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Practitioners' constructions of love in Early Childhood Education and Care

Abstract

Love is rarely mentioned in Early Childhood Education and Care and there is no agreed definition for love in this context. In order to explore love in settings practitioner views on the topic should be sought. Unstructured interviews were carried out with senior practitioners in five contrasting settings. A range of qualitative methods were applied to the constructions over an extended period, and a thematic analysis was carried out at the last. Practitioners talked about wide-ranging aspects of practice in response to the narrative prompt about loving children, including the importance of showing to love through touch, familial and non-familial love, loving to be with children, and love as incorporating teaching lessons for the future. A definition of love is needed to facilitate professional discussions about love in settings, away from children's own homes.

Keywords

Love, constructions, practitioners, professional

The topic of love in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is not commonly spoken about (White, 2016), and this fact makes it more complicated. As long as love in ECEC 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. **And yet, as I found through this research, love is an important topic. The literature on the topic also reports on the importance of love. Children need to feel loved (Gerhardt, 2004, Murray, 2014, Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2015), practitioners feel love for children (Goldstein, 1997), parents want their children to be loved (Page, 2011, 2013), and love in non-familial contexts carries potential hazards (Piper and Smith, 2003, Sikes, 2008, 2009) and complexities (Page and Elfer, 2013).**

This paper is about practitioners' constructions of love. What do practitioners say about love in the context of ECEC? 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.

Definitions of love

Fletcher (1958) noted over half a century ago that...

Nursery school teachers love children. They always have and they always will. But, for a long time we have tried ... to keep away from using the word 'love' because it has led to a confusion of meanings. (p.118)

In order to address this confusion of meaning, I begin with an exploration of the meanings of the word 'love'. Collins dictionary offers the following definitions:

Verb

- 1. To have a great attachment to and affection for**
- 2. To have passionate desire, longing, and feelings for**
- 3. To like or desire (to do something) very much**
- 4. To make love**
- 5. To be in love**

Noun

- 6. An intense emotion of affection, warmth, fondness, and regard towards a person or thing**
- 7. A deep feeling of sexual attraction and desire**

8. Wholehearted liking for or pleasure in something
9. (*Christianity*)
 - a. God's benevolent attitude towards man
 - b. Man's attitude of reverent devotion towards God

www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/English)

The dictionary definition of the verb 'to love' that most closely fits with this research is the first one, namely "to have a great attachment to or affection for" someone. As a noun, the most helpful one is the sixth definition, namely "an intense emotion of affection, warmth, fondness, and regard towards a person". As I experience the concept in educational contexts, love is a highly personal and unique emotion evoked within specific relationships with other people. It varies in intensity and depth, and takes different amounts of time to develop in every case. Sometimes love comes slowly, or not at all. It is possible that, in some cases, practitioners may behave ethically, and care for, rather than love some children.

The fact that I have chosen to focus on definitions one and six, however, is not to disregard the other definitions since these also have a bearing on this research. Some definitions (definitions 2, 4, 5 and 7) allude to love in an erotic, sexual sense. Accordingly, they relate to concerns about the potential for child abuse in the context of ECEC where adults routinely touch children as part of their 'loving' relationships with them.

The word love also encompasses the early Greek distinctions between 'eros', or sexual desire, 'agape', or the Christian notion of charity, and 'philo', denoting a love of something. 'Eros' is associated with definitions 2, 4, 5 and 7, 'agape' is associated with definition 9, and 'philo' is associated with definitions 3 and 8. And yet, definitions 1 and 6, the ones I have identified as most relevant to this research, do not correlate with any of these Greek words. The word 'love', then, will be used throughout this paper. To conclude this section on definitions, the word love encapsulates a range of meanings, and any one of these meanings might be applied to different people's constructions of love in ECEC.

Historical 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) 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 technicians than people who enter into loving relationships with the children they care for.

Current context

Currently, there are few references to **love in ECEC (White, 2016), or in education more broadly (Lanas and Zamblyas, 2015)**. Possibly this reflects the neo-liberal context in which teachers are required to perform to professional standards (Osgood, 2006), 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 **instead**, for example, care, ethic of care, attachment and emotional labour.

