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**Toward Transformative  
Trauma-Sensitivity in Youth Work  
and Peace Education:  
A Comparative Study from Georgia,  
Germany, Spain, and Ukraine**

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*We aim to advance peace education in Europe by developing and integrating conflict- and trauma-sensitive approaches into youth work.*

*Our project strives to provide youth workers and peacebuilding practitioners with context-specific tools to support young people affected by conflict and displacement.*

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## 1. Introduction

In a time of rapidly growing global conflicts, mass displacements and deepening social inequalities, young people all over Europe and its neighbourhoods are living with and through multiple overlapping crises. The war in Ukraine, the lasting legacy of conflict in Georgia, economic insecurity that is plaguing younger generations in Spain and a range of complex challenges experienced by young migrants in Germany are just some of the factors massively impacting the lives of youth. Shared uncertainties such as the triple planetary crisis or the rise of anti-democratic and authoritarian forces are adding to an atmosphere of vulnerability. All these developments take a huge toll on the mental health and wellbeing of young generations. The majority of youth have the resources to regulate extreme stress and recover from life's extremities. Yet, trauma has become a very common but often invisible experience that shapes how young people grow up, participate in civic and political life, and experience community and belonging.

We are at a crossroads when it comes to addressing this situation, with a need for a deep re-evaluation of how youth work and peace education think about and respond to young people's needs in the context of living with and beyond traumatic experiences. Trauma-informed approaches are gaining recognition and visibility both in schools and mental health settings. However, when it comes to youth work and peace education, they are applied in a highly fragmented way that often has little to do with either the wisdom or the collective healing practices of communities. When we speak of healing in this context, we do not mean clinical style of recovery work. Instead, we understand it as a life-giving process of reconnection—with oneself, others, community, and hope for transformation.

Our project is born out of the understanding that professional knowledge and training can only get us so far when it comes to healing complex interactions between individual traumas and collective conditions. At the same time, as the target of war and violence as well as direct and indirect recipients of protracted conflict and marginalization, communities that manage to survive this situation carry deep and powerful wisdom about wounding and healing. Youth workers and peace educators on the ground often feel woefully unprepared and unsupported in their efforts to accompany young people carrying invisible wounds in their midst.

This study within the BREEZE project in Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine documents both the lived reality of traumatic experiences in the lives of young people and creative ways in which communities have responded to the situation. Rather than attempting to impose external conceptual frames on the discussion, we are approaching it from a position of genuine humility and curiosity, beginning with the question: What can we learn from young people and their communities in terms of how trauma is conceptualized, expressed and collectively addressed? Based on insights from this process, we then draw on contemporary trauma studies to offer a way of conceptualizing a specific response to identified needs in the field of youth work and peace education.

Our approach to this point must necessarily be one of humility. We understand trauma as something that is at once both deeply personal and fundamentally political. It is, at once, an extremely embodied and a profoundly social experience. It is also at once historically sedimented and an urgently contemporary phenomenon. Therefore, it cannot be captured in the totality of any one conceptual framework. What we have to offer at this stage instead is what we call “transformative trauma-sensitivity”, an approach to understanding and responding to trauma

that is equally dedicated to honouring both trauma's devastation and human beings' remarkable capacity for healing and social transformation under the right conditions.

Transformative trauma-sensitivity is not intended to replace or be positioned against existing approaches but rather to expand and complement them. As such, it builds on established trauma-informed principles but also incorporates contemporary insights from healing justice movements and their approaches to collective healing, as well as critical perspectives on how trauma intersects with systems of marginalization and oppression. Most centrally, transformative trauma-sensitivity centres the voices and experiences of young people themselves as the first and last guides to understanding what responses can truly be in their best interest.

Both concerning and hopeful is what our research has found. Young people in all four contexts report that trauma is an extremely common experience in their lives. Trauma ranges from situations that young people are carrying from the current and full-scale war in Ukraine to displacement, but also to the all-too-common violence of school systems that routinely humiliate instead of educate, family systems that cause more harm than good, and an economic system that abandons young people to precarity and despair. At the same time, young people themselves, together with youth workers who accompany them, are finding truly creative ways to respond to these traumas in ways that operate both within and against such limiting conditions.

Our hope is to learn more from these realities and experiences. In no way, however, do we claim to comprehensively represent suffering in any of the four countries. Conditions between, let alone within, the studied societies are too diverse. As much as each of the four is particular and unique, certain patterns run through all four settings. We aim to identify patterns and conditions that make individual healing and collective transformation possible. Our goal is to make a meaningful contribution to youth work by showing that transformative trauma-sensitivity can sharpen the understanding of young people, trauma, healing, and social change.

This contribution is relevant to the individual practitioners as well as the undermining institutions, policies and social structures in which young people's capacity to heal and contribute to social change are bound up. As such, we are developing transformative trauma-sensitivity not as a finished model but as an invitation to adding further competences to the fields of youth work and peace education that build young people's potential to be agents of their own and their communities' healing.

This report is organized into five main sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents the empirical findings from our four research contexts, examining how trauma is locally understood, what support needs exist, and what community resources are already in place. Section 3 develops the conceptual framework of transformative trauma-sensitivity, grounding it in both scholarly literature and research findings while articulating its five core qualities. Section 4 explores the practical implications of this framework for youth work and peace education, showing how it can contribute to building youth capacities. Section 5 concludes by reflecting on key insights and offering an invitation to reimagine trauma-sensitive practice as both a practical necessity and a pathway toward collective transformation.

## 1.1 Methodology and Ethical Considerations

In the four contexts, the research used a mixed-method approach, combining the survey with focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews with youth and youth workers.

- Georgia: We conducted four focus groups (27 participants) with a diverse group of young people, including internally displaced persons (IDPs), minorities, rural youth and young people from areas affected by conflict. The survey had a total of 79 respondents in the age range 16-35.
- Spain: Three focus groups were held in total (13 participants) in different age groups (17-22, 24-30 and 15-31). These were followed by 2 in-depth interviews with young people and four in-depth interviews with youth workers. The online questionnaire (71 respondents) included young people, youth workers and experts working in support of migrant communities, ranging in age from 17 to 35.
- Ukraine: The research involved an online survey of 125 respondents (both young people and youth workers) and five in-depth interviews with youth workers and people directly affected by war, displacement or trauma in community and educational settings.
- Germany: One focus group with 8 participants of diverse backgrounds was conducted.

The following methodological features were common to all countries:

- Shared methodological protocol: Core research questions and formats were designed for adaptability in local contexts while ensuring a basis for cross-contextual comparability.
- Informed consent: All participants were informed of the aims, their rights and their ability to withdraw at any time; all information was anonymised.
- Trauma-sensitive facilitation: Each country employed moderators trained to limit the risk of pressuring participants to disclose personal experiences and to ensure emotional safety.
- Cultural adaptation: All teams culturally adapted terminology and specific aspects of the formats (digital or in-person) to ensure accessibility and resonance.

Ethical care was taken through pre-session clarifications that participants were not obliged to share personal trauma, post-session debriefs and signposting to mental health resources if needed, and feedback loops such as commitments to share results back with communities.

