Fyodor Dostoevsky’s final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991), is almost universally acknowledged as his masterpiece. It has, in Joseph Frank’s words, a ‘grandeur’ that evokes comparison with ‘the greatest creations of Western literature’ (Frank, 2002, p. 567). Richard Neuhaus has described *The Brothers Karamazov* as ‘the greatest novel ever written’, noting that it is the one book he returns to year after year, ‘always with increased pleasure and admiration’ (Neuhaus, 2003, p. 75). Others have referred to the book as ‘the greatest Christian novel ever written’ (Delasanta, 2002, p. 35) and ‘perhaps the greatest philosophical novel of the Western tradition’ (Siegel, 1997, p. 39). The common thread in these comments – acknowledgement of the work’s ‘greatness’ – is borne out by the range of fields over which it has exerted an influence. The book has been studied not just by specialists in Russian literature but also by philosophers, theologians, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, cultural studies theorists, legal scholars, and criminologists, among others. All the key characters in the novel have been analysed exhaustively, from a wide range of different theoretical perspectives, over the years. To date, however, few commentators have adopted a distinctively educational point of view when approaching the text, and this will be the task of the present paper.
The Brothers Karamazov centres on the lives of three brothers – Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha – and their involvement in events before and after the murder of their father, Fyodor. Dmitri, the oldest of the three and a son from Fyodor’s first marriage, is passionate, hot-headed and impulsive. Ivan, a tortured atheist intellectual, and Alyosha, a gentle young novice monk, are the children of Fyodor’s second marriage. We learn that all three, and particularly Dmitri, have been neglected by Fyodor, who spends much of his time drunk or playing the buffoon, while nonetheless retaining a certain shrewdness in his control of his finances. The novel is populated by several other significant characters, whose lives become entwined, in different ways, with the brothers: Father Zosima (an elderly monk, and mentor for Alyosha), Smerdyakov (Fyodor’s servant and rumoured illegitimate son), Grushenka (pursued by both Fyodor and Dmitri), Katerina Ivanova (Grushenka’s rival, and torn between Dmitri and Ivan), Snegiryov (the father in a poor family who suffers the death of his son, Ilyusha), Liza (an insecure young woman with an interest in Alyosha) and her mother Katerina Khokhlakov (who seeks guidance from Father Zosima), Kirillovich (the prosecutor at Dmitri’s trial), and Fetyukovich (Dmitri’s defence attorney), among others.

The murder does not take place until several hundred pages into the book. The early part of the novel tells us something about the Karamazov family. This is followed by an unfortunate gathering at the monastery in which Alyosha and the elder Zosima serve. We learn more about the other key characters, and tensions mount between Fyodor and his two elder sons (Dmitri and Ivan). A significant portion of the book then focuses on the death of Zosima and to recalling – through Alyosha – some of his ideas and past experiences. Much of the second half of the novel is devoted to events relating to Dmitri’s actions: he is accused of Fyodor’s murder, tried and (wrongly) convicted. Ivan, who also disliked his father intensely, is tormented and suffers a breakdown. The real murderer, Smerdyakov, kills himself. Grushenka and Katerina both redeem themselves, in different ways, prior to and during the trial, and Alyosha plays multiple roles: as a messenger, anxiously running from one person to the next, as the quiet novice at the monastery, and as a guide for the young boys who become friends of Ilyusha.

The Brothers Karamazov deepens and extends themes addressed in Dostoevsky’s earlier work: the clash of values and worldviews; the tensions between reason, faith and feeling; problems of good and evil; the complexities of human relationships; processes of inner struggle and striving; the significance of suffering; the possibility of redemption; and the nature of hope and despair. Dostoevsky’s exploration of extremes in human conduct, so characteristic of the other novels of his maturity, continues in The Brothers Karamazov. The Brothers Karamazov is a meditation on the qualities of human destructiveness: manipulation, jealousy, humiliation, neglect, resentment, and hatred. At the same time, the novel also provides, through the lives of several characters, well-developed examples of human virtues: caring, honesty, kindness, unselfishness, responsibility, humility, courage, and, most importantly of all, love.

The focus on love is pivotal from an educational perspective, for in the position adopted by Father Zosima we find a key pedagogical claim, namely that love can be seen as a teacher (Dostoevsky, 1991, p. 319, emphasis added). We teach and we learn, The Brother Karamazov shows, through giving, experiencing and understanding love. Dostoevsky’s primary concern is not with an abstract ‘love of humankind’ (cf. Poznar, 1992, p. 278); rather, his focus is on a form of active love that teaches us how to love individual human beings, with all their frailties and flaws. Seen in this light, The Brothers Karamazov
can be regarded as an educational text: a work that has at its centre an implied pedagogical theory.

