

## Youth at Risk – our approach to transformation

### **Appendix: Considering practice across the sector - our reflective-based practices and their similarities with theoretical and psychological frameworks to working with vulnerable young people**

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#### Youth at Risk

Youth at Risk believes that all young people should have a worthwhile future, no matter what has happened in the past or how difficult their current circumstances. Youth at Risk designs, develops and delivers innovative community programmes which enable some of society's most alienated young people to accept responsibilities and transform their lives.

Youth at Risk works in partnership with central government, Local Authorities, other agencies and sponsoring companies to create long-term, measurable change. Our methods are challenging. Our success rates have been dramatic.<sup>i</sup>

#### **How our Methodology Developed and Evolves**

Youth at Risk's basic hypothesis is that **all young people have potential to achieve**. However, they need support and a coherent framework to realise it and act upon it.<sup>ii</sup>

Our model is grounded in years of reflective practice.<sup>iii</sup> The methodology we use in order to create sustainable breakthroughs in young peoples' self perceptions, trust and respect was originally developed in the USA amongst a group of international practitioners experienced in working with severely disaffected young people and communities.

Our UK model has been developed (and continues to develop) from Youth at Risk's reflective practice and evaluation. Our

approach works in a similar way to a range of theoretical psychological frameworks, but in fact offers our own unique blend of techniques that ensure young people and their support communities learn, develop, grow, change and embed that development and change during and after the programme.

We want to share our learning through reflective practice across the sector, but we recognise that professional schools talk in different languages and look at issues through different theoretical glasses. For those who are familiar with social and psychological support interventions, you may recognise similar themes in our approaches and techniques. Below, we have highlighted where there are similarities between our reflective practice approach and traditional theoretical, mainly (but not exclusively) psychological approaches. We do not directly apply these theories, but our impact is similar.

We hope this is a useful paper that expands the understanding of our approach and contributes to looking at the commonalities and potential learning opportunities amongst all of us who are working towards transforming the lives and futures of young people and their communities. We hope it helps to stimulate such reflection and discussion.

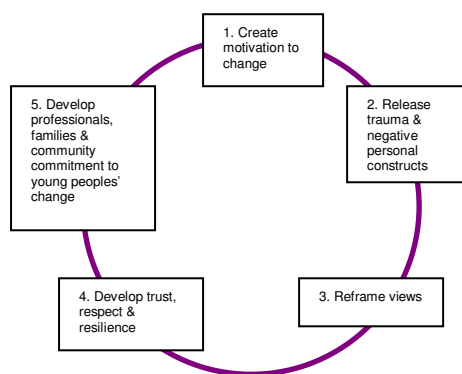
#### **Our Change Process: our practice-based approach and complimentary theories**

The framework of Youth at Risk's practice-based approach has commonalities with **Humanist Psychology's** belief that high levels of personal trauma – whether that be through family dysfunction, intellectual challenge, or personal critical incidences – lead to a lack of capacity to attach securely to people, i.e. lead to a lack of trust. This may lead to young people expressing their emotions on a spectrum from suppressing their feelings to being over-emotional; and may lead to young people acting in a destructive way, such as self harm, drug misuse, criminal activity, anti-social behaviour, as a way to gain control within their lives.<sup>iv</sup>

In a similar manner to **George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory**,<sup>v</sup> Youth at

Risk believes that support needs to work through a series of 'layers' of self beliefs and perceptions that young people may have about themselves and the world, in order to create a breakthrough in young peoples' motivation to change, to reframe their view of themselves as one of possibility, to build the attachment process of trust and respect, and finally to support them in shifting their behaviour to make and sustain positive choices, access support and to make steps towards goals they have set themselves.

**Fig: Change process in Young People to unlock their potential**



The crucial layers of personal construct that need to be developed in order to create sustainable changes in young peoples' self perceptions, trust and respect are outlined below with the theoretical frameworks that are similar to our approach.

- **Layer 1** – creating **motivation to change**, a belief in young peoples' possibility and their responsibility to change through the enrolment process and continued through the intensive training and follow-ups.
- **Layer 2** – The intensive training, follow-ups and (where used) physical and mental challenge<sup>vi</sup> are used to **release trauma and negative personal constructs** by exposing young people to their fears in a safe environment. There are similarities here with **Gestalt's Principle of Totality** to challenge fear on a 'global' (physical and mental) level.<sup>vii</sup>
- **Layer 3** - Trainers support young people to **reframe their views** of themselves and others positively and **building trust and respect** in themselves and in others to be able to

support them. Exploring what their possibilities and choices are and their responsibility to act. Psychiatrists and social scientists may be familiar with similar approaches through Kelly's framework and through **Gestalt's principle of Pragnanz**,<sup>viii</sup> As a reminder, we do not directly apply these theories, but our impact is similar.

