

Practitioners' constructions of love in Early Years Care and Education

Paper by Sarah Cousins for TACTYC Conference - October 2015

The topic of love in Early Years Care and Education is not commonly spoken about, and this fact makes it more complicated. As long as love in Early Years Care and Education remains unspoken, it remains undefined, different in some way to love in familial contexts, with some unwelcome connotations, not the same in every situation, natural in some cases more than in others, and tough at times.

What do practitioners say about love in the context of Early Years Care and Education? What does the literature say? What do policies say? Do practitioners draw on their training or personal experiences to support them with this aspect of their work? These were the questions this research sought to answer.

Earlier references to love

The word love has been used in educational contexts over the centuries. For example, since 1543, the Jesuit religious order conveyed a belief whereby, when children love their teachers, they are more likely to develop a love for learning (in Lawrence, p.63); Roger Ascham (1515-1568) stressed that love was a more powerful motivator for learning than fear (in Lawrence, p.87); and John Locke (1632-1704) believed that teaching could only be done in the spirit of love (in Lawrence, p.123).

In the twentieth century, the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1926) wrote that “all that has been done to improve the education of little children has been done by those who love them” (p.185). De Lissa (1949) wrote about children’s generosity in showing love to their teachers and of the need for this love to be reliably reciprocated:

The child gives his love very generously to the adults in the nursery schools and expects love from them, especially from his own teacher, and in this he must not be disappointed but must be sure of her response. (de Lissa, 1949, p.143)

Gardner’s (1956) book, *The education of young children* was filled with reference to love. She wrote that a child

... often shows very marked improvement, in many and often unexpected ways, once he is convinced that he is really loved and is able to give pleasure by his presence. (Gardner, 1956, p.19)

She used the term “loved people” (p.20) to describe the adults who cared for very young children in nurseries.

Fletcher (1958) wrote about the importance of love between adults and children and stated that although it is not the same as love between parents and children, “it is a love of children which is real, unchanging and very, very understanding” (p.19).

By the 1960s, however, love was less widely encouraged in educational contexts. Although Winnicott (1964) wrote about the importance of love between a mother and a child, he wrote that a teacher should adopt a very different role:

She has, in contrast to the mother, technical knowledge derived from her training, and an attitude of objectivity towards the children under her care. (Winnicott, 1964, p.195)

Langford (1968), too, who wrote that teachers’ attitudes to children “should reflect the necessarily temporary nature of their relationship” (p.144), and that the word love itself has “partiality built in” (p.144).

From these later twentieth century perspectives, then, early years practitioners were constructed more as objective, performative (Osgood, 2006) technicians than people who enter into loving relationships with the children they care for.

Current context

In the 2000s, Gerhardt (2004) argued that people’s psychological make-up is, to a significant extent, shaped in relation to their formative experience of being loved, or not. Manning-Morton (2006), too, argued that “children do not thrive if they do not also receive loving attention” (p.45). Page (2011) emphasised the importance of love in early years settings, and found that this is what parents wanted. She developed the notion of professional love.

Beyond these examples, there are few references to love. Love is hardly mentioned in policy. It did feature in some of the examples of practice within the guidance materials associated with the Early Years Professional Status (CWDC, 2007). However, it did not feature in the Early Years Teacher Status (DfE, 2013) standards that replaced them.

This absence of love possibly reflects the neo-liberal context in which Early Years Care and Education practitioners are required to perform to professional standards,

meet measurable targets and be accountable in terms of outcomes, and love does not fit into this. Other words and phrases have been used more widely, for example, care, ethic of care, attachment and emotional labour.

Methodology

This qualitative research was carried out with leaders of practice in five contrasting settings in London. These included a large children's centre, a private voluntary and independent nursery, a nursery school, a nursery class attached to a primary school, and a childminder setting in a childminder's own home.

Practitioners' constructions on the topic were sought through unstructured interviews. The transcripts were interpreted using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) approach. Theme headings were arrived at through close reading of the interview transcripts. Frequently recurring themes were identified, as well as themes to which the participants gave particular emphasis.

Poems were created to convey some of the emotions expressed in the interviews. The poems were an attempt to re-present sections of transcripts in a less linear frame, and, like some of Richardson's (2002) writings, were "structured rhizomatically, the way life is experienced" (p.50). In other words, the poems were presented in a different way to the rest of the text, assumed a less formal shape, and took unexpected turns. This is to mirror the surprising and inexplicable turns in people's lives.

The notion of a spiral-patterned methodology was conceived of to portray the slow, reflective, recursive approach whereby meaning was made cumulatively over time. A series of research activities were carried out, including reflective blogging and mapping. Although some activities were not carried through to the analysis, all contributed to the process of making meaning.

This research resists positivism, and, with reference to Rorty (1982, 1991), leans on pragmatism as a philosophical position. Postmodernism served as a critical tool to support the interpretation of the data, since, as Atkinson (2003) suggested, postmodernism accepts that there can be no simple answers "in an undeniably complex world" (p.8).