Drawing on the work of Iris Murdoch, I argue that the key to linking the different elements of the educational process together is attention. It is attention, I suggest, that lies at the heart of active love; it is attention that allows us to bridge reason, faith and feeling; and it is attention that provides a helpful starting point for rethinking pedagogical purposes and practices. The first section examines several passages in *The Brothers Karamazov* that address the theme of active love. The second section analyses these examples from the text in the light of Murdoch’s ideas and explores some of their broader educational implications.

**Beyond reason? love in *The Brothers Karamazov***

The importance of love as a theme in *The Brothers Karamazov* is evident from early on in the novel. In Book II, Father Zosima receives a number of visitors at the monastery. At the centre of one group is Fyodor Karamazov, who embarrasses himself and others with his buffoonery. Among the others who seek the elder’s advice, however, is Madame Khokhlakov, who has arrived with her daughter, Liza. Liza suffers from paralysis of the legs and is in a wheelchair. Prior to speaking with Father Zosima, Madame Khokhlakov observes an exchange with another visitor, a woman who was beaten by her late husband, and is greatly moved. Zosima’s closing words of advice to the woman are to go without fear. He counsels her to avoid becoming upset with people or offended by what they have done. He urges her to forgive her dead husband, and to repent. This, he observes, is an illustration of love. In loving in this way, Father Zosima says, she will already belong to God; love saves everything. Love is a treasure beyond all others; one can gain the whole world through it (Dostoevsky, 1991, p. 52).

Madame Khokhlakov believes Father Zosima has already healed her daughter, not by removing the need for a wheelchair but by dispensing with Liza’s night fevers through his prayers for her. She wishes to thank him, and also has a letter from Katerina Ivanova to pass on to Alyosha, who is with Father Zosima. Liza laughs nervously in Alyosha’s presence, and Alyosha, in turn, blushes at her attention. Following their preliminary dialogue, Madame Khokhlakov and Father Zosima begin a conversation that builds on the elderly monk’s earlier words about love. In response to a claim from Zosima that we are meant to be happy, Madame Khokhlakov wonders where happiness can be found and who can profess to be happy (p. 55). She admits that she is suffering – from a lack of faith, it turns out, but not precisely lack of faith in God. She is troubled by the riddle of what happens to us when we die and is terrified at the prospect of nothingness (pp. 55–56). She notes that she had believed only when she was a child, and even then, only unreflectively so (p. 56). Now, as a thinking adult, she is unable to do so, and this is unbearable. Desperate to know how life after death can be proved, Father Zosima admits that such puzzles can be deeply troubling. He suggests that while proof in these matters is impossible, we can nevertheless be convinced (p. 56). When asked how or by what, Zosima replies that it is through experiencing an active form of love. We should, he says, try to love our neighbours in an active and tireless manner. The more we do this, the more convinced we will become of God’s existence and of life after death. Complete selflessness prevents
doubt from entering our souls. These things, Father Zosima claims, have been tested and are certain (p. 56).

Madame Khokhlakov then goes on to indicate that although she has sometimes dreamed of leaving Liza in order to nurse the suffering, she has doubts about her ability to sustain such a mission (pp. 56–57). She fears that her commitment to active love would be tested and undermined by expressions of ingratitude. Father Zosima demonstrates sympathy for her position, recalling that he once heard similar sentiments being expressed by a doctor. The doctor had noted that he loved humankind, but that the stronger his love was in this direction, the less able he was to love people in particular (p. 57). His lofty ideals of going to the cross for his fellow human beings would quickly be replaced by feelings of hatred when in close proximity with real individuals. In response to Madame Khokhlakov’s pleading of what should then be done, of whether falling into despair is an appropriate response, Zosima suggests that being distressed is itself sufficient. We must, he says, simply do what we can, and allow whatever is going to happen from there to do so (p. 57). Conceding that she may have spoken of her weaknesses merely to receive praise, Father Zosima continues to see the good in her thoughts and words, advising her to stay on the right path even if she does not find happiness. He stresses the importance of avoiding lies – particularly the lie to oneself. He urges Madame Khokhlakov not to fear her own misdeeds or her faintheartedness in attaining love. Apologising for the fact that he cannot offer more comforting words, he cautions that active love is not for the faint-hearted; it is very different from the love we encounter in dreams (p. 58). In dreams, love may be immediate, with immediate recognition and reward. Active love may show no such instant returns; it requires hard work and persistence, and will often be hidden from public view.