## 1.2 Expected Outcomes and Limitations

Expected outcomes of the study:

- Gaining insights into local definitions and conceptualizations of trauma across the four different cultural and political contexts
- Identification of needs in terms of addressing trauma, both with respect to young people and youth workers
- Mapping of existing assets, resources and approaches to potentially be strengthened or scaled
- Conceptual and educational framing for trauma-sensitive youth work to be adaptable in diverse settings

Limitations of the study:

Representation gaps: Male youth underrepresentation in Georgia; summer fieldwork in Spain limiting

participation; overrepresentation of older age groups in Ukraine compared to younger age groups.

Resource constraints: Language, travel, and limited access to remote or marginalized groups in Georgia; access and expansion limitations in mapping a broader network in Spain; lack of systemic resources, including translations and methodologies ensuring diverse regional and societal representation, in Ukraine due to the wartime setting.

Conceptual ambiguity: Differences in what trauma itself means in and between the languages and communities in the four settings. In Spain, it is frequently replaced with “emotional distress” as there is a general discomfort in using clinical language. In Georgia, it is closely related to school environments and the generational conflict. In Ukraine, trauma is often framed both in terms of the big, extraordinary event and as a structural condition (war, poverty, isolation).

Stigma and silence: The difficulty of speaking about trauma, which prevails in all four countries, and which may have limited disclosure in group settings.

Acknowledging these limitations, we also find that the convergence of the research across the four contexts and the methods employed points to certain recurring patterns in how trauma is experienced and addressed. These patterns provide a solid basis for moving forward in developing context-sensitive, yet potentially applicable, frameworks for youth work and peace education.

## 2. Research Results

The research results presented in this section are the product of extensive fieldwork conducted in four different but closely related contexts in 2023 and 2024. In all four countries, surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with both youth and youth workers informed our understanding of how trauma is conceptualised, experienced and responded to within each cultural and political setting. These findings provide the empirical basis for the conceptual framework we propose below, helping to ground our theoretical work in the lived realities of those who are most directly impacted by trauma and who are on the frontlines of developing and implementing responses to it.

From the outset, our approach in this research has been guided by a deep commitment to what could be called “participatory knowledge production”. That is, rather than beginning with a pre-existing definition of trauma or healing or relying on the second-hand experience and insight of researchers, we have chosen to directly address and engage young people and youth workers in dialogue. As those who live with trauma are also those most likely to know what works and doesn’t in terms of supporting healing, the patterns that we describe below are the result not of abstract academic analysis but of community-generated insights about the nature of trauma and how to foster healing.

The pages that follow present findings from the four different yet closely interrelated contexts that constitute the BREEZE project. Georgia’s history of long-term territorial conflict and political instability, with all its implications for young people’s identities and participation, affords insights into the way that historical trauma can shape contemporary experiences. Germany, as a site of historical trauma and of displaced and arriving populations today, provides a vantage point on the complex intersections of memory, migration and healing in community. Spain, with its context

of economic crisis and accompanying social movements, enables a focus on how structural violence both causes trauma and is met with collective responses to transform it. Ukraine's current experience of full-scale war, meanwhile, offers urgent and timely insights into how communities make the best of their existing resources in upholding healing practices, even in the most extreme of circumstances. Unique as each of these contexts is, however, certain patterns are revealed as common across all four.

## 2.1 Community Understandings of Trauma

This section begins with a focus on how young people and youth workers from across the four research contexts understand and articulate the concept of trauma. We find, both across and between contexts, a series of common patterns in young people and youth workers' conceptions of trauma. These, however, are mixed with culturally specific framings of trauma that serve to both align with and depart from universalist assumptions about traumatic experience. Rather than beginning from a clinical or universalist definition of trauma, we approached the question of trauma in dialogue with young people and youth workers, beginning from open-ended questions about their own experiences and conceptual frameworks. This methodological decision is rooted in the fundamental orientation of our research: to understand how trauma is understood by those who live with and beyond it every day.

### Local Languages of Trauma

In Georgia, Germany, Spain and Ukraine, trauma is an object of reference for young people and youth workers that emerges through distinctive local vocabularies and cultural frameworks that both connect with and complement the psychological field's assumptions about traumatic experience. The local contexts in which the youth and youth workers we worked with find themselves are crucial in how they make sense of trauma.

In Georgia, young people and youth workers we spoke to tended to conceptualise trauma primarily in metaphors of memory and relationality, both to self and to others. As one participant described, it is "a painful memory that was shaped by a specific event and that impacts how you live, how you relate, and how you see others". When it came to the question of how trauma is understood by our survey respondents in Georgia, these metaphors came through clearly. 42% of all respondents saw trauma as "a combination of emotional, physical and social pain", while others identified it more directly with conflict and violence (32%) or stressful life events (21%). Of note here is that these understandings were not framed as individual-level experiences but, in keeping with Georgia's experience of war, displacement and deep intergenerational uncertainty, often as fundamentally collective in nature. In Germany, a more concrete understanding of trauma as loss of control and safety in one's environment was common. The trauma response was distinguished from the event itself. The latter could be thought of and talked about, while the former was more deeply internalised to define the individual. It was described as something that one carried across mind, emotion and social relations in a totalising way, reconstituting one's entire being and one's relationship to the world.

In Spain, when it came to a local vocabulary of trauma, discomfort with the word itself and its framing as a clinical, mental health category were the most common refrains. The most frequent metaphors in terms of describing it, however, were embodied ones of "wound" or "scar", evocative

images of permanence. Young people and youth workers used language of being “blocked” or “stuck” that resonated with these images of a cut inscribed into body and psyche. For some youth workers, the word “trauma” itself was actively avoided as being “too big” or carrying an excess of pathologization. This discomfort was often spoken around, rather than directly of, with youth workers instead using vernacular concepts such as “emotional distress” or “experiences that leave a mark”. In Ukraine, as in Georgia, local understanding of trauma operates on two levels. Around 39% of respondents associated trauma with extraordinary events that caused a sudden or strong stress response, in line with the acute experiences of the full-scale war. However, 74% of respondents also placed trauma in direct connection with social conditions such as war, isolation and poverty, recognising trauma as inseparable from wider structures of violence.

These community understandings reveal that trauma is not a coherently defined or framed phenomenon within youth work communities. In the diversity of our four research contexts, it was simultaneously a wound, a scar, a memory, a blockage, a social condition, and a collective experience. The multiplicity with which it is articulated in communities, rather than requiring singular interpretation, is in fact a powerful guide for youth work. It can increase trauma-sensitivity by acknowledging these local meanings and honouring alternative frameworks.

