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Research article

Between love and lovelessness: community-based youth work organisations pursuing social change

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, youth work has recently seen the rise of community-based organisations founded by youth of colour from underserved neighbourhoods. Frustrated by the limitations of traditional welfare providers, these young founders draw on lived experience, local knowledge and relationships of proximity. A key motivator for their work is love. bell hooks defines love as the will to extend oneself to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth. Black critical scholars have critiqued dominant, commodified and individualistic understandings of love, arguing instead for a collective, liberatory ethics of love centred around those who are marginalised, because they see that kind of love as transformative. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic research, this article explores the tension between the idealised, transformative role of love and its realisation in the everyday practice of youth work with marginalised youth of colour. The article

analyses the everyday actions of youth workers through the notion of a love ethic and elucidates how a transformative love for those most excluded is often compromised by discourses of deservingness and sectoral, financial and policy constraints. These limitations, however, are not merely individual failings but are structurally embedded within a youth work system shaped by short-term funding, outcome-driven evaluations and neoliberal logics. The article calls for a reimagining of youth work grounded in systemic change, with love as its foundation.

Keywords community-based youth work; youth workers; critical pedagogy; transformative love; urban inequality; resistance; the Netherlands

Introduction

Kobe,¹ a Black founder of a community-based youth work organisation, sat across from me and shared these words:²

For me, the most important thing and something I'm truly proud of is the love, the persistence and the heart in this work. It's about setting aside personal interests for the bigger picture. This generation of youth workers is fully committed; they have no external agendas. They never stop to think, 'What would the municipality think of this?' or 'How will this affect our reputation?'. Their intentions are pure, driven solely by the next generation's well-being, just as mine once were. In my honest opinion, that is the most important factor in what we do: being there for others, being authentic, and doing so with love and intention. That's crucial because you can't truly be there for children if you see this as just another nine-to-five job.

His organisation supports young people in an underserved neighbourhood of the Dutch metropolitan area where he grew up. In his youth in the early 2000s, young people like him were seen as *at risk*, and, as elsewhere in the Netherlands, youth work was used to discipline and govern them, aiming to shape them into normal, participating and civilised citizens. The young people described as *at risk* in urban policies were often boys of colour from lower social-class backgrounds. Motivated by his dissatisfaction with the lack of activities aligned with the lived experiences and interests of young people of colour, Kobe began organising activities himself while still an adolescent.

When I asked what motivated him and his employees to dedicate themselves to what is now an ambitious youth organisation offering sport, education and youth development programmes, his response centred on love. He was the first of many that I met to mention *love* as a core value in youth work. In 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork across two community-based youth work organisations, participants frequently spoke of love, giving back to the community and care as the driving forces behind their efforts. They are not alone in this framing. Both youth work researchers and youth workers emphasise the importance of love in the profession (De St Croix, 2013; Purcell, 2022; Sieckelink, 2022; Skott-Myhre and Skott-Myhre, 2007). Scholars in social and critical pedagogy have emphasised love as an essential element in professional guidance of youth and in the pursuit of social justice (Darder, 2017; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2001; Vincent, 2016). In this article, we apply a social and critical pedagogical lens to analyse the role of love as a core principle in youth work. Where do we see love in the everyday practice of community-based youth workers, and to what extent does love enable affirmative support of youth of colour and resistance against deficit-orientated approaches?

Across the Netherlands, multiple initiatives such as Kobe's organisation have emerged since 2008, motivated by dissatisfaction with the *ineffective* approach of large, traditional welfare providers. (Racialised) deficit ideas about youth from marginalised backgrounds are prevalent in Dutch youth policies (Chalhi et al., 2018; De Koning, 2015, 2017), framing these young people as *in need* and *at risk* based on their race, ethnicity, class and area of residence. The Dutch youth work sector, with an estimated 2,000 full-time jobs (Meere and Stoutjesdijk, 2019; Noorda en Co., 2009; Sieckelink, 2022), is approximately 15 times smaller than the professional youth care sector (Sieckelink, 2022). Especially in underserved neighbourhoods where marginalised communities reside, traditional youth

welfare providers do not sufficiently cater to the needs of local youth. In contrast to deficit-orientated approaches, new community-based youth work organisations claim to promote asset-rich and affirming perspectives on youth. They prioritise hiring local staff with experiential expertise and strong social networks and seek young people's active participation in developing the organisation. These new players in the youth work domain adopt an inherently social pedagogical approach, aiming to support socially vulnerable youth and help them discover and develop their talents and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Crucially, this approach enables young people to assume roles that allow them to actively resist the injustices youth encounter (Úcar, 2020). Simultaneously, their work is deeply rooted in youth work traditions. It lies within a spectrum of practices that support young people's transitions into adulthood through relational work and voluntary activities (Batsleer et al., 2010) and can be described as a form of youth-led community organising (Delgado and Staples, 2007).

