Professional Love in Early Childhood Education: the experience of Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Love is essential for human psycho-social development, in particular in the early years. Just as the love of parents/care-givers and others in the home setting is vital, there is increasing recognition that love is important for infants, toddlers and young children in early childhood education settings (ECES). However, love demonstrated by teaching professionals continues to be under-researched (Dalli 2005; Page 2017a). As a result, educational policy and practice guidelines are still embryonic, or may not yet exist (Dalli et al 2011; Hughs 2013). This article presents findings from a nation-wide survey of early childhood professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) undertaken in 2020 which explored early childhood teachers’ understandings of professional love in ECES in NZ; the first such survey undertaken. Respondents emphasised that a professional approach to love is important despite many responses indicating love is still viewed as unprofessional by early childhood education (ECE) teachers and managers. A key finding of this research is that understanding the nature of love in ECES is required in order to legitimise professional love and thereby inform policy and practice. Findings from the research suggest a way forward.

Introduction

Love is essential for human psycho-social development, especially in the early years. While the importance of love for children from key caregivers and others in the home setting is well-established, the significance of love in educational contexts, especially in early childhood settings (ECES) is much less understood and still under-researched (Dalli 2005; Page 2017a). As a result, educational policy and practice guidelines incorporating love are still embryonic in many places, or may not yet exist (Dalli et al 2011; Hughs 2013). A nation-wide survey in 2020 of early childhood professionals in NZ explored early childhood teachers’ understandings of professional love in early childhood education settings in NZ and is the first survey to do so.

Internationally, there is no clear definition of the concept of professional love. Page (2018) developed guidelines to identify professional love including developing self-awareness, being able to de-centre and “shift thinking away from one's self”, “emotional intimacy” and “building authentic reciprocal relationships gradually” (p.135). However, no-one has, as yet, developed a universally accepted definition of professional love in ECES. Nevertheless, love is recognised by practitioners and theorists as an important interaction between ECE teachers and infants, toddlers and young children despite limited research on professional love in ECES internationally. Love is an emotional attribute which can be a strategy in forming resilience and ability to cope with change (Whyte 2016) but love remains a difficult concept to define, perhaps because it is an aspect of numerous social settings (not just education). Although researchers have advocated for it over decades (Dalli 2008; Goldstein 1997; Dalli 2011), “the place of love and care in the discourse of teacher professionalism is yet to be determined, love in particular” (Zhang 2019, p.260).
Recent interview-based research in NZ involving 15 ECE experts suggests “that love should not be [considered] part of professionalism” (Zhang 2019, p.266), citing issues with perceptions of mothering, with children not being equally 'lovable' and teacher motivation in relationship with children. As Whyte (2016) suggests, love in education is contentious and disputed. This is true of NZ and this research project also offers important insights for other countries which can be gleaned from the experience in NZ given its bicultural make-up.

Attachment theory informs the research design and methods, framing the discussion. This research project assumes attachment relationships with teachers are secondary, not primary. The primary attachment relationship should ideally be with the primary care-giver (in the child's home) (Garhart-Mooney 2010; Zhang 2019). Teachers and other non-primary care-givers should always be secondary attachments as it is suggested if teachers become the primary attachment figure, then the child’s home-life and emotional/relational development may be compromised. Following this introduction, there is a review of international literature (with a particular focus on ‘Western’ countries).

Background and Literature

A significant amount of research emphasises the importance of love and loving relationships in ECES to enhance child learning. In some countries, however, there is official reluctance to promote love. Page (2012, 2014, 2015) notes that in England “the words 'loving and secure' have been eroded from the recent iterations of the EYFS” and infers that “love no longer has a rightful place in early years practice” (Page 2015). Never-the-less, a wide range of literature emphasises the critical nature of defining effective teacher-child relationships in ECE including how meaningful learning is best facilitated.

