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Should I be scared when you say that you love me? Youth Work practice and the power of *professional love*

Introduction

This chapter contributes to an ongoing discourse on the importance of the relationship between practitioner and young person as a central and defining tenet of effective Youth Work practice.¹ Based on inter-personal ways of working, in situations where young people's participation and engagement with the worker is voluntary, youth work is characterized as a process of relationship-building that allows the practitioner to provide both protection and challenge to the young person, while supporting them in fulfilling their potential. A key challenge for the practitioner in this relational form of practice is to recognize the vulnerabilities of the young people with whom they work, and ensure that they do not experience exploitative or otherwise inappropriate behaviour in their relationships with youth workers, who for many young people are the first adult with whom they have chosen to have a relationship. Practitioners are privileged in this regard, and are bound to ensure that relationships characterized by informality, intimacy and warmth foster space for reflection, growth and flourishing, and are used to provide meaningful support in times of difficulty.² This has become particularly important in the context of approaches to service delivery under the prevailing neo-liberal hegemony, where the qualitative impact of

¹ See Huw Blacker, 'Relationships, Friendship and Youth Work', in *Youth Work Practice*, ed. Tony Jeffs & Mark Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15-30; Kate Sapin, *Essential Skills for Youth Work Practice*, 2nd edn (London: Sage, 2013), 57-72; Tania de St Croix, 'Youth work, performativity and the new youth impact agenda: getting paid for numbers?', *Journal of Education Policy* 33, no. 3 (2018), 414-438.

² Peter Hart, 'The reality of relationships with young people in caring professions: A qualitative approach to professional boundaries rooted in virtue ethics', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 83 (2017), 248-254; Jeffrey Jones & Nancy Deutsch, 'Relational Strategies in After-School Settings: How Staff-Youth Relationships Support Positive Development', *Youth & Society* 43, No. 4 (2011), 1381-1406.

youth work's person-centred, context-dependent and relational practice is perceived as problematic in managerialist approaches that distinguish 'clients' and 'providers' and fixate on procedure-led practice and quantitative monitoring.³

In examining the nature of this relationship, I explore in this chapter the idea that love should form a foundational basis of Youth Work practice, and report on my interpretation of the views of 100 Youth Work practitioners from across the globe who completed an online survey shortly before the emergence of the global Covid-19 pandemic. I sought the views of practitioners from a wide spectrum of settings to secure their perspectives on the need for this aspect of practice, and what *professional love* in Youth Work might look like. In my analysis, I build on Jools Page's work on the role of love in professional relationships between early years' workers and the children in their care, to suggest what this might look like in practice with older young people.⁴ My thinking is framed within bell hooks' advocacy for the place of love in society as a whole, and Paulo Freire's call to change the world through engaging the oppressed in dialogue informed by a profound love of humanity.⁵ This radical approach recognises the inherent worth of all humans, particularly the most marginalised and disenfranchised people, and requires practitioners to demonstrate our love for those who we seek to serve in all aspects our practice.⁶

This chapter is structured to allow for an initial exploration of the relevant theoretical positions that have shaped my thinking, followed by discussion of the responses from the study.

³ de St Croix, 'Youth work and performativity', 414-438; Hart, 'The reality of relationships', 248-254.

⁴ Jools Page, 'Characterising the Principles of *Professional Love* in Early Childhood Care and Education', *International Journal of Early Years Education* 26, No. 2 (2018): 125-141.

⁵ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2020); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970).

⁶ e.g. Jools Page, 'Characterising the Principles of *Professional Love* in Early Childhood Care and Education', *International Journal of Early Years Education* 26, No. 2 (2018): 125-141.

Throughout, attention is given to both the required components of *professional love* as an element of Youth Work practice, and the challenges practitioners face when forming professionally loving relationships with the young people in their care.

If 'love' is the cure, what is the 'problem'?