The encounter between Madame Khokhlakov and Father Zosima signals, in condensed form, the key ideas to be considered, contested and enacted throughout the rest of the book. The tensions at work between competing ideas come to a head in Book V, with the arguments mounted by Ivan in the ‘Rebellion’ and ‘Grand Inquisitor’ chapters, and Book VI, where extracts from Father Zosima’s notebooks are offered as an indirect reply by the narrator to Ivan’s views. The ‘Rebellion’ chapter begins with a problem closely related to the one posed by Madame Khokhlakov. In conversation with his younger brother Alyosha, Ivan notes that he could never understand how it is possible to love one’s neighbours; it is precisely those nearest to hand who are the most difficult to love (p. 236). He states his position more precisely a little later, maintaining that while we might love our neighbour abstractly – at a distance – it is far less common to do so when in close proximity (p. 237). Ivan postulates that the kind of love exhibited by Christ is an impossibility on this earth; it is a miracle (p. 237). The reality we live is rather more gruesome. As human beings, Ivan argues, we suffer, but despite this, we seldom seek to understand or address the suffering of others. Indeed, we have demonstrated in our treatment of young children and animals that we are capable of the most hideous examples of cruelty. If such suffering is part of a larger harmonious plan, Ivan wants no part of this.

Ivan raises further questions in his prose poem of the Grand Inquisitor. Set in sixteenth century Seville, his poem describes the reappearance of Christ, who walks among people on the streets, radiating love and compassion (Sandoz, 1964, pp. 359–360). He performs a miracle, raising a young girl from the dead, and is worshipped by those who see him. His
actions come to the attention of the Grand Inquisitor, a ninety year old Roman Catholic Cardinal, who has sanctioned the burning of dozens of heretics just prior to Christ’s arrival. The Grand Inquisitor summons Christ to his cell and admonishes the latter for disrupting order in the town. Motivated by his love for humankind, the Grand Inquisitor advises Christ that he too will have to be put to death. The people may praise him today, the Grand Inquisitor says to Christ, but tomorrow they could just as easily turn on him and call for his blood. Through Christ, people are granted moral freedom – they must choose to do good or to do evil – but all they really want, the Inquisitor argues, is the happiness that comes from full bellies. Freedom is a burden too heavy for most to bear, and for many has brought nothing but conflict, confusion and despair (Jones, 1992, pp. xiv–xv).

Humanity yearns not for freedom, the Inquisitor suggests, but for ‘mystery’, ‘miracle’ and ‘authority’ – principles that correspond with the three temptations faced by Christ in the wilderness. Jesus was tempted by the devil to ‘win people’s hearts by turning stones into bread, to test God by leaping from the pinnacle of the temple, and to rule over all the kingdoms of the earth’ (p. xv). The Inquisitor claims that it was a mistake to reject these temptations. The Catholic Church has stepped in to correct the error, taken the devil’s side, and accepted the temptations. The implications of this decisive move are clear: Church leaders have, for eight centuries, propagated an ‘enormous lie’ (p. xv). Aware that God does not exist, they have created Christianity as an ‘elaborate myth’ with a view to controlling and organising ‘rebellious imaginations’ (p. xv). Their goal, however, has been a noble one: by manipulating people in this manner, they have restricted their freedom but enhanced their happiness. The Church forefathers recognised that we can have freedom or happiness, but not both. The Church has provided what human beings seek. They want others to serve as their consciences; they want to ‘bow down’ to others; and they want to be formed into ‘a common, concordant and incontestable anthill’ (p. xv).

Christ, throughout this encounter with the Grand Inquisitor, remains silent, listening intently to all that has been said. At the conclusion of the speech, instead of responding angrily, or defending himself, he simply moves quietly to Inquisitor and kisses him gently on the lips. This simple gesture, the poem suggests, provides a complete answer in itself (Dostoevsky, 1991, p. 262). Shuddering, the Grand Inquisitor releases his prisoner on to the streets, telling him to never return. With this enigmatic final act, Ivan’s poem ends. Alyosha is horrified at the prospect of Ivan holding similar views to those expressed by the Inquisitor. Ivan’s apparent acceptance of the notion that all things are permitted is of particular concern. Near the end of their conversation, Alyosha repeats Christ’s act, kissing Ivan on the lips. Ivan, in turn, confirms that as long as Alyosha is present, he will want to go on living. Ivan asks Alyosha if that is enough for him and indicates that he can take his commitment as a declaration of love (pp. 363–364).

