) and the choices people freely wish to take now (in openly meeting together), is a basis of education for citizenship in a contested society. Sharing times of being identified as a potential scapegoat, and even bringing humour to this encounter, can bring different people together more.

*Paul (a very large man in all ways physical), was in a position where transport for a group had not turned up on time: “a young person from a Catholic group visiting my club was going to get beaten up by local youths outside the club. I was ridiculed for safeguarding a child from ‘the other tradition’ as I stood with the child. I challenged the youths to take me on if they wished, maybe, being the size and weight I am, I put them off!” (Wilson, 1994)*

If citizenship in more agreed societies has the character of being equal yet different under the law, then one task for youth work organisations in a contested society is to provide spaces where people can meet in relationships not dominated by fear or threat, and learn from each other.

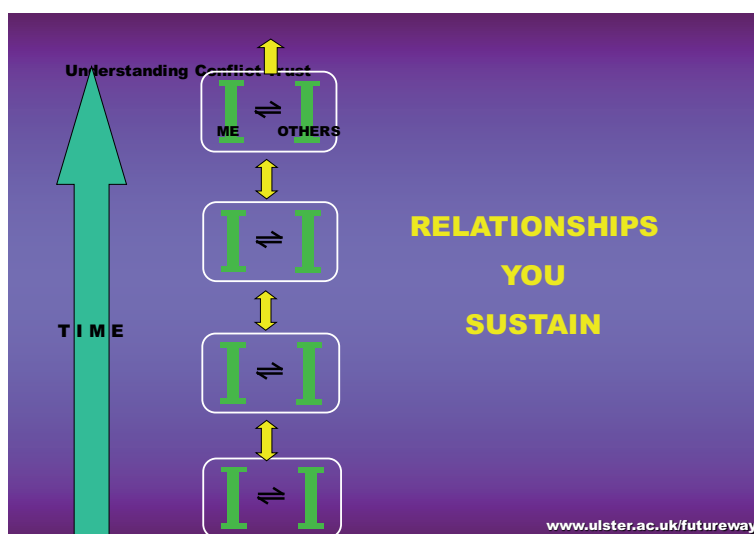
One of the learning tasks for such organisations is to offer people from diverse traditions ways of meeting and gaining new understandings of how people can meet and act together, beyond fear, threat or violence. Such experiences cut old rivalries or end victimisation or scapegoating.



**Diagram 9: The Relational Changes that dissolve or cut old rivalrous ways**

Another learning task is to enable young people to understand how communal rivalry and violence has shaped many relationships, leading them to see others as primarily members of aligned or opposed traditions, making them less free to meet as individual citizens.

Just as we are deeply mimetic with others who are our rivals, we are also mimetic with those relationships where we have been given our place, ensuring there is an openness to meet with others, share and learn openly. When such open meetings do occur, for that time, individual young people experience a different sense of belonging with one another.



**Diagram 10: Relationships of Freedom and Trust that We Sustain**

## 6. THE LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION

### The Youth Worker needs an understanding of the context

The need is to acknowledge Northern Ireland as an ethnic frontier, a place where the post first World War (1914-18), ‘national self determination regime’ of Woodrow Wilson could not be exercised. In such an area, the historically opposed traditions made it impossible to secure and sustain a political agreement. Probably, had an all Ireland solution been the preferred solution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this still would have been an ethnic frontier.

Currently, while we have a new political agreement, and all major parties are involved in a shared executive, there is the historical problem of religious and political clashes. The new challenge is of being a more open society that welcomes people from diverse ethnic minority traditions, people from the enlarged European Community, and beyond.

The challenge and opportunity to build a more diverse and potentially multi-polar society has to be at the centre of the Personal and Social Education agenda. The existential reality, to build experiences, relationships, communities and organisations capable of making all people feel at ease and equal citizens, more than members of competing traditions or

minority communities, is at the centre of this educational task.

The link between personal and social education and the good relations agenda (See the NI Act 1998 Section 75 (2)) that lays a duty to promote good relations between people from different religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groups needs forged. The carriers of this task are primarily elected politicians, adults who direct institutions, policy makers and administrators that develop policies and secure budgets, as well as teachers and youth workers who are responsible for the learning environments.

### **The Youth Worker and Teacher needs to believe in the power of meeting**

To develop greater ease and confidence between people from different backgrounds, traditions, religious cultures and racial groups is no peripheral theme. There is a need for “meeting” and “acknowledgement” where people create a shared narrative that acknowledges the past, develop new understandings of the present, and promote a new language around a shared future and the promotion of good relations. This is a central challenge for professional youth workers and teachers.

Contested spaces need a language that is future centred and experiences that give people something that is totally different and inclusive. Such language, and such experiences, can cause people to, at least, critically question their own identity traditions. This is a task for a value led profession of youth work.

The reality of an ethnic frontier is that ‘group identity’ is more primary than ‘individual, equal and different’ citizenship. Such a place needs ‘in between spaces’ where people are given their place by others and they give others their place also. Such spaces are relational experiences where traces of the character of citizenship are present and real. This is a task for the creative imagination of youth workers in a contested space.

