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Is there a place for love in an early childhood setting?

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Is there a place for love in an early childhood setting?

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in what Jools Page identified as 'professional love'. This research builds upon and extends Page's work considering what love looks like in practice and describing a 'loving pedagogy'. Despite recent research, love is still seldom talked about in the context of early childhood education. This small case study has identified that love is, indeed, present there in practice. Loving interactions were observed between adults and children in a preschool setting and how love manifests itself discussed with three educators during intimate conversations. This study compares observed practice with the educators' understanding of love and discovered a loving pedagogy exists within day-to-day interactions and that there is a place for love within an early childhood setting. As we move into a new era post-covid, disruptions to early years provision have highlighted the need for a loving pedagogy.

Keywords: pedagogy; early childhood; love; care; attachment

Introduction

My introduction to this research begins on a personal level. Page's notable research considering whether mothers want professional educators to love their children (Page 2011) ignited something in me and I found myself thinking more and more about the topic and reflecting upon the themes discussed. I had recently become a mother for the first time and so this particularly resonated with me. I reflected on whether I want my children's practitioners to 'love' them. For me, it was, and remains, a resounding yes. In fact, if my children's educators didn't love my children in a professional context I would wonder why not? What's so wrong with my children that you can't love them?

I also began to reflect upon my feelings as an educator myself. I had previously taught young children in schools but was then working as a childminder, caring for other people's children in my own home, which allows for an even closer relationship. I had a very deep sense of care and affection for the children I looked after and, on

reflection, recognised this as love. However, I also acknowledged that this was a different sort of love from the love I felt for my own children, but it didn't make it any less real or less loving.

In addition to these thoughts around loving the children I cared for, I discovered Chapman and Campbell's writing, aimed at parents, about love languages (2012). This is the idea that everyone has different ways that they give and receive love and better understanding these languages can enable children to feel more loved. Chapman and Campbell have identified five languages: Words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, receiving gifts, acts of service (2012). White states that the, 'fundamental need, desire, hunger, longing and potential gift of every human is to love and be loved' (2008, 45) and love and belonging form part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (2013).

Despite being widely understood as an idea, love is an abstract concept and is not easily defined, yet it is so full of meaning and depth. When discussing love within an early childhood setting, it is vital that various definitions are explored in order to clarify what is meant when the term is used. Cousins (2017, 17) defines love as, 'to have and express, or show, affection for someone. This feeling and expression of affection, or love, may be intense. It may contain warmth, fondness and high regard for another person.' Another notable definition is when adults 'hold each child in mind' and use their close relationship to consider how to best meet the needs of their children (Read 2014, 59). This study aimed to ascertain whether there is a place for love in an early childhood setting and specifically looked at relationships within one setting. It attempted to interpret interactions observed and concepts discussed through a lens of love.

Methodology

The case study focused on one small, city centre pre-school in England which caters for 28 children with four or five educators supporting them during a session. The children observed were aged between 3 and 4 years old. Denscombe (2014) acknowledges that feasibility and practical considerations should be taken into account when designing research projects and the research setting was chosen predominantly based on the practicalities of gaining permission to spend time there, location of the preschool and ethos of the setting. On their website the setting is described as having, ‘a sensitive, responsive, warm and loving environment’ therefore it was felt they would be open to discussing love within a professional context. The observations were made during children’s free-play or playtime outside. During this time children were able to initiate their own learning as well as engage in activities planned by adults.

The research adopted a qualitative approach to consider the topic of love, investigating how love unfolded in a setting. According to Greig, Taylor and Mackay (2007, 136), quantitative research misses the ‘richness of accounts of experience’ and in this study richness is captured and presented through practitioner stories and observations of children.

This research posed one main question: Is there a place for love in an early childhood setting? In order to answer this question it aimed to:

- Find out how love unfolds between people in an early childhood setting;
- Consider what is understood by love and loving pedagogy in an early childhood context;
- Find out how the theory relating to ‘professional love’ is implicit within

practice;

- Explore if a child can feel loved within an early childhood setting.