Because of their relational nature and focus on marginalised youth, we adopt an analytical lens informed by social pedagogy to study these new youth work practices. Social pedagogy has received increasing attention across Europe (Coussée et al., 2010; Hämäläinen, 2003; Moss and Petrie, 2019; Úcar, 2020), particularly as a way to address wicked problems that shape young people's lives and the professional work supporting them. These include precarious working conditions, limited outcomes and the persistent marginalisation of young people's perspectives (Charfe and Gardner, 2020). As articulated by ThemPra (n.d.), social pedagogy is a values-led, relationship-centred approach grounded in commitments to human dignity, recognition of inherent potential and the belief that people can be supported in unfolding their potential. Love can be seen as a generative force in this relational approach, because it implies a special attentiveness to the needs and rights of the other and a personal and professional commitment to care for those who are 'othered' (Darder, 2017; Hoveid and Finne, 2014).

In social work and youth work scholarship, this orientation has been widely recognised as both relevant and generative (Charfe and Gardner, 2020; Corney et al., 2024; Hämäläinen, 2003; Úcar, 2020). In particular, social pedagogy makes visible the often-undervalued *how* of practice: the relational labour, ethical judgements and affective commitments through which interventions take shape (Charfe and Gardner, 2020). In youth work contexts, this relational emphasis translates into practices that foster proximity and mutuality between young people and professionals, recognise young people as embedded within communities, centre their perspectives and agency, and approach their lives holistically rather than fragmentarily (Úcar, 2020). Simultaneously, research across national contexts highlights the difficulty of translating social pedagogical values into everyday practice. Structural conditions such as managerialism, austerity and outcome-driven governance obstruct mutual, caring relationships in the youth domain (Charfe and Gardner, 2020). Against this backdrop, examining a Dutch youth work practice that explicitly claims to establish loving relationships offers an opportunity to explore how social pedagogical, love-orientated commitments are negotiated within a specific local and political context.

To complement this social pedagogical lens, we also adopt a critical pedagogical one, examining the political potential of loving relationships between youth and professionals. Scholars in critical pedagogy, Black feminism and the ethics of care have long associated an expansive love for all humankind with resistance to oppression and the pursuit of social justice (Freire, 1970; Gilligan, 2014; hooks, 2001; Tronto, 2020). Freire (1970, p. 30) argues that within the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors, a gesture of love may be found. By fighting oppression, the oppressed liberate not only themselves but also their oppressors from structures of domination. In an act of liberation, the oppressed and the oppressors become human again. This liberatory act is therefore an act of love, born out of recognition of a shared humanity. Similarly, hooks (2001) draws on the writings of Martin Luther King, Thomas Merton and Erich Fromm, underscoring that love is never absent from the struggle against oppression:

There is always an emphasis in their work on love as an active force that should lead us into greater communion with the world. In their work, loving practice is not aimed at simply giving an individual greater life satisfaction; it is extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression. (p. 76)

In the field of ethics of care, loving relationships are also described as a means of resisting the moral injury of subordination or lack of voice (Gilligan, 2014; Tronto, 2020). By highlighting the importance of mutual care in relationships, dominant dehumanising frames can be challenged and social justice promoted.

Despite its potential significance, love remains an underexplored aspect of social support practice. Godden (2017) finds that love is a fringe topic in international social work and absent from international codes of ethics. Moore (2018) observes that 'relationship formation, collective care, and love continue to be unacknowledged, under-theorised and understood as less than radical potentials' (p. 327). Furthermore, scholars have examined the role of love in pedagogical settings (Beckles-Raymond, 2019; Brooks, 2017; Pascoe, 2023; Thrana, 2016), yet its role in youth work remains understudied. In this article, we thus examine love within youth work practice, asking whether it can serve as a path to social justice. Does embracing love in new community-based youth work initiatives offer a way out of the deficit-centred approach in youth policy?

To study love, we draw on hooks's notion of a *love ethic*. hooks (2001) understands love as 'the will to extend oneself to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth' (p. 4). She describes seven ingredients of *true love*: care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and honest and open communication. Those who integrate these dimensions into their everyday agency and relations embrace a *love ethic*. This article explores how that ethic enables resistance to injustices in work with young people while also examining the tensions between the idealised, transformative role of love and its everyday realisation.

Lovelessness in the youth work sector

The youth work domain has been affected by neoliberal governance and the logics of New Public Management. In most countries in Western Europe and in the United States, youth work funding has shifted from state-sponsored general social services to incidental project-based grants in areas such as labour market participation, security and crime control, or to reliance on social entrepreneurship outside state subsidies (Lohmeyer, 2017; McGimpsey, 2018). Efficiency has become a focus within public administration, and citizens are construed as *customers* or *users* of public services, rather than bearers of civic and social rights (Carpenter, 2017; De St Croix, 2018; Van Houdt et al., 2011). Consequently, surveillance policies and output control have entered youth work, limiting youth workers' opportunities to engage in critical youth work aimed at caring and humanising pedagogical relationships (Batsleer et al., 2010; Chalhi et al., 2018; De Koning, 2015, 2017; Walle et al., 2011). This has led to the containment and stigmatisation of marginalised youth, mutual distrust and further marginalisation.