An answer to the Grand Inquisitor is provided by life and teachings of Father Zosima, as set out in Book 6 (‘The Russian Monk’). Alyosha assumes responsibility for recording the elderly monk’s thoughts, making them available after Zosima’s death. These writings constitute an indirect repudiation of the idea of everything being permitted and an affirmation of the principle of active love espoused by Zosima in his earlier interactions with Madame Khokhlakova and her daughter. We discover that a pivotal event in the life of Zosima was the death of his older brother, Markel, as a teenager. Six months before his
death, under the influence of a freethinking scholar, Markel had come to the conclusion that God did not exist. This is distressing enough for the boys’ mother, but when she learns that Markel’s illness will be fatal, she is even more distraught. On his mother’s urging, Markel takes communion, but finds his own way to deal with death. A remarkable transformation takes place, and he speaks increasingly of the joy of life, of the beauty and glory that is all around us. He stresses the importance of serving, loving and forgiving others. In standing before others, we are all guilty, for everything and everyone (p. 289). These ideas form the kernel of Father Zosima’s creed of active love. Several other key ideas, all closely related to this central notion, are conveyed: the idea that paradise is within us, hidden, awaiting the revelation that comes when we truly understand that we are guilty before all and responsible to all. We live, it is noted, in an age of isolation, separated from our fellow human beings by our greed, our selfishness, our envy, and our desire for self-determination. Instead of experiencing the fullness of life, there is a kind of suicide (p. 303). This is not a natural state of affairs but a descent into darkness. What is needed is fellowship with others and this can be demonstrated by an individual, even if this means being regarded as foolish (pp. 301–302). Also explored in these pages are ideas such as embracing suffering and finding redemption through confession (pp. 310–312).

Dostoevsky invokes, through the homilies of Father Zosima, a notion of prayer that has important pedagogical implications. Father Zosima advises the young to remember to pray. Prayer, he contends, will bring with it a flash of new thought and feeling, through which courage can be renewed. Following this advice allows us to see that prayer is a form of education (p. 318). A distaste for the pretensions of the ‘educated’ classes is evident throughout Dostoevsky’s work and there are hints of this in The Brothers Karamazov. Among Father Zosima’s homilies, for example, there is indirect reference to the kind of dismissive arrogance Dostoevsky observed in some members of the Russian intellectual elite. It is those who are typically regarded as educated who suggest that monks are useless idlers, beggars who bear no shame in living on the back of others’ labour. One can admit, Father Zosima says, that among monks there are some who prey on the good will of others, or seek their own pleasure; at the same time, there are many who, with humility and meekness, seek solitude, prayer and peace (p. 313). What passes for ‘education’, Dostoevsky seems to suggest, will often have little connection with the forms of teaching and learning that should be valued most: those most consistent with the principle of active love. Love teaches those who teach as well as those who learn. Prayer, as loving attention, is one way to enact this principle.

Love, attention and education

Iris Murdoch’s concept of attention, adapted from the work of Simone Weil (1997, 2001), provides a helpful starting point in exploring some of the broader educational implications of these ideas. Murdoch (2001) defines attention as a ‘just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality’ (p. 33). Attention is the task of active moral agents; it is an exercise of love through which we come to know others (pp. 29, 41). Murdoch is interested not so much in abstract principles as in the concrete and the particular. For Murdoch, the individual is the centre of morality (p. 29). Murdoch develops her view of attention via a well known example. She asks us to imagine a mother (M) who experiences feelings of hostility
toward her daughter-in-law (D), finding her good-hearted but somewhat vulgar. M sees D as, at times, rude and childish. She disapproves of her dress sense and overly familiar manner. As M sees it, D lacks refinement and dignity. She cannot escape the impression that her son could have done better. M keeps her feelings to herself, behaving ‘beautifully’ in her interactions with D (p. 17). Murdoch takes the example further by proposing that M, as an ‘intelligent and well-intentioned person’ (p. 17) reflects on her feelings, making a careful, attentive effort to consider D in a fresh light. M admits to herself that she may be ‘snobbish’, ‘old-fashioned and conventional’, perhaps ‘prejudiced and narrow-minded’ and ‘certainly jealous’ (p. 17). She commands herself to look again. In observing or reflecting anew on D, M’s view gradually changes. D’s behaviour does not alter; the transformation takes place entirely in M’s mind. M comes to see D as ‘refreshingly simple’ rather than vulgar, happy and spontaneous rather than noisy and undignified, ‘delightfully youthful’ rather than ‘tiresomely juvenile’ (p. 17). Through attention, M demonstrates her capacity to love, and in so doing, she comes to know both D and herself better. This is, Murdoch makes clear, a form of active love; M has been ‘doing something, something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself’ (p. 19).

Attention as Murdoch understands it is a form of looking, of seeing, that can involve a process of inner struggle. This is the case for M in Murdoch’s example, as she slowly but surely shifts her perspective on D. M’s attentive inner activity is uniquely her own. The distinctive nature of individual acts of attention is, in part, what makes it impossible to adequately explain or characterise moral activity in quasi-scientific terms. M’s attention to D is not just an attempt by the former to see the latter accurately but an effort to do so ‘justly and lovingly’ (p. 22). Such efforts are necessarily fallible; they are never perfect but ‘infinitely perfectible’ (p. 23). Persistent attention is progressive, even if it might not immediately be perceived in that way by either the person giving the attention or the person receiving it. We may pay attention in this manner not just to another human being but to objects (e.g. works of art or features of the natural world) and to situations and contexts. The task of attention is necessarily ongoing and incomplete: it is ‘endless’ (p. 27). As we undertake acts of attention, concepts and ideas change. There is, in this sense, always more work to do in realising our capacity for attention.