### **Patterns of Recognising and Expressing Trauma**

Recognition and expression of trauma, furthermore, is profoundly affected by local cultural norms. In Georgia, trauma occupies a paradoxical space—omnipresent yet unspoken. Only 11% of participants described their community as one in which trauma is spoken about. Instead, 53% identified trauma as “a widespread experience rarely talked about”. This culture of silence is actively reinforced by social sanctions: to make oneself vulnerable through emotional disclosure risks the label of being weak, unstable or merely attention-seeking. Educational authorities, particularly in rural contexts, were frequently identified as key sites of betrayal of confidence that reinforced the overall culture of silence. “We don’t talk about it—because society sees it as weakness. You hide it, until one day it becomes too loud to ignore”, explained one respondent. Gender was also an important factor, with strong cultural norms that allowed emotional pain to be more culturally “permitted” for women than men. In Germany, the way that stigma functions around trauma is somewhat different. There, the word “trauma” was seen as commonly circulating in public discourse but strikingly taboo in private life. Silence about past or current trauma is maintained, as in Georgia, by intergenerational transmission and a lack of places to speak. However, there is also the problem of simply not being able to find the right words to talk about what one has been through for fear of being judged or not taken seriously when attempting to articulate one’s distress. The Spanish context, meanwhile, is marked by the cultural imperatives of positivity and productivity. Participants, particularly in Catalan communities, described a “social imperative to be fine” in which speaking about trauma was culturally inappropriate and of low social acceptability. For migrant communities, an additional layer of prohibition is added, with a Moroccan youth worker we spoke to reporting that, in his own community, emotional pain simply wasn’t something one spoke about. Gender was also highly relevant in Spain, with far more informal spaces for emotional expression open to women than men. In Ukraine, stigma is also internalised in a somewhat different way: not as positivity culture but as a matter of survival logic. As such, trauma was framed in most responses as a personal mental health issue (46%) rather than as a social concern. While this is part of why it was so difficult to mobilise collective forms of support, only 50 of the 125 respondents said they were “somewhat comfortable” when it came to discussing trauma-related topics and experiences, speaking to a degree of openness limited by the collective need to simply survive.

These patterns reveal that the invisibility of trauma is not a matter of it being simply unspoken, but rather actively produced by cultural norms and forms of interaction that condition emotional expression. It is in relation to these local forms of stigma and social prohibition that the potential for what participants in all four countries called “counter-cultural spaces” in youth work comes into view.

### Specific Trauma Experiences

The experiences associated with trauma reflect each country’s particular historical moment and social structure, while revealing universal vulnerabilities in youth experience. In Georgia, traumatic experiences were rooted in systemic failures of care—family instability, poverty, domestic violence, and notably, school-based humiliation. Educational environments emerged as primary sites of traumatization, with teachers described as perpetrators of bullying and confidentiality violations. The legacy of conflict added layers: internally displaced persons reported enduring alienation and economic precarity. Political unpredictability and unemployment created what participants called chronic baseline anxiety. In Germany, trauma narratives interweaved historical and contemporary experiences—war, migration, displacement, and discrimination alongside intimate violations like domestic violence and sexual abuse. This dual register reflects Germany’s position as both site of historical trauma and destination for displaced populations. In Spain, participants distinguished between acute events (sexual assault, disasters, police repression) and chronic conditions (poverty, precarity, systemic racism). Childhood emerged as particularly vulnerable. Activists introduced state repression and surveillance as sources of collective trauma. Cultural construction also emerged—one participant observed: “An abortion may or may not be traumatic. Society’s expectation that it should cause trauma already influences how you interpret the experience.” In Ukraine, war and displacement dominate the trauma landscape. Young people reported embodied responses—panic attacks, burnout, isolation—directly linked to ongoing violence. Internally displaced persons described profound losses and severed connections. Teenagers added layers of “ordinary” trauma—bullying, family conflict—that persist alongside extraordinary circumstances.

While specific experiences vary across contexts, certain spaces and relationships consistently emerge as sources of wounding: educational institutions that humiliate rather than nurture, family systems that perpetuate rather than protect from violence, and state structures that abandon or actively harm vulnerable populations. For youth work, this suggests the need for what one participant called “institutional accountability”—recognizing that trauma often originates in the very systems meant to support young people, requiring systemic rather than merely individual interventions.

### Collective Dimensions of Trauma

All four contexts reveal sophisticated local understandings of trauma’s collective nature, expressed through culturally specific frameworks. In Georgia, collective trauma is inextricable from national narrative—war, territorial loss, and ethnic division create what participants called “inherited wounds”. Internally displaced communities carry silenced losses across generations, ethnic minorities experience perpetual “othering”, and rural communities face compound isolation. Participants emphasized cyclical transmission: “One traumatized generation raises the next. You grow up with fear and silence—that becomes normal.” In Germany, collective trauma operates through the dialectic of public memory and private silence. Historical trauma shapes national consciousness while families maintain silence about personal experiences. Participants described intergenerational patterns where children absorb ancestors’ unmetabolized pain—trauma as inherited atmosphere rather than transmitted narrative. In Spain, collective trauma was recognized in simultaneous experiences (COVID-19, terrorist attacks), systemic oppressions

(gender violence, racism), and historical wounds (Civil War, ETA violence). Vicarious trauma through media coverage of Palestine and femicides shapes collective emotional landscapes. Despite recognition, participants noted trauma's frequent individualization. Feminist spaces emerged as exceptions—successfully transforming personal pain into shared resistance narratives. In Ukraine, an apparent contradiction emerged: 46% perceived trauma as individual mental health problem, yet 74% linked it to social conditions. This suggests implicit recognition of collective dimension constrained by lack of frameworks for collectivization.

These findings reveal that communities possess sophisticated understanding of trauma's collective dimensions but often lack languages and spaces to address it collectively. For youth work, this suggests moving beyond individual counselling models toward what participants called "collective healing practices"—approaches that recognize trauma as shared wound requiring community-level response. This might include collective storytelling, community rituals, or social action that transforms shared pain into collective agency.

### **Symptoms and Manifestations**

Trauma manifests through both universal patterns and culturally specific expressions that require careful cultural literacy to recognize and address. In Georgia, survey data revealed that youth associated trauma with familiar symptoms—depression (90%), withdrawal (74%), aggression (74%), anxiety (68%). But youth workers identified culturally specific readings: loss of motivation interpreted as laziness, difficulty concentrating dismissed as poor character, mistrust of authority read as rebelliousness. In Germany, participants described delayed manifestations—emotional reactions, linguistic avoidance, sudden outbursts appearing decades after original events. These "hauntings" shape contemporary behaviour in ways that remain opaque without contextualization. In Spain, participants developed local typologies—"inhibition" (silence, apathy, dissociation) versus "explosion" (rage, compulsive retelling, destructive behaviour). Physical manifestations were common. Participants also identified "positive traces"—resilience, activism, solidarity—while warning against romanticization. In Ukraine, war conditions produced specific patterns—hyperactivity and panic attacks alongside profound apathy. Youth workers interpreted "oppositional behaviour" (withdrawal, refusal to participate) as trauma response.

These varied manifestations reveal trauma's fluctuating nature—appearing differently across cultures and contexts. For youth work, this demands what we might term "symptomatic multiliteracy"—the ability to read distress across its various cultural expressions. A withdrawn Georgian youth, an aggressive German teenager, a compliant Spanish student, and an apathetic Ukrainian youngster may all be manifesting trauma, requiring practitioners to look beyond surface behaviours to underlying wounds.