The experience of being young should not by default be characterised as 'problematic', as the period of being a 'youth' (typically viewed as 13-19 years of age) is one of self-discovery and identity development, when new opportunities and adventures open up, and young people's personal biographies take new shapes.⁷ Nevertheless, the lives of early 21st century global youths are impacted by (among other things) global economic changes, educational shifts, and changing responses to relationships and household formation, affording greater freedoms and opportunities at the same time as increasing responsibility and competition between individuals.⁸ As these trends influence how young people's lifelong outcomes are framed, their increasingly individualised experiences present structural challenges that are 'faced most acutely by the least resourced', reinforcing the impact of social, cultural and economic inequalities on generating unequal outcomes.⁹

Young people should not be seen as a homogenous group, and – while there are many common experiences – structural factors impact differently to affect the extent to which individual young people have choice and agency over their response to these. Youth Work has a role precisely because many young people's autonomy is constrained as they struggle to negotiate the effects of these forces.¹⁰ Moreover, as well as having to deal with

⁷ Alan France, et al., *Youth Sociology* (London: Red Globe Press, 2020).

⁸ Dan Woodman & Johanna Wyn, *Youth & Generation: Rethinking Change & Inequality in the Lives of Young People* (London: Sage, 2014).

⁹ Woodman & Wyn, *Youth & Generation*, 6.

¹⁰ Simon Bradford, *Sociology, Youth & Youth Work Practice* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

issues related specifically to adolescence, the post-modern world presents young people with myriad challenges, the experience of which is particular to this era, and which combine uniquely to create a global crisis in young people's mental health and wellbeing¹¹. Poverty, precarity, inequality, stress, competitive pressures to succeed and loneliness are undermining the life chances of large numbers of increasingly isolated and marginalized young people¹².

All of these conditions have been exacerbated by the global Covid-19 pandemic: lockdowns, inactivity and self-isolation, and – in extreme cases – parental neglect / abuse have had especially adverse effects on young people, heightening the need for Youth Workers to enhance collective wellbeing over the coming years.¹³

Youth Work and professionally loving practice

When these pressures are considered together, it is easy to understand why many young people might succumb to a de-politicised and passive form of learned helplessness.¹⁴

However, practitioners can mobilise love as the antidote to the destructive power of this sense of hopelessness, fuelling practice with 'critical optimism' by demonstrating their love of humanity to tackle oppressive and dehumanizing structures.¹⁵ The all-encompassing

¹¹ Martin E Purcell, 'Investigating the Transformational Potential of *Professional Love*' in Work with Young People', *Radical Community Work Journal* 3, No.1 (2018); Martin E Purcell, Jools Page & Jim Reid, 'Love in a time of *Colic*: mobilizing *professional love* in relationships with children and young people to promote their resilience and wellbeing', *Child & Youth Services* (2020), 1-25.

¹² Janet Batsleer & James Duggan, *Young and Lonely: The Social Conditions of Loneliness* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020).

¹³ Liat Levita, *Initial research findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the well-being of young people aged 13 to 24 in the UK* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 2020); Anant Kumar & K. Rajasekharan Nayar. 'COVID 19 and its mental health consequences', *Journal of Mental Health* 30, No. 1 (2020), 1-2.

¹⁴ Henry A Giroux, 'War Culture and the Politics of Intolerable Violence', *Symplokē* 25, No. 1-2 (2017), 191-218.

¹⁵ Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), 85.

power of loving practice inculcates radical hope about the possibility of an ethical, more humane future, in which individuals are able to imagine possibilities for life to flourish, beyond the constraints of their current circumstances.¹⁶ This form of practice – imbued with love, humility, faith in and solidarity with others, hope and critical thinking – can help young people overcome the denigration they feel, moving them to a place of empowered resistance based on new understandings of their own oppression.