Adopting a case study approach (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier 2013) the research included practitioner stories and insights gained from semi-structured interviews with educators, observations of these educators and observations of children. Educators needed to feel free to talk and the data collection methods used needed to emancipate them from a formal interview situation (Miller 2017) and thus encourage them to speak freely. Therefore, the interviews were described as ‘conversations’ to capture their informal nature, reflect the intimate subject matter and enable the educators to feel at ease.

To help ensure legitimacy and validity a triangulation technique was used, corroborating interview responses with observational notes to ensure reliability (Walliman and Buckler 2008). Observations were cross referenced with the views of the educators obtained through the conversations and the researcher noted if the educators’ ideas of a loving pedagogy played out in practice with the children. Ethical guidelines were addressed, with informed consent obtained from the educators and all efforts were made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants (Beauchamp & Haughton, 2012), for example, all participants were assigned pseudonyms (O’Reilly, Karim, Taylor & Dogra, 2012). The research process was also questioned and the researcher remained reflexive throughout demonstrating an awareness of how the researcher's role could have influenced the study (Pillow, 2003).

Key Findings

Findings confirmed that love can be observed within daily interactions; through positive touch, through an adult taking a keen interest in the life of a child or simply within a smile. Early childhood educators demonstrate love for children not only through words or physical touch, but also through other actions such as protecting children, feeding and nurturing them, wanting the very best for them, thinking of them and promoting their interests and also through the way they offer guidance and boundaries to help them to grow and develop into secure individuals. All of these actions were observed.

The aim of this study was to paint as true a picture as possible of what love looked like in a preschool setting and to illuminate how love shines through the practices observed. Through sharing observations of adult-child interactions and having intimate conversations with practitioners, this study found evidence that a loving pedagogy exists within day to day practices. From dealing sensitively with an accident to cuddling up during carpet time, the adults observed were putting into practice their ideologies and beliefs about how best to care for children. Such interactions demonstrate a loving pedagogy. Three key themes emerged from the data: the tactile nature of a loving pedagogy; the empowerment of children; and how practitioners were 'holding children in mind'. These themes demonstrate how love unfolded in this study.

Tactile Love

Educators were often physically affectionate with the children and used positive touch by holding hands, cuddling, hugging or even applying sun-cream which could be considered as an intimate act. The following observation depicts a scene that was commonplace in the setting.

Context: On carpet for singing time.

Heidi (ad) is sitting on a rug on the floor with her knees folded under her, and Siena (ch) sits in her lap. Heidi's right arm protectively holds Siena in place, while Siena's right arm comfortably rests on Heidi's. Freddie (ch) snuggles up into Heidi's left side and Heidi gently rests her left arm around him. All three are looking happily at Diane, the preschool leader, and singing along with the Aiken Drum song, comfortable in each other's company.

This was a very comfortable scene to observe. Siena was happily sitting on Heidi's lap and Freddie had snuggled into her side. There was an air of warmth and affection as they shared in the singing time together. Children being physically close to educators represents the tactile nature of a loving pedagogy. Young children need to touch and be touched (Aslanian 2018; Bergnehr and Cekaite 2018) however adults may be wary of touching the children in their care, for fear of it being misinterpreted (Aslanian 2018; Piper and Smith 2003).

This was alluded to as Heidi said, 'I think people are so careful to say the right thing and do the right thing...' She was answering an unscripted question relating to why the word love is not used frequently in early childhood settings. She shared that many people feel using the word love crosses a line that should not be crossed. Despite this, she continued, 'Showing love in a setting is the right thing to do, there's nothing untoward about it.'

In addition all three educators during the conversations mentioned their role as being in the place of the parent and thus their practice was influenced by their belief that they should act as if they were the child's parent, including being physically affectionate towards the children. Pat stated, 'We hug children and sit them on our knee, in the same way that we would our own children.' Lucy said, 'If they need a hug, we'll give them a hug, it's those sorts of things that they might ask their parent for... if

they're not there, we'll do our best to step in and support whichever need they have' and Heidi stated, 'They need you to be there caring for them in place of a parent.' Heidi draws the distinction between a short term cuddle in a setting compared with a more sustained 'snuggle' that a parent might have with a child at home. Despite this she states, 'We feel comfortable enough to cuddle them.' Despite the difficulty in defining appropriate touch in relation to professional practice in an early childhood context this study suggests that it occurs naturally as adults interact with children.