There are, however, some advocates for love in ECEC. 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) **wrote** that "children do not thrive if they do not also receive loving attention" (p.45). Page (2011) emphasised the importance of **love from parental perspectives and developed the concept of 'professional love'**. She found that **parents wanted their children to be loved by the professionals who cared for them**. White (2016) wrote about teaching with love in the context of dialogic pedagogy and drawing on Bakhtin's philosophy. **Such a love is relational, and unique with every child. Children learn by the way they are touched and the loving sounds of those who communicate with them. From White's Bakhtinian perspective, ECEC practitioners need to tune into children's diverse understandings of love, and love children in ways that children recognise love.**

Alongside these references to love in the literature the word appears infrequently in educational policy or training in England. There is a slow re-emergence of the word in educational contexts, but wide usage or a common understanding have not yet been achieved.

Methodology

This qualitative research was carried out with leaders of practice in five contrasting settings in London. **I sought practitioners' constructions of love** through unstructured interviews. I interpreted **the transcripts** using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) approach. **I arrived at theme** headings through close reading of the interview transcripts. **This led to the identification of frequently** recurring themes, as well as themes to which the participants gave particular emphasis.

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

Theoretical perspectives

In this research I resisted positivism. Instead, postmodernism served as a critical tool to support the interpretation of the data. As Atkinson (2003) suggested, postmodernism accepts that there can be no simple answers “in an undeniably complex world” (p.8).

Social constructionism (Gergen, 1999, Burr, 2003) served as a theoretical framework, whereby people draw on their social and cultural resources to construct meaning. Accordingly, what the research participants said about love did not necessarily represent what they did in their practice. The empirical materials were what the participants 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, my own selection and interpretation of their constructions.

Constructions of love

I led unstructured, individual interviews. This was so as to create an opportunity for participants to tell me about love in the context of their work in any way they chose to. Although I acknowledge that my own positioning inevitably played a part in shaping the constructions, I wanted to elicit the participants’ own constructions on the topic as far as possible. Accordingly, I posed a “generative narrative question” (Flick, 2014, p.266) so as to stimulate talk about love in ECEC. I reminded the participants about my research interest in the topic of love and invited them to talk about love in the context of their work. Examples of the generative narrative questions I posed were:

- Do you remember? We talked about loving children. Tell me about that.

- Remember I showed you what the research was about. Really, what I am interested in is how teachers/practitioners feel able to love children in their care. Tell me about it.

I did not refer to a scripted question, or read an opening prompt, since I felt that this would impose a formality on the meeting, and might lessen the participants' sense of ease with the situation.

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.

A number of themes were identified, including:

- Love as preparing children for the future
- Touch as an expression of love
- Love as a more natural disposition in some people than in others
- The relationship between love in familial contexts and love in ECEC settings
- Childhood experiences of love (or lack of love) and love in ECEC settings

The sections below expand on each theme in turn:

Love as preparing children for the future

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, be ready to move on to school, grow as people, gain self-confidence, and learn. They alluded to their motivation to help children develop their personal, social and emotional skills for the future.

Hilary: Love is not just about hugging them or kissing them or being there for them. It's helping children to grow, making sure that the choices that they make, whether they are right or wrong [...] making them see that every action they do has a consequence. And [...] not just being their friend, but, you know, also being a teacher as well.

Another participant, Ana, also 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'." She interpreted

loving practice as encompassing a range of approaches, including guiding children to adopt positive behaviour patterns and offering love to support their well-being.

Ana: You can't go through life without being loved, and [...] If a child is not loved [...] that child, he's going to find it very difficult to have a normal life in the sense of socialising, of making friendships, of being able to trust people, all of that. I think every child needs to be loved.

Ana also said that she was “*quite strict and firm*” with the children.

Ana: You can't just give them love, love, love and not tell them when they are not right and wrong.

Angela, another participant, also constructed love as important for the future. She talked about the importance of caring for children “*as learners*”. She said she kept her focus on children's future development, and this influenced the choices she made as a professional. In this construction, ‘love’ also involved “*tell[ing] somebody off*”.

Angela: Love [...] doesn't mean you just go “Oh, everything you do is lovely!” [...] It's helping them understand other people and what's acceptable and why that's acceptable. And I think they understand that too. [...] if you tell somebody off it hasn't broken the bond that they have got with you.