- **Layer 4** –With a life coach committed to the young person's possibilities, the young person develops goals, works towards achieving them and explores choices when confronted with challenging situations, mistakes<sup>ix</sup> and achievements. Through this process, they will **develop trust in themselves, others and community**, as well as possibility, choice and responsibility. To achieve this, our reflective practice leads us to a similar viewpoint to that of attachment theory – i.e. it is important to support young people to build their capacity to attach securely to others before any support can be affective. Our practitioners have also considered the **GROW model of coaching**<sup>x</sup> in developing our unique training package for our life coaches.
- **Layer 5 – Professionals and / or community members are developed and supported**<sup>xi</sup> all through the programme to leave a lasting legacy of support and commitment to young peoples' goals and to develop mutual respect and trust. This approach fits with that of multi-systemic therapy (MST)<sup>xii</sup> and resilience theories,<sup>xiii</sup> both of which emphasise the importance of community and family development.

## Our Techniques: the basis of our reflective practice and complimentary theories

### Enrolment, Intensive Training and Follow Ups

To facilitate self exploration within our workshop sessions, we use **Socratic Questioning**,<sup>xiv</sup> i.e., asking questions to creative reflective thinking. In this way, we develop young peoples' self-expression and enable them to see their possibility and choices for themselves.

It is crucial that this self-exploration is facilitated in a safe environment for it to be effective. Our trainers are able to facilitate this process.

To further develop young peoples' concept of responsibility and choice, we conduct this questioning within an adult to adult framework; in this respect, we operate in a similar manner to **transactional analysis**,<sup>xv</sup> i.e. emphasising contract, consequences, choices and responsibility.

### Life Coaching

We continue to develop young people through life coaches (known as performance coaches in education settings). In developing our unique approach, we have found the GROW model to be a useful framework,<sup>xvi</sup> i.e. **G**oal setting, **R**eality checking, **O**ptions, **W**hat is to be done, **W**hen, by **W**hom and the **W**ill to do it.

The core concept here is that the coach is committed to the young person's commitment to change and develop. Through this, trust and respect is developed and the young person learns to trust their own choices and actions, deal with mistakes and challenges, trust and access support available and make positive choices for themselves within the coaching period and after the programme ends.

### Quality Assurance

Youth at Risk's approach to quality is to ensure that our trainers are of the highest possible calibre, and are supported by continuous training and development.

From external and internal evaluations for Youth at Risk programmes, there are key characteristics that enable our highly trained trainers to deliver our unique approach successfully:<sup>xvii</sup>

- **Inclusiveness** at the level of the young person's choice to participate within the programme; crucial to reinforcing choice, possibility, responsibility and community;
- **Commitment to young peoples' possibilities**; crucial to creating the motivation and possibility to change and developing new personal constructs;
- **Coherence** in the theoretical and principle framework that enables

trainers to ask and answer questions in a robust manner and to encourage positive choices;

- **Being calm throughout challenges** - crucial for demonstrating trust and respect, commitment to young peoples' possibility, choice and responsibility;
- **Being flexible** to adapt to the needs of young people and the communities we are developing. We feel our strength is in our ability to adapt our programme design to specific needs.  
xviii

### Evaluation: our approach

We evaluate all our programmes externally where the funding is available, and internally where not. We focus on understanding the change that has taken place for individual participants, for the groups and for communities, why certain approaches work (hence our emphasis on reflective practice), and who they work for. As such, and as happens with many youth-based interventions outside of Random Controlled Trials in psychology and psychiatry, lessons on effective practice and opportunities for replication can be developed out of users' evidence.

### Need More Information?

For more information about Youth at Risk's approach, please see [www.youthatrisk.org.uk](http://www.youthatrisk.org.uk), or contact Peter Warren, Head of Marketing at: [peter@youthatrisk.org.uk](mailto:peter@youthatrisk.org.uk).

