

Is there a place for love in early childhood education and care in England?

Early years educators' beliefs

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ABSTRACT

The importance of love for young children is well documented. Increasing numbers of young children are spending time in early years settings. The recent Government policy announcement of free childcare for children from nine months is likely to increase the number of babies attending early years settings, so the concept of love within early years education and childcare has never been more important. However, the qualifications that enable someone to work within an early years setting in England do not mention love. Similarly, love does not feature within the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, which those working with our youngest children must follow. This research identified polarised opinions regarding the place of love within early childhood education and care, with some practitioners clearly uncomfortable with the idea of loving children who are not their own, whilst others believing that loving the children you work with is vital.

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of young children are attending early years settings from a young age (Aslanian, 2018; Page, 2018), some as young as six weeks old. The recent Government policy announcement of 30 hours' free childcare for children from nine months (HM Treasury, 2023) will further increase the number of babies

and young children being cared for outside of the home. The care these babies, toddlers and young children receive whilst in an early years setting, and the sensitivity and responsiveness of the interactions that take place in their early years settings, impact on a their long-term cognitive, linguistic and social skills (Taggart, 2020). Therefore, the role of the early years practitioner and their disposition, individuality and

KEYWORDS

LOVE

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION AND CARE

PROFESSIONAL LOVE

LOVING PEDAGOGY

EARLY YEARS TRAINING

professional knowledge, alongside the concepts of love, care and compassion, have become of increasing interest to researchers (Taggart, 2020). Yet, love is a word that is not ordinarily used in early years education and care contexts in England (Cousins, 2017) and is not mentioned within the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2021). This is despite both research and

theory suggesting that love is important for children (see Gerhardt, 2014; Campbell-Barr *et al.*, 2015a; Page, 2017, 2018). Whilst care is commonly discussed, love is often overlooked, construed as private, and related to romantic or familial relationships (Aslanian, 2015), which invites exploration and scrutiny of the value of love for the health and well-being of young children (Aslanian, 2018). This aligns with White & Gradovski's (2018) view that while love is considered an invaluable characteristic for children to acquire and experience, the actuality is that care, not love, is considered an integrant element of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England. Page (2011, 2013, 2017, 2018) highlights that while researchers' empirical foci vary, there emerges the legitimacy for love to be considered as a deeply valued and natural construct in effective ECEC, and coins the term 'Professional Love'. Nonetheless, Page (2018) identifies that 'love is negated in policy frameworks, fudged in provider rhetoric, and all but excluded in public discourse and training' (Page, 2018, p. 123).

More recently, Grimmer (2021) has begun to discuss the concept of a loving pedagogy in early years settings. Situated within that pedagogy is the strong belief that children have the right to grow up in a society where they are loved (Grimmer, 2021) and a recognition of the impact that love has on children's self-confidence and self-esteem. Yet, as already identified, love is not mentioned within the Statutory Framework for the EYFS, nor is love, Professional Love or a loving pedagogy mentioned within the Teacher Standards (Early Years) (NCTL, 2013), Early Years Educator, level 3 qualification criteria (DfE, 2019) or the Early Years Practitioner, level 2 qualification criteria (DfE, 2018), which are the qualifications that enable someone to work within the field of early education and care, further demonstrating the limited value placed on the importance of love within the ECEC sector in England. With this in mind, along with the researcher's personal

experience in early years settings, this piece of research seeks to explore, define, and yield a better understanding of, practitioners' views of love and care and their place in ECEC.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Dominant in research is the discourse that children have unique needs and that to support healthy development, it is essential to provide appropriate environments and relationships. Although many of these needs are met at home, increasing numbers of children are now being cared for in early years settings (Aslanian, 2018; Page, 2018). The intensity of the adult-child relationship, the positive emotional interactions, and transactions, that occur between the child and carer, and the quality of these non-familial experiences of care (Page, 2011, 2013, 2017, 2018) in early years settings represent the foundation for a child's socio-emotional development (Mihaela, 2015).

Forming responsive and sensitive pedagogic relationships in the early years setting is a deeply human activity eliciting joy and satisfaction, but stress and uncertainty, too (Elfer & Wilson, 2021). The importance of considering children's emotional well-being has been emphasised extensively in ECEC research and policy (Elfer, 2012). Enabling such attention has been perceived as being achieved through attachment interactions between practitioners and the children they care for. However, there is increasing dialogue suggesting that facilitating such interactions in a way that optimises outcomes for children, and their primary carers and practitioners, requires professional reflection that is equally attentive to the emotional experiences of all parties (Elfer, 2012).