Youth Work addresses needs and interests articulated by young people themselves, promotes autonomy, self-reliance, self-esteem and empowerment while embracing diversity, challenging oppression and promoting social justice.¹⁷ The relationship between the practitioner and young people is integral to this process, as – unlike other practitioners, who are required to maintain ‘professional distance’ from their ‘clients’ – Youth Workers are encouraged to overcome this distance to develop a partnership with the young person, characterised as ‘a *covenant* ... in which Youth Worker and young person work together to heal hurts, to repair damage, to grow into responsibility, and to promote new ways of being’.¹⁸

The importance of these relationships for helping young people navigate the new experiences and challenges of ‘youth’ cannot be over-stated, especially where the young person has had a poor experience of or no meaningful familial relationship.¹⁹ They are particularly important for the most vulnerable young people, who may be prone to

¹⁶ David Robinson-Morris, ‘Radical Love, (R)evolutionary Becoming: Creating an Ethic of Love in the Realm of Education Through Buddhism and Ubuntu’, *The Urban Review* 51 (2019), 28-29

¹⁷ Kate Sapin, *Essential Skills*, 3-21.

¹⁸ Howard Sercombe, ‘Youth Workers as Professionals: Managing Dual Relationships and Maintaining Boundaries’, in *Ethical Issues in Youth Work*, ed. Sarah Banks, (London: Routledge, 2010), 78.

¹⁹ Nick Frost & Melanie Watts, ‘Young People’s Transition to Adulthood’, in *Human Growth & Development in Children and Young People*, eds. Jonathan Parker & Sara Ashencaen Crabtree (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020), 153-170.

heightened peer pressure and risky behaviour, by showing them how to develop feelings of self-worth. Their experience of attachments to practitioners helps young people to experiment with their affective responses to the challenges that relationships present. An empathic values-based practice can help sustain and contribute towards the overall flourishing and wellbeing of young people.²⁰

My conceptualisation of Youth Work *professional love* in practice builds on the view that early years practice should be informed by a 'pedagogy of love', ensuring that all children 'know and understand that they are worthy of being loved', providing a basis for their 'emotional resilience, learning and ultimately independence'.²¹ Page further asserts that children require 'sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they have formed a deep and sustaining relationship'.²² This is even more important for children who have experienced poorly attached relationships in their families, or when the professional caregiver's natural feelings toward an individual child are not instinctively warm and loving.

While Youth Work is not directly commensurate with early years work, practice can be enriched and only becomes more valuable and impactful when practitioners exhibit motivational displacement and attunement towards the young person they are working with; and are able to develop deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships with them. Furthermore, by deliberately investing in a level of professional emotional intimacy as opposed to a level of professional distance, practitioners intellectualize their experience of

²⁰ David Shemmings, *Attachment in Children and Young People* (Dartington: Research in Practice, 2016).

²¹ Jools Page, 'Characterising the Principles of *Professional Love*', 134.

²² Jools Page, 'Developing *Professional Love* in Early Childhood Settings', in *Lived Spaces of Infant-Toddler Education and Care: Exploring Diverse Perspectives on Theory, Research and Practice*, ed. Linda Harrison & Jennifer Sumsion (London: Springer, 2014): 125.

the relationship as 'loving'.²³ Conceived as a form of 'love labour'²⁴, Youth Work should sustain people as 'emotionally and relationally engaged social beings' by being affect-driven and 'other-centred', and demonstrating that moral commitment, effort, time and energy have a place in emotional, mental, physical and cognitive work²⁵. Hence, the practitioner must be able to actively demonstrate their love for the young person in all that they say and do, to develop and sustain purposive relationships that are genuine, trusting and respectful, and that are experienced as something similar to the compelling urge of care derived from pre-established (e.g. familial and friendship) relationships. A final aspect that should be present in sustained, relational based practice is a degree of mutuality that is usually present in love labour.²⁶

Ensuring ethically sound practice

This raises the potential for professionally loving practice to be misconstrued, or for strong emotional feelings to impair professional judgement and decision-making, particularly as Youth Work features many elements of friendship and the use of language codes familiar to young people, which can potentially make them feel that the Youth Worker is their friend.²⁷ For instance, a young person may find the informal nature of the professional relationship confusing, meaning that the practitioner is responsible for ensuring clarity about the relationship, so that professionally loving practice does not cause confusion. Similarly, where a young person has not previously experienced a positive relationship with their

²³ Jools Page, 'Characterising the Principles of *Professional Love*'.