For Murdoch, attention is educative. Murdoch speaks of a process of learning whereby our understanding of that to which we are attending becomes deeper and more complicated (p. 30). Our use of words, including as concepts in our private inner activity, plays an important role in this process. Thus, M’s characterisation of D as either ‘vulgar’ or ‘spontaneous’ will bear on what else she might learn about D. ‘Uses of such words’, Murdoch says, ‘are both instruments and symptoms of learning’ (p. 31). Understanding others requires the ability to relate in a meaningful way to their contexts – the particulars of their situation. We need to recognise also that attentive acts are always ‘historically conditioned’ (p. 37). Through attending to contexts, we learn, and as we pay close attention to objects, our ‘vocabulary’ develops (p. 31). It can be inferred from Murdoch’s discussion that ‘vocabulary’ includes not just words but categories for understanding; ways of seeing others, ourselves and the world.

Murdoch claims that when M is just and loving in her attention to D, ‘she sees D as she really is’ (p. 36). Seeing someone as she ‘really is’, or something as it ‘really is’, does not mean any problems are now solved and our work is done. To the contrary, the work of attention must continue, for what ‘really is’ the case at any one moment may not be so
at the next. The world in which we are undertaking the act of seeing is constantly changing, as are we and those to whom we pay attention. The work of attention ‘imperceptibly … builds up structures of value round about us’ (p. 36), such that when major moral choices are required ‘most of the business of choosing is already over’ (p. 36). This suggests a notion of human freedom built not on the logic of grand decisions – singular moments where self-conscious, explicit, bold life choices are made – but more on the basis of small, continuous, often unnoticed acts of attentive love. We learn through this process, but we can never fully comprehend everything that has contributed to our learning. The idea of ethical decisions being fully intentional breaks down here. As we engage in acts of attention, progress is being made, but sometimes only in ‘obscure’, ‘less clearly conscious’ ways (p. 37).

For Murdoch, there is no clear separation between reasoning and willing. The will exerts an important influence over what we believe, just as reason may do so. In Murdoch’s theory of moral activity, it makes no sense to see the domain of rational thought as somehow ‘impersonal’ and the process of willing as wholly ‘personal’ (p. 39). What we come to want is, in part, driven by what we see. We maintain a degree of control over what and how we see but this is never complete. Murdoch takes from Simone Weil the idea that willing is more like obedience than resolution (p. 39). Acts of attention demand of us a willingness to wait, to look, to listen. They require patience and humility (cf. Catton, 2017; Laverty, 2007). They are not so much a matter of ‘controlling’ ourselves or others but more a matter of submitting to a process as a kind of necessity. In this way of looking at human activity and morality, there is also no separation between ‘goodness’ and ‘beauty’ (p. 40); the aesthetic realm is also a moral realm (and vice versa). Attentive love is both beautiful and good. Attention is part of the fabric of daily life (p. 42). Acts of attention may be so small, so apparently insignificant, that we barely notice them, but cumulatively, they play a crucial role in sustaining us and in forming us as moral beings.

There are important connections between Dostoevsky’s notion of active love and Murdoch’s concept of attentive love. The theme of active love is evident throughout Dostoevsky’s post-imprisonment writings (cf. McReynolds, 2008) but finds its fullest elaboration in The Brothers Karamazov. Active love, as explained by Father Zosima, is a form of humble, patient attention to others. It is non-judgemental; it entails accepting others as we find them and acting with a sense of equanimity and openness in our dealings with them. Active love is not concerned with grand gestures but small moments of giving and receiving. It is, like Murdoch’s attention, a form of work that is never complete. To love actively is difficult and complex; it often involves a process of quiet inner struggle. Active love is, as Dostoevsky depicts it, both the most mundane, everyday phenomenon – something that is frequently unnoticed and seldom celebrated – and the most beautiful, divine thing in the world. Active love gives quietly but cumulatively to both those who exhibit it and those who receive it. Just as, for Murdoch, we learn through acts of attention, so too do those who practise active love learn (cf. McMenamin, 2017). For Murdoch, ‘reason and emotion are conjoined in the call to be “just” and “loving” in our orientation toward another’ (McDonough, 2000, p. 223). Dostoevsky, similarly, draws no rigid boundaries between the different elements of consciousness. Active love comes to life through thought, feelings, actions, and relationships. It is not abstract but concrete, grounded in the messy realities of daily life. Through active love we shift our focus of attention away
from ourselves – the prompting of our ego – but in so doing, more fully become what we are meant to be as moral beings.