The task of the informal educator is to create, nurture and sustain such spaces because that is a space where people and groups can imagine, model, and experience more open engagements between different people.

Whether Northern Ireland exists: as it now is; becomes part of a new united Ireland; or remains in a diminished UK if the UK withdraws from the European Union; the reality would still exist of it being:

- a deeply rivalrous society, where the potential of deadly rivalry remains;
- a society dominated by the impossible dream of ethnocentrism from different sides;
- a place where fear can readily trump hope;
- a place where ‘different others’ are always to blame, scapegoats of the different traditions.

### **The Youth Worker needs an enlightened policy framework**

In the midst of such dynamics, the space to develop new relationships and understandings can be diminished and closed down unless those working for Personal and Social Education acknowledge this context. Informal and formal educators need to have their work motivated by the vision of building safe spaces in which ease with differences, and an openness to others are, understood to be central.

Such work needs the potential of spaces for association and voluntary engagement that an enlightened Youth Service can offer. This work needs the ‘zing’ that goes with solid evening youth club or youth organisation work, group work, residential education, team and programme work that good Community Youth Workers, supported by enlightened and supportive managers, can do with ease and some grace!

The need to grow, develop, and multiply spaces where people are understood to be equal and different citizens first, not members of a group or tradition, is paramount in a contested space. The challenge for youth work organisations is to grow groups, organisation and institutions that increasingly know this reality.

Some starting points for this more long-lasting work is: in work that affirms people associating, mixing and meeting; in changing the cultures of existing organisations to take responsibility and work for a shared vision; and in growing new organisations and activities that have shared governance, diverse leadership and inter-linked activities

Field Workers have a responsibility here and also Managers, Policy Makers and Board Members (see appendix). The development of shared work or cross tradition governance would substantiate good relations practice and would enable the society to become more open to making this society an open space for all.

Work that unpacks the unhelpful manners in which we have constructed race, and that deny us from meeting as members of one race, the human race, needs done together. Organisations, old and new, need to now commit themselves to find ways of meeting, and listening, between people from different religious, political and racialised<sup>24</sup> experiences.

Contested societies highlight the need for practitioners to be alert ‘to the assimilative’ tendencies of majorities, who can always be open to people who are no political threat, and so often wish ‘others’ to become like them!

## 7. DO RELATIONSHIPS STILL MATTER WHEN IT COMES TO ORGANISATIONS?

### **Aligning the Values. Practice and Policies of Youthwork Organisations**

Advocacy about this work needs critically engaged with, while mainstreaming Personal and Social Education. This work means that staff need to insist that institutions, and organisations, are human spaces and do their educational / learning work better when people:

- Have their place (Equity);
- Are respected and respectful of others (Diversity) and have their different gifts and backgrounds valued;
- Move about in spaces that are committed to a Shared Future together, building common civic values (Interdependence) (See (ii) below).

Even in task centred work aimed at delivering programmes to young people with specific needs, thoughtful youth work has to stay on a relational level. If such young people have difficulty standing up to peer group pressures, or moving free of a sub culture that limits them, teaching them only skills and techniques without assisting them unmask and discover the ways rivalrous relationships might be binding them, will have limited impact.

Youthwork Directors and Fieldworkers must argue an educational rationale that acknowledges the associative and communal dimensions of learning, and the power of relational work in enabling young people to walk free of many of the limiting patterns of relationships they are in. When people change from 'having to be there' to 'choosing to be there', even in a required course, deeper learning occurs. This change, from requirement to choice, impacts on the levels of motivation and the learning that can be acquired and is a relational skill of the youth worker.

Thoughtful youthwork practice then needs to create spaces, programmes, experiences and ways of working that enable people to be more open to one another, grow understanding between them, share more of themselves and their interests and concerns and, in time, come to trust people different to them.

The physics, or the scaffolding, of creative youth work is the organisations that have their vision, policies and practice aligned and where Directors, Managers, Supervisors, Workers and Volunteers are in common agreement and in open support of one another.

The chemistry of creative youth work is that staff are at ease with themselves, and are supported to facilitate association across lines of experience, tradition and background.

The catalyst for creative personal and social education work is that agencies and staff work as if change is possible; with a belief that in relationships where people are valued and respected, growth and change can occur.

The energy in such work comes from people: getting space to enjoy open and affirming relationships; having the space to reflect on issues that are important to them, and that are essential to them making sense of life and relationships.

A central focus of this work is that people gain freedom:

- from rivalries that destroy hope.
- from impossible dreams or standards they, and many others, waste their time in competing hopelessly with.
- by weakening intimidators, bullies and crowds selecting and ejecting random scapegoats that are no more responsible than anyone else.