²⁴ Kathleen Lynch, 'Love labour as a distinct and non-commodifiable form of labour', *Sociological Review* 55, No. 3 (2007): 550-570.

²⁵ Kathleen Lynch, 'Love labour', 553.

²⁶ Kathleen Lynch, 'Love labour', 559.

²⁷ Howard Sercombe, 'Youth Workers as Professionals', 78-79.

parents, the practitioner must avoid being drawn into a relationship reflecting that of a surrogate parent/carer. Furthermore, as the young person may entrust the practitioner with deeply personal elements of their selves, they must make the young person feel that it is safe to be vulnerable.

As in all relational work, practitioners need to be aware of the potential impact of their positional power on the (re)actions of young people, and the significance of 'choice' in relation to the young person's engagement in the relationship (if it does not meet their needs, the young person should be able to disengage from the process).²⁸ Power also features in the practitioner's multiple accountabilities (to the young person, their family, their employer, funders, etc.); its potential impact being intensified when there is an affective or emotional dimension to the relationship.

Professionally loving practice comes with emotional and psychological costs for the practitioner, who – through excessive exposure to emotional labour – may lose touch with their authentic sense of personhood.²⁹ A blurring of the lines dividing professional and personal interactions places extra pressure on the practitioner, who may become or appear less authentic in their work with young people, thereby undermining the potential their relational work offers.

Love and Youth Work: listening to practitioners' voices

The rest of this chapter is informed by practitioners' contributions to an online survey, conducted shortly before the outbreak of COVID-19, and uses their voices to illuminate the

²⁸ Kate Sapin, *Essential Skills*, 57-59.

²⁹ Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

themes addressed so far along with the practicalities of enacting professionally loving practice. Invitations and a link to the survey were e-mailed to 1,000 contacts on a professional networking site; I limited the sample to the first hundred responses to ensure the data set was manageable. Respondents live and work in disparate countries (including Australia, Bosnia, France, Ireland, Kenya, Sweden and Uganda), although the majority are UK-based (45% England, 25% Scotland, 10% Northern Ireland and one from Wales). While only twelve respondents' current job title is *Youth Worker*, at least 35 have a professional qualification in Youth Work. A further 28 respondents identify themselves as being in a management role in a range of Youth Work contexts. Of the rest, six respondents are employed as *Support Workers* and two as *Social Workers*, while three are employed in residential care; and other roles occupied by respondents include Lecturer (three), foster carers (two), Youth Justice Worker, etc.

Maintaining quality professional relationships

All respondents acknowledge the importance of the relationship between practitioner and young person, ascribing particular importance to being compassionate, acknowledging feelings and vulnerabilities, and demonstrating to young people that they are important to you. Allowing people to feel that they are worthy of love and that they are loved is felt to be 'essential / very important' by 87% of respondents. As one respondent asserts: 'Young people's early experiences of positive, safe and caring people are crucial, and anything missing, lacking or negative can impact them into adulthood.'

A third of respondents identify consistency as key to ensuring the quality and impact of practitioners' relationships with young people, along with demonstrating genuine interest in their lives, concerns and aspirations. Typically, this involves for one practitioner: 'finding

out about the young person, their needs, perspective, ambitions. Being interested, friendly, welcoming, questioning.’ For others, learning about the young person’s personality, beliefs, environment and problems makes them ‘feel seen’ and demonstrates acceptance, especially when ‘listening to their rants’.

