

## University of Dundee

### Editorial

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## Editorial

**Mark Smith**

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Ten years ago it would have been highly unlikely to be publishing a journal issue on a theme of love in the context of children in out of home care. It would have been considered just too left field, dangerous even, in a context of intense anxiety over child abuse. That wider climate has not changed significantly and, if anything, has become more fevered on the back of the Jimmy Savile<sup>1</sup> case. What has changed, though, is that sufficient numbers of practitioners, care leavers and academics are developing the confidence to say what is patently obvious to them, both experientially and conceptually - that love is an inevitable feature of child and youth care and is generally a positive one. Jennifer Vincent's article, which opens this issue, highlights that the importance of love in direct care and educational contexts is recognised and robustly articulated across a range of people professions. Keith White, in the following article, makes the case that someone must use the word love responsibly and healthily in relation to children.

So, I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to edit this special joint issue of the Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care and the International Journal of Social Pedagogy, and to open up responsible and healthy discussion about love. The interest in the issue and the range and quality of the contributions to it are testament to the timeliness of academics and practitioners opening up this subject to discussion and debate. It is a discussion that is global in its scope – we have articles from Canada, the United States, Norway, the Philippines and New Zealand as well as a crop of more home grown contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Jimmy Savile (1926-2011) was an English television and radio personality who at the time of his death had been lauded for his charitable work. Subsequently, claims emerged that Savile was a paedophile whose charitable work provided access to children. This case, and others, led to the setting up of an independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England.

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Having said this, the topic can still elicit some discomfort; my own wife and kids laughed when they heard I was involved in anything to do with 'love', as I knew they would. Personally, I don't 'do' love in any demonstrative way. I haven't really told my family that I love them, at least not since they were of an age to understand what I was saying. It's daft, I know, but I still get embarrassed by saying or writing 'love you'. In fact, I even feel a bit uncomfortable when I hear other people saying it. This embarrassment around certain aspects of love isn't just mine but extends to wider professional communities; as Keith White notes, John Bowlby considered the term insufficiently scientific and, having in his earlier writing used the term love, he went on to replace it with the term attachment, with its far more psychological feel. This has had profound implications for how we approach relationships in child care, removing from that discourse the vocabulary of love with all its emotional messiness and opting instead for 'attachment', with its lustre of scientific and 'professional' objectivity.

Although I may not do love in any sentimental sort of way, I, nevertheless, take it for granted that love is and ought to be at the heart of just about everything I do. I don't consider myself to be particularly religious but was brought up a Catholic and continue to be guided by some tenets of that tradition – 'Do you love me – feed my sheep, take care of my lambs!!' Even in a largely post religious world that command to love is still a powerful one.

At another level, I began to discover philosophical perspectives that would support what we might legitimately think of as love, what Scottish Enlightenment philosophers identify as an innate sympathy that predisposes human beings to reach out to the other (see Hearn, 2016). More contemporary philosophers, such as Emmanuel Levinas, suggest that we are drawn to 'the face' of the other, while the great Scottish philosopher John MacMurray tells us that caring relationships do not derive from a sense of duty but can only emerge through an ethic of love. Such high level ideals are brought down to a practice level by Herman Nohl, one of the founding fathers of social pedagogy. Nohl characterises the task of bringing up children as involving 'the loving relationship of a mature person with a 'developing' person, entered into for the sake of the child so that he (sic) can discover his own life and form' (cited in Spiecker, 1984, pp. 203-204), a statement that calls us to consider the responsibility that a loving relationship involves; it is not, in a professional context, an equal relationship; it is entered into for the sake of the child. This does not preclude reciprocal feelings but it does demand a regular checking in with self around who and what a relationship is for.

A Christian, or perhaps just a human, command to love recognises that love involves doing something – a point that Jennifer Vincent's article also picks up. The Good Samaritan did not just throw a couple of coins to the man he found by the roadside but responded in a personal, tending way, which may have been frowned upon by others. He demonstrated one aspect of love, what the Greeks

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would call agape, or compassionate love. This quality of agape features in several of the contributions to this issue. The idea of love being expressed through a sort of call and response, reaching out in practical and symbolic ways, is also captured in Ruth Emond's article, 'More than Just a Bracelet'.

The command to love also operates at another level. When sheep aren't being fed, when lambs aren't cared for, then love ought to be expressed in anger, what the great Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, calls an armed love that calls us to announce and denounce. Hans Skott Myhre and his colleagues draw on a range of post-structuralist thinkers to consider the place that a radical love might have in a capitalist world that struggles to accommodate love within its lexicon or rationale.