### **Impact on Youth Participation**

Trauma profoundly shapes civic and social engagement, but its effects are mediated by specific cultural and political contexts. In Georgia, trauma erodes what participants called "voice and visibility". Young people described shrinking from public space due to emotional exhaustion, institutional mistrust, and fear of humiliation. Political instability itself was traumatizing: "When you're traumatized, you lose the ability to believe your voice matters. You shrink. You disappear." In Germany, participants described split responses to trauma—some withdraw into isolation while others channel experience into activism. This split reflects different relationships to collective memory and political possibility. In Spain, trauma both inhibits and occasionally catalyses participation. While many withdrew, some engaged activism as coping mechanism.

Yet collective spaces like demonstrations could feel threatening due to hypervigilance. Police infiltration was identified as specific form of collective trauma altering participation dynamics. In Ukraine, participation is shaped by immediate survival needs. Many withdrew citing burnout and hopelessness. Yet paradoxically, 64 of 125 respondents had participated in trauma-related projects—suggesting hunger for connection when safe conditions exist.

These patterns reveal that trauma’s impact on participation is not predetermined but depends on available “containers”—spaces strong enough to hold both pain and possibility. For youth work, this means creating what participants called “brave spaces” rather than just safe spaces—environments that acknowledge trauma while cultivating agency, that validate suffering while nurturing resistance, that hold pain while building power.

## 2.2 Identifying Community Needs

This section examines what young people and youth workers themselves identify as essential for addressing trauma effectively. Rather than beginning with professional assessments of need, we prioritized community-defined requirements, recognizing that those who live with trauma’s effects are best positioned to identify what kinds of support would be most meaningful and effective.

### Common Support Systems

Across all contexts, young people navigate trauma through complex support ecologies that reveal both the resourcefulness of communities and the limitations of formal systems. In Spain, friendships constitute the primary support system, with participants valuing peer understanding but recognizing limitations—friends lack tools and can become overwhelmed. Family support proved ambivalent: mothers serve as emotional anchors while fathers remain peripheral. Gender patterns were explicit—women have normalized emotional dialogue while men lack equivalent spaces. Mental health professionals enjoy high trust but remain inaccessible due to cost. Interestingly, therapy is perceived as normalized for over-25s but viewed as crisis intervention for younger people. In Ukraine, 45% reported safe spaces exist but remain limited and professional help-seeking remains underdeveloped. Youth workers discovered simple presence—“park bench conversations”—often proved more effective than formal interventions. Significantly, 74% expressed desire to learn peer support skills, indicating readiness to professionalize informal care. In Germany, youth rely on family, friends, and trusted peers, with community connections emphasized as crucial. Professional support remains underutilized due to stigma and perceived lack of safety in formal systems. In Georgia, the absence of trusted spaces emerged as central theme. Friends represent first-line support, though mistrust often prevents disclosure. Family occupies a paradoxical position—simultaneously source of trauma and space where sharing is avoided to protect relatives. Schools were overwhelmingly described as unsafe. Remarkably, youth workers reported AI chatbots have become unexpected sources of support, with young people feeling “less judged and more heard” in algorithmic spaces.

These findings reveal that informal support systems carry enormous weight in trauma response yet cannot substitute for professional care when needed. For youth work, this suggests developing what participants called “support bridges”—approaches that strengthen informal networks while creating accessible pathways to professional help. This requires recognizing mothers’ disproportionate emotional labour, addressing men’s lack of emotional spaces, and legitimizing emerging digital forms of support while ensuring they complement rather than replace human connection.

### Visions of Supportive Environments

When invited to imagine ideal support environments, young people provided detailed blueprints that challenge professional assumptions about trauma care. In Spain, participants envisioned spaces characterized by warmth and agency—arrival without appointment, welcome with small gestures, voluntary participation. Facilitators would validate without judgment. Arts—theatre, rap, podcasts—enable expression without forced verbalization. In schools, youth want emotional education normalized and teachers with basic psychological literacy who respond with curiosity rather than punishment. In Ukraine, youth envisioned non-judgmental spaces where “presence itself is enough”. They emphasized flexibility—open hours, informal gatherings, peer dialogue. Physical security was prerequisite for emotional safety given war conditions. In Germany, safe spaces were imagined as warm and informal—group meetings and cultural activities where trust builds gradually. Choice was paramount—sharing when ready or remaining silent without pressure. In Georgia, young people emphasized qualified psychologists in educational settings alongside trustworthy adults maintaining confidentiality. They envisioned facilitated support groups and non-formal methods—workshops, cultural events, arts, storytelling, sports—normalizing emotional wellbeing. Mobile and online counselling would serve isolated populations.

These visions converge on spaces that are radically different from clinical settings—informal rather than institutional, warm rather than sterile, flexible rather than rigid, and participatory rather than hierarchical. For youth work, this suggests developing what participants called “living room models”—spaces that feel more like visiting a wise friend than attending therapy, where healing happens through connection rather than treatment, where young people are agents rather than patients.

### Youth Workers’ Support Needs

Youth workers across contexts face the paradox of being expected to address trauma while receiving minimal support themselves, revealing systemic failures in care infrastructure. In Spain, workers described themselves as “sponges of pain” lacking outlets. Few had formal training, intuitively developing practices while emphasizing need for better conditions and supervision. One noted: “Dealing with mental health without being able to offer minimum material conditions is impossible.” In Ukraine, 38% of youth workers rate their ability in dealing with trauma as “somewhat good” but 27% have no experience. Despite eagerness to improve mental health capacities, youth workers lack protocols and psychologist access, needing training in re-traumatization recognition, crisis intervention, and self-care. In Germany, workers fear triggering reactions without adequate preparation and express need for training, tools, supervision, and peer support to avoid burnout. In Georgia, youth workers expressed mixed preparedness—some developed non-judgmental listening capacity while others felt overwhelmed. Fear of harm was pervasive: “I want to help, but what if I make it worse?”

These findings reveal that youth workers are already trauma’s first responders but with little recognition, resources, or support. For youth work, this demands what participants called “care infrastructure”—systems that support those who support others. This includes foundational training that builds confidence without requiring advanced psychological expertise, supervision spaces for processing secondary trauma, institutional policies protecting workers’ wellbeing, and professional recognition that values emotional labour.

## 2.3 Existing Resources and Community Wisdom

This section examines the healing resources that communities have developed organically, often in response to the inadequacy or inaccessibility of formal support systems. Rather than viewing these as “alternatives” to professional care, we understand them as complete systems with their own logic, effectiveness, and cultural resonance. Despite formal service gaps, communities across all four contexts have developed healing resources that operate through alternative logics, revealing remarkable resourcefulness in the absence of institutional support.

Digital Innovations emerge as unexpected healing spaces. In Georgia, where formal resources are scarce and distrusted, youth turn to Instagram lives, mental health reels, and psychologist Q&As as more reliable than institutions. Remarkably, AI chatbots have become confidants where young people feel “less judged and more heard.” Spain’s youth utilize podcasts to recognize shared experiences before risking face-to-face vulnerability. These digital practices don’t replace human connection but create what participants called “rehearsal spaces” for emotional expression.

