

Early years: what's professional love got to do with it?

Morgan, John

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Sensitivities about contact between caregivers and children means this is a difficult question, but research shows expressions of care and affection in non-familial settings can be hugely beneficial to children, writes John Morgan. There is a "significant gap in the English early years system" – and that gap is where "the places of love, care and intimacy" should sit. The first point to make is that Page is not just coming at this issue from a theoretical perspective: she switched into academia following a 30-year career in early years policy and practice that included roles as a nanny, a day care centre manager and as senior policy adviser for under-threes at a local authority. [...]Page has been working with education researchers at the University of Huddersfield, who are looking at whether professional love could be relevant for older children from the most challenging backgrounds, examining data on what young people want in their relationships.

FULL TEXT

How should an early years professional respond when a child wants a hug? Sensitivities about contact between caregivers and children means this is a difficult question, but research shows expressions of care and affection in non-familial settings can be hugely beneficial to children, writes John Morgan

There is a "significant gap in the English early years system" –and that gap is where "the places of love, care and intimacy" should sit.

So runs the influential argument put forward in research by Jools Page, senior early years lecturer at the University of Brighton, who has coined the term "professional love" to describe the "enduring and close relational attachment" that can be formed between early years professionals and children in their care.

Only when children feel secure in their relationships will they be set up to learn, she argues. So early years professionals must show the children in their care that "regardless of their circumstances, everyone born into this world is worthy of being loved just for who they are –not because of something they have to do in order to earn that," she says.

So what, exactly, is "professional love" and how could early years professionals –in nursery schools, preschools and other settings –express it to the benefit of children?

The first point to make is that Page is not just coming at this issue from a theoretical perspective: she switched into academia following a 30-year career in early years policy and practice that included roles as a nanny, a day care centre manager and as senior policy adviser for under-threes at a local authority.

She says in these roles she was often "applying this notion of professional love long before I ever came up with the terminology for it".

Page began to arrive at that terminology in research within a PhD thesis at the University of Sheffield, completed in 2010, examining what mothers were looking for when they made decisions about childcare arrangements for babies under a year old. Her thesis found that mothers wanted early years professionals to have a "deep and meaningful" relationship with their children that "didn't take away from the love between the parent and the child but actually complemented it".

That led on to a 2015 project led by Page while she was a lecturer in early childhood education at Sheffield. The

professional love in early years settings (PLEYS) research project aimed to investigate how early years professionals “can safely express the affectionate and caring behaviours which their role demands of them”. PLEYS included a survey of staff in the field that Page says “seemed to open up the floodgates” among early years professionals.

“Everybody wanted to talk about it, because it’s something that really matters to people,” she says.

What the project found was that early years professionals “were able to articulate their understanding of love and affection in non-familial settings” but “what they were lacking was confidence” in that concept, as many “were fearful about being falsely accused of child abuse”.

Page’s research began at a particularly difficult time in early years education: the period after the nation was shocked by the crimes committed by nursery worker Vanessa George in Plymouth, who sexually abused children in her care and who was jailed in 2009.

Continuing sensitivities around contact between early years professionals and children in their care means they are constantly confronted with difficult questions in their day-to-day working lives: how to respond when a child wants a hug? What to say when a child says, “I love you” ?

How far was this negatively impacting the care EYFS teacher felt they could provide in their settings?

What is love?

Page published a paper in 2018 to address this issue. It put forward a model for early years practitioners to follow in “thinking about professional love”, involving them thinking about the needs of the child, as well as forming a “reciprocal relationship” with child and parent.

It detailed how early years practitioners needed an opportunity to do some “deep level thinking before acting”, providing opportunities to “theorise notions of love” and to “make sense of it pedagogically” in a very different way to the more instinctive love shown by a parent.

She adds that it needs to “sit alongside ...all of those really important child protection policies and safeguarding practices”.

What did settings do as a result of having that space to think about what love should look like? In response to the concept, “some settings have been able to come up with a policy around cuddling and so on where they didn’t have one before, because they have been able to feel braver about having these conversations,” continues Page.

What might a policy that takes professional love into account look like?

“I suppose my question for early years practitioners to reflect upon is: why would they refuse a child who wants a hug?” says Page. For some children, a hug “may not be the most appropriate thing to do” –and if this is the case, there are other ways to “show a child they are loved and worthy of being loved: a smile, an acknowledgment ...using kind words, kind gestures”.

“Each child will be different and each set of circumstances will be different,” she adds.

Similar actions or concepts of professional love would need to be talked through in each setting in a similar way. Page’s work has drawn on thinkers such as John Bowlby, whose attachment theory held that children must form bonds with caregivers to form normal emotional relationships, and Nel Noddings’ ethics of care, which also stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships for development.

What she is asking, though, is not easy. She emphasises that, for practitioners, being able to apply her model of professional love demands both “emotional resilience” and “intellectual capacity”. As such, her research has implications for early years recruitment and training.

While emphasising that she has a “huge amount of respect for those who are working in early years”, she also says that we “have to have the best people working with our youngest citizens –in my experience, that’s not always the case”.

Despite the challenges, there has been national and international interest in the concept of professional love among academic education researchers. When Page guest edited a special issue for the International Journal of Early Years Education, on “love, care and intimacy in early childhood education and care”, there were 50 abstracts submitted for the six article slots.

Meanwhile, Page has been working with education researchers at the University of Huddersfield, who are looking at whether professional love could be relevant for older children from the most challenging backgrounds, examining data on what young people want in their relationships.

“Strangely enough, they want to be loved,” says Page, of what has emerged from that research to date.

There has been interest in her work in Scotland, where there is a “really big movement ...looking at [addressing] the effect of children’s adverse experiences”, she says. And she is “in discussions with colleagues at the University of Brighton about how to take those ideas [on professional love] forward to politicians”.

Given the consensus showing that emotional relationships are integral to children’s development, policymakers “need to bring that into practice”, Page argues.

That will bring its own challenges, but the central message of her work is clear: she wants to banish the “sad myth that love and care of other people’s children is easy and is of less importance than education” and to counter the view that in education, caring is somehow separate to, and less significant than, cognition.

John Morgan is a freelance writer

This article originally appeared in the 1 May 2020 issue under the headline “Tes focus on...Professional love”

DETAILS

Subject:	Professionals; Caregivers; Early childhood education; Child development; Educational psychology; Love; Student teacher relationship
Company / organization:	Name: University of Brighton; NAICS: 611310
Publication title:	The Times Educational Supplement; London
Publication year:	2020
Publication date:	May 1, 2020
Section:	News
Publisher:	TES Global Limited
Place of publication:	London
Country of publication:	United Kingdom, London
Publication subject:	Education
ISSN:	00407887
Source type:	Trade Journal
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2395465900

Document URL: https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/early-years-what-s-professional-love-got-do-with/docview/2395465900/se-2?accountid=130472

Copyright: Copyright TES Global Limited May 1, 2020

Last updated: 2020-04-30

Database: ProQuest Central

LINKS

Database copyright © 2023 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)