Whilst acknowledging that early years practitioners do possess similar attributes, it is important to recognise that they do not come as members of a homogeneous group (Carter & Fewster,

2013). Examining this dialogue, Moss (2006) asks us to be reflective and enquiring educators, and to consider alternative narratives and paradigms that challenge our assumptions, values and beliefs, notably when promoting a pedagogy of care and love. Langford (2020) implores practitioners, as they develop their professional identities, to re-examine and reflect on their assumptions regarding social relationships in early years, and to consider the complex connections between care, education and love, in their everyday practice. It is necessary to recognise that emotions are an everyday part of our lives; however, emotions do not simply exist within us as a psychological phenomenon (Madrid *et al.*, 2013). Emotions encourage people to act and react to one another in context, in multiple spaces and situations, and can create attachments, disconnections, reactions and reflection. As adults, our emotions impact on the love, care and education we provide for the children we work with and this requires our acknowledgement.

Love is an empowering agent for children's well-being and a fundamental human right, as acknowledged within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989). As such, love within ECEC, is an integral element of effective pedagogical responsiveness, and young children respond best when they are emerged in acceptance and love (Carter & Fewster, 2013). However, ECEC is emotionally driven (Degotardi & Sweller, 2012). For many early years practitioners, the emotional needs of children and their need and right to be surrounded by love within a professional, care-based relationship, pose a challenge (O'Connor *et al.*, 2019).

Throughout the literature, words such as acceptance, belonging, care, compassion, commitment, empathy, ethics of care, honesty, presence, respect, recognition, sympathy and trust are all identified as essential elements of ECEC practice. Although these concepts are interrelated,

independently, they represent small pieces of a larger puzzle (Vincent, 2016). Love, is acknowledged less, yet love in professional practice is paramount in ECEC (Vincent, 2016). Children need to feel loved; parents want their children to be loved; and practitioners should feel love for children (Page, 2011; Cousins, 2017). The aspects of love and care that are normally associated in the context of home and family relationships are fundamental for young children's healthy development and well-being and a necessary and integral part of the provision in early years settings, and must inform pedagogy (Page & Elfer, 2013). Relationships and interactions with children set the foundation for the learning environment (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012), and the emotional bond between practitioner and child is a crucial element within a framework for a loving pedagogy (Grimmer, 2021).

Langford (2020) challenges practitioners to consider these aspects of love and care. These ethics of care (Noddings, 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) represent an overarching moral framework in which practitioners examine how they engage with each other, and with children, to promote natural care and love that enhances children's emotional well-being, and supports the dyadic attachment between practitioner and child, particularly young children in the early years settings. Luff & Kanyal (2015) utilise the term 'care-full pedagogy' whereby practitioners' enactment, interpretation, thinking and understandings of care are employed in their relationships with children. This is further highlighted by Taggart (2016), who emphasises the importance and integration of a compassionate pedagogy, and Papatheodoura & Moyles (2009) who advocate for a relational pedagogy. Recchia *et al.* (2018) express that critical to effective pedagogies and early years practice is considering the notion of love.

The notion of love in pedagogy is becoming more received (Bergnehr & Cekaite, 2017; Page, 2017; Grimmer, 2021), with academic discourse encouraging us to examine and analyse the position of love in early years pedagogy (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013; Page, 2013, 2017, 2018). Grimmer (2021) posits that a loving pedagogy has its place within early childhood settings, providing enrichment of experiences for children and practitioners. Yet, White & Gradovski (2018) postulate that discourse regarding love in the same sentence as pedagogy is conflicted and, at best, passive, despite compelling research that advocates the importance of care and caring relationships and their centrality to learning. Love, alongside care, should be a deeply valued, essential and integral, pedagogical concept (Page, 2018) as it is in other European countries (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012; Campbell-Barr *et al.*, 2015a, b), despite the lack of mention of love within the statutory framework for the EYFS in England and English qualification frameworks.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used an online questionnaire to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from practitioners working in the field of ECEC settings. The questionnaire was placed on a number of Facebook groups for people working in the sector. It incorporated simple, structured, direct questions where the respondents could choose from some answers (Kumar, 2014) and some open questions, which harvested more proliferous information (Mukherji & Dryden, 2018). The closed questions provide quantitative data (Blaxter *et al.*, 2010). Qualitative data were provided through a range of open questions, where respondents volunteered their thoughts and opinions on love and care in ECEC. A definition for love as an intense feeling of deep affection was provided within the questionnaire.

This questionnaire received 235 responses in a noticeably brief period (two hours), which highlights that there is great interest in the subject of love and care in the early

years in England. Very few questions were left unanswered by the respondents, which suggests that there is no gap in the data collected (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Quantitative data were analysed statistically to understand the place practitioners felt love and care had within ECEC. Qualitative data were analysed and coded by reading the questionnaire responses and identifying frequently used words, expressions and emergent themes that reflect the respondents' responses to the questions asked. The responses were considered, examined and, where possible, linked to theoretical literature in an informed discussion and analysis, creating a descriptive narrative (Roberts-Holmes, 2018) to better understand practitioners' views of love and care in ECEC.

3.1. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The University of St Mark and St John ethics procedures were followed throughout this piece of research. The risk level of this research was low, due to the participants being adults, willingly choosing to complete the questionnaire and the questionnaire being completed anonymously.