Murdoch’s example of the shift in M’s view of D resonates strongly with the difficult process of loving individuals in all their particularity described in The Brothers Karamazov. At several points in the text, Dostoevsky draws our attention to the difference between loving human beings in general, as a group, or in the abstract and loving them as the individuals we encounter in daily life. At a distance, we can love, but up close this is a much more challenging task. At a distance, we cannot focus as well on what we are seeing; up close, if we are to love, attention is required. Our initial response when faced with the real individual person in front of us might, indeed, be one of utter repugnance. In The Brothers Karamazov, Dmitri, Ivan and Alyosha all fall short of the ideal of active love in the way they respond to their half-brother Smerdyakov (cf. Berman, 2009). Smerdyakov is consistently viewed as merely a ‘lackey’, unworthy of their love or respect. Respect is an important element of attention, as Murdoch understands it (cf. Bagnoli, 2003). The brothers’ inability to respect Smerdyakov is one manifestation of their failure to attend to him. Smerdyakov sees Ivan as something of a kindred spirit but the latter responds with venom and violence to Smerdyakov’s attempt to build a connection with him. Already rejected by his biological father, Smerdyakov also finds himself unwanted as a sibling. When Ivan strikes him, he breaks down into uncontrolled sobbing, and he later hangs himself. Even Alyosha, the most attentive of the brothers, dehumanises Smerdyakov. He appears to care little for him, and in conveying the news of Smerdyakov’s suicide to Ivan, he is strangely matter of fact in his manner. His focus is more on Ivan than on any grief or sadness he might feel at the loss of Smerdyakov. As Anna Berman (2009) shows, this is part of Dostoevsky’s literary design and it allows us to see just how much is demanded of us if we are to take the ideal of active love seriously. If, in accepting the guiding hand of the narrator, we end up thinking that Smerdyakov is undeserving of brotherly love, then we too as readers fail to realise the ideal. This reinforces the notion of everyone being guilty before all. Smerdyakov ‘acts as the lynchpin of the novel, the overlooked brother in a world based on forming lateral bonds. He is the reminder of the price we pay for choosing Christ over the Inquisitor’ (p. 281). (In-depth discussions of Smerdyakov and his relationships with other characters in the novel can be found in Kanevskaya, 2002; and Kantor, 2004.)

Dostoevsky poses similar challenges for us in Notes from Underground (Dostoevsky, 2004). Most commentators have depicted the Underground Man as a thoroughly reprehensible creature; it is possible, however, to argue for a ‘compassionate’ reading of him (Roberts & Saeverot, 2018). Such an approach is consistent with the principle of active love espoused in The Brothers Karamazov. Dostoevsky encourages us to see both ‘holy fools’ (Murav, 1993) and ‘great sinners’ (Merrill, 1971, p. 75) in a fresh light. Of course, it is often considerably easier to espouse and enact this principle in relation to a fictional character than in direct connection with a flesh and blood human being. Nonetheless, as Murdoch’s analysis of the M and D example shows, the ideas remain the same, and the concept of attentive love has as much applicability when encountering a work of art as it does in our dealings with living individuals. There is educative value in both cases. What, then, of those situations and contexts where we might expect to find the kind of loving, educative attention Murdoch describes most in evidence: our schools, universities and other learning institutions?
In many respects, contemporary educational institutions provide unfriendly soil for the cultivation of attention and active love. There is an obsession with measurement and assessment that works against the patient, unpredictable, often unknowable forms of learning Murdoch describes when discussing attention (cf. Webster, 2017). In schools and universities, students (and their teachers) are constantly expected to perform, and their progress is charted on the basis of demonstrated learning behaviours. Attention is compromised not just in relation to what is being studied but also with regard to how teaching and learning occur. By forcing, say, the study of a work of art into the categories for judgement prescribed by a compulsory assessment regime, the elements of quietly waiting and watching necessary for genuine attention can be lost. The demand for relentless assessment can also constrain opportunities for teachers to fully attend to students, and for students to do so with each other.