These shifts in governance have placed youth work in a paradoxical position. Youth workers aim to build caring, empowering relationships with young people, humanising youth and restoring their dignity (Baldrige, 2014). However, political trends push youth workers to adopt a 'deficit paradigm' regarding youth of colour growing up in underserved urban areas. The deficit is placed within young people; there is something wrong with them and they need to be *fixed*, despite growing up in challenging circumstances (Baldrige et al., 2011; Coussée et al., 2009; Jong, 2012; Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo, 2013). According to Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), a consequence is that the youth work sector fails to address the effects of societal mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation on youth, such as racism, poverty, incarceration and unemployment.

These developments are also evident in the Dutch social domain, with similar consequences (Bredewold et al., 2018; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2013). The youth sector was reformed in 2015 to minimise reliance on government support and strengthen the *pedagogical base* of preventive services. The aim was to stimulate early detection of problems by organising *light support* closer to home, thereby reducing the costs of more specialised youth care (Memorie van Toelichting Transitie Jeugdwet, 2013). However, waiting lists for specialised youth care have grown (Voor Jeugd en Gezin, 2023), and the youth sector repeatedly faces austerity cuts, leading to youth centre closures and reduced activities (Chalhi et al., 2018; Meere and Stoutjesdijk, 2019). In line with international trends, funding for youth work often comes from safety- and security-orientated budgets, which can result in a containment-orientated deployment of youth work (De Koning, 2017; Meere and Stoutjesdijk, 2019). These developments have left the sector struggling, placing both young people seeking support and professionals providing support in a challenging situation.

Theorising love

The love ethic that hooks (2001) proposes might be recognised in the attempts of community-based youth workers to escape the loveless conditions of their sector. It is a verb; it requires deliberate action. Furthermore, she asserts that love cannot coexist with abuse or injustice, as abuse and neglect are the opposites of nurturance and care. When love is absent, hooks (2001, p. 6) calls it *lovelessness*. Her definition is rooted in the pursuit of freedom, which connects hooks's notion of love to resistance and the struggle for social justice. Beckles-Raymond (2019) summarises hooks's definition through three core assumptions:

- It is liberatory, resisting domination and enabling us to challenge and move beyond systems of oppression such as white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy.
- It is relational, concerned not only with those close to us but also with those beyond our immediate surroundings, including people across the globe.
- It is transformative, aiming to improve life. Love takes a stand; those who love cannot leave things as they are when injustice prevails.

Based on hooks's work, Godden (2017) frames love as an ethic of action, encompassing dialogue, non-violence, interconnectedness among people and with nature, the pursuit of justice, personal reflection, shared power and solidarity.

Love and resistance

Like hooks, scholars studying love (Brooks, 2017; Moore, 2018; Pascoe, 2023) critique how neoliberal ideologies have individualised and marketised our understanding of love. In contemporary culture, love is often portrayed narrowly as an emotion within romantic or familial relationships. This depoliticised framing strips love of its communal and political power, reducing systemic injustice to individual attitudes and mistaking justice for kindness (Pascoe, 2023). Brooks (2017) adds that this conception of love is racially coded; it is associated with whiteness rather than Blackness and with individualism rather than collectivism.

Within the traditions of critical pedagogy and critical social work, some scholars have examined the relationship between love, resistance and social justice in education, social work and youth work (Beckles-Raymond, 2019; Brooks, 2017; De St Croix, 2013, 2016; Godden, 2017; Green et al., 2021; Pascoe, 2023; Thrana, 2016). They find that love is a vital element in resisting the oppression that young people experience.

In youth care and work, Thrana (2016), De St Croix (2013) and Purcell (2022, 2024) find that love can challenge oppressive practices both individually and systemically. Thrana (2016) highlights the importance of close relationships, in which love is expressed through physical acknowledgement, emotional intimacy and enduring connections. Such relationships help young people see themselves as lovable and capable, thereby strengthening their self-confidence and developmental trajectories. De St Croix (2013) finds that love is a core motivation for youth workers and may serve as a form of resistance to the neglect, exclusion and discrimination of young people.

Purcell (2022, 2024), like De St Croix (2013), finds that love serves as a motivator. Youth workers in his studies point out that they see professional love as a core element of youth work that can help young people to develop and draw on personal resources, based on feelings of closeness, trust and empathy, demonstrating to them that they deserve their place in their community, and helping them to shape collective goals. Although they value professional youth work, youth workers in Purcell's (2022) study also report that love is difficult to cultivate. They list personal limitations on their side and on that of young people. Young people are not always ready to accept love, and youth workers themselves struggle to determine an appropriate degree of distance, as they have not been trained to adequately deal with personal proximity in their work. Furthermore, they identify institutional limitations, such as regulations and protocols that prescribe physical distancing, and practical limitations, such as workload and colleagues' lack of understanding.

Godden (2017) challenges social work to embrace love as a foundational principle. As the field seeks to end domination and is grounded in the values of dignity and personal worth, social work is well suited to a love ethic. Godden suggests practical applications of love in social work, focusing on self-love, family love, spiritual love and love for colleagues, community, humanity and nature.