In Angela's construction, love also involved helping children learn skills for life:

Angela: They need to be able to deal with going through changes and with ups and downs in them. And, again, that is kind of learning from them, really. They're going to have the same thing at home, really. Family relations are like that. They are not all smooth and simple because, actually, people are – people are not smooth and simple [...] I think that is about learning about life.

Flori, a childminder participant, also constructed love as helping to prepare children for the future. She said: “*I will love them as if I were the mother, tell them off – you know, and really educate them*”. She suggested that she offered love from a maternal more than a professional perspective.

The participants constructed love as helping children to acquire habits “*that they need to have later on in life*”. Hilary referred to this style of love as “*hard*” and “*good*” love, and said: “*You've got to have both*”. This “*hard love*” was constructed as a way of teaching children lessons for the future and forms part of an ensemble of behaviours that the participants talked about in their constructions about love. In

Ana's construction, a loving approach also helped children to develop friendships, trust people and "have a normal life" in the future. The participants made a distinction between loving children and making them aware when their behaviour was unacceptable.

In these constructions, love was not just a case of "love, love, love", as Ana said, or about being a child's friend. Part of loving children was to contribute towards their healthy social and emotional development, and learn the difference between right and wrong, and this might involve "hard love", or telling them off at times.

Touch as an expression of love

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.

The 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. Love expressed through touch is something that is greatly feared in the context of ECEC in England. There is a "moral panic" (Piper and Smith, 2003, p.890) that prevails in relation to the subject of child abuse, reinvigorated with particular force following the Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris cases in 2014 (Weaver, 2014). In these constructions of love, to restrict touch was interpreted as contrary to good practice, and not touching small children limited their development. The participants were concerned 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 surprising feature is that love is not necessarily 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.

This emphasis on touch in the participants' constructions is indicative of the complexity of work in ECEC. Elfer (2012) and Gooch and Powell (2013) found that practitioners may be supported through opportunities to talk openly about different aspects of their work in ECEC. Such opportunities for talk would support this work that involves love.

Love as a more natural disposition in some people than in others

Love as a more or less natural disposition in different people featured in all of the constructions. The participants also said it was important that those who worked in ECEC 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*”.

The word ‘*natural*’ was sometimes used to denote a flair or instinct for the work. This natural approach was also referred to as variable, more or less present in different people. Hilary referred to love as natural in her opening words to me, as illustrated from the first section of the interview transcript:

Hilary: I think it is very much a natural thing in every person, maybe more so in the female sex rather than the male.

She said that she rarely used the word love in her nursery since “*it is generally there in your own persona*”.

In Hilary’s construction, it is not external qualifications that lead to loving approaches, but innate qualities and natural dispositions.

Hilary: You can check their references and their qualifications. But, again, as I said earlier, when that person goes out onto the floor, if they are naturally good with children, then you know they love children.

Another participant, Kathleen, said that love “*is actually innate in all of us*” and “*is the nature of an early years practitioner*”, although she qualified her position at a different point in her interview as follows:

Kathleen: There are teachers who are natural teachers, and, you know, they have that love – they have the ability to have children work with them. There are others who just don't have it. So there has to be something that's intrinsically in you, or it isn't.

Ana also said that not all practitioners are the same in this regard.

Ana: I appreciate that not everybody is the same and not everyone has got the same levels of patience, caring or loving or whatever we want to call [it], because they don't.

She said that love in the context of her work, involved “*patience*” and “*caring*”. She talked about how she applied such an approach when settling children into the nursery. She said that this is something some of her colleagues found difficult to do:

Ana: I don't think it is fair on the children to get those members of staff to actually settle them in because I know they are not going to get what they need, because those staff are not able or prepared to invest the time settling them in, so I tend to either give it to staff that I know have got more patience, or if I'm in the room then I'll settle them in.

These constructions of love as natural or not in some people accords with research on love. Noddings (2007) suggested that, in many situations, people respond ethically to each other without thinking, or in a natural way. Such an approach does not need to be considered or “summoned” (p.222), but is learned through people's own experiences of being cared for. Ana, for example, said: “*I'm just natural when I talk to the children.*” In this sense, it could be said that she applied her “embodied knowledge” (Harwood et al, 2013, p.5), learned through caring for her own baby sister since the age of eleven, to her professional role. She also drew on her “professionalism from within” (Osgood, 2010, p.126), calling on her inner intuitions based on experience and wisdom.

