Keynote Address
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Naming the Tensions
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In the summer of 1987, I was working as a camp counselor as part of an advanced undergraduate course in psychology. This was my introduction to youth work; the time when I knew for certain that my life work would involve young people. *What was it about that experience that inspired in me a passion for the field?* I can isolate the day that to me is both the essence of youth work and my entry into the field. That day occurred on a lake when Christopher, a five-year old boy, mumbled the word "fish" during his one-on-one with a counselor. The entire camp rejoiced that night and for the rest of the summer. That one word inspired in us all that we could make a difference. Prior to that day and since the age of three, Christopher had been mute after witnessing his mother die from a gunshot wound that was inflicted by his father.

The story of Christopher when compared to the field today raises some interesting tensions about who we are/have become and where we are headed. I am using the word tension here to describe not a conflict but the relationship between ideas that have contrary demands and implications - as in a dialectic where an opposing concept emerges in direct relation to an existing concept. Thus, without one, the other would not exist. The term "Out-of-School Time" is a good example, as clearly without "School" we would not frame our work as occurring "Out of School."

Here I name six tensions or dialectics.

#1 - Who are the 'youth' included in the practice of youth work?

How many people here are youth workers? Now keep your hand up if you also serve children (ages 5-13). {Most people in the room raised their hand to the first question and I recall only 3-4 hands that went down in response to the second question meaning they were only working with teens.}

The first tension emerges in what some see as the inconsistency in the language we have constructed to describe what we do and with whom we do it. Here the scenario is based on an interaction with a five-year old, a child; yet, I introduce this situation as my introduction to youth work. We have not yet agreed on who is included/excluded in our

understanding of the word, 'youth.' Do we mean adolescents or all young people from school age to young adulthood?

The dialectic is in whom we choose to see as making up the category - youth. If we define 'youth' as a chronological period, such as adolescence, then youth work immediately excludes pre-teens. But this may be the only tension that itself is resolved today. We do not work with youth as an abstract sociological category. Rather, we have come to define 'youth' by who attends youth programs and this includes children as young as five (school age) and as old as twenty-five (young adult).

#2 - Do our assessments capture 'development?'

The second tension exists at the crossroads between development and assessment. Christopher's utterance was viewed as a huge developmental milestone and psychological breakthrough. Today, frontline workers would still view it this way and it would still be celebrated.

However, today we would also miss this milestone in the requisite standardized test or assessment. The very essence of youth work, the reasons why we engage in the work are disconnected from what funders and researchers want and are being asked for. Once we impose the need to aggregate these milestones, we ironically lose our potency. That is, how does one add Christopher's utterance with Tenesha's decrease in tantrums with Mark's getting an 80 on his history test with Lisa's cutting ties with a befriended gang member?

Our work focuses on our relationships with youth who have individual needs and from which emerge amazing accomplishments. As we continue to move in the direction of assessing youth work outcomes, we must articulate this tension explicitly. What do we risk losing in the quest for statistical rigor?

As soon as we introduce assessment we back into a goal that can only be met in the aggregate. That goal might be that the program helps 85% of youth improve their school attendance, self-esteem, behavior, literacy, etc. Where do individual, gradated improvements come in? This is not to say that we should not assess our work but it is to urge that we come up with methodologies that do not disguise our essence.

#3 - Is youth work a focus on individuals or groups?

The third tension is that we have come to "individualize" youth work. To me, youth work by definition is communal and based in the unit of the group. In fact, I was not the counselor most directly responsible for Christopher's milestone. That fact never occurred to me until recently.

We shared our successes because the moment when the outcome is observable and peaks to the surface does not reflect the thousands of interactions and developmental accomplishments that had been going on below the surface and that each of us contributed to.

#4 - What is the continuity of youth work (and youth workers) in the lives of kids?

The fourth tension arises in the discontinuity of practices across settings in which kids are. What happens at the end of summer? Where is the continuity in Christopher's life in his access to youth work professionals who understand how to reach him? Christopher was still likely to fail school (or school was likely to fail Christopher).

Youth work has done much for kids but has done much less in identifying the distinct set of practices by which it is defined. As such, its successes (our successes) cannot be shared with others who also interact with youth in school or even at the dinner table. What do we risk by not articulating boldly who we are?

#5 - Who loves the work and who stays in it?

The fifth tension relates to the counselors and resides between the love and the reality of the work. Where did the counselors go after that summer? My own path led to a full-time job coordinating a dropout prevention program for "at-risk" youth and the quick recognition that while I loved the work, I simply could not pay back student loans; afford rent, food and a car on $18,000K per year. For those without a degree, the situation is even bleaker. What are the circuitous routes in and out of youth work and what do we risk by not investing in stronger education and career pipelines?

#6 - Should we focus on professionalization of the field or development of the discipline?

The final tension rests in our present and in our future, in who we are and who we are becoming. As energies abound in the development of competencies, credentials, and curricula, and as we think about next steps, I would raise a final question: what do we risk by focusing on the professionalization of the field rather than the development of the discipline?

It seems to me that until we clearly articulate the domains of knowledge and practice that inform youth work as a discipline we are barking up the wrong tree. What is Youth Studies? Is it a vocation, a profession, an academic discipline? While we have agreed that Youth Studies is interdisciplinary, it is not clear that we have mapped this out clearly

and explicitly. Do we not have any unique knowledge to offer or are we simply borrowing from education, social work, leisure and recreation, etc. If we want to gain legitimacy within academia, I think the time is upon us to define our discipline.