As with the English curriculum, ‘love’ as an aspect of teaching is not overtly visible in the NZ national ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki, a bicultural document first published in 1996 in both English and Māori languages (Ministry of Education [MOE]). It is important to note that in NZ (as a bicultural society), the understanding of Māori cultural views and understanding are both acknowledged and considered. However, there still remains differences in cultural understanding. In the ECE curriculum, one example is seen where ‘loving’ is mentioned twice in the English text of Te Whāriki whereas the concept of ‘aroha’ is discussed 17 times in the Māori text (Hughes 2013; Stewart-MacKenzie 2010; Zhang 2019). ‘Aroha’ is a Māori word frequently translated as ‘love’ (Moorfield 2005). Hughes (2013) critiqued “the word love [have] the same emphasis in the English text of Te Whāriki as the word aroha already has in the Maori language section” (p.70). However, the revised edition of Te Whāriki (MOE 2017a) still demonstrates the (in)visibility of ‘love’. In the English language version, ‘love’ is mentioned twice (once in the glossary) and ‘aroha’ seven
This is interesting when one considers the Māori text for ECE, *Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo* (MOE 2017b) which refers to ‘aroha’ 27 times – a 40% increase on the 1996 edition.

In NZ, the ‘distance discourse’ has encouraged ECE and school teachers to ‘keep their distance’ from young children (Collins 2019; Farquhar 2005). This was at its height when the NZ teachers’ union stressed to teachers in a Code of Conduct that “physical contact by staff with children is not encouraged but it is accepted that there will be some circumstances where it will be appropriate” (New Zealand Educational Institute 1996). This appeared to be in response to high profile sexual abuse cases, such as allegations connected to an ECES in Christchurch, NZ in 1991 (Hood 2001). This discourse arguably still influences teacher-child relationships, undermining a healthy, constructive expression of love in education settings.

If there is a difference between ‘care giving’ (nappy changes, meal times) and ‘caring for’ (a focus on relationship) (Brooker 2010; Mitchelmore and Degotard 2017; Zhang 2019), then consideration must be given to what ‘care’ means. As noted by Recchia et al. (2018), “the deep and complex connections between love, care, and education in childcare...have been for the most part overlooked, silenced, or simply ignored” (p.142). To understand these connections, attachment theory and attachment-based relationships in ECE contexts should be explored.

The quality of ongoing attachment-based relationships with teachers directly depends upon the quality of the experiences children have had with those teachers (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Brooker 2010; Christie 2010; Dalli 2005; Dalli et al. 2011; Deans and Bary 2008; Mikaere-Wallis 2012; MOE 2019; Page 2014, 2017b). Quality of experience and relationships are vital, and infants and toddlers look for social referencing cues from those around them (Christie 2010; Deans and Bary 2008; Gonzalez-Mena 2012; Howes and Hamilton 1993; Howes and Smith 1995; Linke and Fleer 2002; Maslow 1943, 1987; Murray and Andrews 2000; Page 2018, 2017b). Love and healthy attachment appear to be inextricably linked (Dalli 2005; Garhart-Mooney 2010; Gerhardt 2014; Lewis et al. 2000; Page 2017b; Robinson 2009) with the attachment process deemed to be the primary way that infants experience love, and learn to give and receive affection (Garhart-Mooney 2010). The positive effects of love, kindness and care on children in ECES are well documented (Burchinal et al 2010; Burchinal et al 2014; Cryer et al 2005; Dalli 2005; Deans and Bary 2008; Finch et al 2015; Gerhardt 2014; Gonzalez-Mena 2012; Linke and Fleer 2002; McLaughlin et al 2015; Pauker et al 2018; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

Although not always a predictor of the quality of the attachment (Ereky-Stevens et al 2018), dyadic sensitivity in the teacher is a key component of healthy attachment-based relationships in ECE (Rachel
Some studies into brain cortisol levels and child stress have focused specifically on the role of secure attachment between the child and teacher (Badanes et al. 2012; Dalli et al. 2011; Perry and Pollard 1998; Shore 1997; Sinnamon 2014). Where the attachment-based relationship was high, child stress was much lower – “a good relationship with a lead teacher may buffer children at child care, and suggest a possible avenue for targeted teacher training.” (Badanes et al. 2012 p.163). From a neurobiological perspective, the teacher-child relationship must begin with an adult who knows the vital impact of a calm environment where trust can be fostered (Dalli et al. 2011; Gerhardt 2014; Hall and Curtin 2016; McCaleb and Mikaere-Wallis 2005; Perry and Pollard 1998; Recchia et al. 2018; Rowley 2016; Shore 1997; Sinnamon 2014; Wallis 2019). However, despite connections between neuroscience, attachment-based relationships and love, and how infants and toddlers learn and grow holistically, teachers still have no definition about what love looks like in practice.