An example of adults naturally touching children occurred during an observation on a hot day.

Context: Outside area during free-play time. It was a hot day. The Preschool has permission to apply sun cream to the children as appropriate.

Sarah (ad) asks Beth (ch) – 'Have you had suncream on today?'

Beth – No

Sarah – 'OK – we need to do your suncream. Put your arms out like a robot!'

Sarah crouches down in front of Beth and squeezes some cream onto her hand.

Beth laughs and happily puts both arms out straight in front of her and says in robot voice – 'I – am- a- ro –bot!'

Sarah gently applies cream to Beth's arms and legs. Beth looks comfortable being touched by Sarah, but she starts giggling and laughing.

Sarah – 'Is it tickling?'

Beth nods and giggles again, Sarah says, 'You are really ticklish!'

Sarah continues smoothing cream onto Beth's arms and legs, finishing with her face.

Sarah - 'Look up for a bit, that'll do.'

Beth happily returns to her play.

Beth is happy for Sarah to engage in the intimate act of applying sunscreen to her body. This could be an uncomfortable time for both Sarah and Beth, however, neither adult nor child look or appear to feel uncomfortable, in fact, the opposite is true. This becomes an intimate time where Beth receives some positive one-to-one adult attention and a fun shared experience by Sarah suggesting that Beth adopts a robot stance! Beth embraces this idea and reciprocates, holding her arms out and using a 'robot' voice. This observation is in stark contrast to Piper and Smith's comment that, 'The touching of children in professional settings is no longer relaxed, or instinctive' as this interaction appeared to be both of these things (2003, 891). They continue that touch has become a, 'self-conscious negative act' and educators are, 'controlled more by fear than by caring' (Piper and Smith 2003, 891). This study suggests that not all adults are fearful about appropriately touching young children and it could be argued that this willingness to positively and safely touch children is evidence of professional love in practice. Both Sarah and Beth enjoy the interaction and this natural positive act demonstrated the warm and affectionate relationship that they shared.

An additional observation clearly highlighted a child initiating positive touch with an adult. Again, this was a common scene and the researcher recorded numerous occasions when children initiated holding an adult's hand or sitting on their lap uninvited yet fully welcomed.

Context: In outside area during free-play time.

Michael (ch) purposefully walks over to Heidi (ad) - Heidi, I want to show you what's in the tree stump!

Michael takes Heidi by the hand and leads her off to the edge of the playground where the grass begins. There is a tree about 1m away and growing at its base are several green shoots.

Heidi smiles and says - There's more over there too. We'll have to have a good look Michael. Do you know what they'll grow into?

Michael – Snowdrops?

Heidi – That's a good guess. We have snow drops over there don't we.

Michael purposefully seeks out Heidi and leads her by the hand. Heidi smiles, shows an interest and follows him. Holding hands is a common tactile experience between adults and young children and is a method of non-verbal communication as leading her by the hand is a way of ensuring she follows. In addition, Bergnehr and Cekaite (2018) would describe holding hands as an example of 'affectionate touch' used to show fondness and demonstrate approval. From their research which considered touch in a preschool environment, affectionate touch was the most loving way that they observed touch between educators and the children in their care. Although a child holding an adult's hand is regularly observed, this is an example of a child wanting to remain in close proximity to the adult they have an attachment with (Elfer 2006; Bowlby 1953) and children would only want to hold the hand of adults that they are familiar with and want to be close to.

Chapman and Campbell (2012) include physical touch as one of the languages that children use to demonstrate love and these observations suggest that Sienna, Freddie and Michael are all using this language to communicate their feelings for Heidi who has stated that she feels, 'comfortable enough to cuddle them.' This implies that the love shared is reciprocal and not unrequited.

During another observation, Michael uses this haptic communication to demonstrate to Heidi that he is comfortable in her presence and wants her to follow him. He reiterates this in his words and Heidi follows him and engages in conversation about the flowers that he has discovered. This observation is a good example of how a loving pedagogy can be empowering to young children because through acting in a loving way the child's voice is being heard (Clark 2017).