Social constructionist (Gergen, 1999, Burr, 2003) served as a theoretical framework, whereby people draw on their social and cultural resources to construct meaning.

Accordingly, there is an acceptance that what the research participants said about love did not necessarily represent what each of them did in their practice. The empirical materials were what the participants, or “social actors” (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003, p.132) involved in this research, said they did or thought in relation to the topic. Additionally, this research paper “does not function as a mirror” (Kamler and Thomson, 2014, p.11) on the participants’ constructions, but is, rather, the researcher’s own selection and interpretation of their constructions.

What did the practitioners say?

Eight themes were identified:

1. Love as preparing children for the future
2. Touch as an expression of love
3. Love as natural
4. Love as in ‘love to be with children’
5. Professionals as human beings
6. The relationship between love in familial contexts and love in Early Years Care and Education settings
7. Childhood experiences of love (or lack of love) and love in Early Years Care and Education settings
8. Love and training.

The participants said that it was important to love children, because this contributed to their social and emotional development, thus preparing them for the future, helping them to learn to behave, to be ready to move on to school, grow as people, gain in self-confidence, and learn. In their constructions on love in Early Years Care and Education, part of loving children was to contribute towards their healthy social and emotional development, and learn the difference between right and wrong.

Hilary, one of the participants, referred to this style of love as “*hard*” and “*good*” love, and said: “*You’ve got to have both*”. This “*hard love*” forms part of an ensemble of behaviours that the participants talked about in their constructions about love.

Ana, too, constructed love as preparing children for the future. She said that telling children what is right and wrong was as important as love in shaping their future development. She said: “*You need to say ‘No’*”.

Ana: I think that, you know, you can’t just give them love, love, love and not tell them when they are not right and wrong.

Flori, the childminder participant, said: “*I will love them as if I were the mother, tell them off – you know, and really educate them*”. She constructed love from a maternal more than a professional perspective.

Another way the participants talked about supporting children’s development was by showing love in demonstrative ways, for example, by hugging children. They said this was important for children’s healthy emotional development, and to build their self-confidence and sense of self-worth, particularly when they were hurt, upset or in need of reassurance. Some of the participants also suggested that touch was an important element in cultural repertoires of how children are normally treated.

Four participants said that their settings they did not impose any restrictions about touching children, though one talked about the policy requirement where she worked for practitioners not to have children on their laps. They said that to restrict touch was contrary to good practice, and that not touching small children limited their development. Their concern was that, while they understood the need to attend closely to safeguarding issues, they were being required to monitor and limit the ways in which children were touched. They said this went against their instincts both as human beings and professionals.

The participants also said it was important that those who worked in Early Years settings should be people who could show love for children, and for whom loving children was “*natural*” and an “*innate*” quality. Two of the participants said that different people showed love in different ways and that children sometimes approach adults with whom they felt “*more comfortable*”.

As well as talking about loving children, four participants talked about loving *to be with* children. This is a rather different use of the word love, focusing on practitioners’ own emotions rather than on any potential benefits to the children.

They said they had chosen to work in Early Years because they loved to be with children.

Overall, the participants constructed love in Early Years settings as different from love within families. The key difference they identified was that children were only in Early Years settings on a temporary basis (both in terms of hours of the day, and also years of their lives). However, they pointed out that parents wanted to know that their children were loved while in the care of professionals, or in non-familial contexts. While clearly distinguishing between love in the family and in a work setting, the childminder identified the most similarities between the two, and was explicit that her role let her “*be a mum*” on a temporary basis.

Lets me be a mum
A childminder's refrain

One of the reasons I chose childminding
It lets me be a mum

I love it!
 Playing
 Singing
 Joking

Lets me be a mum

I love them
As if I were the mother
 Mother
 I

Love – Equals – Feeling safe – Equals – “I trust you”

Every child is different

I love it!

The participants’ constructions of love were diverse. They said that, on occasions, they turned to their personal understanding of love, as learned through life, more than to national directives, which contain minimal reference to love. They also suggested that they acted from their hearts as much as from their heads, from what they *felt* was right, rather than according to top-down standards of practice.

The participant attached to a primary school talked about policy requirements imposed by school leaders and advisers. In her construction of love in Early Years Care and Education there was a clash between the need to show love to support children's social and emotional development and the requirement to prepare children for their educational futures with a focus on academic targets. She said it was inappropriate to set targets for literacy and numeracy in the context of early years, for example, if these caused teachers to neglect children's social and emotional needs. She communicated a sense of feeling oppressed by school and local policy requirements.

Coming to School

Kathleen's refrain

Coming to school
I feel rather saddened
The impact it has had
On all of them

That whole, that whole...
We are being pulled into this

The inspector was saying
Well... Why not?

Soul destroying
She lost her brother
A child lost her brother
A way down the list

Get on the ladder
Up they go!