Teacher beliefs and knowledge are important considerations in a learning environment (Berthelsen and Brownlee 2007; Dalli 2005; Entwhistle et al. 2000; Page 2011, 2017b; Richardson 1996; Squires 2004). This includes how beliefs (which teachers arrive with) are biased (based on judgements) and potentially factually inaccurate. Therefore, teacher beliefs about love (and what they have been taught about love) are vital considerations as responsive, intimate, relationship-building experiences are crucial in the care and education of infants and toddlers (Christie 2010; Dalli et al. 2011; Gonzalez-Mena 2012; Howard 2014; Linke and Fleer 2002; Page 2014, 2017a, 2017b; Stewart-MacKenzie 2010). Variables such as teacher education, centre size, resources and poor teacher-child ratios correlated directly to less sensitivity in teachers (Gerber et al. 2007; Pauker et al. 2018). The educational development of children in ECES may be at risk if the settings are unstable (for example, high staff turn-over), if teacher sensitivity is inconsistent (how individual teachers view children), or if the child attends multiple care settings (Ahnert et al. 2006; Garrity et al. 2016; Lang et al. 2016; Linke and Fleer 2002; Page 2014; Pauker et al. 2018; Pilarz and Hill 2014). Continuity of care and minimising change in relationships for infants and toddlers in non-parental care was only beginning to be recognised in research at the turn of the 20th century (Cryer et al. 2005; Howes and Hamilton 1993; Howes and Smith 1995; Zigler and Lang 1991). Ensuring that infants and toddlers in non-parental care experience consistency in their ECE teachers is now seen as ‘best practice’ (Brooker 2010; Christie 2010; Cryer et al. 2005; Dalli et al. 2011; Deans and Bary 2008; Horm et al. 2018; McLaughlin et al. 2015; MOE 2019; Page 2011, 2018; Recchia et al. 2018; Ruprecht et al. 2016; Stewart-MacKenzie 2010; Whyte 2016).

In an infant and toddler ECES, teacher sensitivity (or lack there-of) is perhaps best demonstrated in a practice commonly known as ‘self-soothing’. Although anecdotally associated in NZ with Emmi Pikler (and ‘The Pikler Approach’), ‘self-soothing’ was first coined in 1971 (Anders and Weinstein) to document infants who, after waking, were able to go back to sleep without crying. Although self-soothing has become a way to identify the practice of allowing children to cry themselves to sleep (also known as
controlled crying), Pikler (director of a Hungarian orphanage) would very well be alarmed were she still alive, as she repeated the following sentiment clearly and often in articles and interviews: “So, we have to help the crying infant. We have to try to eliminate the cause of the crying ... we mustn't let [the child] cry desperately” (1982). Pikler's goal was to create resilience in young children using tools such as kindness, gentle hands and voice, and love. Teachers or centres who identify with her work should be mindful and informed as they adapt work in a Hungarian orphanage to current teaching in ECES in NZ (Brownlee 2015; Stewart-MacKenzie 2011, 2012).

A definition of professional love must include an understanding of care, kindness and empathy, focusing on building trusting relationships. According to Loreman (2011), “a pedagogy of love can only occur in an environment in which kindness exists” (p.19) and he urges teachers to develop personal kindness in order to foster kindness in learning environments. One challenge for teachers may be to “shift their thinking in order to intellectualise the experience as a loving caring experience” (Page 2014, p.121). This is directly in relation to understanding what parents want from ECE teachers (Page 2011, 2014). Page (2017a) reviewed international ECES discourses on love (NZ, Hungary, USA and Australia) and suggests that professional love is a useful lens to examine how effective teaching could be reframed. Researchers in NZ developed an excellent framework, attachment-based learning (ABL), to develop a practical application of professional love in practice. ABL drew on the known benefits of secure attachment (Ainsworth et al. 1978), and used the basis of strong attachment as a guide for learning (Bary et al. 2008; Deans and Bary 2008; Massey University 2020). Teachers followed infant and toddler cues and holistic development unfolded naturally; relationships were dyadic in nature, and focused on trust, kindness, responsiveness and empathy (qualities encompassed in the concept of love).