Studying love

To gain insight into how love relates to everyday practices and resistance in everyday interactions, we have studied two community-based youth work organisations in the Netherlands. This article zooms in on one of them. Intrigued by the recent establishment of these organisations and curious about what they were doing, I (SR) approached two community-based organisations for ethnographic fieldwork in early 2023. We chose ethnography because it allows close observation of what is done rather than what is said. Through a combination of participant observations and interviews, ethnography allowed me to investigate the dynamics between stated intentions and enacted practices, paying close attention to the context in which the agency of youth professionals takes shape, and in which their relations with youngsters are embedded. In the 18 months that followed, I conducted participant observations at sports training sessions (32), tutoring projects for young adults (18), large-scale events for young adults (two), internal meetings (20) and external meetings (22). I also shadowed youth workers to get familiar with the work of those who did not coach or tutor (eight). This enabled me to immerse myself in the communities of these organisations over a longer period, as ethnography aims to unravel the 'rhythms and logics used by socio-cultural groups to make sense of the world' (McGranahan, 2018, p. 2; see also Zaitch et al., 2016, p. 257).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the founders (four), role models/youth workers/co-founders (15), youth attending activities aged 16 to 18 (eight) and external partners such as civil servants and funders (five), lasting between 20 minutes (for young pupils) and 90 minutes. Interview topics covered general themes of my research (for example, personal trajectories, motivations, daily work, young people's societal position), as well as topics that arose during fieldwork (for example, events that occurred, how both professionals and youth coped with territorial stigma, their views on experiential expertise, love as a core value and relationship-building). I also held informal conversations between training sessions and during events to deepen my understanding of these organisations. To learn more about the youth workers' relationship-building, I closely observed their interactions with youth attending the activities. In addition, I observed how they described their organisation across these settings and online. My presence at the office allowed me to become part of the team, attending team and youth board meetings and participating in events. I made extensive field notes using the strategy of comprehensive note-taking as described by Wolfinger (2002) and complemented them with a chronological description of each day. Field notes and interview transcripts were thematically coded in Atlas.ti using hooks's elements of love. For this article, I have selected vignettes that best illustrate the outcomes of this coding process.

Kobe was initially hesitant about my fieldwork due to prior negative experiences with researchers. Although it was unspoken at the time, I sensed that the social stratification of most researchers (mostly white, middle class, focused on theory, objectivity and bureaucracy) vis-à-vis the position of most involved youth and youth workers (mostly youth of colour, from lower social-class backgrounds, focused on daily on-the-ground struggles) was a hurdle, as Kobe and his employees would speak of 'people who just don't get it'. What enabled me to gain trust was my positionality as a young Black woman (aged 27 in 2023) and my outspokenness. I had work experience in youth organisations, but I had grown frustrated by their apparent whiteness, lack of representation and indifference to the experience gap between the professionals working in these organisations and the youth they claimed to represent. Feeling a mismatch with the field, I ultimately researched these topics. Explaining my background made Kobe and his colleagues more receptive to my plans. This eventually enabled me to gain access in ways others might not, because I was able to blend in and be attuned to important yet imperceptible issues. In hindsight, I would say that I adopted a stance of cultural humility (Gottlieb, 2021; Tervalon and Murray-García, 1998). I did not know their world and, very early on in the process, I accepted that I needed to be self-aware and curious. I aimed to watch and learn from them about their world, while paying attention to the institutional and societal forces that shaped their habits and perspectives. This approach was largely informed by my experience of being Black, coming from a low-income household, and by my Dutch-Surinamese cultural background. During my research, most members of the organisations became more receptive, and their willingness to give it a chance grew.

Love in practice

In the following sections, we illustrate the organisation's approach, connecting it to the characteristics of a love ethic. We do so by presenting vignettes from the field, centring Caleb, a local role model.

The birth of the role model

In early October 2023, Caleb invited me to observe training. He was in his mid-twenties, of colour, and had been born and raised in the neighbourhood. He set clear rules for me, expecting a consistent presence and devotion to – as he had begun to call it – *our project*. I hesitantly agreed, only to later discover that he was lenient with me as an outsider. Still, it soon became clear that he held himself to high standards.

Caleb referred to himself as a coach and role model, as did most of his colleagues. The organisation that he works for has no vacancies, and positions are created and offered to community members who stand out for their commitment and/or talent, need help or take initiative. Caleb had been active since the beginning, joining sport classes as a youngster. Kobe told me that he immediately recognised Caleb's talent; he saw him as a natural leader. When Caleb finished senior general secondary education (*Havo* in Dutch), he quit school and started working, vowing never to attend school again. This sentiment was often voiced by boys in the organisation, who mostly explained that school was boring, the curriculum did not match their lived experience, they felt that they would never succeed and teachers were rude and unkind. These powerful refrains frame the self as having low chances of educational success and are particularly attached to youth of colour by teachers and other powerful figures in their early school days (Jonker, 2006; Turcatti, 2018). They persist with these youth throughout their educational careers as an interactive and cumulative process of (self-)exclusion.