Empowering children

It is interesting to reflect upon the power dynamic within the setting (Hyland 2010) and consider where the power lies in these observations. On this occasion, the power lay with Michael as he initiated the contact with Heidi and literally led her to where he wanted her to go. Heidi followed, yet not in a submissive way, but in a reciprocal way, her body language and conversation demonstrating that she was a willing participant. On further reflection, this scenario felt equal in terms of the balance of power. Equal because, although Michael clearly led Heidi away, Heidi reciprocated and pointed out some more flowers to Michael. She could easily have led him over to those flowers and it would have felt like a natural progression, without the balance of power shifting. Thus, this was about a loving interaction and reciprocal relationship. This links in with Chapman and Campbell's (2012) love language of 'quality time', when love can be expressed by spending time together and sharing moments. In turn, this enables children to feel empowered and adds to the image of the child as being a competent learner (Clark 2017; Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2012).

Heidi recognises this when she states, 'I think they can only have that sense of security by having the love and foundation – the loving foundation – you know and the secure base that they've come from and they know that we're ready to take them off to the next chapter of their lives.' In addition, she refers to wanting children to succeed and

thus pitching activities at the right level to avoid failure and also to accepting every child whatever their ability and ensuring that adults remain non-judgemental in their interactions with children. This is aligned with the idea of a teacher as carer and it could be argued that these desires for our children are naturally part of the role of the teacher (Goldstein and Lake 2000) and not necessarily evidence of a loving pedagogy. However, loving can be described in terms of practical actions (Chapman and Campbell 2012) and thus can be observed through such actions.

For example, in the following observation, Heidi was practically supporting Dylan.

Context: During free play session.

Dylan (ch) had wet himself and sought out Heidi (ad). She crouched down next to Dylan and talked quietly to him before standing up and hand in hand walked with Dylan to the bathroom, which is just situated through a door off the main playroom. As Heidi left the room she gestured to Lucy (ad) that she was going to the bathroom by pointing to the bathroom and to Dylan. She asked Lucy to collect Dylan's bag, without explaining why it was needed and Lucy understood the inference. Lucy immediately walked to the pegs and collected Dylan's bag, taking it to the bathroom, handed it quietly to Heidi, who thanked Lucy. Dylan reappeared in the play room a few minutes later wearing different trousers, smiling and looking happy. He walked over and joined his friend Milo who was playing with small cars on a rug depicting a road scene.

Heidi is very conscious of not drawing attention to Dylan's accident. She is respectful and helps to sort him out quickly with limited fuss. Sometimes children are

upset or embarrassed if they wet themselves, however, the loving manner in which Heidi approached cleaning him up limited any opportunity for upset or embarrassment. Heidi quietly asked for help from Lucy and Dylan was back playing with his friend in a very short space of time. This is an example of professional love as defined by Page (2008) as the notion of loving care framed in a professional context. It could be argued that Heidi was simply doing her job by assisting Dylan, however, Heidi was conscious of his feelings and interacting very sensitively. This did not feel like a brisk, professional act but one that was carried out efficiently with love and warmth which Vincent and Ball (2001) identify as being vital in a child-carer relationship.

It could be argued that this is an example of how children might feel respected, loved and cared for within this setting. Heidi believes children feel this way as she states, 'The children, being loved and cared for by the team and being respected by the team, enables them to come and have a great time.' Heidi goes on to talk about children feeling, 'accepted and not judged' in their setting and my observations align with a non-judgemental approach, as Heidi does not make any comment to Dylan about being wet, he is accepted and cared for in spite of the accident. Some authors raise concerns that care routines are becoming impersonal rather than being intimate (Byrne 2016; Hopkins 1988), however, this study would suggest that intimacy is possible within early childhood education as Heidi takes time to support Dylan emotionally, physically and sensitively in this warm interaction.

In addition, during the above observation, Heidi brought herself physically down to Dylan's level by crouching down. This is an important way of levelling the power dynamic between the taller adult and the smaller child and an example of how adults can treat children as if they were equal in status. Pat talks about this when she says, 'I think it helps learning [for children] to feel valued and maybe love and valuing are so

intertwined that they're part of the same thing.' If children feel loved and valued, this will empower them to be competent learners (Grimmer 2021).

