Centre based youth work (‘the steadfast in young people’s lives’)

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This reflection highlights the value of centre-based, relational youth work for young people. As Sue Robertson (2000) notes ‘youth clubs have a unique role and one that should be valued and supported as they can make a big difference in the lives of many young people and their communities. Youth workers, in youth clubs, play a crucial role in supporting young people develop emotionally, personally, and socially.

Youth clubs offer young people a sense of belonging and association. It achieves this through the relationship youth workers develop with young people through planned, long-term, strength-based approaches and conversations. A study by the Wales Youth Agency (1996) highlighted four distinct needs that young people expressed as important to them. They were the need for **association** (somewhere to go), the need for **activities** (something to do), the need for **autonomy** (a space of our own) and the need for **advice** (someone to talk to). Youth clubs can meet these needs through an open-door policy, the activities and projects they offer, but ultimately through the relationships that can be formed there (with other young people and with caring and supportive youth workers).

Attending a local youth club enables young people to gain positive relationships and life outcomes, as they develop trusting relationships with their youth workers, who can be a constant positive in their life, from childhood through to adulthood. As members of a youth club, they are connected to their youth workers and their peer group but also to the life of the club, through their wider involvement in club life. For these relationships to form, Williamson (1997) suggests that ‘young people in transition need space for reflection and self-determination plus clear guidance, support, and information’ which I argue can be achieved through attending their youth club.

Richardson (1997) highlights the importance of relationships but warns that ‘… developing good relationships takes time and needs continuity’. Time to initiate, build and maintain these relationships is a crucial aspect and distinctive element of our youth work approach. Centre-based work affords youth workers the time to build long-term relationships that enables transparent, honest and challenging conversations with young people. Holman (2000) suggests that ‘good youth work is not just about the here and now and measuring, it’s about memories and long-term learning’. It is worth remembering the significance of this relational youth work as the pressures of contemporary practice sees workers redirected into managerialism, accounting and form filling, limiting the time that they have to engage with young people, building fun and lasting memories with them.

Reflecting on my 27 years of practice enables me to see how young people view their youth club like a second home, it is like a second family and a place where they feel they can be themselves. It's where they feel they belong because they feel comfortable attending and feel valued, enabling them to develop emotionally, personally, and socially while equipping them for adult life. As youth work progresses, I would caution policy makers, funders and planners from erasing the very thing within our work that makes such a distinct difference – the time for honest and real relationships between young people and their youth worker.