



FOCUS ON LOVE

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*Love makes
your soul
crawl out
from its
hiding place.*

—Zora Neale Hurston

- **Professional Love—The Heart of Our Work**
by Carol Garboden Murray
- **Bringing Love to the Young Children in Your Care**
by John Surr
- **Loving Care for Infants and Their Families**
by Heather Fox
- **The Science of Love in Early Care and Education**
by Laura A. Jana
- **What's Love Got to Do With It?**
by Amy David

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Professional Love

The Heart of Our Work

by Carol Garboden Murray

“Love is the very foundation of relationships and of ethical encounters with and through the other.”

—Lynda Stone

Dr. Jools Page, from the University of Brighton, United Kingdom, has drawn upon the work of care theorist Nel Noddings to develop the concept of professional love. Page researches the intimacies that arise in early education settings and seeks to legitimize love at the foundation of early childhood education and care practices (Langford, 2019). Page attests that teachers are relieved that research on love is at last being conducted, because in the past, love has not been associated with professionalizing the field, even though research has confirmed that loving relationships are essential to developing identity and empathy in young children.

A Parent’s Perspective on Professional Love

A parent described this scene of dropping off her 3-year-old daughter at school last week.

“I walk up to the center with a knot in my stomach. My daughter is clinging. I am late for work. Everything about the morning has been hard and emotional. I know separation will be bad. I am bracing myself as I approach the front door with my daughter’s arms and legs wrapped around me. I feel embarrassed. I think, she’s a preschooler and she should be walking into school independently. The teacher approaches us and puts one of her hands on my shoulder and the other hand on my daughter’s back. With her touch, we both relax. As I transfer my daughter to her, I feel we are all three connected. My daughter’s arms and

legs wrap just as tightly around her teacher now as they had been around me only a few seconds earlier. I am in awe that it went smoothly, and that the teacher received us both with love. This moment changes everything about the rest of my day.”

Professional Love Is Not Surrogate Parenting

I remember my first few years teaching preschool, when I cried at the end of the year while saying goodbye to the children with whom I had formed deep relationships. A more mature colleague told me that I was too attached, and explained that I needed to develop stronger boundaries to be a professional, and most importantly, that I should never mistake myself for a surrogate mom. As I reflect, I see how that conversation exemplifies some of the misconceptions that are prevalent in our field about the secure bonds we form with children. The idea exists that if we love children, we are acting like their parents, not their teachers. In his article *Farewell to Childcare* (2006), Robert Moss explains that the concept of teachers and caregivers acting as substitute mothers is inadequate. He promotes an alternative view of early education, which names intimacy and care as an essential pedagogy and as inseparable from learning. The relationships we form with children are different than the ones they have at home. Professional love for a child, which is rooted in attachment theory, is not a substitute for parenting. The seed of our best practices grows from an understanding of the significance of attachment at the beginning of life.

Professional Love Is Rooted in Attachment Theory

Page describes the dynamic relationship between child-parent-teacher as a triangle of love, which is complementary to the parent-child relationship (Page & Elfer, 2013). Page’s evidence is that parents value teachers’ love of and intimacy with their children (Page, 2011). Parents do not feel threat-



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ened or replaced; instead, they feel admiration, connection, and gratitude to those teachers who love their children.

As early childhood educators, we understand that a powerful element of our work with children is in supporting their own reciprocal capacity for love and belonging. At the beginning of the day, we open our arms to receive children directly from the arms of their parents. At the end of the day, we hold children on our laps as we prepare for pick-up. All day long, we help children form mental images of their families. We conjure their attachment and we amplify their love when we say, “Mommy will be here soon, I imagine she is getting her keys and walking to her car now, and I bet she is thinking about how good it will be to hug you when she sees you.” To be a part of this vital attachment is a wonderful privilege and, arguably, one of the most important aspects of our professional roles.

Why Is It Challenging to Name Love as a Professional Value?