**NZ ECE Teachers' perspectives of professional love**

When exploring perspectives on professional love in NZ, one must consider the history of teacher-child relationships, and draw on seminal research as well as current neuroscience. Most importantly, one must consider the voices of ECE teachers. This was done through an online survey undertaken in March-April 2020.

Of the 24 questions, seven required participant qualification, experience and type of ECS worked in. Ten optional questions sought a word or a phrase in response to the following terms: love; aroha; empathy; self-soothing; confident and capable; controlled crying; Pikler approach; neuroscience; attachment theory; ABL. These terms were chosen based on ECE discourse in ECES and literature in NZ.
The 18th question, “Do you love any of the children in your care?” required a yes/no response. If ‘yes’, there were four sub-questions exploring whether love was viewed as acceptable by various people in the ECES. If participants answered ‘no’, they skipped to the last questions. These two questions (optional) asked participants to consider links between being loved between birth and 5 years of age and success in curriculum learning (for example, literacy, numeracy, science concepts), and to brain growth and development (for example, reasoning, empathy, memory). These questions were based on literature validating the connection between love/care and positive outcomes in infant, toddlers and young children's holistic learning and development.

Using inductive content analysis (Gläser-Zikuda et al. 2020), responses to open-ended questions were categorised and grouped into themes. Two assistants (both with education backgrounds, one ECE, one Primary) reviewed the responses and verified major themes; differences in opinion were resolved by discussion.

Participants were ECE professionals comprising ECE teachers (qualified, student, unqualified) and managers of ECES. Emails (sent to ECES) and social media (Facebook ECE groups) were used to distribute information about the survey to enable participation.

**Results**

One hundred and eighty responses were received. Ninety percent of participants were working in ECE at the time of the survey (Fig. 1). Of these, 66% were working in ECES licensed for infants and toddlers.

In terms of qualifications, a teaching degree in ECE was held by 33% of participants. However, a Bachelor degree is the ‘gold standard’ in NZ. If the 180 are representative of teachers in NZ, it is of concern that half of participants only have an ECE Diploma (27%) or have no qualification at all (23%). Thirty percent of participants in the ‘untrained’ category were student teachers enrolled in degree courses.

Respondents time (in years) working in the ECE was fairly even (Fig. 2). This indicates a healthy ECE sector with experienced teachers and beginning teachers working together.

When asked to identify two-three words connected with ‘love’ and with ‘aroha’, a total of 111 words were identified. Table 1 lists the 15 most common words. These provide an understanding to participants’ subsequent answers as well as guidance in understanding and perhaps defining what professional love might look like.
Table 1
Word connected to aroha and/or love

| Word connected to aroha or love or both | Aroha | Love | Total |
|----------------------------------------|-------|------|-------|
| affection                              | 11    | 23   | 34    |
| authenticity / authentic / genuine     | 5     | 7    | 12    |
| care/caring                            | 38    | 63   | 101   |
| comfort                                | 4     | 8    | 12    |
| compassion                             | 6     | 9    | 15    |
| connection                             | 27    | 11   | 38    |
| cuddles / hugs / hugs & kisses / embrace /action | 18   | 29   | 47    |
| empathy                                | 6     | 13   | 19    |
| full attention / attentiveness / responsive | 5   | 12   | 17    |
| happiness                              | 3     | 12   | 15    |
| kindness                               | 14    | 19   | 33    |
| love /loving                           | 88    | 1    | 89    |
| nurturing / nurture                    | 10    | 20   | 30    |
| relationship/s                         | 9     | 20   | 29    |
| respect                                | 15    | 20   | 35    |

When considering responses to 'love', participant theoretical knowledge of seminal works by Bowlby and Ainsworth (Attachment Theory) is important. Figure 3 shows that 17% of survey respondents had not heard of attachment theory (or did not remember much). A further 14% named a key word, or confused the theory with the work of Harry Harlow or Abraham Maslow. Just under half of respondents appeared to have a good understanding of the theory or its application in an ECES.

Respondents were also asked about their knowledge of Attachment-Based Learning (ABL), a teaching strategy influenced by Attachment Theory with specific application to infant and toddler ECES. Sixty-two percent of respondents had either not heard of ABL or had heard of it but did not know much about it. Although 38% did have a little knowledge, only 16% of respondents had detailed understanding about ABL, for example: “The relationships [with two key teachers] becomes very strong and children learn to trust that their needs will be responded to.”.