Lucy refers to emotion coaching (Gilbert, Gus and Rose 2021), when adults support children to talk about their feelings and learn how to problem solve and resolve conflicts for themselves. She describes it as, 'a cooperative approach to help them self-regulate their emotions so that they can deal with different situations.' This links with the theme of empowering children as Heidi elaborates that emotion coaching is, 'giving them the tools' that they need for the future.

In addition, when asked how she would define a loving approach with children, Lucy talks about catering, 'to those personalities so everyone feels included and can succeed.' Practitioners must adapt their provision bearing in mind the needs of individual children and in order to cater for individuals, adults must build secure relationships with them (Elfer 2006). Developing a loving pedagogy includes building close relationships and using knowledge of the children to plan effective learning opportunities and thus empowering children as they feel valued, included and their interests are celebrated and accommodated.

Holding in mind

There were many times when adults took an interest in specific children and what they were doing or were playing with and then interacted sensitively with them. This demonstrates Read's notion of holding in mind (2014) and becoming attuned to their needs, as the following two observations show in practice,

Context: Outside area during free-play time.

Kirsty (ch) is wandering aimlessly through the playground, vaguely walking towards Lucy (ad). Lucy immediately notices Kirsty on her own, catches her eye and smiles at her whilst walking towards Kirsty. Kirsty smiles as Lucy bends

down and picks up Kirsty, lifting her above her head saying, 'What are you doing you little lovely!' Kirsty laughs and smiles. Lucy gently places Kirsty back on the ground and both Lucy and Kirsty laugh together. Then Kirsty skips off happily away from Lucy.

Context: In the outside area during free-play time. Jay (ch) wanders along looking aimless.

Diane (ad) walks over to him, smiles and asks, 'You OK Jay? You looked a bit lost then...'

Jay smiles up at her and answers, 'Yeah'

Diane asks, 'Are you playing with Ryland?'

Jay nods and says, 'Yeah'

Diane smiles and says, 'OK' As Jay runs off happily. She watches him run towards Ryland.

These two observations clearly show the adults noticing children on their own and then gently intervening to check on these children. Many adults may not have noticed these children as they were not upset or demanding attention in any way, however, both Lucy and Diane notice them and respond warmly, smiling and reassuring the children with their interested presence. These examples of holding in mind (Read, 2014) could demonstrate that the adults were tuning into the children's needs, being responsive and offering 'attentive love' (Noddings, 2002). Lucy recognises this as she reflects upon her practice saying, 'We're very inclusive and caring and will support a child if we think they're struggling.' Pat also describes acting in a loving way as a spectrum, 'from opening the door to a child, being pleased to see them and letting them

know that, to the way we treat them if they've hurt themselves, to comforting them when they're upset, but also enjoying their company, having a laugh with them.' Many such interactions were observed during the research period suggesting that these warm interactions are evidence that love exists within daily practices. The children were being held in mind; adults would notice if a child was absent or arrived late; adults would compliment a child's jumper or ask them about their older sibling or new baby at home.

An example of this was observed during breakfast one morning:

Context: Before the main session began, during breakfast club. 2 children are sitting at a small round table set for breakfast with a small jug of milk in the centre. Diane (ad) sits with them on a child-sized chair at their level and Lucy (ad) is in the kitchen next to them.

Diane asks each child what they want to eat and as Lucy prepares it, she chats to the children.

Diane - How is Harry getting on at school?

Milo - Harry's at big school.

Diane - Yes Harry goes to big school. Does he like big school?

Milo - Yes and I'm going to big school too.

Diane - You're going to Harry's school in September aren't you?

Diane is sitting as near to their level as possible, on a small chair at the table with the children. As they chat there is an air of friendship and comfortableness, as if they were all waiting together to be served in a restaurant. These children felt accepted, loved and part of the family of the setting. This observation was typical of many

observed in which the adults showed a genuine interest in the children's lives, in the same way that one would enquire about the family of a friend. Diane also repeats Milo's language back which is another way of reassuring a child that you are listening to them, whilst demonstrating interest in them.