Arts and Embodied Practices provide universal languages for trauma in all contexts, whether through theatre, music or visual arts. The research highlighted that Ukraine’s youth maintain creative expression even during air raids. Sports consistently emerged as a key practice—not as distraction but as embodied processing where trauma can be discharged through movement. Survey data from Georgia confirms this ecology where creative activities (63%) and sports (53%) far outrank formal support (26%).

Community Spaces and Informal Gatherings anchor healing in relationship. Spain’s youth centres provide what formal services cannot—long-term consistency and trust-building rituals. Likewise, in Germany, youth centres normalize mental health discussions through casual integration rather than special programming. Ukraine’s “park bench conversations” don’t require formality to function effectively and sustainably. These spaces succeed through specific qualities rather than particular formats: non-judgment, continuity, youth participation, and cultural resonance.

Cultural Rituals and Collective Practices transform individual pain into shared meaning. Georgia’s supra (communal feast) offers structured emotional release through storytelling. Spain’s popular festivals provide predictable belonging that trauma often disrupts. Germany’s commemorations connect personal experience to historical memory. Even in wartime Ukraine, everyday solidarity—sharing food, presence, conversation—becomes healing ritual.

Intuitive Professional Wisdom emerges across all contexts. Youth workers have developed basic trauma-sensitive practices through experience rather than training, revealing practical wisdom. Workers intuitively understand that trauma disrupts basic trust, requiring patient relationship-building rather than immediate intervention. They create “opt-out” moments during activities, validate silence as legitimate response, offer breaks while maintaining inclusion, and prioritize presence over programs.

These practices emerge from what one Spanish worker called “learning through feeling”—developing sensitivity through accumulated experience of what helps and what harms. Yet this intuitive practice remains precarious, as many youth workers report feeling unprepared, lacking relevant experience despite facing overwhelming need. The gap isn’t commitment but support—workers consistently express high motivation to learn but lack institutional backing.

Importantly, youth workers also realise the limits of the support that they can offer. As one coined this clearly: “We don’t need to become psychologists. But we do need to know what trauma looks like — and what not to do.” This includes basic training in recognition and response, institutional acknowledgment of trauma’s reality, clear referral pathways, and crucially supervision spaces to process their own secondary trauma. When asked what skills youth workers need to support trauma-affected youth, respondents identified the following most frequently:

- Empathy and active listening – 79%
- Conflict resolution and de-escalation skills – 66%
- Understanding how trauma manifests – 68%
- Ability to recognize emotional distress and respond – 63%
- Knowing when and how to refer to professionals – 58%

Critically, these aren’t “alternatives” to professional care but complete systems with their own coherence and effectiveness. They succeed by being different from formal services, in being accessible (available when needed, not by appointment), culturally resonant (speaking the community languages of distress and healing), sustainable (embedded in daily life not time-limited interventions), and dignified (allowing young people to be agents rather than patients). Young people move between online spaces and in-person gatherings, formal services and informal support, individual processing and collective ritual, innovative new forms and traditional cultural practices. Each of these has a different healing function—some provide witness, others offer meaning-making, some enable forms of expression or simply create belonging.

This analysis points to a fundamental shift for youth work. It’s not about importing clinical models (this is for trained professionals) or lamenting service gaps (although advocating for broader service availability is crucial). The task is recognizing and building on what already exists as community assets. This means fostering human connection, understanding cultural practices as primary not supplementary healing modalities, creating support bridges between informal and professional, and most fundamentally understanding that communities have their own healing wisdom and need resources and recognition to build upon it.

The implications are transformative: trauma-sensitive youth work isn’t about adding therapeutic services. It’s about nurturing conditions where communities’ own healing capacities can flourish. This requires what participants across all contexts put into words—not trauma treatment but trauma-sensitive accompaniment, that honours both wounds and wisdom, suffering and strength, individual pain and collective power. This acknowledges the social dimension of trauma and healing.

### 3. Conceptual Framework: Transformative Trauma-Sensitivity

Building on the empirical findings from our four research contexts, this section develops a theoretical framework that integrates community wisdom with scholarly insights to propose a new approach to trauma-sensitive youth work and peace education. Transformative trauma-sensitivity emerges as a synthesis of what communities are already practicing with what research tells us about effective trauma response.

To conceptualize trauma-sensitive peace education, we first need to understand what trauma is and what it is not. Many times, the word “trauma” is used in everyday conversation to describe something unpleasant or difficult. But in trauma studies, the term has a more specific meaning. To work respectfully and safely with young people and communities affected by conflict, we need to become familiar with the differences between stress, traumatic experiences, and trauma as a condition.

### **Stress, Stressors and Distress**

Stress is not always negative in experience. It is a natural biological and psychological reaction of the body that helps us respond to challenge, change or danger in the environment. When we feel stressed, it means the body is trying to protect us, helping us survive or perform better. For example, before public speaking or escaping danger, our heart beats faster, muscles tense, and our attention sharpens. This is called the stress response.

The event or condition that causes stress is called a stressor. It might be a loud sound, conflict, illness, different types of violence or war. But not every stressor leads to trauma. Usually, after the stressor ends, the nervous system returns to balance, called homeostasis—a state where the body feels calm and safe again. Stress, in this way, is the body’s tool to protect homeostasis and survival (Porges 2011).

However, when a stressor is too intense, or when it becomes chronic or repeated, the stress becomes distress. Distress means the stress response that is too strong, too frequent, and/or too long-lasting, which disrupts the body’s ability to return to balance. In distress, the system cannot regulate itself well anymore. It becomes harder to sleep, focus, rest, or feel connected. If this condition continues, it can lead to the traumatization of the system.

### **Traumatic Event, Symptoms, and Trauma Condition**

A traumatic event is something that feels overwhelming, frightening, or life-threatening, like an accident, abuse, war, or forced displacement. But trauma is not the event itself. Two people can live through the same experience—one develops trauma symptoms, and the other does not. Trauma symptoms are the signs that may appear after a traumatic event. These can include difficulties in sleeping, nightmares, trouble concentrating, anxiety, emotional numbness, negative perceptions and ideas of self or strong reactions to reminders of the event. For many people, these traumatic symptoms reduce with time. But for others, they may stay longer.

Trauma as a condition is when the nervous system gets stuck in the survival responses—fight, flight, freeze, or collapse, even after the danger is no longer there. In this state, the body and mind cannot return to calm. The distress becomes too overwhelming for the system to regulate. Trauma is not a weakness or a disorder—it is the body’s way of protecting itself when the experience was too much, too fast, or too soon (Levine 1997; Van der Kolk 2014). When the body’s protective strategy cannot restore balance, it can become stuck in a dysregulated survival mode—what we call a trauma condition. In this sense, trauma is a dysregulated form of protection that continues even after the threat is gone.