For more information about Youth at Risk's impact, please see [www.youthatrisk.org.uk/evaluation](http://www.youthatrisk.org.uk/evaluation), or contact Esther Gillespie, Development Manager at: [esther@youthatrisk.org.uk](mailto:esther@youthatrisk.org.uk).

<sup>i</sup> Please see Youth at Risk's 'Track Record' and external and internal programme evaluation reports on [www.youthatrisk.org.uk](http://www.youthatrisk.org.uk) for programme impacts.

<sup>ii</sup> As part of their review on resilience evidence and based on Bernard and Marshall's, 1999, Resilience Framework, (Planning Framework for Tapping Resilience), Newman and Blackburn state, "While specific interventions may promote resilience in different contexts and at different points in the lifecycle [of support], these individual strategies should be based on a strategic approach, the foundation of which is a belief that children are capable of positive change.", Newman, T., and Blackburn, S., 2002, *ibid.*, p17.

<sup>iii</sup> By 'reflective practice' we mean thinking critically about experiences and identifying lessons to be learnt and changes to be made. This methodology has most famously been developed by Donald Schon, 1983, *The Reflective Practitioner*.

<sup>iv</sup> For example, John Bowlby, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1990.

<sup>v</sup> Kelly, G.A, 1955, *The Psychology of Personal Construct*, New York: Norton.

<sup>vi</sup> This can take the form of our ropes course, through to performance arts and sports employed through our five star experiences.

<sup>vii</sup> Gestalt's, Principle of Totality suggests that conscious experience must be considered physically and mentally, to engage the mind in action.

<sup>viii</sup> Gestalt explores principles of emergence, reification, multistability and invariance to demonstrate perception. Then 'pragnanz; (i.e. conciseness), which suggests that we tend to order our experience in a regular, systematic, simple manner which is based on what we already know. This leads to similar patterns of behaviour in similar circumstances.

<sup>ix</sup> Research supports that to build resilience, it is necessary to promote children's' ability to resist adversity, as well as moderating the risk factors. Cited in Newman, T., and Blackburn, S., 2002, pp14-15

<sup>x</sup> W Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, 1976, & *The Inner Game of Golf*, 1979, Random House Inc: New York; Witmore, J., 1992, *Coaching for Performance*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

<sup>xi</sup> Our full community programmes will develop professionals, community and family. Our 'lighter touch' programmes, such as coaching for success in education, will focus on developing professionals. However, based on our reflective practice, we are developing more support work for parents.

<sup>xii</sup> Multisystemic therapy has been a popular and empirically proven methodology in the States. See SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, March 2007, *Multisystemic Therapy for Juvenile Offenders*. As this review states, "The ultimate goal of MST is to empower families to build a healthier environment through the mobilisation of existing child, family and community resources."

[www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM\\_ID=102](http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM_ID=102).

<sup>xiii</sup> Newman and Blackburn, *ibid*, cite that resilience theory highlights the role of a supportive family being the most powerful resilience-promoting factor for young people, together with a strong social support network, a committed mentor or other person from outside the family, p.2.

Hauser et al (1985) identifies three protective factors for children exposed to a wide range of stressors: personality, social milieu and family structure.

Hauser, S., Vieryra, M., Jacobson, A., and Wertlieb, D., (1985) *Vulnerability and resilience in adolescence: views from the family*, *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 5, 1:81-100. In Newman and Blackburn, 2002, *ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>xiv</sup> Paul, R., and Elder, L., 2006, *The Art of Socratic Questioning*, Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking

<sup>xv</sup> Berne, E., 1964, *Games People Play*, New York: Grove Press; 1975, *What do you Say After you Say Hello?*; *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*

<sup>xvi</sup> W Timothy Gallwey, *ibid.*; Witmore, J., *ibid*.

<sup>xvii</sup> See [www.youthatrisk.org.uk](http://www.youthatrisk.org.uk), external evaluation reports.

<sup>xviii</sup> The flexibility in our programme design has been criticised on the basis that our programmes cannot be systematically evaluated or compared to each other. (See for example, see Berry, V., Axford, N., Little, M., and Cusick, G.R, 2007, *An Evaluation of Youth at Risk's Coaching for Communities Programme*, Dartington Social Research Unit) However, social researchers argue that Randomised Control Trials are not suitable for all types of intervention and while RCTs may tell us the impact of a programme compared to a specific other group, they do not tell us why this impact has happened. Nor do they hold as valuable or capture the meanings and interpretations that participants give to the change the programme has made.