Responding to 'Heartwork' – reflections on the Stop the Clock Conference keynote by Dr Tania de St Croix

By Debs Erwin and Gail Neill

The Stop the Clock Conference was, in part, a celebration of 50 years of Community Youth Work training at Ulster University. It was also about creating space for practitioners and academics to pause and reflect on youth research and practice. So, we were delighted to partner with the Journal of Youth Studies in bringing this international conference to Belfast. Early in September 2024 over 250 international delegates arrived at Ulster University for a 3-day gathering which included more than 150 papers, 15 panels, 5 keynote presentations and a range of community and cultural events. Delegates from over 20 countries attended, adding to the richness and diversity of the research insights shared. The conference aimed to ***'Stop the Clock'***, providing researchers and practitioners the opportunity to reflect on how these times of rapid social change and political and economic turbulence impact on young people – and their ramifications for the future.

For years I (Gail) have been drawing on the work of Dr Tania de St Croix (King's College, London) as I teach a Critical Thinking BSc module. Using themes raised in her book, *Grass Roots Youth Work* (2016), I challenge students to think critically about where youth work positions itself, who it aligns with and ultimately consider what it is we aim to achieve – and for whom. It was an absolute pleasure then, when we had the opportunity to host Tania as a keynote speaker at the conference and it was quickly clear that her exposition of 'heart work' struck a deep chord with many of those present. Here are some of our meandering thoughts in response.

Entitled "**Youth work as heart work in turbulent times – spaces, stories and struggles**", Tania's paper introduced us to the idea of foregrounding rather than shying away from love and compassion in our interactions with young people. While the concept may immediately resonate for youth work practitioners, it can also trigger a nervousness or cautious engagement with the idea of framing our work using such 'emotional' language. The unease may, in part, be due to attempts to professionalise youth work, and the associated struggle for it to be valued and regarded on a par with other people-facing professions such as teaching or social work. In doing so however, distance, boundaries, and emotional detachment may have inadvertently become the markers of such professional identities.

So, what if we consider such emotional engagements differently? Rather than understanding love, in this context, as romantic or parental (and thus, to be avoided), instead it is an acknowledgement of a genuine, caring relationship with another (Thrana, 2016: 17); professional love as demonstrated through emotional closeness and an enduring commitment to young people, where love and care are "*central elements of relational practice with young people"* (Purcell, 2024:158).

Tania spoke of how young people value youth work for intrinsic reasons – its informality, emphasis on relationships, and offer of a 'third space' (a space outside of home, school/work). Such intrinsic dynamics of *"caring engagement with young*

people" (de St Croix 2013: 41) are a key element that motivate practitioners' sense of care towards young people (Purcell, 2024). 'Heart work' then is about this kind of intrinsic love and ethic of care and I found Tania's presentation got me (Debs) thinking about how we bring our whole selves to our work – as integral to our practice.

One of the questions Tania posed to delegates was, *'what happens if we foreground what is heartfelt, heartbreaking and heart-full in our work?'* (2024). It is challenging to contemplate what this might mean for us as she further asked, *'how much of our own heartbroken stories are we ready to tell?'* (ibid.) Perhaps we might start with a need for greater honesty – about our own pain, our pain about the suffering we encounter through our work and in the world around us. What do we do when this work is so often utterly heartbreaking, when we see such distress at the individual level, and compounding harm on an unrelenting, systemic scale? Honesty might also be required about our coping strategies – at least with ourselves, but also with others. How then can we create safe, brave spaces in which to be vulnerable? And who is it that looks after the hearts of those engaged in heart work? As Tania alluded, there is a lot of talk about trauma-informed practice, but this might not always be reflected in an ethic of care towards those workers engaged in this work.