Since our society has traditionally held a narrow view of love as a feminine quality, and has linked love of children with maternal instincts, it has been difficult to name love as a professional educational value. Because love is thought to be domestic and natural, it is considered a private matter, rather than part of the public or professional realm. Love has been sentimental and idealized as well, and so we worry that if we describe the love we feel, we will give the impression that our educational practice is always sweet, rosy and easy—when in fact, what we experience when we build authentic, secure relationships with children is a deep knowing, and a serious, messy, joyful, challenging, sort of grappling with the complex issues of human care.

Although there has been a belief that it is dangerous to use words like care and love in our vocation, because we will not be taken seriously, it is time to change the paradigm that claims love is gendered, soft, easy, and/or unprofessional. The philosophy of feminist care ethics has given us a framework to reconceptualize the purpose of education. Carol Gilligan, one of our care ethics pioneers, asks us not to deny or resist connections, care, and love, but instead to resist the patriarchy that seeks to deny us the very capacities that make us human. We have been told that love is a soft skill, when we know without a doubt, from the evidence about responsive caregiving, that loving care is the key ingredient of human strength and thriving. Care ethics gives us rationale to reassert the virtues of relationships and interdependency

that have in the past been invisible, unnamed, and unmeasurable.

Our work is intimate, because our encounters with children are wrapped up in the rituals of care. Caregiving is not only a physical interaction, but it is an intellectual and heart connection too. How can we spend hour after hour, day after day, week after week changing children’s diapers, feeding them lunch, and rocking them to sleep, without falling in love with them? If we did not love, we would be treating care as custodial at best, and as drudgery at worst. As Allison Gopnik says in her book “The Philosophical Baby,” “It is not so much that we care for children because we love them, as that we love them because we’ve cared for them.”

How do we name this powerful, intimate, foundational work? We can call it relationship-based learning. We can call it attachment-informed education. We can call it the pedagogy and practice of care. We can call it professional love. When we illuminate the significance of caring rituals as encounters that build secure attachments, we name loving relationships as educational practices. There is increasing evidence that the capacity for empathy, compassion, and love is like a muscle that can grow (Taggart, 2016). This frees us from the notion that love is only natural or instinctual, and allows us to consider the practices, methods, and dispositions of love that can be cultivated professionally.

Naming Professional Love Can Root Us In an Educational Philosophy of Care Ethics

A far greater danger exists in our field than the threat of appearing unprofessional by talking about love. The threat of not naming and valuing love may pose severe consequences to the secure relationships that are essential for our youngest citizens. As Geoff Taggart argues, “We are in danger of producing practitioners who do not value or understand the complexity of their own care simply because universities find it difficult to measure this.”

I think of myself as a young teacher who let myself love children, but did not know how to name professional love, and at times felt confused or worried about expectations of professional behavior. I wonder how the conversation with my mature colleague who was concerned about my expressed love of children would have been different, if we had known the term professional love. Those three topics my colleague talked with me about—boundaries, professionalism, and surrogate parenting—are still important conversation starters, but I imagine they could take us in new directions.

Now, I might ask my younger self, and the teachers that I have the opportunity to mentor in the future, these sorts of questions:

- Can you tell me about a child you have loved?
- What is the difference between boundaries and detachment?
- How are teaching and parenting different?
- How do we name and value the human emotions we experience in this intimate work?

As we begin to examine professional love, I hope we will lean upon care ethics as a robust educational philosophy. Care ethics can also be thought of as relational ethics, or the ethics of encountering the other. These theories give us fertile terrain for exploring the complexities of emotions we experience with children in the secure relationships that sit in the heart of our work. Care ethicists have described the early years as the incubator for the virtues of relationship, such as empathy, care, and love, from which grows a moral citizen and a strong democracy. I believe that many of the answers we seek as an evolving society and as developing people can be found in that nucleus of care, at the beginning of life. Our potential as a human race can be modeled by the way we love our babies and toddlers.

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*The best and most beautiful things
in the world cannot be seen nor even
touched, but just felt in the heart.*

—Helen Keller