In response to: 'When you hear the term ‘the Pikler Approach’, what comes to mind?' almost three quarters of respondents indicated they knew about or had heard of Emmi Pikler (Fig. 4). Some described her work and ideas. Some described the 'Pikler Approach' as a way of teaching in ECE settings: “Freedom. Pikler
makes me think there is trust for children to explore with minimal adult interruption." Very few respondents evaluated 'The Pikler Approach', but comments such as "Another controlled kind of education" and "People swallowing ideas whole without unpacking it into their context... parts of this approach that have huge benefits for infants and toddlers but others that do not fit comfortably alongside Te Whāriki" suggest that there is some critique of this approach by ECE teachers in NZ.

Those who answered: ‘When you think about ‘self-soothing’, what comes to mind?’ fell into three groups. Just over a quarter left general comments (an attempt at a coping strategy, such as thumb-sucking or holding a comforter). Just under a quarter associated self-soothing as something gentle and supported by adults, for example, “Feeling secure and loved enough to trust that ‘I am okay, and I can do this, and even if I can't, there is help there for me when I need it.’” Thirty-nine percent of respondents felt it was a negative strategy, often describing actions they had witnessed in ECES.

Some respondents had never heard of ‘controlled crying’, with one stating, “I've never heard that term before. To be honest it sounds cruel - who tells you when you can or cannot cry?”. This is perhaps understandable as it tends to be used by ‘sleep experts’ for parents trying to change children's sleep patterns. Less than a quarter of respondents understood the strategy; “leaving a child to cry for a period of time before you go and attend to them. Let this period of time get longer so the child become used to it.” However, nearly half of respondents were alarmed by this, and it was clear from some answers that controlled crying occurs in ECES in NZ with one respondent writing; “Neglect of a child's right to comfort, by teachers who assume they must learn to self soothe”.

Nearly one third of respondents felt they were not supposed to love children in their care in ECES (Fig. 5), but some questioned this feeling “How can you be an infant toddler teacher giving of yourself on every plane - physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually - if you don't love them??” Comments such as “I have been told by parents ... that they feel safe leaving their child in the centre because they can tell the teachers love their child” are representative of the relationship expectations by family of ECE teachers.

When respondents reflected on teams, love was again seen as acceptable ('ok') “…it is a different type of love. We care for, protect, nurture, and support these children. We understand what it is like to share these attachments with the children” and less than 10% of respondents believed love was unacceptable in their teams. (Fig. 5)

Almost 90% of participants answered the question, “When you hear someone mention neuroscience, what comes to mind?” Over two-thirds answered “brain” or “brain development”. The Brainwave Trust (NZ organisation dedicated to brain development) was frequently mentioned, with one quarter of the answers connecting neuroscience to children's learning. Fewer than 6% of the answers made a connection between love and neuroscience.

The last questions explored the connection between: love and children's success in curriculum learning (such as literacy and numeracy); love and children's brain growth and emotional development (for example, development of reasoning, empathy, memory); love and children's overall competence. Although
only one respondent believed love had nothing to do healthy brain development, over eighty percent outlined in detail how love and brain development (including emotional competence) were linked: “We... know our brain works better when we are happy. A lack of dopamine and serotonin causes depression and sadness and means our brain is unable to fully function. Love is a chemical composition in our brain... Love is a positive response [and] supports a healthy brain.”

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine factors influencing ECE teacher understanding of love in the professional context of their work. A high proportion of respondents were already enthusiastic about the idea of professional love. How to obtain the view of those who are less keen or see professional love as unprofessional is something to be considered in further research.

Of the 16 qualitative questions, the results regarding attachment theory are of greatest concern as the researcher believes that all teachers should have an understanding of Bowlby and Ainsworth’s seminal works (including validation now found in neuroscience). Bowlby wanted to understand love between a mother and child, developing his ethological theory of love, while Ainsworth worked with his ideas, developing understanding of attachment-based relationships. However, almost a third of the respondents did not understand in depth, or at all, this important theoretical approach to relationship-building when working with infants and toddlers (Fig. 3). Less than half of the respondents appeared to have any depth of understanding of attachment theory, and/or its application in ECES. It is therefore unsurprising that attachment-based learning (ABL), an innovative teaching strategy using attachment theory in NZ ECES is also unfamiliar (Bary et al. 2008; Deans and Bary, 2008). ABL focuses teachers on developing trusting relationships with children, ensuring that secondary attachments (with teachers) can grow.

