Article

Revolutionary Love: Early Childhood Education as Counter-Culture

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Abstract: This paper places the pedagogies of love and care which typify the early years of practice in the context of evolution, arguing that, during an optimum window of development, young children are predisposed physiologically to benefit from the attention of multiple alloparents. This anthropological model of community stands in stark contrast to the individualistic and privatised notion of love in neoliberal cultures, indicating reasons why practitioners may be ambivalent about it. Moreover, it is argued that, whilst the notion of care is easily commoditised, the deeper concept of love, contextualised within wisdom and faith paths, is resistant to the money culture. In looking beyond neoliberalism at counter-cultural alternatives, alloparenting traditions suggest a way in which ECEC settings can establish themselves as models of social sustainability rooted in ‘philia’ and mutuality.

Keywords: love; care; early childhood; sustainability

1. Introduction: Love in Action

McMullen et al. [1] escribe a typical scene from early childhood practice:

‘Once outside, Jane sees several children busy painting the big wooden board that she had Mr Banks attach to the fence the night before. She tells the children ‘the colours they have chosen are so lovely!’ She smiles as she sees them making good use of the small rollers and big brushes that she had laid out earlier. Her attention is quickly drawn away by shrieks of delights from Annie at the bottom of the slide. ‘Da da! I did it, Miss Jane! I did I did!’ yells Annie, arms thrown high triumphantly. ‘You did? By yourself!’ replies Jane animatedly. ‘Did it, did it, did it!’ Annie sings as she marches about. Jane wraps Annie in a big hug and says ‘I knew you could, you wonderful girl! You practised and practised and look what you did! You are so brave and strong! You can do anything!’ As Annie runs off, Thomas approaches Jane, something tightly clenched in his fist. ‘What have you there Thomas?’ asks Jane. Thomas holds out his hand to reveal a shrivelled and very dirty green bean from the nursery garden. ‘Bean’ replies Thomas, rather proudly. ‘A bean. How wonderful!’ replies Jane, ‘So Mrs Sanjay didn’t get all of the last vegetables, did she?’ Thomas shakes his head, indicating ‘no’. ‘Did you pick it for our vegetable soup?’ Thomas smiles broadly. ‘Brilliant, Thomas’, says Jane. ‘Shall we bring this to Mrs Sanjay to wash up and add to our soup?’ Thomas takes Jane’s hand they walk together back inside’.

The authors use this example to show that ‘when caregivers’ practices are based on responsive, positive, nurturing relationships they develop young children’s sense of affinitiy, self-respect and communication’ [1]). Such practice promotes children’s wellbeing so that they can relax and explore their environment, knowing that they belong and are loved, even if practitioners themselves might not use such an emotive word [2]. Love is deeply implicated in the rich description of interactions between children and adults offered by Magda Gerber [3]) and most recently by Grimmer [4]). Many settings will also build...
these values into their organisational fabric with a system of ‘key-working’ or ‘primary caregiving’ [5] whereby each child has a named adult with whom they can develop a consistent bond. This practice has its origins in the attachment theory of evolutionary theorist John Bowlby e.g., [6], which argues that the survival chances of newborn mammals are enhanced by an innate capacity for care-seeking and bonding with the primary carer. The importance of early attachments has been given through support through further experiments in neuroscience, as reported by Gerhardt [7] and Music [8].

While terms such as ‘relational pedagogy’ may be preferred [9] the depth of connection and emotional commitment is tantamount to love. This connection is addressed implicitly within studies of pedagogical approaches that prioritise the interpersonal relationship [10,11]; since, as well as this being a Vygotskian tool of learning, this relationship is the symbol of trust and emotional connection in human beings. As such, love is not a curriculum package that can be ‘delivered’ but relies on qualities such as openness, maturity and self-awareness of the adults involved. For example, the work of Page and Elfer [12] which takes a psychoanalytic approach, argues that, without proper supervision and training, a practitioner’s psychological defences against vulnerability inhibit attunement and responsiveness. These latter qualities seem to be the cornerstones of a loving pedagogy, along with attentiveness, flexibility and empathy [12–18].