Relationship energy flows when:

- People enter relationships that unmask ways in which they have been bound to demeaning relationships or dynamics with others;
- People enter relationships that empower them to make changes today;
- Relationships equip children and young people to get some space and freedom from patterns of relationships that diminish, or that constrain, their best intentions or abilities;
- Places exist for young people to take responsibility for themselves and their actions with others;
- Spaces are secured that enable young people and staff to gain and maintain their freedom.

Relationships do matter, they are the foundation experience of quality thoughtful youth work practice. Not only in contested societies, but everywhere.

## Endnotes

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**APPENDIX:**

**WAYS TO CUT HURTFUL RELATIONSHIPS AND AFFIRM CHANGES IN YOURSELF, THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH AND THE STRUCTURES YOU WORK WITHIN.**

	<b>CUTTING SCAPEGOATING</b>	<b>DISSOLVING UNLIMITED RIVALRY</b>	<b>STAYING CLEAR OF MODEL-OBSTACLES</b>	<b>MODELLING FREEDOM IN RELATIONSHIPS</b>
<b>PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR ORGANISATIONAL POLICY</b>	Board Members deal with realities and facts, not hearsay. Board Members and Senior Staff have different and distinct structures for consulting or meeting staff. Policies are shaped by values and core beliefs.	The staff have clear accountability and support structures. Board Members in their communications use a human language that speaks about their common vision and goals. Staff are encouraged to clearly advocate for their programme needs to the Board. The Board aligns its goals and programme targets with the funding and resources they have.	The Board acknowledges current realities and establishes realistic policy goals, not impossible ones. Staff are not expected to do the impossible or tolerate the intolerable. Securing a Life-Work balance for staff is constantly in view. Mentoring support or co-working is encouraged as appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attention is given to develop open internal working relationships between Board members.</li> <li>• Goals set for the organisation reflect relational outcomes and outputs.</li> <li>• The Board buy into a ‘Shared Future’.</li> <li>• The Board actively promotes structural changes or learning programme that aligns them with building an open and diverse society.</li> <li>• Board supports Good Relations work.</li> </ul>
<b>PEOPLE IN MANAGEMENT</b>	A Responsibility Culture is Developed with all staff. The Management Culture is to deal with facts not hearsay There are limits to gossip. The tacit culture of the organisation is unpacked and aligned with the values and purposes of the organisation.	Leadership is devolved and initiative encouraged by all. There is clarity about the objectives and practices of the organisation. Reasonable targets are established ‘The administration’ serves the work of management and the fieldwork staff, not itself. Dispute resolution mechanisms exist	Not setting impossible goals Not making unreasonable demands People’s ‘best work’ is always good enough. Unachievable goals, if established, are named and dissolved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage imagination and well-considered risk taking across lines of difference</li> <li>• Value the stories of relational practice</li> <li>• Promote evaluation measures that capture the significance of the work developed by staff.</li> <li>• Acknowledge innovative practice</li> <li>• Support sustained quality practice</li> </ul>
<b>FIELD-WORKERS YOUTH WORKERS</b>	With Groups / At Events / In Teams Insist on proper names unless people really are happy with their nicknames. Stand with those being scapegoated Unmask the dynamics at play through group feedback, reviews, discussions. Call people to relationships ‘of account’ if they move to name call, isolate others, generate ‘mobs’ or try to secure a ‘group tyranny’.	Ensure the quiet members have a voice, if they wish it. Do not ‘mind-read’ those who are quiet in a group, value them. Establish secure and agreed boundaries and clear expectations for group membership. Always bring people back into agreed structures, behaviours and clear relationships. Do not have favourites or allow colleagues to develop a ‘favourites’ culture	Be open to collegial working and do not be ‘obsessive’ in your work. Do not bring young people into rivalry with impossible demands. Always work in a relationship manner, do not allow competitive demands or obsessions with levels of attainment to get in the way of working relationships. Establish reviews of fieldwork practice and ensure the work addresses the needs of group members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with compassion and humility</li> <li>• Work as if change is possible</li> <li>• Be open to ‘the unexpected’ happening.</li> <li>• Value small steps as worth multiplying</li> <li>• Document ‘practice’ in a way that values the growth of young people, informs the interest of managers in terms of their organisational objectives and supports the advocacy and policy work of the Board about the needs of young people.</li> <li>• Remember that when relationships are not threatening young people will develop.</li> </ul>



**The Understanding Conflict Trust (UCT) grew out of the work of The Corrymeela Community in 1987 ([www.corrymeela.org](http://www.corrymeela.org)).**

**The charitable purpose of UCT is:**

**The advancement of Education, in particular, to promote the understanding of conflict in the community.**

**Our work gathers around:**

**Pursuing:** “the study of the role of traditions in community conflict and the place of tradition in the development of reconciliation in the community.”

**Developing:** “the exercise and development of a training, supervisory and consultative relationship with community and professional groups”

**Publishing:** “the authorship, publication and distribution of materials, videos films, papers, books and other documentation... in compliance with the objects.”

UCT Papers in this set are in support of the “Living Well Together’ theme in Corrymeela’s current programme.