For Caleb, working meant spending his days in the stockroom of a big department store, although his high school diploma gave him access to higher education. Kobe noticed the situation and offered Caleb a job in 2018. Kobe had high expectations of Caleb. He understood his lived experiences and was eager to offer him support and mentorship, despite a lack of funding. Caleb accepted the offer and *fully* committed to it, starting as a volunteer and gradually transitioning to a paid employee.

Kobe's gesture was extraordinary because it defied the usual expectations of boys like Caleb. Firstly, Kobe did not push Caleb to return to college. Caleb did not exactly meet the requirements to be a youth worker, because he did not hold a degree in secondary vocational education (*mbo* in Dutch) or a university of applied sciences (*hbo* in Dutch) in social work (Meere and Stoutjesdijk, 2019; for more on qualifications, see Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, n.d.). Kobe could have sought to recruit social work graduates, but he chose to work with Caleb and his peers because he found locally engaged staff with experiential knowledge who showed talent for the work more important than qualifications. He believed that he could educate people on important aspects of the work, but not on the deep connection with the neighbourhood and its people. Kobe noticed that Caleb had the potential to do more than spend his days in the stockroom of a store where, as Caleb said, 'nobody would miss me if I resigned'. In doing so, Kobe showed recognition for lived experience, making it a legitimate source of knowledge for youth work and care for the young people within the local community and their futures. Caleb, then, *trusts* Kobe enough to dedicate his time to the project. Kobe functions as what Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo (2013) call an 'agent of social capital' (p. 1702). These are youth workers who, through their relationships with young people, gradually gain trust within their professional networks and attain the informal status of expert. Simultaneously, through this process, they make highly valued resources, such as opportunities, privileges and services, available while supporting young people in developing the knowledge and coping strategies they need to access institutional resources.

Caleb's entry into the organisation mirrors the experiences of his peers. Throughout my time in the organisation, I encountered interns, volunteers and role models whose stories followed a similar pattern: they experienced a sense of non-belonging. Their values and talents were not recognised at school or work, and they felt disconnected from regular youth professionals who were not tuned into their lived realities. The organisation offered them a space to belong. After becoming role models, they would pass on the favours they had once received themselves. I regularly overheard conversations between Caleb and youngsters training in his team in which they asked him for an internship, always followed by a yes. In the following weeks, I would see those youngsters in other departments of the organisation.

Within Kobe's organisation, young people could wear tracksuits, speak street language, be in a place that felt familiar and be among people they knew. They were celebrated for being what Dutch society often interprets as *street*. Street culture in the Netherlands is often studied through a problematising lens that associates it with negative effects, ranging from falling victim to street culture's (self-)destructive elements (El Hadioui, 2011) to anti-social behaviour, conflicts, violence and crime (Dijken et al., 2017; El Hadioui, 2011; Mosselman, 2025). Being *street* is portrayed as something to be wary of; it is perceived as a threat. Kobe effectively countered this sentiment by fully embracing these young people within his organisation and showing them how to apply the knowledge they gained on the streets wisely; he *recognised* their intrinsic worth.

By employing this model, social entrepreneurs in the youth work sector, like Kobe, introduce a new type of professional to the Dutch youth work landscape: the role-model youth worker. This is someone with standing in the local community with whom young people can identify (De Jong, 2015). They learn and develop on the spot, rather than through formal professional training. De Jong (2015) argues that the proximity of these role models' physical and cognitive abilities creates feasible future perspectives on success, as young people may not be able to relate to individuals with established careers. This creates a peer-to-peer learning environment and a range of opportunities, as youth feel they could be the next role model. The main assets of these role models are their lived experience, proximity to the neighbourhood and being streetwise. They have first-hand knowledge of the hardships young people experience.

We get them

At the end of my first day of training, Caleb was cleaning up and urging the young members of his team to *go home*, adding *straight home* each time. He walked around the gym, checking in with youngsters and persuading them to leave as it was late. Taking on a *big brother* role, he looked around the training hall, closely observing everyone. He saw one of the girls sitting on a bench with a friend, wearing only a shirt, and asked where her coat was. When she said she had not brought one, he offered his, which she refused. He repeated the offer until she finally said yes. Caleb *cared*. He was nonchalant about it, displaying a relaxed, laid-back, cool attitude, but whenever I asked him anything about the 40-ish youngsters that he coached, he seemed to know what was going on, who needed what and why. Because Caleb was also a young man born and raised in the neighbourhood, he knew their schools, streets, friends and hardships. Drawing on his knowledge of the local context, Caleb sensed how they felt, even though they did not tell him everything.

He worried about them: 'I don't just ask them how they are doing; I ask because I worry. I ask because I want to know.' For role models like Caleb, worries mostly centred on young people's stories, such as violence in their households or skipping school. If someone needed advice, he would spend training time in the dressing room, listening while his apprentice took over. Caleb told me: 'It costs a lot of energy keeping up with all of them, checking up on them. I wish to actively remember who they are, what they experience, and what their talents are, and to connect them with the right people to develop these talents.' Here, Caleb confirmed the *affectionate* nature of his work.