Hopefully, practitioners become ‘attuned’ or ‘in synch’ with the rhythms of children’s play and explorations and become experts in ‘professional love’ [19]. In defining this, Page proposes that it ideally arises as the outcome of the three-way relationship between parent, practitioner and child and that it can be fostered deliberately by practitioners as they cultivate dispositions of self-awareness and emotional resilience. Another way of thinking about love in practice is via the phenomenological concept of ‘presence’ from nursing theory [20], which seeks to articulate the alert receptivity and connectedness shown by skilled practitioners in both healthcare and ECEC. I have also borrowed from the practice of nursing in arguing that compassion, in its broadest sense, is an appropriate way to conceptualise the professional love of nursery staff [21]. This is because it seeks to alleviate vulnerability, not just suffering, and because ‘compassion science’ [22] shows that it is a skill that can be developed and applied in different contexts. In having both a political and psychological dimension, compassion also encompasses images of the child as both agentic and emotionally immature, as a holder of rights as well as the recipient of care [21,23] 2019.

2. Love and Human Evolution

Love was certainly a central concern for the founders of modern early childhood practice who saw its fundamental importance to the human species. Even very recently, Sellars and Imig [24] have celebrated the continuing influence of Pestalozzi and his ‘pedagogy of love that dominates everything that he thought and wrote about and practiced’. His mentee, Fredrich Froebel [25] famously wrote that the primary purpose of education is ‘to call forth the love within [the child]’ and emphasised the archetype of the mother, which practitioners should copy as the model of enduring love Maria Montessori [26] argued that practitioners should aim for open-hearted inclusiveness towards the world and maintained that ‘of all things, love is the most potent’. However, despite the prevalence of a vocabulary of love amongst early childhood pioneers and its support from contemporary psychology, modern pedagogical frameworks have tended to shy clear of the word, perhaps due to concern that the new discipline of child development should be taken seriously as a science [27].

The noteworthy exception is the Te Whariki model from New Zealand [28] which includes the ancient idea of aroha as a core value. Aroha encompasses various dimensions of love such as compassion, empathy, affection, benevolence and is at the heart of the curriculum principles of wellbeing, belonging, communication, contribution and exploration. Barlow [29] explains that the word itself is composed of more fundamental ideas of aro (thought or life principle), ro (introspection), ha (life force or breath) and oha (generosity or abundance). The Te Whariki approach to early learning recognises that education, as well as involving the transfer of knowledge and skills, is also a mythic rite of passage and initiation into clearly articulated community values, a dimension that Halifax [30] argues
we have lost. More broadly, this ethic of social sustainability that Te Whariki espouses is reflected in different ways in many indigenous cultures. Indeed, in a synthetic conceptual analysis of various indigenous traditions called ‘For the Love of Our Children’, Ullrich [31] identified connectedness as a core value and argued that ‘when children are able to engage in environmental, community, family, intergenerational and spiritual connectedness, this contributes to a synergistic outcome of collective wellbeing’. It is this ‘a web of generative relationships’ that Wals [32] evokes in her characterisation of social sustainability in relation to ECEC.

From an anthropological standpoint, Narvaez and Gleason [33] argue that this connectedness and wellbeing is maintained as a result of faithfulness to ancestral forms of child-rearing typical of small-band hunter–gatherer societies. They argue that early childhood is characterised by a developmental ‘niche’, a window of opportunity that, if opened, allows an individual to grow in an optimal sense. Since their emergence over 30 million years ago, young social mammals seem programmed to flourish when they are weaned on breast milk, have rich opportunities for play, receive responsive caregiving and physical touch and enjoy attention from across the community (alloparenting). Of particular relevance to contemporary early-childhood practitioners is the focus upon attentive, responsive caring and the ‘positive social climate with multiple responsive caregivers’ [34]. Through evolution, the simultaneous formation of attachments with diverse adults would have expanded the circle of available support and protection from danger [35]. In fact, as Hrdy [36] explains, non-maternal care has been fundamental to the development of our species. Because early humans were able to trust and rely on the care of others, they were able to reproduce more frequently, giving them an evolutionary advantage over hominoids (e.g., apes) who were (and are) more possessive and private parents. She comments that, although commentators often say it takes a village to raise a child, the truth is that ‘it always has. Without alloparents, there never would have been a human species’ [36]. Eisler and Fry [37] argue that love and nurture in childcare are characteristic of ‘participatory’ societies such as those that typified the ‘hunter–gatherer’ stage of evolution. Participatory societies are egalitarian and non-sexist and based on beliefs about human nature that promote empathy and relatedness. The implications of this standpoint for ECEC are enormous, providing Western practitioners with endorsement from evolutionary psychology for the love, care and play opportunities they offer, and which have typically only been given explicit approval within minority indigenous cultures. Significantly, the principles of the evolved developmental nest tally with many of those found in developmentally appropriate practice e.g., [38]) and the approaches inspired by Montessori, Magda Gerber and the Italian region of Reggio Emilia [39].