‘Love’ has no place in such systems; it is seen as inappropriate, irrelevant and unpredictable. ‘Love’ is something that is supposed to figure in teachers’ and students’ lives only beyond the school gates. This does not mean an individual teacher cannot display the qualities associated with active love; it is just that there is no formal recognition of the pedagogical importance of these attributes. No ‘performance review’ exercise asks a teacher, ‘Do you love the students with whom you work?’ Indeed, an answer in the affirmative from a teacher to such a question is more likely to invite disciplinary action than commendation. Love is understood primarily as a romantic notion, and even if the forms of attentive and active love to which I have referred above could be incorporated into teacher evaluation systems, this would itself rub against the ethical views espoused or implied by Dostoevsky and Murdoch. It is the logic of performativity, the drive to assess and measure everything, that is the problem (see Roberts, 2013a). Education as Murdoch and Dostoevsky understand it takes place in spite of this, and sometimes in direct opposition to it. Simone Weil, to whom Murdoch is indebted for her concept of attention, was herself a teacher for a number of years and she quickly found herself in trouble with educational authorities for refusing to make examination results a priority. Her focus was instead on developing students’ abilities to reflect and to pay attention, and these qualities were often best fostered in unorthodox ways that had nothing to do with performance on tests or examinations (see further, Caranfa, 2010a, 2010b; Roberts, 2016).

Attention runs counter to the spirit of our age in other ways as well. In the Western world, distractedness and inattentiveness are not uncommon (cf. Rozelle-Stone, 2009). One expression of this is the idea of ‘multi-tasking’, where people engage in several activities at once, often failing to complete any one task well. At home, students will frequently have multiple electronic devices operating at any one time – a computer, a cell phone, a television, and so on – and when they enter school or university grounds, their expectation is that as many of these devices as possible will continue to run. (This description, of course, assumes a degree of privilege commensurate with having access to these various technologies.) Cell phones have become like extra body parts, as inseparable from their users as an arm or a leg. The notion of focusing, quietly, patiently, and with total attention, on one task, or one person, or one situation, and without a cell phone ringing or vibrating, is out of kilter with everyday experience for many young people.³

Demanding attention of this kind from students will often lead to fidgeting, impatience, and sometimes outright hostility. Attention takes time, and time seems to be in perpetually short supply. This is not just a matter of how students behave; it is built into the thinking
that structures formal education. A drive from politicians and policy makers to attain ever greater efficiencies from the education system has been present in most Western countries for decades. Maximising output relative to input is the goal, and time is a key ‘cost’ in measuring inputs. Cultivating our capacity for attention may make us more efficient in some senses – the ability to focus, to concentrate can allow us to complete tasks more effectively – but it does not lend itself well to the need for regularity and predictability in seeking and measuring efficiency gains. Attentive love is, in its whole orientation, fundamentally at odds with the very idea of making systemic efficiency a key educational goal. Love – slippery, unpredictable, immeasurable – is, for the educational bureaucrat committed to efficiency, ‘wasted’ time.

Teaching involves constant attention to myriad small features of each pedagogical context and situation, from the temperature and layout of a room, to the subtle facial gestures and other movements of students, to the texts under examination. A good teacher must know not only how to look and listen but also how to speak and to respond. Teaching will often require the use of several senses simultaneously. Teachers also need a sense of perspective, both from moment to moment within a classroom (e.g. in facilitating a discussion, with attention to both individual speakers and to their interactions with others), and more broadly (e.g. in placing ideas in their wider contexts). Special care is needed when dealing with tension and conflict, where attention to detail will often be crucial in understanding the nature and genesis of an apparent ‘problem’. Attention to particulars can transform what might at first glance be seen as an insurmountable obstacle into an educative moment, where all participants can learn something worthwhile.

No rulebook, no blueprint, no guidelines, could ever be sufficient to prepare a dedicated teacher for what he or she will face in working with students. The messy realities of classroom life can often come as a shock for beginning teachers. Teaching is a demanding, exhausting activity. Developing the capacity for attentive love in teaching ‘is frequently a struggle and a sacrifice. It is a struggle and a sacrifice to see beyond our egoistic selves so as to see our students more clearly’ (Liston, 2008, p. 389). Just as we can never step into the same river twice, so too can a teacher never enter the same classroom on more than one occasion. Every element of pedagogical life is subject to change, from the furnishings in a classroom, to the circumstances outside the school that bear on students’ ability to learn, to the dynamics of instruction, interpretation and discussion associated with the engaging of curriculum content. Interactions between students alter from one day to the next, from one moment to the next. We teachers change, hour by hour, day by day, year by year. Every pedagogical situation is distinctive, even if there may be much that overlaps with other teaching and learning experiences and contexts. Once the habit of attention has been developed, it is not a case of whether to attend to students, but of how ‘to do so in each particular context’ (Hansen, 1997, p. 170).

Both Murdoch’s notion of attention and Dostoevsky’s concept of active love allow us to think about pedagogical ‘acceptance’ and ‘resistance’ in a fresh light. Acceptance of a certain kind is necessary in the sense of allowing the process of watching and waiting to occur. We might even think of this as a form of submission. Attention in education cannot be forced. There is, as David Lewin (2014a) points out, an element of attention that ‘eludes the simple direction of the will’; ‘a moment of awareness that in some respects is prior to the engagement of intended concentration’ (p. 355). The teacher’s role is not to ‘control’ or ‘manage’ the development of attention in students. A teacher can say, in effect,
‘Behold’ to a student, drawing attention to something, but doing so requires a recognition of the ‘autonomy of the student in the apprehension of being, and the agency of the world in the givenness of things’ (p. 356). That autonomy, however, is never total. Attention, for both teachers and students, is better conceived as a ‘gift’ (Lewin, 2014a, 2014b) than as something over which we can have full agency.