How love unfolds

Interestingly, this idea of adults and children feeling comfortable together came up within the intimate conversations with practitioners. For example, Pat mentions 'being pleased to see them' [children], 'enjoying their company' and 'having a laugh with them'. Lucy believes that children feel at ease and loved as she states,

We are very friendly and welcoming and we try to engage all the children and get down to their level and I just think it makes them feel at ease and then, you know they can thrive and enjoy their experience when they're here and I think we do build up really good rapport with them and, you know, they all arrive so happily and separate so happily I think you can see that there is that sort of connection and whether it's, you know, they feel loved... I think we do act in a loving way towards them, you know we're like a little community really and they all feel a part of that which is important so I guess in that sense they feel, yeah, they feel very much loved in the setting.

The way she talks about the children, she genuinely enjoys their company and wants the best for the children. She implies that the adults work hard to build rapport and these secure relationships and suggests that the proof of these strong bonds is that the children are all happy to leave their parents and attend the setting. Lucy believes that the children in their setting feel loved by the practitioners.

Heidi also refers to these relationships. She states,

Building those secure bonds and relationships for us is beneficial for the children, I think they feel secure and it means that they can arrive in the morning and they can know that everybody here they trust and they know and they're kind of keen to come in and get involved, I think if they feel trust, if they feel loved and cared for by the team, it makes coming into the setting easy.

During the intimate conversations the practitioners shared how love unfolds over the course of the year and an additional point that arose was the temporary nature of this. When Heidi talks about the love she has for the children in the setting she says, 'you know that it's going to be short term, so you don't put everything into it...' It would be interesting to investigate if the children understand the temporary nature of the relationship they are building with the adults. If they do not, these children will probably not be holding back anything in terms of the love that they share with the adults, whereas Heidi goes on to say, 'there's something of you that must hold back because otherwise you'd find them going off, you know when they actually leave the setting, it would be heart-breaking.' This could make the relationship more unequal than previously thought and could represent unrequited love on the part of the child.

Perhaps it is this scenario that Freire is alluding to when describing needing 'courage to love' (2005, 5). When children leave early childhood settings, adults are at risk of feeling bereft which might encourage some educators to remain distant and have a 'detached attachment' (Nelson 1990) with the children in their care. Both Heidi and Pat also share about how they remain interested in the children after they have left the setting and feel pleased when children remember their preschool days or when parents fill them in on their children's progress several years later. This does not imply a detached attachment, as they are expressing care and concern for these children long after their departure from the setting. Instead, it could be interpreted as a loving

inquiry, just as one might inquire after a close friend with whom one has amicably lost contact.

Conclusion

In a preschool, educators have traditionally been in loco parentis, having a duty of care for the children they look after and it could be argued that the interactions observed are part of this statutory role and thus not evidence of a loving pedagogy. However, the intensity of feeling expressed by Lucy, Pat and Heidi throughout this research implies that it is more than just a job. The interactions observed during this case study could be taken as evidence of a loving pedagogy in practice.

Through sharing observations of adult-child interactions and having intimate conversations with practitioners, this study outlines how a loving pedagogy exists within day to day practices. From dealing sensitively with an accident to cuddling up during carpet time, the adults observed were putting into practice their ideologies and beliefs about how best to care for children. Interpreted through the lens of love, these actions and interactions demonstrate a loving pedagogy.

Within this study the educators observed were not afraid to demonstrate their affection for the children through positive touch which was encouraged both within policy and practice. Chapman and Campbell (2012) recognise physical touch as one of their five 'love languages' and Klein's study (1989) acknowledged physical proximity in terms of hugging and kissing as being one of the main ways that young children understood the concept of love. Thus, the practices that I observed are in line with these ideas and this study suggests that the tactile interactions are evidence of love in action.

The study has also highlighted how developing a loving pedagogy empowers children to feel safe, secure, valued, listened to and loved which in turn enables them to become self-assured and confident. Children should not be viewed as powerless but

instead as competent beings (Clark 2017; Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2012) and Pat, Lucy and Heidi, viewed the children as co-players and equal in their interactions. In addition, several observations indicated how adults were setting up the environment to promote children's independence and empower them through encouraging them to problem solve for themselves and resolve conflicts.