3. Love, Faith and Social Sustainability

One of the problems involved in moving towards social sustainability is developing an alternative social imaginary [40] when the language used to conceive of a more sustainable future has already been appropriated for neoliberal causes. For example, a visit to UK branches of the Tesco supermarket shows the words ‘love’ and ‘care’ emblazoned over the frozen foods aisles. When such language has been evacuated of its possibilities, a deeper exploration is necessary. Faith traditions obviously predate neoliberal society by thousands of years and, in the transition to greater social sustainability, it would be beneficial to draw upon wisdom that may be applied to the postmodern context. One thinks of the concept of ubuntu from African animist cultures, which is often translated as ‘I am because we are’, a kind of philia or fellow feeling. A common feature of wisdom traditions is their faith in the values of community and the possibilities for human beings to transcend their habitual preoccupations with self-interest. Love is understood as fundamental to creation itself in Abrahamic religions. For example, in Judaism, chesed refers to the love that characterises a close community united in gratitude and devotion to God. It is frequently translated as “loving kindness”, showing its similarity to the meaning of metta in Buddhism, a psychological disposition of benevolence and compassion that can be deliberately cultivated and
extended. Judeo-Christian traditions also include a strong element of polemical prophecy directed against forces of injustice and financial corruption. This enduring willingness to 'speak truth to power' demonstrates the position of counter-cultural movements such as liberation theology [41]. An example of this prophecy is the excoriating critique of the 'spirituality of money' directed principally at the financial markets [42] which contrasts with the way in which the invisible and seemingly omnipotent global networks of money have replaced the similarly tacit and powerful sense of our dependence on genuinely social networks based on love and mutuality. It is this kind of counter-cultural love suggested by faith traditions that has the potential to challenge the individualistic stance of neoliberalism.

4. Love in a Time of Neoliberalism

At the moment, we seem very far from this vision. For example, Roberts-Holmes and Moss [43] discuss the impact of the neoliberal principles of competition, consumer choice and efficiency measures on the early childhood sector. Within this paradigm, political discourse avoids the topic of caring attitudes towards the young, old or vulnerable because it challenges the assumption of free, individual self-determination with its reminder of human frailties. Dahlberg, Pence and Moss [44] focus attention on the way in which phenomena in early childhood provision that are difficult to measure are tacitly excluded from measures of ‘quality’. It goes without saying that love is one of these phenomena [45]. Quality exists only in terms of recordable outcomes. As Rouse and Hadley [46] observe, neoliberal assumptions have been used to legitimise initiatives that promote ‘school readiness’, involving a shift towards education and an earlier introduction of formal learning at the expense of nurture. Early childhood is merely a transition stage enroute to the achievement of an identity as a ‘self-mastering, self-interested and responsibilised subject’ [43].

Eisler and Fry [37] contrast participatory societies with domination systems, of either political extreme, which are biased towards the powerful and remain profoundly silent on all aspects of caretaking, which are assumed to be inherently private, domestic and feminine. They point out that one of the key features of the Western industrial domination system has been the use of a universal and context-free science as the exclusive measure of human value, often being used to justify patriarchal assumptions about women and care. For example, White [47] points out that only John Bowlby’s first publication used the vocabulary of love to describe early relationships. He refers to a video interview of Bowlby’s son Richard in a video saying that the term ‘attachment’ was soon preferred as ‘love had too many different meanings for a scientist’ [48]. Despite this commitment to objectivity, his treatment of attachment assumed a narrow European/North American view of upbringing centring almost exclusively upon the conventional mother-child dyad and ignoring the role of alloparents. Similarly, the evidence of the benefits for children of love, care and play is mostly ignored by neoliberal governments in favour of a restrictive focus upon school-based competencies [43].

Ironically, this turn to a subject-focused curriculum has occurred over the same period in which the private sector has discovered the values of care and play to meet the needs of capital. Over thirty years ago, Rose [49] commented that ‘the best companies did not suppress what is non-rational in people, they used it,’ encouraging a ‘play ethos’ as much as a rational, bureaucratic one. ‘Emotionally intelligence’ is now a byword in the management literature and employees are expected to expend ‘emotional labour’ [50] in the interests of customer care. The call centre can be seen as the paradigm of the neoliberal workplace. In their research into the recruitment of customer service representatives (CSRs) at call centres, Callaghan and Thompson [51] quote a manager as saying, “You can tell by talking to someone during interview whether they smile, whether their eyes smile. If you smile during your interview and you are enthusiastic, you’ll be okay”.