The cultivation of certain qualities – humility and patience, for instance – can nonetheless be helpful in opening up possibilities for this gift to be given and received. In teaching and learning, sometimes our difficulties in demonstrating these qualities can themselves have educative value. It need not be a case of either acceptance or resistance (see further, Roberts, 2013b). Resisting our urge to resist, to struggle, in the interests of attaining the state of submission necessary to see and hear and attend, can become self-defeating. Attempted submission can end up becoming its opposite. Acceptance can emerge through resistance rather than in spite of it. We can, through learning and experience, come to accept that we are resistant beings. Acceptance is a more active, reflective concept than submission. Acceptance is not passivity. It is not merely an exercise in ‘letting go’ but a process of ‘letting be’. This may mean, and indeed often will mean, struggling with something in order to make sense of it. We can become frustrated, even angry, with the object of study. But this need not be inconsistent with the principle of active love. We can, as Paulo Freire puts it, fight with a text while loving it (Freire & Shor, 1987). Active, attentive love, as both Dostoevsky and Murdoch show, will often mean resisting certain impulses – self-centredness and selfishness, for example – in order to allow us to see and accept the good that stands before us.

This is not to suggest a pedagogical model based on an idea of emotional detachment. Teachers are typically encouraged, explicitly or tacitly, to suppress their emotions; yet, the cultivation of a rich life of feeling is vital to the lifelong process of education. We can give something of ourselves away – relinquishing a certain sense of control and agency – when faced with a person or a text or a situation that calls us to attend, but this does not mean other aspects of our emotional makeup disappear. Acknowledging, reflecting upon, and working with the emotions that structure our teaching lives can enhance our ability to appreciate what others have to offer. Active love, as explored in The Brothers Karamazov, teaches through allowing us to see that what is most frightening, most repellent, may at the same time be utterly beautiful. But this does not mean we must turn a blind eye to weaknesses (in ourselves and others), or to social injustices. Accepting oneself and others, in the countless pedagogical situations presented to us by daily life (situations where we can always make ‘progress’, in Murdoch’s terms) does not mean ‘giving in’ to the world as it is, or making no attempt to change the world. To the contrary, change is, as noted above, continual. But if we cannot pay attention to what is nearest to hand, cannot appreciate it, cannot learn to love it, we will never know how to make the most of social change when it does come about.

Concluding thoughts

One of Dostoevsky’s defining strengths as a writer is his ability to convey a rich range of human emotions, virtues and vices without resorting to either one-dimensional character portraits or the construction of artificial differences. In The Brothers Karamazov we find anger, frustration, sadness, and despair, but also hope, surprise, wonder, humour, and
joy. The tensions between different emotions and impulses often emerge within characters in Dostoevsky’s novels, and this is particularly true of those in The Brothers Karamazov. Dmitri is torn between the desire to destroy and the will to a certain kind of nobility, pride and grace. He is compulsive, hot-headed and strangely calm – almost serene – by turns. Ivan is a deep thinker who is also driven to the point of madness by his thoughts. Alyosha is gentle, patient and caring, yet he treats Smerdyakov with dismissive indifference. What binds the brothers together, either through its enactment or its absence, is the idea of active love, a notion that has much in common with Iris Murdoch’s concept of attention. Love is a teacher, the book suggests, but it is also a process of struggle. Active, attentive love needs humility and patience, but it also needs constant effort and renewal. In both giving and receiving pedagogical attention, we remain unfinished beings, always with more work to do. As the world around us changes, we need to be ever ready to observe, to reflect, and to act, waiting where necessary, responding as the particulars of a situation demand, and valuing the good we can find in the smallest moments of everyday life.

Notes
1. As one of the reviewers of this article observed, the notion of attention is also an important theme in the work of Nel Noddings. For a discussion of the connections between attention and care in Noddings’ writings, see Gendron (2016).
2. A situational account of love can be helpful in recognising that as we respond to others, we are doing so at a given moment in time, in a specific context. Thus, perceptions of repugnance may differ from one situation to another. Acquiring an understanding of possibilities for different modes of being in different contexts is part of the process of learning to pay attention. I owe this point to one of the reviewers.
3. See also Carr (2010) on the impact of the Internet on the human brain. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for drawing this work to my attention.
4. See further, Bakhtin (1984); Lensmire (1997); Roberts (2005).

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