Love features most in responses as a means of ensuring the *quality* of the relationship. One respondent asserts that practitioners should ‘love them simply because they are human beings’; another suggesting that ‘if people don’t show love and respect with one another as adults, it will also be true of children they serve’.

Demonstrating love in professional relationships with young people

Respondents’ views demonstrate the complexity of engaging in professionally loving relationships with young people. For many respondents, love is clearly something which they embrace as a driving force in their practice, as illustrated here:

Love is at the centre of all that I do. I believe love is extremely important - it shows how genuine you are, enables you to be caring, helps a young person to develop and see what love is for themselves. If we don’t show love how can we expect to see a loving response back from a young person? Love is interlinked with so many other important aspects and values too.

Typifying other responses, this comment highlights the conscious growth of love in practice:

When I started out, I didn’t expect to love my clients, but I do. It’s a different kind of love than loving your own child or your friend or your partner, but, like those relationships, the love just comes across if it’s genuine.

Presence & Consistency

Over half of responses refer to the need to 'be there' and to be consistent in one's dealings with young people for them to feel loved. This reflects the impermanence of many key relationships in young people's lives, and the need to deliver on promises made to young people, 'too many of whom have been let down by adults too many times'.

Boundaries feature in comments on consistency, many highlighting their importance in helping young people feel safe. One residential worker emphasises the importance of 'structure and routine' in the lives of the young people they work with, including eating meals together. Similarly, modelling and expecting appropriate behaviour features in several respondents' characterisation of professionally loving practice, with one describing this as 'being considerate to young people's needs without indulging their whims'.

Responses also suggest that being present and consistent requires a carefully considered and crafted use of humour, warmth and any emotions (including anger) to show empathy ('definitely not sympathy'). Love demonstrated this way can allow for the emergence of a 'felt connection', something that 'cannot be forced, but is still within the professional boundary'. Similarly, several respondents identified forgiveness for previous 'transgressions' as a means of demonstrating your continued availability for the young person. One respondent linked forgiveness and love thus:

Love is about attending to people: listening to them, seeing them for who they are despite some of their 'behaviours'. You have to see past this. I will accept them even when they mess up, without judgement and without anger.

Attentiveness

The importance of greeting each individual young person ‘properly’ every time you meet them features repeatedly, for instance to ensure ‘they feel that my day is better now they have arrived’. Suggestions included welcoming them with a smile and a verbal greeting, using their name; making them cups of tea; maintaining eye contact when talking, thereby emphasising that the young person is ‘at the centre of your thoughts’.

Contributions linking communication to attentiveness include the suggestion that practitioners operate ‘from a place of humility’, one French Youth Worker stressing that the relationship should not be ‘about knowing more, or bestowing help. It's about drawing alongside and listening. Finding out what they need first and foremost’. Remembering the content of previous conversations, and being interested in what has happened about things you have discussed before, also features in many responses. Similarly, incorporating elements of the individual stories of young people (such as ‘the small things like what they like to eat or music they like’) in plans for sessions and activities, is another way respondents demonstrate love to young people.

Language and touch

Around two thirds of respondents highlight the importance of language in conveying feeling and of bolstering young people’s sense of identify and self-worth. Uniquely, one respondent’s employer encourages staff to use the word ‘love’ in their interactions with young people, as a form of ‘affirmation of their place with us’. A quarter of respondents feel that overt physical expressions of love for young people (touch, kissing, cuddling, etc.) are deemed inappropriate. Nevertheless, another quarter advocated for the physical

expression of *professional love*, including one therapist who acknowledged they are 'privileged to have the occasional hug', asserting that:

The professional relationship in every circumstance is an intimate one, where young folk share experiences they would only share with people close to them. I fear with the lack of physical contact – that offers assurance and compassion – we've somehow thrown the baby out with the bath water.