Neuroscience is worth consideration as how a child’s brain works and responds to environments, especially in the context of relationships is well documented (Mikaere-Wallis 2012; Perry and Pollard 1998; Perry and Szalavitz 2007; Perry 2006; Sinnamon 2014; Wallis 2017). Strong dyadic relationships (built in ECES through secondary attachment relationships) provide real opportunity for optimal growth, learning and development. Most participants knew of neuroscience with a quarter of the answers clearly connecting the importance of supportive, positive learning environments built with strong, positive teacher-child relationships and optimal outcomes for brain development. Associating neuroscience research and teacher responsibility was clear, with the perceived connection between love, neuroscience and learning explicit in some comments: “Links between loving care and brain development research, growing healthy minds, nurturance, relationships” and “Attachments, responsiveness, brain development, even in ECE love shapes brains”.

While the Pikler Approach was familiar to most respondents (Fig. 4), only one respondent mentioned resilience in their comments. Resilience is integral to Pikler's work. As director of Loczy Orphanage (for children from birth to seven years old), time was limited to instil a strong ‘sense of self’ in children - to be resilient. Therefore, one of the objectives at the orphanage was to encourage children's understanding of
resolving problems independently. This meant sometimes children cried a little bit before being attended to by their nurse, but it was never intended that children were left to cry until they stopped crying, or cry until they became distraught. The lack of connection to resilience highlights a distinct lack of knowledge and understanding to this approach. Combined with the inaccurate attribution and interpretation of ‘self-soothing’, it is apparent from this research project professional development and learning opportunities are urgently needed: Pikler stated quite clearly in interviews, essays and articles that one must never, ever leave an infant to cry, and that resilience is built with loving support and encouragement.

Although some respondents identified behaviours associated with self-soothing (such as cuddling a soft toy), the researcher was alarmed by some descriptions such as, "A baby being left ALL ALONE !!! to cry it out to sleep": ‘alarmed’ not because of very young children being left alone, but because this infers that in some ECES it is a common and/or unchallenged practice to leave infants and toddlers distressed and alone. One respondent was quite specific: “Everyone gets upset and needs space to figure out they are resilient - but I don’t like the framing of selfsoothing and how I’ve seen it used with an almost militant action.” This suggests some teachers interpret Pikler’s gentle, respectful approach as a potentially harmful action children must go through if they need sleep ECES.

‘Controlled crying’ describes a strategy parents employ when changing a child’s sleep habits, for example, to get their child to sleep through the night. One question focused on this as ‘controlled crying’ is very similar to the ECES strategy (sometimes) employed called self-soothing. Many respondents had just described ‘controlled crying’ when they answered the previous question about self-soothing. Some who thought self-soothing was acceptable were against controlled crying, and vice versa. However, there were only four explicit references to the same or similar strategy being used in either approach, so it could be assumed most of the respondents did not make the connection.

When respondents were asked if they were ‘not supposed to love’ children in their care, nearly one third of respondents reported feeling this. Detailed responses were given: “… the managers asked we take the word love out of our philosophy because love is between a child and their family. Not a child and teacher” and “When I began in ece love felt like a dirty unprofessional word.” Literature supports this type of response, as teachers often feel any display of affection may be construed as unprofessional. However theory (such as neuroscience) is very clear about the importance of caring relationships in the early years, and the biological and social impact such relationships have on young children's learning and development. What needs clarification is what ‘care’ looks like in these centres. Is the term ‘love’ problematic? Statements such as: “I've felt judged for responding to a child's cries where staff have asked to ignore or disengage from the child's behaviour” suggests that care for a child may be affected if ECE staff are not permitted the emotional response of love.