This is not a job

In November 2023, all team members gathered in the living room to eat together before a December team meeting. It felt informal; team members were talking and laughing. One team member cooked rice with soy chicken and snaps, and we sat at a long table, each of us eating from disposable plastic containers and drinking soda. Caleb and I had developed a habit of discussing things that I *just did not understand*. He would voice a provocative opinion, making me wonder whether he genuinely held that view or was testing me. I sensed that most of the time it was both, as he seemed to want to find out where I stood. We would discuss topics such as Kanye West's latest antisemitic rant or ethnic profiling in Dutch clubs, and he would adopt a standpoint: 'But boys of colour do cause trouble for clubs; I would deny them entry if I was a club owner.' And I would end up taking the opposite position: 'That is discriminatory; why would you want to do that?' I was eager to interview Caleb, hoping it would help me better understand him. I invited him as we were eating, and he accepted. Briefly informing him of the specifics, I said we would talk for an hour, and he exclaimed: 'Are we going to talk for an hour?' 'Uhu', I said, grinning, and then I made the mistake of saying that I wanted to talk with him about his *work* and

that that would take some time. He looked at me and frowned. 'This is not a job to me; you do know that, right?', he said in a more serious tone. I hesitated, not knowing how to respond. 'What is it to you then?', I asked him. He explained that he saw this as 'Just what I do.' 'But you do get money for it, right?', I answered, still not knowing where he was heading. 'Yeah, to keep afloat', he mumbled. This time, his disappointment in me seemed genuine.

Although Caleb was one of the more dedicated team members, his commitment was not exceptional. His view that his work was not work was shared by all the other role models and senior staff I asked. They saw their work as a calling, something they did because they understood the urgency. Young people needed them, just as they had needed someone when they were younger. Caleb's refusal to see what he does as work tells us about his belief in the incompatibility between mainstream ideas about work and community-based youth work.

Community-based youth workers often feel their work goes beyond a job. De St Croix (2013) notes that they profess a 'principled and value-based' (p. 39) commitment to young people, which leads them to accept low pay, overtime and the flexibility it demands. In this context, 'not doing work' meant embracing work that went around the clock. If Caleb walked through the neighbourhood in his spare time and met young people, he would always take the time to talk with them and ask about their situation. He would train his teams year-round, including during holidays, and add half an hour to the regular training time at the request of the team, without complaint. On long days, we would start in the office around 10 in the morning, move to a high school sports hall, return to the office, go to another hall and end the day at 10 in the evening. In between, he would stop at his house; we would sometimes eat at McDonald's or stop by the office. Reflecting on such days, I would find myself uncertain about where the work began and ended. Essentially, Caleb and his peers believed that a work attitude would push youth away because young people would sense a lack of commitment from a mile away, a sentiment also expressed in De St Croix (2013).

In youth care, studies show that both practitioners and young people value authenticity. Crisp (2024) shows that the authentic projection of the self, meaning that youth workers care and prioritise young people's interests, is essential to achieving positive developments through relationships. Marshall et al. (2025) show that authentic relationships are characterised by mutual self-disclosure, genuine emotional investment and practitioners going 'above and beyond' for young people. In Caleb's eyes, work only allows for restrained commitment. As he explained, 'nobody wants to be someone else's obligation'. This sentiment is corroborated by studies on youth work in paid employment contexts (De St Croix, 2013; Fyfe and Mackie, 2022; Marshall et al., 2025; Purcell, 2022; Scott, 2011). They show that authenticity and *love labour* require training and support in mutuality and authenticity that go beyond the emotional detachment, inflexible boundaries and affective neutrality normally associated with professionalism (Scott, 2011). If professionals wish to practise love, they worry whether young people think they care only because of their pay (Purcell, 2022). Furthermore, the culture of performativity that arises from policy demands prioritising quantitative targets undermines community-based youth workers' ability to nurture meaningful relationships that are not easily quantified (Fyfe and Mackie, 2022). That same culture may also lead employers to exploit youth workers' emotional commitments for profit, alienating them from their emotions (De St Croix, 2013). Furthermore, providing authentic care within professional settings poses challenges in managing work-life balance and navigating career transitions (Marshall et al., 2025).

This is corroborated by young people seeking relationships that extend beyond routine professional-client interactions, including love and proximity (Thrana, 2016) and relational continuity (Naert et al., 2017). Caleb and his peers thus demonstrate that their commitment to local youth was greater than their commitment to general conceptions of what it meant to have a job or to do youth work. They were all invested in the future of these young people, far beyond the rewards a job could offer.

We are family

Caleb and his peers were able to extend their care well beyond the standard expectations of their role because of the organisation's model. I sometimes worried about them and about what their devotion to the project cost them, but they did not share my concerns. They had their support system: within this organisation, they were *family* – something they would explicitly express in their marketing, but it was more than marketing; it also became apparent in their affective relations. De St Croix and Doherty (2023) point out that youth work spaces are deliberately curated to function as communal spaces.