One respondent gives equal prominence to 'sitting on the ground with them – less standing up' as to 'hugs, kisses, kind words, respectful listening and laughter together'. Other responses suggest that increasingly risk-averse and 'safeguarding-obsessed' settings and policies hamper their relationships with – and impede the development of – young people. Practitioners need to learn 'not to be afraid of appropriate contact', including 'rebuffing them if they pounce on you'.

Supervision is identified as a way to help practitioners navigate potential pitfalls (to avoid becoming too emotionally invested in relationships with young people; to manage boundaries effectively; to ensure 'courageous acts of love' are not misinterpreted as a precursor to intimacy; etc.). Respondents feel that this support should come from experienced practitioners who have managed the complexities of professionally loving relationships themselves.

Obstacles to professionally loving practice

Three respondents claim that there are no obstacles to professionally loving practice, as long as practitioners 'follow professional values and ethics', or/and 'start with the right motivation', or/and have sufficient time to commit to developing one-to-one relationships

with young people. However, as summarised below, most respondents' practice is subject to at least one obstacle to professionally loving practiceⁱ.

Personal limitations of young people

The young person's prior experience of relationships with significant adults (parents, carers, social workers, teachers, etc.) may have been negative/abusive, undermining their ability to sustain rich relationships with practitioners. One respondent typically finds young people 'often reject love because they don't want to form meaningful relationships due to them constantly being let down by people who are supposed to care for them'. This may result in trust issues or low self-esteem; inability to receive or believe positive feedback from adults; or trauma-induced behavioural issues. One respondent finds 'young people I work with expect me to be angry and 'shouty'. They meet me with an expectation of conflict and the main obstacle is getting them to understand that I can be compassionate'. Practitioners need, therefore, to 'stick with the young people and continue to show them love even when they display behaviours that tell you they don't want to be loved'.

Several respondents recognise that young people may not 'understand loving and caring relationships in the way we might do', often confusing the distinction between Youth Work and friendship. In particular, many young people struggle to accept *professional love* as 'appropriate', while some 'don't know how to receive love, or interpret love as sexual or a power dynamic'. Crucially, the young person's expectation – based on prior experience – that the relationship will be curtailed can leave them feeling suspicious and fearful.

Other obstacles to professionally loving relationships experienced by respondents include peer or family pressure on the young person not to engage, and being expected to

engage in environments where they struggle already (e.g. school or home). Similarly, their exposure to chaotic influences in their lives (drugs, violence, homelessness, etc.) can make it even more difficult to engage in such relationships.

Personal limitations of staff

Interestingly, the majority of respondents feel their own personal limitations outweigh those of the young people with whom they work, with several identifying the impact of professional development on their understanding of what is appropriate in relationships. One – having been ‘taught in social work not to be attached to my clients’ – self-limits their relationships with young people. For another, their fear of ‘going anywhere near a topic that could lead to a crossing of a professional boundary’ has been ‘drilled into’ them in their training. Others worry that their perception of the likely difficulty in re-setting boundaries once loosened might limit their professionally loving practice.

The fear of being perceived as only showing interest in the young person because of being paid to do so is another recurring theme, while some respondents are also concerned about setting young people up to fail in relationships with other practitioners not committed to providing the same degree of love, care or positive regard. Additionally, the fear of failure permeates and inhibits professionally loving practice for some, with one respondent evoking the darkness of the moment: ‘when you can't spark even the smallest sense of hope or worth, and therefore they can't see the reason to try anything’.

Many respondents’ initial route into Youth Work reflects their own stories of oppression, vulnerability and trauma. Some respondents are conscious that unresolved trauma may inhibit effective relationship-based practice, as young people’s experiences

might trigger their own emotional response. Furthermore, respondents worry about 'compassion fatigue', with one clarifying: 'If you experience, through love and compassion, the pain of all your clients - that's a lot of pain'. This relates to stress, an oft-cited obstacle to professionally loving practice emanating from practitioners or/and inadequate supervision, leaving many respondents feeling over-tired or stretched.