The survey results show that there is a degree of discomfort with the idea that it is acceptable to love children (over half saying it is not appropriate). However, a significantly greater number (75%) indicated that they felt the families of their ECES communities were ‘ok’ with teachers loving children and the same percentage believed that their team felt it was acceptable to love children. A similar number (74%)}
indicated that head teachers, managers and team leaders believed love had a place (Fig. 5). “Our head teacher and manager are just as passionate and full of love to share as we are.” Of the 151 people who responded to the question, 134 felt that the team leaders and managers are supportive of love being part of teacher strategy. Zhang (2019) identifies that many education experts suggest a clear lack of definition regarding love, and what it looks like as a teaching strategy, identifying “a diverse nomenclature for love in teaching (e.g., ‘teacherly love’, ‘professional love’, and ‘pedagogical love’)” (p.265). In 2005, Dalli encouraged the NZ government to place “love for children at the centre of … practice” (p.165) and, in 2006, entreated the ECE sector to “revision” love and care into a discourse of ECE professionalism (p.11). Zhang notes that there “has not been substantive response to the proposal; that is, after one decade, it is still unclear what the revisioned love looks like” (p.267). In 2013, Hughs identified that “research into an agreed definition of teaching with love” (p.80) in ECE in NZ was needed, including the “presence or absence of the interwoven nature of love in the [NZ] curriculum”. This discrepancy between respondents’ own willingness to declare it is OK to love children and the wider acceptability of love in the ECES is intriguing and needs further exploration in future research. It is possible that respondents’ ambivalence about saying it is OK to love children reflects the ‘distance discourse’ discussed earlier.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the place of love in ECES from the perspective of ECE professionals with the goal of informing guidelines for a definition of professional love. Despite concern or ambivalence that love is unprofessional, the study found consensus amongst ECE teachers: that loving children is vital to who they are as teachers. However, there is a gap between teacher beliefs and behaviour, and a way to describe these beliefs and behaviours. For decades, there has been discussion and research into love in education contexts. Yet the need to define professional love, contextualised in ECE, is still paramount.

This study has confirmed and validated the voices of ECE teachers, placing the importance of love alongside the notion of ‘education and care’ for infants, toddlers and young children. There is a need for those in the ECE sector to be informed by relevant and current theory and research. Developing a definition of professional love may be a way to achieve this. Zhang (2019) suggests there is a “misconception that personal characteristics such as care and love are not teachable [but] researchers have provided evidence of the opposite” (p.269) explaining that “the currently unspoken approach to love needs to be articulated so that it can be scrutinized and adjusted”.

The NZ survey data adds to the significant empirical evidence supporting the importance of love in ECES. Building on this empirical base, it is now a priority for ECE policy makers to develop policy and guidelines on professional love in ECE settings. It must be recognised that love as a teaching strategy in ECE is unique, specific, supported by social science and biological theory. This research has demonstrated the tensions currently existing between what is acceptable for ECE teachers to say, and their own personal recognition of, and that of the wider ECE community (managers, families) about the importance of love.

**Abbreviations**
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Data availability

Data (anonymised) is available from the author on reasonable request in compliance with the ethics approval.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicting interest.

Ethics approval for the research project “Situating Professional Love: What does Professional Love mean in EC Settings in Aotearoa New Zealand?” was approved by the Research Ethics and Approvals Committee, EIT Hawkes Bay in 2019. Research Reference ID : Ref19/31.

Consent: All invited participants were informed about the research - including a description of participation, the benefits and risks of participation, confidentiality and anonymity. They were also given a consent form that outlined the ability to withdraw from the study, including information and the understanding that all information shared would remain confidential.

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**Figures**

**Figure 1**

Current work-place of respondents.

**Figure 2**

Experience in ECES
Figure 3

Respondents' knowledge of Attachment Theory.

did not answer 20%
never heard of it 2%
description of Bowlby and/or Ainsworth's work 28%
have heard of it but don't remember much 15%
described theory in ECE context 21%
1-2 key words or confused with another theory 14%
critiqued use of Pikler's ideas in ECE 5%
description of Pikler's work 41%
wrote 'don't know' or 'not sure'...
description of application in ECE 30%

Figure 4

Respondents knowledge of 'The Pikler Approach'.

| Question                                    | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------|------------|
| Do you feel its seen as 'not ok'?           | 20%        |
| Do family think its ok?                     | 80%        |
| Do other teachers think its ok?             | 80%        |
| Do managers think its ok?                   | 80%        |

- Its not 'ok'
- Its 'ok'
- Skipped
Figure 5

How love (and loving children) is perceived.