## 3.1 Understanding the Connection of Trauma and Healing

The relationship between trauma and healing represents a fundamental tension in youth work and peace education: trauma simultaneously wounds and potentially transforms, isolates and connects, silences and eventually speaks. Our empirical findings across Georgia, Germany, Spain, and Ukraine reveal that young people experience trauma not as a singular event but as what participants described as “a wound in the soul”—something that lives in the body, shapes memory, and influences how individuals and community’s function. When we speak of healing in this context, we do not mean clinical recovery. Instead, we understand healing as a life-giving process of reconnection—with oneself, others, community, and hope for transformation. It involves growing new capacity for joy, agency, and solidarity while carrying the marks of difficult experiences.

This understanding aligns with contemporary neuroscientific insights. As van der Kolk established, trauma literally reshapes both brain and body, with traumatic memories stored somatically rather than narratively (Van der Kolk 2014). The Polyvagal Theory further illuminates how trauma disrupts our capacity for social engagement—precisely the mechanism through which healing occurs (Porges 2011). This creates what our Georgian participants articulated as a double bind: trauma makes connection feel unsafe, yet connection is essential for healing.

**Our research reveals three critical insights about the trauma-healing connection:**

**First, trauma is embodied but healing is relational.** Across all contexts, young people consistently turned to peers and informal networks as their primary support system. In Spain, 74% identified friends as their first line of support; in Ukraine, “park bench conversations” were described as more effective than formal interventions; in Germany, participants emphasized that peer support and community connections feel safer than formal counselling. This preference isn’t merely about accessibility—it reflects an intuitive understanding that healing happens through co-regulation and witnessed experience. As Levine notes, the body possesses innate healing capacity when supported to complete defensive responses (Levine 1997). Our findings suggest this completion happens most naturally in trusted relationships where the nervous system can gradually recalibrate from hypervigilance to safety.

**Second, individual wounds require collective response.** While trauma is often framed as an individual mental health problem—46% of Ukrainian respondents saw it this way—our participants consistently recognized its collective dimensions. Georgian youth spoke of “one traumatized generation raising the next,” while Spanish participants identified how events like terrorist attacks or gender-based violence create shared emotional landscapes. German participants described how public memory and national history influence how youth understand trauma, with intergenerational patterns where children carry unspoken pain from their parents or grandparents. This echoes Volkan’s concept of “chosen trauma” and Duran’s “soul wound”—collective suffering that transcends individual experience (Volkan 2001; Duran 2006). Importantly, our findings show that healing, too, operates collectively: through Georgian supras, Catalan festivals, Ukrainian solidarity networks, German community dialogues, and even digital spaces where young people comment “I feel that too” under strangers’ posts.

**Third, trauma contains transformative potential when properly held.** While acknowledging trauma’s devastating impacts—Georgian youth reported depression, widespread withdrawal

and apathy in Ukraine, German participants noting how trauma shapes daily behaviour decades after events—participants also described how trauma sometimes catalysed activism, solidarity, and meaning-making. Spanish youth workers noted that some young people channel trauma into “renewed will to fight injustice,” while German participants described how some youth transform painful experiences into civic engagement and collective action. However, they cautioned against romanticizing this resilience. This aligns with post-traumatic growth theory but extends it: transformation isn’t automatic or individual but emerges when communities create conditions for trauma to be metabolized rather than merely managed (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995).

### 3.2 Conceptual Foundation of Transformative Trauma-Sensitivity

Transformative trauma-sensitivity represents a reconceptualization of how we understand and respond to trauma in educational and community contexts. Moving beyond the evolution from trauma-informed to trauma-responsive approaches documented by SAMHSA, this framework integrates critical insights from liberation psychology, somatic theories, and decolonial practices to create what we might call a “third space” of trauma work—one that neither medicalizes suffering nor abandons professional rigor (SAMHSA 2014).

At its foundation, transformative trauma-sensitivity draws from three intersecting theoretical traditions that reshape our understanding of both trauma and healing:

Critical Trauma Studies extend some universalist assumptions of Western trauma discourse. As Behrouzan argues in examining indigenous historical trauma, Western frameworks often impose explanatory models that obscure local meanings and resistance strategies (Behrouzan 2023). This critique does not dismiss clinical insights but situates them within broader matrices of power, culture, and history. Trauma becomes not a decontextualized syndrome but what Kleinman and colleagues call “social suffering”—distress inseparable from conditions of structural violence, historical oppression, and cultural disruption (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997).

Somatic Integration Theory suggests that transformation requires engaging the body’s wisdom, not just cognitive understanding. Building on Levine’s Somatic Experiencing and emerging research on embodied cognition, this approach recognizes that trauma disrupts fundamental organismic rhythms—what Levine calls the “felt sense” of aliveness (Levine 1997). Healing involves restoring these natural rhythms by gradually and safely reconnecting with difficult experiences, moving gently between moments of activation and calm, and allowing the body to complete protective responses that got interrupted during the traumatic event. But transformative trauma-sensitivity extends this beyond individual bodies to what we might term “collective somatics”—the shared nervous system of communities that co-regulate or co-dysregulate together.

Healing Justice Frameworks, emerging from Black feminist and indigenous movements, fundamentally reorient trauma work from individual recovery to collective liberation. As articulated by Hemphill and others in the healing justice movement, this approach asks not “how do we help traumatized individuals?” but “how do we transform the conditions that create trauma?” (Hemphill 2017). This is not about replacing clinical care with political action but recognizing their interdependence—what Ginwright captures in his alteration from asking “what happened to you?” to “what’s right with you?” and ultimately “what does freedom look like?” (Ginwright 2018).

### 3.3 Core Qualities of Transformative Trauma-Sensitivity

These theoretical foundations merge into five interrelated qualities that distinguish transformative approaches:

#### 1) Multiple Ways of Knowing

Transformative trauma-sensitivity recognizes that there are many valid ways to understand and respond to trauma—through the body, through stories, through culture, through spirituality, and through political action. This is not about saying “everything is equally true” but recognizing that different approaches address different aspects of traumatic experience, like different tools in a healing toolbox (Santos 2014).

Indigenous healing practices are not “alternatives” to therapy but complete systems with their own wisdom. German participants highlighted how traditional practices, community dialogues, and collective remembrance offer pathways to healing that psychotherapy cannot provide alone. Youth using AI chatbots in Georgia or TikTok for emotional processing are not exhibiting “help-seeking behaviour” but creating new spaces where algorithmic neutrality might provide what human systems often deny: non-judgmental witness. Spanish participants valued podcasts as indirect ways to recognize shared experiences before entering group spaces.

#### 2) Time Moves in Circles

Unlike linear recovery models that expect people to “move on” or “get over” trauma, transformative approaches recognize that healing doesn’t follow a straight line. Time moves in circles—trauma moves backward and forward through time, individual and collective memory, past wounds and future possibilities (Rothberg 2009).

German participants described how traumatic reactions can appear decades after original events, shaping daily behaviour and social interactions. Healing does not follow stages but spirals, returning to similar themes at deeper levels. This circular quality appears in how historical trauma (Spanish Civil War, Soviet repressions, German collective memory) erupts in contemporary youth experience, requiring approaches that work simultaneously with past, present, and imagined futures.