This phenomenon is a key reason why, in an ECEC landscape dominated by multi-national companies, the language of care remains problematic. It would seem that the neoliberal concept of care makes no distinction between preschool children receiving nurture in a deprived neighbourhood and tired executives being ‘cared for’ by cabin crew on a first-class flight.
One option is to restore integrity via an appeal to care ethics [52] and another is to explore virtue ethical approaches through explorations of compassion and love [21]. Currently, early childhood practitioners are faced with trying to make their broad professional ideals fit into a restrictive notion of ‘care’, which might be expressed in competency standards (e.g., effective communication). In particular, several studies exist that contrast the official policy discourse of early childhood education with an informal practice-based discourse that focuses strongly upon the values of love and compassion [53–58]. The moral dissonance seems to be particularly acute in cultures, such as the US and UK, where an absence of collectivist values and a historical emphasis on ‘self-help’ and ‘laissez-faire’ has allowed neoliberalism a particularly strong grip. For example, it may not be surprising that, compared to the ex-USSR state of Hungary, English early childhood practitioners are more likely to see love as something private and internal rather than external, communal and part of their public identity [59]. Within regimes of surveillance, early childhood teachers increasingly engage in ‘acts of loving disobedience’ and ‘ethical subversion’ [60]. Anxiety is produced by the anticipation of close scrutiny and lack of organisational trust [61] and practitioners cannot be fully immersed in their interactions with children because of vigilance in the face of demands for this ‘school readiness’.

Acts of resistance help to show why love is the concept to be preferred over care. This love arises out of early childhood teachers’ daily experience in which they are witnesses to growth, development and experimentation and their hearts are enlivened and inspired by regular episodes of ‘moral uplift’ [62]. The early achievements of young children testify to the resilience and creativity of the human spirit and, in turn, children themselves become symbols of hope and endurance. In other words, early childhood teachers are in love with the professional ideal of human flourishing [63] and this love is revealed precisely when it is threatened. Jaworska and Wonderly [64] draw a distinction between care and love by arguing that the denial of opportunities to express love has negative consequences for the individual, which denial of care opportunities does not. That is, ‘the individual’s sense of oneself as an agent building a meaningful life is directly compromised without the object and/or when the object fares poorly’ [64]. They indicate that the difference between care and love lies precisely in the extent to which one is ‘altogether spent or broken’ when the loved object or ideal is violated. This insight helps to explain the sense of grief and moral compromise reported by practitioners above when children’s developmental needs are ignored in the interests of schooling. As Osgood [65] has noted when practitioners are marginalised and controlled, they ‘come to question and doubt established and preferred practices’. Paradoxically, neoliberalism has itself helped reveal the depth of this loving pedagogy. Superficially, we may conclude that, because teachers are not weakened or harmed when particular cohorts of children inevitably move on, they have been expressing care only. More correctly, however, we can see that the corrosive harm to the moral compass and sense of purpose caused by pervasive neoliberalism testifies to the love that teachers harbour for more fundamental principles of flourishing, co-operation and community.

5. Conclusions: From Maternal Care to Love and Compassion

Although increasingly commoditised itself, the early childhood sector offers a model of a community built out of countless acts and gestures of love:

‘Eva was asleep on a mattress on the floor. Rainee knelt down beside Eva. She bent right down to obtain eye contact. Rainee gently stroked the back of Eva’s head while quietly calling, ‘Hello’ in a sing-songy voice. Eva reciprocated by lifting her head up, looked at Rainee, rocked back on to her knees, rubbed her eyes and moved her head from side to side before lying down again. Rainee lowered her head to maintain eye contact with Eva. Eva reached out for her teddy which was at the top of her mattress whilst Rainee continued to stroke Eva’s head and talked to her until Eva was fully awake. Eva pointed to something on the other side of the room and Rainee said, ‘What’s that?’ Eva got to her knees and then stood up. Rainee remained on her knees so that she maintained eye contact. Eva said ‘Oh, Oh’, which Rainee echoed followed by, ‘I’m awake, I’m awake’. Eva
appeared to be unsteady on her feet so Rainee, who was still kneeling, supported Eva by holding her hand. Eva sat down on Rainee’s knee to drink a cup of milk, which was bought in by a practitioner. Rainee put her arm round Eva’s back to support her whilst gently stroking Eva’s leg. Rainee continued to talk in soft tones when responding to Eva’s cues’ [66].