The youngsters attending activities, the role models and senior employees were close. Some were related, while others had known each other since childhood. Most young adult volunteers and youth workers joined the organisation's activities based on personal relationships that predated the organisation's founding. The young people within the family came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses and educational levels, and they held different religious beliefs, yet they formed a strong community with shared customs and traditions. Most members frequently wore identical tracksuits with the organisation's logo. On arrival, it was customary to greet everyone personally, either by hugging or by high-fiving, and to ask how everyone was doing. Holidays were celebrated together, and the senior employees and role models regarded the older members' young children as their nieces and nephews. Kobe often emphasised the importance of presenting this family model to other young adults. He believed that creating a space where children, adolescents and young adults felt welcomed and wanted to belong was the first step in their work. In doing so, Kobe has created what Kaulingfreks (2015) describes as an alternative structure of belonging. This structure counterbalances the *outside world*, where these youngsters contend with how territorial stigma sticks to them (Pinkster et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2007) and with social exclusion based on their social class, ethnicity and skin colour. Being in the organisation offered them a space free from these negative experiences and affirmed their sense of self-worth and dignity.

The close relationships between role models and others in the neighbourhood helped them to arrange support. They would regularly mobilise (real) family members to assist their younger peers. When Adnan, one of Caleb's team members, was struggling in school, Adnan's mother threatened to pull the boy out of the sports team to discipline him. Caleb intervened, arguing that removing him from sports would not benefit the boy and explaining that his mother, a retired teacher, supported all his team members in planning monthly homework and tests. If he failed school, it was despite, not because of sports. To ensure that Adnan would do his homework, Caleb arranged for him to come to the office to do it, where the role models could help and sign off on his attendance.

Studying mutuality in youth mentoring relationships, Lester et al. (2019) find that mutuality comprises shared relational excitement and experiential empathy. The former reflects a genuine desire by both parties to invest in the relationship. The latter involves mentors connecting with, advising and normalising mentees' situations by sharing their own experiences. Because of what they had been through, the role models felt the need to affirm these lived realities in ways the outside world would not, offering pupils a space to be *recognised* and to unpack their experiences. Their own stories motivated them to develop a worldview of support that they could apply in their peer-to-peer role.

The family showed *mutual care*. Youth workers like Caleb could draw on family in their work, providing creative solutions they believed were needed, but they could also rely on family support, finding a home away from home. Being part of the family meant that someone had your back and that you would also be there for others. Caleb and his colleagues invested their time, money and mental energy in young people, believing that this would help the entire community move forward. This communal approach to youth work resists the individualisation that has become dominant in the youth sector.

Love in short

We have now shown how this Dutch community-based youth work organisation practises a love ethic in everyday pedagogical relationships, working with role models like Caleb who have lived experiences that reflect those of the youth they support. The organisation values experiential knowledge, offering alternative pathways to recognition and belonging. Role models engage deeply with youth, providing care, guidance and opportunities beyond conventional work structures. Their commitment is grounded in mutual trust and shared experience. The organisation operates as a chosen family, fostering a community that resists deficit-based narratives and exclusion. It offers young people space to belong, be recognised and thrive.

Lovelessness in practice

We now return to the tensions between the idealised transformative role of a love ethic and everyday practice. This tension crystallises around what we call the radical. Scholars writing on love as resistance insist that transformative love is not selective. It is a love for all humankind, not just for those most

proximate, deemed deserving or familiar, and particularly for those most marginalised (Biana, 2021; Brooks, 2017; Freire, 1970; Green et al., 2021; hooks, 2001; Moore, 2018). By the radical, we refer to a youth work practice grounded in an unconditional love ethic that seeks to transform systemic inequality.

This expansive ethic was rarely evident in the everyday practices that I observed. I return here to my discussions with Caleb, particularly the one on ethnic profiling. Paradoxically, Caleb expressed no discomfort with ethnic profiling. I came to understand that his support for youth was conditional. Caleb opposed some injustices but saw others as people's own doing. He supported oppressed individuals if they showed a willingness to *make something of themselves* and be productive members of society. Unwittingly, he excluded those who struggled to meet that standard, reinforcing what is described as a discourse of deservingness (Katz, 2013; Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky, 2016). Popular culture, political debate and everyday talk distinguish between those deserving of social support and those who are not. Watkins-Hayes and Kovalsky (2016) argue that discourses of deservingness obscure the systemic forces that drive inequality. Caleb's stance, while personal, reflects broader narratives in which support is tied to productivity and personal effort, rather than to structural analyses or solidarity.

Kobe also embodied this tension. He often said 'a space for all is a space for none', reflecting a strategic decision to cater to a specific group. In the opening quote, Kobe relates the attitude of today's young role models to his past activism. They have no agenda; however, he now has one, because he is responsible for the organisation's funding, institutional recognition and survival. As the organisation grew and became more established in the youth work domain, Kobe became concerned with its reputation and sought to create a space that felt like home to a specific group of young people that he identified with and knew were marginalised: young people drawn to street culture, who valued ethnic diversity and were committed to contributing to the local community, even if this focus came at the cost of broader inclusion of other potentially more vulnerable or deviant youth. There was awareness of those who felt excluded, often expressed through narratives about young people who struggled to fit in and eventually left (with the door always symbolically left open for their return), but also a sense of resignation, an implicit belief that true inclusivity was either unattainable or potentially counterproductive.