So, when, around 12 years ago, in teaching students on the MSc in Residential Child Care at the University of Strathclyde, I first began to raise the possibility of love being a feature of child and youth care/social pedagogy, it had a sound personal and philosophical basis. But I knew that it wasn't that simple; particular cultural and emotional scripts are at play which act as a disincentive to raise the existence of love or even its possibility in child care settings. Yet, having mentioned it, I quickly realised that I was not alone – others plucked up the courage to say that love featured in their approach to looking after children. In fact, over the past 10 years or so, an acknowledgement of the place of love in care has become commonplace. In fact, so commonplace that it started to make me a bit uncomfortable again. Having identified an absence of love in care, it can be an easy next step to draw the simplistic conclusion that if only we loved kids then all would be well. Such a lazy understanding of love has a tendency to sentimentalise it and to downplay its complexity, its duplicity even. I remember a similar superficiality around 30 years ago when we became aware of children's rights and began to think that rights-based approaches were the answer to all of the problems in children's care. I would argue that a simplistic and overly enthusiastic application of rights-based approaches actually became part of the problem, which made love, or even just everyday relationships with children, more difficult. I am reminded, again, of the Jonathan Hearn article I cited earlier. In it he concludes that sentiment needs to be augmented by structural concerns for justice – love on its own is not enough.

Putting to one side anxieties around the level at which some people may latch onto the re-emergence of love, there is no doubt that it is back on the child care agenda. Indeed, some jurisdictions, notably Norway and New Zealand, have gone so far as to include the word love or some conception of it in legislation. This has led to debate in these countries and I am delighted to include articles from three Scandinavian scholars, reflecting different perspectives on that debate. Hilde Marie Thrana's article is grounded in the work of the German social theorist, Axel Honneth, who identifies qualities of love, rights and solidarity as central to the experience of recognition as a human being. Mette

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Lausten also picks up on the growing interest in Honneth's work in her article 'Do you love me? An empirical analysis of the feeling of being loved among children in out-of-home care'. Cecilie Basberg Neumann draws on debates in feminist ethics of care to consider the implications of the recent legislation in terms of an expectation to love as potentially devaluing professional care work.

Of course, there is a conceptual difficulty in seeking to mandate that we love children; some of those we are called to love may not be particularly likeable. We cannot just set that reality aside. This is as unrealistic as the expectation that we do not love them at all. Love may encompass a whole range of emotions, some of which do not even equate with liking; emotions that may make us feel angry, guilty, helpless... To suggest that this is not the case or that these feelings can somehow be bracketed off and hidden behind a veneer of 'professionalism' makes particular assumptions about what it is to be a professional, which, in turn, betrays an Enlightenment conceit that we can separate off our rational, thinking and professional selves from our sentient, feeling selves. We can't, and if we can, we probably shouldn't be working with children.

Of course, love exists in professional relationships in a range of different guises. I have already mentioned the Greek idea of agape. That is fine in cases where we need to cross the road to tend to someone who needs our help. But the very proximity of child and youth care or socio-pedagogical relationships raises the possibility of forms of love that go beyond agape. The Greeks have another term, philos, for the kind of friendship relationships that can emerge between workers and those they care for. Again, this isn't simple because the idea of philos would suggest that these are relationships between equals, freely entered into. As already indicated, the power differentials in care settings render such an expression of love less than straightforward but I would argue that an idea of philos does, nevertheless, reflect the nature of some relationships that emerge during and certainly after care.

The third dimension of the Greek typology of love is eros, which involves attraction between human beings, including sexual attraction. Because of this, it remains the love that dare not speak its name in child and youth care. Of course we know that eros creeps into residential child care; anyone who suggests otherwise is engaged in an exercise in denial. Nevertheless, there can be a strong disincentive to even suggest as much, especially perhaps in a present-day UK cultural context, which evinces some pretty muddled thinking in anything that might have to do with sex. It feels like a gap in this issue that it does not address eros. And maybe that will be the next step in what will hopefully be an ongoing dialogue about love in caring for children and young people. We need to discuss in a considered and responsible manner the various ways in which attraction features in human relationships – including relationships between

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carers and children and young people – in order to understand what goes wrong when it crosses over into sexual abuse, as it can and does.

We do not just need to understand other people in relationship – we need to understand ourselves and to care for ourselves, but not in the kind of mechanistic ‘doing’ ways that might take us in the direction of seeking to impose a distance between ourselves and others. Nicole Little addresses the inadequacy of such approaches, suggesting instead that we need to leave ourselves open to connecting with others at an emotional level.

In addition to the full-length articles mentioned in this editorial, the issue includes a number of shorter pieces from practitioners and students. It is great to see those who work in care settings plucking up the courage to share their thoughts more widely. Again, the theme of love seems to have pushed them to do so. I hesitate to pick out any particular short pieces but would suggest readers have a look at them – they include some powerful messages about the nature of care in the contemporary world.

The issue is rounded off with three book reviews, each of them touching on a theme of love, or certainly relationship.

## About the author

Mark Smith was an experienced residential child care worker and manager before entering academia. He has written extensively on both residential child care and social pedagogy.

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