#### 3) Zoom In, Zoom Out

Transformative trauma-sensitivity operates like adjusting the zoom on a camera—sometimes focusing closely on individual experience, sometimes pulling back to see family patterns, community dynamics, or structural forces—recognizing how they’re all connected.

An individual panic attack connects to family dynamics, community safety, institutional policies, and structural violence. Rather than choosing between individual therapy or social change, this approach practices “zoom agility”—moving fluidly between levels while maintaining their connections. German participants noted how trauma manifests both in personal reactions and in broader social patterns of exclusion and discrimination.

#### 4) Growing Life Force

Beyond reducing negative symptoms, transformative approaches cultivate what we might call “life force”—emotions and experiences that increase our power to act, connect, and create (Spinoza 1996). This involves not just safety but reclaiming joy, creativity, and desire as resistance to traumatizing systems (Brown 2019).

The arts-based practices our research participants valued across all countries operate here—not as “therapeutic activities” but as practices of growing life force in the face of life-draining systems. German participants described how artistic expression, demonstrations, and cultural gatherings help youth transform anger or grief into collective action and solidarity.

### 5) Living the Change

Transformative trauma-sensitivity embodies the world it seeks to create. Drawing from grassroots organizing traditions, it practices “prefiguration”—making the means consistent with the ends (Freire 2000). Healing spaces become laboratories for the just, creative, connected world we’re building.

This isn’t about creating perfect “safe spaces” but about creating imperfect experiments in collective flourishing (Haraway 2016). German participants emphasized that safe spaces should allow choice and be built on trust over time, while Spanish participants stressed the importance of spaces where participation is voluntary and welcoming rituals create belonging.

## 4. Practical Relevance for Youth Work and Peace Work

This chapter translates the conceptual framework of transformative trauma-sensitivity into concrete implications for practice. The implications for youth and peace work extend beyond adding trauma-awareness to existing practices. We will examine how these insights contribute to a more holistic understanding of youth work and peace education. This includes reimagining central purposes, relationships, and practices. The guiding question is, how do we reimagine educational purpose, practice, and learning relations so that they contribute to healing and transformation.

### Reimagining Educational Purpose

What is education when reframed by a trauma-sensitive lens? One potential answer is that education can become “the practice of freedom” (Hooks 1994). If schools and educational systems often unwittingly reenact trauma—through hierarchical competition, punitive discipline, or cultural annihilation—transformative education can have an opposite effect. This is not so about therapeutic schooling, but what we might call “critical hope”—education that both analyzes conditions of oppression and nurtures capacities for their transformation (Duncan-Andrade 2009).

In this way, education shifts from a practice of depositing content to what we might call “composting”—transforming difficult experiences into generative, life-giving soil (Freire 2000). Curriculum emerges not as pre-given content to be mastered but from community needs and desires. For example, German participants highlighted the need for education to help youth make connections between their experiences and broader social dynamics, while Spanish participants emphasized schools’ need to normalize emotional learning.

### Youth Work as Accompaniment

The Spanish word “acompañamiento” is a key framework that transcends both therapeutic and educational models. In this approach, youth workers become neither therapists nor teachers, but rather “accompaniers” along young people’s journey toward both healing and agency (Noel 2013).

Central to accompaniment are several practices identified in our research as being particularly effective:

**Presence Over Program:** Rather than using set interventions or curriculum, accompaniment foregrounds radical availability and willingness—being present without an agenda (Marcel 1956). This is not a lack of structure but a holding of space for youth to explore rather than receive (Winnicott 1971). For example, the park bench conversations highly valued by Ukrainian participants and the informal community gatherings described by German participants reflect this quality of unpressured presence.

**Cultural Bridge-Building:** Youth workers help youth make connections between their lived experience and larger frameworks for analysis and action (Gramsci 1971). Rather than imposing political consciousness, youth workers can support youth to research and transform their own conditions (Cammarota and Fine 2008).

**Institutional Change-Making:** However skilled, individual youth workers cannot be agents of transformative practice within traumatizing institutions. This requires a dual approach of working both “inside” and “outside” established institutions (Fraser 1990). Youth workers can become “change agents”—living alternative ways of being while navigating existing constraints (Meyerhoff 2019).

### **Practical Relevance to Peace Work**

The application of transformative trauma-sensitivity to peace work requires conceptual innovation. Much traditional peace approaches operate within the framework of what Galtung critiqued as “negative peace”—absence of direct violence—while paying little attention to structural and cultural violence intact (Galtung 1969). Although the framework of positive peace, is now widely established in peace work (not in political reality), additional focus on the impact of traumatic experiences might be needed. Transformative trauma-sensitivity suggests that sustainable peace requires addressing what we might term the “hidden injuries” of conflict.

**Trauma as Hidden Infrastructure:** It is increasingly recognized in contemporary conflict studies that protracted conflicts create what Bar-Tal calls “conflict-supporting narratives”—collective beliefs that reproduce antagonism (Bar-Tal 2007). In addition, we identify the need to examine how trauma becomes embedded in what we might call “invisible structures”—the unspoken rules and reactions that allow violence to continue. They operate through automatic defensive reactions, avoidance patterns, or normalized mistrust. These structures operate on an unconscious level but shape everyday community dynamics. For peace work, this means durable transformation must address not only explicit beliefs and conscious memories but also the embodied patterns and relational habits that traumatic experiences have woven into community life.

**When Past Becomes Present:** Building on Volkan’s concept of “time collapse,” traumatic conflicts create situations where past and present become one (Volkan 2001). German participants described this as trauma influencing how youth understand history and current events, while Georgian participants noted how unresolved conflicts continue shaping youth identity across generations. These are not simply psychological processes. It is social and political, as trauma influences are sustained through social memory practices of communities: commemorations, monuments, and educational curricula that keep the wounds alive (Connerton 1989). Peace work must address these temporal architectures, not to forget but to “remember differently”—

maintaining memory but transforming its operative power (Ricoeur 2004). It requires the creation of new rituals and practices that honour the past without remaining trapped in it. It means helping communities to hold historical memory in ways that acknowledge the pain while also opening pathways toward new futures.

**Emotion Circulation Systems:** Emotions like fear, anger, or humiliation are not individual properties but circulate through communities like invisible currents—through media, rumours, or daily interactions (Ahmed 2004). Ukrainian participants describe how war trauma creates a community-wide emotional landscape, and Spanish participants noted how events like a terrorist attack have left a collective emotional mark. Transformative peace work must engage these emotion circulation systems through what we might call “community healing practices.” These are the daily ways communities process violence together (Theidon 2013). It requires working with the emotional “atmosphere” of communities. Peace practitioners must recognize how emotions circulate between people and become embedded in collective life, shaping what is possible for trust, dialogue, and reconciliation.

**Body Memory Inheritance:** Emerging research suggests that conflicts literally reshape the biological and social fabric of entire populations across generations (Yehuda and Lehrner 2018). German participants observed trauma patterns being passed between generations without direct discussion, creating what one researcher calls “body memories” living in families and communities across time (Menakem 2017). These physical patterns of hypervigilance, shutdown, or defensiveness can persist long after conscious memories disappear. Peace work that does not attend to these embodied dimensions will only be scratching the surface of conflict while leaving its somatic roots untouched. This advocates for approaches that address not just attitudes but embodied patterns. Consequently, body-based approaches become necessary, not supplemental, to peace processes.