Education is very hard for children
I feel rather saddened
Losing that whole soul
The whole family
Her worries

And it is love
Time for love
Not allowed

Did not make two levels of progress?
What is wrong?

Three of the participants made the connection between their formative life experiences and their approach in their settings. One said that “*as you grow up, so you go on to do*”. Another talked about growing up in a Latin culture where people embrace and kiss each other in a range of contexts to express a range of sentiments. She made the link between this and her practice where “*physical contact is not a No No*”. Another made a connection between her work with vulnerable families and her own experience of growing up in one.

The participants constructed their training as not relevant. Four out of five of them said that their training contained nothing about love. In the one case where the participant said her training *did* mention love, this was only in a negative sense whereby professionals should maintain a distance between themselves and the children in their care.

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It was interesting that the participants

1. Were willing to talk about love in Early Years Care and Education
2. Talked about their own experiences of being loved
3. Talked about touch in response to the question about love
4. Talked about what they love about their work in Early Years Care and Education

Firstly, it was interesting that the participants talked about love and appeared interested and engaged by the topic. The participants elaborated on the topic with minimal prompting. Their constructions suggest that the topic of love in Early Years served as a useful trigger for reflecting on their practice in general.

Secondly, the participants talked about their own experiences of being loved (or not) as children. From the social constructionist perspective chosen, and as the analysis of the constructions showed, the participants talked about their life learning in their constructions on the topic. They talked about what they did as Early Years practitioners and how they constructed this, if necessary, in stark contrast to their childhood experiences.

Thirdly, it was surprising that four participants talked about touch in response to the question about love. In their constructions, they also used other words to denote physical demonstrations of love, such as “*hug*”, “*embrace*” and “*kiss*”, and said that such outward, physical expressions of love were important for children’s healthy psychological development. They talked about the extent to which they were permitted to touch children in their settings. The surprising feature is that love is not the same as touch, and vice versa. Love may be expressed through touch, though not in every instance. When practitioners hug children, for example, they may be acting ethically, or responding to human need in a caring way, and this may not necessarily involve love.

Finally, it was surprising that the participants talked about what they loved about their work in response to the question about love in Early Years Care and Education, thus applying a different definition of love to the one identified as most relevant for this study. The definition adopted of love was to have a great attachment to and affection for another person, and that this could be quite intense at times, with feelings of real warmth and fondness towards the other person. Nevertheless, the participants constructed love, in part, as love for their work.

What are the implications for future research and practice?

Some of the implications of this research are:

1. The need for professional discussions about love
2. Love to feature in training and professional development programmes
3. Practical guides on love in professional contexts to be drawn up
4. Research to be carried out with wider sample, including participants who do not easily show love to children
5. Research to be carried out in Denmark, and other places where researchers have focused on different emotional affordances of nurseries and homes

If, as the participants suggested, love supports children’s social and emotional development, then it might be helpful for practitioners to consider how it is appropriate to show children in Early Years settings that they are loved. The participants in this research argued that touch was an important way of demonstrating love to young children, but the moral panic about paedophilia has resulted in some confusion about what sort of touch is acceptable. Thus open discussions among practitioners may be helpful. This would provide forums for talking about ways in

which they can demonstrate to children that they love them without being accused of inappropriate behaviour, for example.

If, as the participants said, some Early Years practitioners do not show children that they are loved, and this is interpreted as a weakness in their practice, could they be helped and supported to undertake this aspect of their role better? Possibly initial training should include content about the importance of loving children and showing them that they are loved. Additionally, professional development, in the form of opportunities to talk explicitly about practice, as found in research by Elfer (2012) and Gouch and Powell (2013), could support such enhancements of practice.

One practical way in which this emphasis on love could be put forward is by disseminating the findings of this research and other research about love to practitioners. A possible approach would be to draw up a practical guide for trainees and other practitioners including managers and leaders.

It might also be beneficial to carry out future research studies about love in Early Years on a larger scale, with a bigger sample. This would be more likely to include participants who perhaps, for example, do not easily show love to children. It would be interesting to analyse such constructions and disseminate findings to the research community.

Related to this point, it might also be valuable to do some international, cross-cultural research to build on research by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007), Degotardi and Pearson (2009) and Dencik (1989), who found that relationships in Early Years settings are quite different from familial ones. It would be interesting, for example, to carry out research about love with Early Years practitioners in Denmark, where Dencik's (1989) research took place, and find out whether their constructions would be significantly different from those found in this research.

Researcher's final reflections

I did this research partly because, as a practitioner, I loved the children I taught, and believed that this was a key aspect of practitioners' relationship with children. I was also interested in the emergence of recent research about love (Page, 2011, 2013), particularly when policies and current research literature say so little about it. I found it encouraging that the practitioners I interviewed shared my perspective about the importance of love in Early Years and hope that, although love gets little attention

today as an aspect of early years practice or as a focus for research, my research will contribute to the importance of love in Early Years being more widely recognised and celebrated.

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