Legal and organisational constraints

Over half of respondents feel that policies constrain their ability to engender supportive, caring or/and loving relationships with young people, with safeguarding legislation and policies seen as particularly problematic in this regard. All respondents accept that safeguarding rightly permeates all aspects of person-centred practice with young people, though many feel the implementation of safeguarding policy impedes relational practice, and the implementation of *professional love* in particular. For instance, one respondent feels that agencies and institutions 'have their hands tied by different approaches and protocols'. The requirement in safeguarding policy for staff to report anything that *might* indicate abuse inhibits respondents in their practice, as this requirement effectively 'betrays trust, and takes power away from the young person'.

Additionally, around a third of respondents find policies requiring them to be physically distant from young people problematic, with many organisations proscribing physical contact altogether, something which several consider as potentially more damaging to the young person. One practitioner 'feel(s) the need to sometimes be guarded rather than open'; another is concerned that 'we aren't supposed to have physical contact, when sometimes they just need a hug'; while another 'would sometimes love to give a young

person a hug, just because at that moment it's exactly what they need. I do not, however, as it would be viewed as crossing safeguarding boundaries'.

Practical considerations

The majority of respondents feel that their workload (specifically the numbers of young people with whom they are expected to work) mitigates against the development of profound relationships, undermining the potential to enact *professional love*. For one respondent 'making and sustaining loving relationships takes time plus commitment', and the lack of time is the main obstacle to effective relational practice.

Similarly, limitations in resources can result in practitioners not seeing young people often enough, or for too short a time, or in group sessions when what they need is personal attention. For several respondents, the demands of group work often mean that 'a young person in need may not get as much time as they should have'. Other respondents cite bureaucracy and the outcome-driven focus of funders as obstacles to relational practice, especially as it is 'hard to quantify care'.

Lack of understanding, support and trust among managers and colleagues inhibits professionally loving practice. In some cases, respondents' colleagues are simply 'uncomfortable' with their approach; in others, a lack of commitment and enthusiasm means colleagues fail to 'see the potential of young people and don't have empathy or understanding of their situation'.

A contested notion

Not all respondents accept the premise that there is a role for love in Youth Work practice, with seven contradicting the request to describe how they demonstrate love in their professional relationships with young people. Some are clear that they ‘don't want to create loving relationships’, with others clarifying that this relates to the use of the word ‘love’ in relation to their practice. For one respondent, the term is ‘too intimate’, though they acknowledge that love is ‘manifested in myself (and others) when our work is not a *job* but considered a *vocation*’. Another feels that love is ‘a deep personal connection, and I am not sure that it is realistic to expect that working with so many young people’.

A small number of respondents think that ‘loving’ practice could open young people up to potential harm, if implemented by practitioners who do not have their best interests at heart: ‘we know some adults will exploit trust and vulnerability. This means love and care in a boundaried and carefully supervised environment’. Similarly, some respondents are fearful that enacting *professional love* might open them up to allegations of abuse, particularly in their engagement with vulnerable young people, where relational work must not be open to misinterpretation. Here, respondents see the pitfalls around the requirement to maintain boundaries and ‘professional distance’, which – if overstepped – can lead to ‘fear of malpractice; fear of being perceived as abusive’. For one respondent, policing these perceived boundaries results in ‘fear in forming relationships with young people, which is to their detriment’.

Three respondents feel more comfortable with the term ‘care’, which they describe variously as ‘enthusiasm and passion for their safety and happiness’; ‘doing what you say you will, giving young people time and space’; and ‘a two-way thing, a relationship and stick

with it good or bad'. Similarly, one respondent asserts 'I demonstrate good support, not love'; while another prefers 'unconditional positive regard', a 'more spacious' term than *professional love*.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the fact that different perspectives on the appropriateness of professionally loving practice are identified in this research, Youth Work practitioners should not be afraid of entering into the 'deep personal connections' that one wary respondent cautioned against. Indeed, I take encouragement from the fact that so many practitioners were prepared to engage in this research, and that the majority of them used the experience as an opportunity to reflect on making their practice more loving and ensuring the wellbeing of young people in different settings across the globe. The central message their contributions offer is that *professional love* is not only desirable as part of the Youth Work practitioner's 'toolkit', but that some practitioners have already devised sophisticated approaches to embodying love in practice and use it as a central tenet of their work with oppressed, marginalised, or otherwise vulnerable young people.