The need for practitioners to be valued for this affective work was emphasised by Taggart (2011). Taggart argued that, although some people may be naturally ‘good’ with children, a disposition to love and care should be valued as part of the professional role, as it is in other professions, such as nursing or ministry.

The participants constructed their own actions in the workplace as natural rather than derived from external guidelines. Love is visible through people's actions which are

more or less loving, and a propensity to love children is something that people have to a greater or lesser extent.

The relationship between love in familial contexts and love in ECEC settings

Overall, the participants constructed love in ECEC settings as different from love within families. The key difference they identified was that children were only in ECEC 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.

more here...

Menzies Lyth (1982) emphasised the importance of mirroring the experience of the home in the institution, and for carers to work closely with families. For Menzies Lyth, young children need consistency of care, and “holding together by space as well as by attached people” (p.19), so that the outside world is mediated for them by “familiar caretakers” (p.19). The intensity of love was emphasised as more important than the quantity of it by Goldstein (1997). Goldstein wrote that although practitioners in settings only have children on a temporary basis, the quality of their love for children may be just as intense as the quality offered in families.

Noddings (2007) emphasised the relational aspect of this affective work. She argued that people are “dependent on each other” (p.225) and need love. Accordingly, adults need to consider how to respond to each child as if they were “a member of [their] ... inner circle” (Noddings, 2007, p.223). On the other hand, Page and Elfer (2013) recommended that the approach in one context cannot be simply translated onto another context, and proposed that such a translation was likely to be “problematic” (p.10). They found that the practitioners sometimes relied on their intuition in nursery contexts, and proposed, instead, that there should be a clear distinction between love experienced in the family and in ECEC settings.

Childhood experiences of love (or lack of love) and love in ECEC settings

Three of the participants made the connection between their formative life experiences and their approach in their settings. The interviews about love in the early years triggered this association. Kathleen said that “*as you grow up, so you go on to do*”. Flori 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*”. Hilary made a connection between her work with vulnerable families and her own experience of growing up in one.

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 ECEC practitioners and how they constructed this, if necessary, in stark contrast to their childhood experiences.

Discussion and implications for the future

The participants talked about love and appeared interested and engaged by the topic. They elaborated on the topic with minimal prompting. The topic of love in ECEC served a useful trigger for the participants to reflect on their practice in general. The word love was talked about in a range of different senses and from differing perspectives. Accordingly, a clearer definition should be developed by practitioners and researchers. A clearer definition could incorporate elements such as those that arose in the constructions, for example, love in order to teach children lessons for life, or love as expressed through touch. A clear definition would facilitate wider discussions about some of the issues that were raised. One issue, for example, was assessing how well different team members loved children in order to allow appropriate distribution of work within teams. Another issue was how practitioners felt love for the children as if they were a member of their family. Further opportunities for discussions might facilitate professional reflections on the topic.

Since love supports children’s social and emotional development (Gerhardt, 2004, Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2015, Dowling, 2014), it might be helpful for practitioners to consider how it is appropriate to show children in ECEC settings that they are loved. Touch is an important way of demonstrating love to young children (Gerhardt, 2004, Murray, 2014), 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 **practitioners to talk** about ways in which they can demonstrate to children that they love them without being accused of inappropriate behaviour, for example.

In the participants' constructions, some ECEC practitioners do not show children that they are **loved as naturally as others**. **It would be useful if they could** 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, could support such enhancements of practice.

It might also be beneficial to carry out future research studies about love in ECEC 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 **valuable** to analyse such constructions and disseminate findings to the research community.

Final reflections

I carried out this study partly because, as a practitioner, **I** loved the children **I** taught, and believed that this was a key aspect of **my** relationship with children. **I** was also interested in the emergence of love in **more** recent research about love (**Goldstein, 1997, Noddings, 2007, Gerhardt, 2004, Page, 2011, 2013**), particularly when policies and current research literature say so little about it. **I** was encouraged that the practitioners shared this perspective about the importance of love in ECEC. Although love gets little attention today as an aspect of early years practice or as a focus for research, **I hope** that this research will contribute to the importance of love in ECEC being more widely recognised and celebrated.

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