We argue that the responsibility to include all young people does not rest solely with Kobe and Caleb. It is a sector-wide responsibility to ensure that all young people can access support and that the injustices they face are meaningfully addressed and challenged. However, we observe that a commitment to social justice is not structurally incentivised across the youth work sector. Rather, the sector is focused on integration, on how to get those who diverge to adhere to the existing, unequal societal hierarchy of socio-economic success. While Kobe's organisation was celebrated for its innovative approach, the truly revolutionary elements, such as prioritising long-lasting relationships and community formation, allowing young people to be and participate just as they are, and supporting them in finding ways to develop their strengths, even if that means going beyond the institutions that fail them, remained underfunded. As a result, these elements depended on the personal commitment of staff, many of whom were themselves young, marginalised people.

At sector-wide meetings that I attended, young people and their stories were absent from the conversation. Youth work was framed as a mechanism to activate marginalised young people, guiding them to become productive citizens through effort and discipline. Rarely was youth work envisioned as a social pedagogical space capable of confronting the root causes of these young people's problems (Úcar, 2020). Apart from the lack of funding for transformation, most of the sectoral focus was on logistics, budgets and outputs. Youth work was treated as a temporary project. Conversations were rarely about the importance of long-lasting, holistic, durable and strong social relations in the neighbourhood and what these relations could mean for young people; rather, they focused on how funded activities could address the most pressing issues. The casualness of these discussions shocked me, particularly when contrasted with the deeply personal stories of the young people that I met and their accounts of what it meant to be part of these organisations.

Baldrige (2020) argues that the social and political complexity of community-based educational spaces is often overlooked. These practices are often celebrated for their meaningful contribution to young people's lives, yet Baldrige argues that the socio-political context should be critically examined, particularly how community-based spaces can encompass multiple logics at once, for example, being both a space of affirmation and a space of containment. Baldrige (2020) identifies this dynamic as the youth work paradox. The organisation we studied embodied this paradox. It was more radical than its traditional counterparts, more attuned to systemic forces of marginalisation and more invested in

the everyday lived experiences of young people, yet it faltered in fully embracing the radical. Its love was conditional.

This constraint is exactly what we can expect if radical love is not incentivised. The loss of the radical, then, is not a moral failing of individual practitioners but the predictable consequence of the sector's lovelessness. When funding is consistently short term and driven by logics of deservingness and deficit, it remains detached from the lived realities and genuine needs of marginalised young people. As a result, the long-term, authentic relationships that truly support young people depend on workers willing to give far more than they will ever be paid, recognised or celebrated for. Within such a system, asking youth workers to do even more, to include all young people while simultaneously resisting systemic injustice, is an unfair demand. To make this possible, we must first create the conditions that support and sustain them. Until then, we may strive to practise love within this system, but without structural transformation of the system itself, we will inevitably arrive at the same place: organisations with bold dreams will be slowly worn down by daily pressures and impossible expectations.

Conclusion

This article traces how elements of a love ethic inform the daily work of a Dutch community-based youth work organisation. Centring young adults' experiences and visions, the organisation, through the role model figure, goes above and beyond for them and practises caring, engaged youth work within the community. It seeks to counter harmful, deficit-orientated narratives and practices within the sector. In doing so, it has crafted a practice that contributes to the lives of an often overlooked group of marginalised young people. Set against the status quo in the Dutch sector, which all too often portrays these young people as falling short, deficient or even as a threat to an orderly society, these organisations are a breath of fresh air in their loving approach.

However, one issue repeatedly emerges: the absence and loss of the radical. During my fieldwork, I observed that commitment to the radical is absent in everyday practice because those engaged in youth work do not always believe that everyone is worthy of their attention, and the sector itself does not radically love young people.

In her critique of hooks's notion of love, Biana (2021) points to the simplicity of hooks's love ethic. Ordinary people will not become more critical of existing dominating structures through conversations about love; investing in concrete practices of love takes time. It can only develop through dedication. This article confirms that critique. It shows how people with the best intentions remain motivated by their personal experience and worldview. Those used to oppression need more than a lecture on what love could be; to make love work, it should be a practice that requires deliberate investment. This urges researchers and practitioners to further consider how to stimulate that deliberate investment within professional contexts. Furthermore, our findings indicate that this investment should be facilitated, supported over time and rewarded by youth work funders.

The love ethic practised by community-based youth workers is powerful, creating space to build a world where young people are met with unwavering commitment. If we are to move towards that world, we must first recognise that love, in all its radical potential, cannot be an afterthought. It must be the foundation.

Notes

- ¹ All names in this article are pseudonyms. The Netherlands is a small country with a small number of community-based youth work organisations. To ensure pseudonymisation at the individual level, we do not disclose participants' names, ages or ethnic backgrounds. To ensure further pseudonymisation on the organisational level, we do not specify all their activities or the municipality this organisation is in.
- ² This article is based on the ethnographic fieldwork of the first author, Sharifah Redan, who is the 'I' and 'me' in this article.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Ethics Advisory Board of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research AISSR of the University of Amsterdam (12 October 2023, no. FMG-4089_2023).

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings was secured before publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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