My attempt to summarise the key elements of *professional love* in practice has identified three aspects which are compatible with the professional values and principles underpinning Youth Work: presence and consistency; attentiveness; and language / touch. These all feature in one practitioner's articulation of how they demonstrate love in their practice, which encapsulates my understanding of *professional love* perfectly:

I smile with them, laugh with them, know them completely and demonstrate to them they can trust me. I comfort them when they are hurt or upset, I give them

names for their emotions. I tell them I love them and make an effort to praise certain aspects of their character which make them unique. I'm always happy to see them and I think that demonstrates love. I am consistent in responding to their needs and similarly consistent in setting appropriate boundaries in terms of behaviour management.

The practitioner's willingness and ability to demonstrate that they know and are deeply interested in each young person with whom they work, remember what is important to them and stick with them is at the heart of a professionally loving practice. Crucially, given what we know about behavioural drivers, professionally loving practitioners must continue to show the young people they work with love even (or particularly) when they display behaviours that suggest they don't want to be loved. This is perhaps where the practitioner's conscious use of self comes to the fore, drawing on their own pool of experience to demonstrate empathy and understanding, and to nurture mutuality and reciprocity within the relationship. Indeed, it is the presence of these qualities in the relationship that I feel distinguishes professionally loving practice from care, which is nevertheless a component part of *professional love*.

I recognise that potential pitfalls exist, of which practitioners must be aware. Not least among these are concerns expressed by several respondents about the importance of safeguarding as a foundational aspect of practice, and the potential for genuine professionally loving practice to be misconstrued, or to impact on the necessarily flexible and sometimes porous boundaries of Youth Work practice.³⁰ Even worse, as in any

³⁰ Peter Hart, 'The Reality of Relationships', 1381-1406.

profession, those determined to do harm could adapt this form of practice to suit their nefarious ends, with potentially catastrophic consequences. Nevertheless, as a form of humanistic practice, it is not unreasonable to seek out the best in people, and deterrents identified by this study can be built into practice management to bolster existing safeguarding measures. A focus on the role of supervision (seen as a cornerstone of Youth Work management³¹) was specifically foregrounded, suggesting that *professional love* can be critiqued and supported (and, potentially, modelled) in the relationship between the professionally loving practitioner and their supervisor. This offers the potential to enhance the benefits assigned to *professional love*, to augment measures to protect young people from unscrupulous practice, and to protect against the re-creation of young people's negative experiences of relationships with adults.

The different experiences and perspectives of the broad range of practitioners who participated in this research suggests that self-healing is a crucial part of the practitioner's preparation for professionally loving relational practice with young people: practitioners should only seek to enact *professional love* if and when they are psychologically and emotionally fit to do so, to obviate the potential for damage to them and to the young people under their care. Given our understanding of the emotional and psychological cost to practitioners of love labour, and the emerging interest in self-healing as preparation for community development and other forms of practice, this is perhaps the main area where my research will focus going forward.³²

³¹ Margo Herman, 'Reflective Practice Meets Youth Work Supervision', *Youth & Policy* 109 (2012): 118-128.

³² Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*; Lynch, 'Love Labour'; Phia van der Watt, 'Prepared for a journey into wounded communities – and into the self', *Community Development Journal* 55, No. 4 (2020): 662-679.

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ⁱ Or 'to engendering supportive, caring or/and loving relationships with children and young people in their care', as *per* the question.