Intentionally practicing this kind of heart work presents a range of systemic limitations such as the prevailing 'target culture' with its focus on quantitative outputs and metrics, and evidence of impact. This can leave little room to observe let alone talk about feelings, growth, or evolving human relationships and squeezes the space and time for meaningful reflective practice (de St Croix, 2013). It also dilutes the commitment to justice and equality that has been foundational to youth work and renders our long-term, relational investments in young people almost impossible. It is hard to be 'on the side' of young people (Nicholls, 2012) subverting the systems that marginalise them when so many programmes and funding grants position young people as the 'problem' to be fixed.

While youth workers are often happy to say they love *youth work,* there is often an extra 'bit' that they engage in for the benefit of young people, which can remain more elusive. Indeed, Tania has previously noted *"the little extra"* (2013: 34) that workers do, while Neill and Hammond (2023) observe youth workers' willingness to go 'above and beyond' simply doing the job. I (Gail) have heard some workers reference this extra 'bit' as *"conscience work"* (ibid.) – that inner sense of what is important, what will make a difference, that which has to be done despite it not being your official job or within your remit. And this is where the youth worker's dedication and commitment can be exploited – their heart work not recognised, acknowledged nor seen as essential in realising the wider aims of programme and initiatives. As one worker told me (Gail) *"how can I go about getting a young person into education when they've nowhere to live or nothing to eat?"* Heart work requires a refocusing of priorities, attending to the person in front of you and *their* most pressing needs.

Such emotional labour is stretched more than ever against a backdrop of ongoing austerity measures, funding cuts and the 'cost-of-living' crisis. There is a relentless exhaustion from living in a *"modern world at odds with Love"* (Walker 2024) – you

might even call it a kind of ‘heartsickness’. It is against our conscience to leave young people ‘high and dry’, but many youth workers are navigating multiple barriers to getting young people the support they need on a regular basis. This is compounded by the apparent performativity of public bodies – talking of a commitment to a young person-centred ethos and calling for the application of youth work approaches while the necessary funding to sustain such approaches are inadequate.

And yet, Tania’s work reminds us that *“love and passion might help youth workers to work in authentic ways despite having to deal with systems which treat people as commodities”* (de St Croix, 2013: 48) and her keynote highlighted the radical and transformative possibilities of centring *“heart in our work with young people as a form of liberatory and revolutionary practice”* (2024). Perhaps this is our time to take ownership of a *“professionally loving practice”* (Purcell, 2024), to explicitly name it as such rather than hiding from it, and to wield it as a deliberate act of rebellion and resistance (de St Croix, 2013) – because, as highlighted by one conference delegate, “if we don’t talk about it, who will?” (Eliz McArdle). At a time when – as Tania observed – *“we have no business doing business as usual”* (2024), might a recognition of our work as ‘heart work’ and an acknowledgement of the many griefs that pile up and the hurt around us lead us into a space of possibility? A way to apply a more ‘heart-full’ intention to our daily practice?

For us, reflecting on Tania’s keynote message and writing this piece has served as a means of renewing our commitment to young people, to bringing our hearts and our whole selves to this work. It also generates many more questions that will likely feature in our ongoing conversation and dialogue with colleagues across the sector. Questions about ways of looking after our hearts at both the individual and the organisational levels in the face of precarity, about guarding the integrity of youth work values and practice as it is increasingly invited into new spaces and settings, about how we teach and equip community youth work students, about how we even initiate these kinds of conversations with each other and create the kinds of spaces that will help us reflect on and value our work sharing stories of our passion and our resistance.

For now, perhaps it is enough to name our work as heart work and by doing so, to enable it to be centred, and to align ourselves with Love as the reality within which we choose to operate (Walker, 2024). No doubt readers will be able to name many colleagues bringing their hearts to their work with young people every day – heart work is happening all the time. Clear-sighted acknowledgement and enactment of practice that is full of heart will strengthen our resolve to resist the problematising labels attached to young people and the 'professional’ distance expected in such work, to partner in solidarity and not just for the next collaborative funding bid, to claim the importance of relationship, to be undeniably and unapologetically on the side of young people, to keep it real amidst the messiness rather than play the hero or the victim, to focus on depth rather than breadth, to resist neat models, programmes and branding, to stick with it for the long-haul.

References

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