Building on this, our study suggests distinctive approaches to peacebuilding:

**Conflict Transformation as Community Healing:** Instead of separate tracks for peacebuilding and psychosocial support, transformative approaches acknowledge the deep interconnectedness of these domains. This can include collective rituals that mourn losses and imagine futures simultaneously or economic programmes that meet material needs while rebuilding social trust (Hamber 2009). Sustainable peace can hardly be built on foundations of unhealed trauma, just as healing can hardly occur in contexts of ongoing violence and insecurity. Transformative practice weaves together material reconstruction, emotional processing, and relational repair. This integrated approach recognizes that peace requires simultaneous attention to outer conditions (security, justice, resources) and inner landscapes (grief, fear, hope).

**Cultural Regeneration as Peace Practice:** If culture can carry trauma, it can also hold healing resources. German participants emphasized how commemorations and cultural gatherings create spaces for intergenerational dialogue, and Spanish and Georgian participants highlighted the role of traditional practices in this work. This is not a nostalgic return but what we might call “living traditions”—cultural practices that honour the past but adapt for present needs (Visweswaran 1994). In this context, cultural regeneration means reclaiming rituals, stories, and practices that violence has disrupted or distorted. It requires asking which cultural elements reinforce division and which can be reimagined to support connection. This approach fosters cultural work that aims to be a healing source so that communities can draw on their heritage while also creating new shared meanings that break old boundaries.

**Youth as Peacebuilders, Not Just Beneficiaries:** Peace education often positions youth as recipients of peace knowledge. Transformative approaches recognize that youth are both products of and potential transformers of conflict systems (McEvoy-Levy 2006). This requires pedagogies that do not just teach peace but are laboratories for its practice—ways of embodying our desired future in how we learn together (Freire 2000). Youth have unique insights because of living at the intersection of inherited conflicts and emerging possibilities. Their experience generates specific knowledge about what peace requires in the here and now. This reimagines peace education from knowledge transmission into a collaborative inquiry process where youth agency is the driver of learning and social change. The goal is not preparing youth for future peacebuilding but recognizing and strengthening their capacity to reshape the conditions they inhabit.

## 5. Conclusion

This research project started from one critical observation. Young people across Europe and its neighbouring regions are navigating significant levels of trauma, yet the responses available to them—whether in educational systems, youth work, or peace education—often fail to address the full complexity of their experiences. Our fieldwork across Georgia, Germany, Spain, and Ukraine documents this vividly, but also provided a compelling alternative vision. We found a persistent reality of trauma in young people’s lives but also the remarkable wisdom and creativity that communities demonstrate in developing responses to it.

The sobering reality is that trauma is far more widespread and systemic than is typically acknowledged in youth work and peace education. Young people face trauma in many forms—from war and forced displacement to everyday violence in schools, families, and economic systems. These experiences deeply affect their ability to join community activities and participate in civic life. Looking at current developments and historical legacies outside our research area, we see similar patterns emerging across different settings. Yet young people and their communities show remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in responding to these realities. From Spanish communities that built feminist spaces into laboratories for collective healing, to Ukrainian youth workers who found that showing up was more effective than deploying specialised interventions—everywhere we looked, we found evidence of healing wisdom emerging from lived experience.

These findings guided our conceptual work and point toward what we have called transformative trauma-sensitivity. A new approach that honours both the devastating impacts of trauma and the profound human capacity for healing and social transformation when appropriate conditions are created. This approach challenges several assumptions that currently limit responses to trauma in youth work and peace education.

First, it challenges the individualization of trauma that positions healing as primarily a personal responsibility. Our research consistently revealed that trauma operates collectively—through shared historical experiences, systemic violence, and intergenerational transmission—and therefore requires collective responses. Second, it enriches professional approaches by highlighting the vital role of community-based healing knowledge. While professional support remains important, our research revealed that the most trusted and accessible sources of support were peers, informal networks, cultural practices, and community rituals. These informal systems possess their own coherence, effectiveness, and deep cultural wisdom that complement

professional expertise. And third, it advocates for a stronger connection between healing work and social justice work. Our findings consistently showed that trauma cannot be adequately addressed without also addressing the conditions that create it—poverty, displacement, educational violence, systemic racism, and political oppression.

The framework of transformative trauma-sensitivity that emerges from these insights offers a reorientation of youth work and peace education that is simultaneously practical and visionary. It is practical because it builds on approaches that communities are already using, requiring not the creation of entirely new systems but the recognition and strengthening of existing community assets. It is visionary because it imagines youth work and peace education as practices that contribute to collective liberation.

This reorientation has specific implications for practice. For youth workers, it suggests moving from a service-delivery model to what we have called “accompaniment”—walking alongside young people as they navigate both healing and social transformation. For educational institutions, it suggests moving beyond trauma-informed policies toward trauma-transformative approaches that not only avoid causing additional harm but actively create conditions for healing and empowerment. For peace education, it suggests moving beyond approaches that focus solely on conflict resolution skills toward “collective healing practices” that address the traumatic legacies of violence while building capacity for transformed relationships and social structures. Perhaps most importantly, this framework suggests a fundamental reorientation of how we understand young people themselves. Rather than viewing them as either perpetrators or victims of trauma, transformative trauma-sensitivity recognizes young people as the primary agents of both their own healing and broader social transformation.

The limitations of this study point toward important directions for future research and practice development. Our research was necessarily constrained by time, resources, and the particular circumstances of each context—including the ongoing war in Ukraine. Future research might explore how these insights apply in other contexts, how they can be adapted for work with different age groups, and how they can be integrated more systematically into professional education and institutional policy. Yet even with these limitations, the evidence presented here suggests that significant transformation is both necessary and possible. The young people and youth workers who participated in this research have provided a roadmap for approaches that are more responsive to lived realities, more connected to community wisdom, and more oriented toward collective liberation.

The path forward requires what our Georgian participants called “institutional accountability”. The recognition that trauma often originates in the very systems meant to support young people, and therefore that effective responses must be willing to examine and transform these systems rather than simply helping individuals adapt to them. It requires what our Spanish participants called “care infrastructure”. Which needs systematic investment in the conditions that enable both young people and those who work with them to engage sustainably with both trauma and transformation. Most fundamentally, it requires what our Ukrainian participants demonstrated even under the most extreme circumstances—a commitment to maintaining spaces for connection, creativity, and collective healing even when formal systems are overwhelmed or absent.

This research concludes not with prescriptions but with an invitation. It invites youth workers, educators, and peace practitioners to observe their own practices through the lens



of transformative trauma-sensitivity. This can start by asking not only “How can we help traumatized young people?” but “How can we transform the conditions that create trauma while nurturing the conditions that support healing and social transformation?” It invites to recognize young people not as passive recipients of services but as the primary agents of both their own healing and broader social transformation. And it invites all of us to understand trauma not as a problem to be solved but as a doorway into deeper understanding of both individual resilience and collective transformation.



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