3.2. LIMITATIONS

The response to the questionnaire was much greater than anticipated. However, the authors regret not asking a specific question regarding the respondents' gender. Gaining male practitioner perspectives would have, perhaps, enriched the discussion on the place of love and care in early years education because, as Jones (2015) highlights, male practitioners have consistently made up just 2% of the early years workforce and discourses surrounding men who practise in ECEC have been tainted by negative connotations. Therefore, a perception of the values, beliefs and practices of men who work with young children would have enhanced the analysis and discussion of love and care in the early years.

4. RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data suggest that almost all respondents believe care has a place in ECEC, with 96.6% of respondents agreeing that care is important in early years settings. The narratives shared concur that pedagogical care is an integral part of early years practice (Noddings, 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Elfer, 2012; White & Gradovski, 2018; DfE, 2021), as demonstrated by respondent 7, who stated 'Care is essential. Care underpins early years practice.' Similarly, respondent 16 said that 'Caring for children is at the heart of everything we do' and respondent 127 expressed that care was essential, stating 'You care for the children daily by making sure they are safe and secure, and their needs are met.'

More ambiguity existed on the place of pedagogical love in ECEC, with 20.5% of participants disagreeing that love is appropriate in an early years settings. Many respondents regard love as something reserved for familial relationships (Alsanian, 2015), as illustrated by respondent 201 who said 'I have never considered it my job to love the children I am paid to care for. I love my own children.' The sense that love is not appropriate in a paid job was also shared by respondent 103, who stated 'You can care and nurture those in your care, but love is something that should be treasured for those you have a deep bond with', and further illustrated by respondent 26: 'It is a job. I am not paid to love children.'

Despite the, clearly strong, feelings from some participants that love is not appropriate in ECEC, more than 79% of respondents felt there was a place for love within ECEC. Amongst those advocates for love in ECEC, there was a recognition of children's need for loving practitioners (Page, 2011, 2013, 2017, 2018), as illustrated by the following quote from respondent 1: 'Love for your children in a professional capacity. Deep care for their wellbeing and development.' Likewise, respondent 4 said 'You need to love the

children you work with, not all the time, but you need to feel a bond and a caring for the child to do your job to its best' and then went on to share their feelings regarding responding to children telling you they love you, stating, 'If a child expresses their love for a practitioner, I was always told: don't tell the child you love them back, in case the child goes home and says: so-and-so loves me; however, I feel that if a child does express their love for you, you should not shut them down; it could be a hindrance in the ways they express themselves.'

Despite the high percentage of participants who felt that love within ECEC was important, the data show that almost none of the participants had heard of the concept of Professional Love, with only three of 235 participants reporting they had heard the term and 100% of participants identifying that their training had not included anything with relevance to love. This is unsurprising, considering the lack of mention of both Professional Love and love generally within courses that qualify someone to work within ECEC in England (DfE, 2013, 2018, 2019) and the lack of mention of love within the statutory framework for the EYFS (DfE, 2021). However, analysis of the responses highlighted that many practitioners unwittingly adopt a pedagogy of Professional Love. They have a Professional Love for the children in their care. The emotive language and intuitive knowledge (Page, 2018) that permeate some of the responses can be enveloped in a Professional Love for the children, by practitioners who have embraced a loving pedagogy (Grimmer, 2021), as illustrated by respondent 129, who says '[I] Love early childhood and love bonding with the children.' While many respondents did not recognise this term, their responses suggest they are thinking and feeling it, yet they are just unaware of how to label it.

5. CONCLUSION

This research found that practitioners had strong feelings regarding the place of love in ECEC and were polarised in their beliefs, with some respondents viewing love as paramount, whilst others argued that love is for familiar relationships and their own children, not those they are paid to care for. The notion of Professional Love (Page, 2013, 2017, 2018), despite being unheard of as a concept, and not being taught within English qualifications that enable someone to work within ECEC, as demonstrated by both participants in this study and through analysis of the qualifications frameworks, was evident in the emotive language participants used when discussing their work within ECEC. Considering the importance of love for children's well-being and development (Page, 2013, 2017, 2018; Gerhardt, 2014; Campbell-Barr *et al.*, 2015a), the significant numbers of young children being cared for within ECEC, which are likely to rise as a result of the Government policy announcement to provide funded childcare for children from nine months (HM Treasury, 2023), and the strong feelings identified in this study, it is time to reposition love in ECEC (Rouse & Hadley, 2018). Love does not diminish the ECEC professional identity and we should not privilege education over love and care. As Page argues (2018), Professional Love needs to be recognised as an essential, integral and pedagogical concept promoted in ECEC and included as part of training, education and professional development, for all adults who are caring for children in ECEC. A loving pedagogy (Grimmer, 2021) needs to be placed at the heart of early childhood education and care and prioritised within training that qualifies people to work in this sector as well as being included within the EYFS Statutory Guidance. ■

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