These acts of love have been profoundly ambivalent for the status of women. In the traditional role as wives and mothers, women are supposed to have natural, inborn tendencies to care, which makes them best suited to work with young children. This essentialism has helped shape ECEC as an occupation for women with low career expectations and levels of formal education [67–69]). There is a double-bind: care is devalued as ‘women’s work’ and women are also demeaned because of their association with care. At the same time, the ‘women’s work’ of supporting those who are sick, old or vulnerable has exposed the inadequacy of the neoliberal vision of society. Nearly forty years ago, the term ‘love labour’ was coined to express the link between care and work in these endeavours [70]. Love is relevant here since, as Fine [71] points out, it signals the emotional commitment, ‘the mental element, the love, worry and concern’. This love labour has offered models of what a more compassionate society might look like, were such work to be better recognised and rewarded. As Ruddick [72] showed, care for children is not just a thoughtless instinct but an alternative way of thinking. This alternative would seem to be more necessary than ever as ‘the values of love and care which women ‘held’ as best they could on behalf of society through the turbulent period of industrialisation are in danger of going AWOL altogether in the post-feminist era’ [73].

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‘I heard of an incident in one nursery where several young nursery staff were in a room with a small child who had just been told off for doing something wrong. The toddler was crying desperately in a corner. The administrator then came into the room and asked if any of them were going to talk to the child or comfort her. Their collective response was ‘I’m not her key worker . . . ’ [73].

These practitioners do not lack the capacity for love. In such settings, the human instinct has been hived off into a job description, rather than established as an institutional value. Within modernity, love is seen in personalistic terms, as the property of individuals (i.e., women) instead of communities. Rather than a remothering of societies, therefore, love and care can be seen as taking the gender-neutral fields of ethics and politics in new directions [75,76]. The inadequacy of neoliberalism to deal with the interconnected and organic nature of global environmental and health crises suggests a need to turn to examples of communities that recognise common vulnerability and dependency and champion human warmth and solidarity. The application of feminist care ethics [77] has helped us to see the cultivation of such a caring community in nurseries and preschools as a form of ethical praxis and utopian experiment, rather than as the thoughtless expression of female biology (e.g., [19,52,78–80]). Such neighbourhood institutions, if allowed to thrive independently, foster social sustainability and embody the ‘care world view’ that ‘humans are essentially, in the plural, homines curans, caring people’ [81].

Stephens [74] observes that post-maternalism ‘relies on an elaborate process of cultural forgetting’, that is the generational erosion of inherited values. Such forgetting is implicit in the marginalisation of care and cultural embarrassment about our human need for love. It is also implicit in our assumption, as a species, that technological societies no longer need to meet the neurobiological requirements for healthy development suggested by the ‘evolved developmental nest’ [82]. As a contrast to this forgetting, Lipponen et al. [83] argue that nurseries function as seedbeds of altruism and that the accumulated acts of
helping, sharing, collaborating and including constitute ‘cultures of compassion’. This vision is echoed in the examples of ‘attachment-based’ settings [84] and the cultivation of metta as an aspect of professional development [75]. Perhaps illustrating the overall result, Elliot [85] describes a typical scene that could be found in many early childhood programmes and settings:

‘All of these toddlers are approximately eighteen months. It is difficult to capture the activity that swirls around us. There is an ebb and flow of emotions, activities and energies. It is challenging to observe, as my attention is like the toddlers themselves, moving and shifting as they do. Perhaps I am picking upon on their energy. I like being here and I like their energy . . . They notice tiny details with joy and intensity, delighting in the discovery. They are moving, running, climbing, pushing someone for the sheer joy of it. The caregivers, calmly and quietly, are describing movement, texture, surface—‘it’s slippery, wet, rough’. The children watch each other with concern, curiosity, familiarity. . . . Noses running, tears flowing. ‘Come sit on my lap’, standing still, crying, desolate. Mel, a caregiver, puts out her arms. Elisha lifts hers and Mel picks her up. Others run and smile and laugh, aware of Elisha’s unhappiness and yet enjoying the sun, the warmth of late October’. Such writing is an act of cultural remembering and validation of love, both giving and receiving, as the essential characteristic of human beings.

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