During the intimate conversations, the love and affection that Pat, Lucy and Heidi have for the children in their care was evident. They spoke honestly and passionately about their roles and how they worked hard to develop rapport and secure bonds with the children, getting to know the children really well in the process. They shared how they enjoyed being in the company of the children and how they wanted the best for the children in their care and held them and their needs in mind (Read 2014). This study suggests that holding children in mind is evidence of a loving pedagogy in practice.

The findings of this small study have certain limitations which must be acknowledged. Firstly, it was carried out within only one early childhood setting and a very small number of practitioners were interviewed. Secondly, the setting was deliberately chosen because within their stated ethos on their website, they openly acknowledge loving relationships as being an important aspect of their approach. Thus it could be argued that their practices are not representative and cannot be generalised and accepted as evidence of love within all early childhood settings. Despite these limitations, the results are valuable as they clearly demonstrate loving practices that exist within one setting and highlight the meaningful perspectives of adults working with very young children.

In addition, researchers are influenced by the values that they hold (Ivlampie, 2014) and this study is no exception, however, I attempted to remain reflexive throughout the research process and accepts that the research field was entered subjectively, as it would be impossible to be truly objective (Pillow, 2003).

The themes discussed in this study could be described as elements of professional love and highlight the complexity of this issue. As Page (2018, 126) asserts,

Professional Love is a complex construction because there are many instances when aspects of love, intimacy and care are overlapping and cannot be compartmentalised, which is why it is difficult to distinguish these – one from another – within actual professional early years practices in any tangible way.

This resonates with this interpretive case study, as observations from practice could indicate care, intimacy or love or perhaps elements of all three. It would be easy to interpret a caring interaction as a loving interaction or an intimate conversation as also demonstrating love or care. It could be argued that it would do children a disservice if love, care and intimacy were to be compartmentalised as it could add fuel to the idea that adults should remain professionally distant from children and thus children would not receive the warm interactions that they need. This study counters the ‘moral panic’ that Piper and Smith (2003) have observed as it adds weight to the idea that there is a place for love within early childhood settings.

This study concludes that there is a place for love within an early childhood setting and it could be described as a loving pedagogy . This approach could be viewed as a core part of the early years curriculum as children are taught about relationships through precept and example. In addition to what is directly taught, adopting a loving

pedagogy becomes part of the 'hidden curriculum'; the unwritten ethos, setting expectations and learning experiences that teach children through daily routines and interactions (Jackson, 1968). Love can be observed within these daily interactions through the way people treat each other, the loving attitudes demonstrated and the use of positive touch. There is now a wealth of evidence that acknowledges how the relationships children form in early childhood impact on adult relationships and shape future attachments (Music, 2017; Bowlby, 1953) thus when adopting a loving pedagogy early childhood educators should be aware of the part they play in young children's learning about relationship and interactions outside of their family. As educators naturally build close bonds and feel a strong affection for the children in their care (Bowlby, 1953), hold them in mind (Read, 2014) and are attuned to their needs and wants (Fisher, 2016) they are teaching children how to care about others in loving ways. Therefore this study recommends that all educators should aspire to adopting a loving pedagogy and feel confident to base their practice upon a foundation of love. Within this approach children will thrive and flourish.

There is a need for further research into a loving pedagogy, both in terms of practice but also in terms of young children's understanding of the term love and how they can feel loved within an early years setting. Coupled with strong evidence relating to attachment theory (Elfer, 2006), this research could then shape policy making and thus influence future practices, encouraging more settings to adopt a loving pedagogical approach. This would ensure that children attending early childhood settings and schools grow up feeling secure, loved and accepted. In addition, further research could investigate what constitutes a loving pedagogy in relation to children of different ages, particularly of school age, within an educational context.

Several recent journal articles consider love within an early childhood context (Edge 2019; Haslip, Allen-Handy and Donaldson 2019; Zhang 2019) and further discussions and research in this field are undoubtedly following which might help to popularise the notion of love within practice and promote love within policy. The author hopes this small study will add to these and help inspire others to adopt a loving pedagogy.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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