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TEACHERLY LOVE

Review by
Mary Cherian, Doris M. Martin and Julia Reguero de Atilas

INTRODUCTION

Teachers often talk about how much they love children. However, it would be safe to assume that not all teachers love children or are capable of loving. Apart from general observations such as these, until recently there was not much written about the love that teachers have for children in their care. One reason could be that “...our culture tends to downplay qualities of the heart that are viewed as feminine, soft and weak” (Miller, 1981, p.15). A second reason could be that concepts such as love are not easily dissected and subjected to scrutiny.

Fortunately, the last decade has seen more research on teacherly love, a term used by Lisa Goldstein (1998).

This paper examines teacherly love by focusing on selected findings from two qualitative studies of teacher-child relationships: a study by Goldstein (1998) on the experiences of two primary grade teachers trying to create and enact a vision of education centered around loving relationships; and our own ongoing study on the ending of teacher-child relationships.



For our study, data has been collected through interviews in America, Mexico, Australia, Singapore and Wales. We found that when our teachers were invited to talk about their experiences of saying good-bye to children, they frequently reflected on the nature of their relationships with the children. In this paper, we focus on those parts of our data that touch on teacher-child relationships. Our intent is to add to the conversation on teacherly love by reflecting on the data in relation to findings of Goldstein's study.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Current thinking about care and commitment has been influenced by research conducted in reaction to Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) work on moral development. According to Kohlberg, the most sophisticated level of making moral decisions calls upon universal principles, invoking the language of rights and justice. Carol Gilligan (1982) questioned Kohlberg's findings on gender differences. Goldstein (1998) observed that Gilligan's landmark work paved the way for a powerful influx of writing about the ethic of care in classroom relationships. Today, the ethic of care is considered just as important as Kohlberg's ethic of justice. The research on teacher-child relationships illuminates the value of teachers forming caring relationships with children (e.g. DeVries & Zan, 1994; Kidder, 1989; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992).

The Ethic of Care

An influential proponent of the ethic of care is Nel Noddings (1984). Noddings writes about every interaction providing one with an opportunity to enter into a caring relationship. As individuals, we

have the option of interacting in a caring or an uncaring way. In most healthy relationships, all involved have opportunities to care as well as to be cared for. Lisa Goldstein (1998) points out that this perspective has significant implications for schooling. Teachers who look upon the act of teaching as opportunities to participate in caring encounters, will be teaching their students more than academic knowledge. Children who are cared for will, in turn, have the opportunity to learn to care. Goldstein stresses that this caring goes beyond a modelling of desired behaviour: "*it is a moral stance that has the potential to transform education*" (1998, p 15). Goldstein's research is grounded in the intellectual foundation provided by the ethic of care – steeped in the concepts of care, concern and connection – but like Maxime Green (1986) and Robert Fried (1995), she advocates for passion in teaching as well.

Study on Teaching with Love

Goldstein (1998) defines this marriage of passion to care, concern and connection as love, although she is quick to point out her hesitance in defining love too precisely or concretely. She conducted an in-depth qualitative study on the role that love plays in the professional practices of two women teachers (one of them, herself). The goal was not to prove that love existed in the chosen educational settings: the two teachers explicitly stated that love was an important factor in their teaching and in the functioning of their classrooms as caring communities. Instead, the study explored the nature of teaching with love and the various contributions that love could make to the education of young children.

Through intensive participation observation and the use of her journals from previous years, Goldstein explored the nature, the scope, the dimensions and the variety of teacherly love. She collaborated with a primary grade teacher, spending three months first assisting and then, co-teaching with her. The themes that emerged in the course of this study included issues relating to the more difficult aspects of love in classroom settings: the ambivalence, dangers and complications that may arise. Goldstein also contrasted teacherly love with motherly love, guided by her own struggles to understand her seemingly changed relationships with students after her own children were born. She concluded that putting love in the centre of the educational enterprise enhances the experiences of both the children and the teachers involved.

Study on Ending Relationships

Unlike Goldstein's work, our focus has been specifically on the ending of teacher-child relationships as a way of illuminating the nature of the relationships as experienced by the teachers. Diana Kelly-Byrne (1990) pointed out in her book, *A Child's Play Life*, that many of us who work with children often fail to prepare both ourselves and our children for the many occasions on which we have to face endings. There is also a scarcity of literature on ending relationships (Alexander, 1997; Martin & Cherian, 1990; Needleman, 1990), in contrast to literature on beginnings of relationships (Driscoll & Nagel, 1999; Morrison, 1998; Sapon-Shevin, 1999). To address this gap, we began exploring how teachers experience the ending of their relationships with young children. All interviews were

transcribed and analysed for patterns or themes that connect teachers across their years of experience and grade levels. The data was also examined for differences that preserve the experiences of individual teachers within their own particular contexts and situations.

As we have shared preliminary findings with both teachers and teacher educators at education seminars and conferences (Cherian, Martin & Reguero de Atilas, 1999; Martin, Cherian & Lowe, 1999; Martin, Cherian, Reguero de Atilas & De Bord, 1999), their responses to the data have helped us to formulate new and deeper questions. Likewise, the process of writing this paper is part of that mid-analysis and stocktaking as we prepare to proceed with more data collection. It also enables us to share findings that add to the growing body of knowledge and understandings about teacherly love. To this end, the discussion below is structured around (i) choosing to teach with love and (ii) learning to teach with love.

Choosing to Teach with Love

A teacher's decision to teach with love is influenced by that teacher's willingness to enter into relationships with students. Advocating for teaching with love, Goldstein (1998) commented that "*nothing is lost if teachers choose to love their children. No one is hurt, cheated or deprived*" (p 118). Our study brings to light occasions when choosing to love their children does result in teachers feeling a deep sense of loss when the children move on. Teachers may also feel hurt and, at times, cheated when the love is not reciprocated or the teacher is not prepared to let go of the children when it is time to part. Beginning teachers appear to be

especially vulnerable to such feelings.

The Emotional Costs of Teacherly Love

Teaching with love has its costs. In our study, interviewees talked about the realisation that loving children can hurt because of the temporary nature of the teacher-child relationship. Good-byes were often difficult. Unlike parent-child relationships, teachers know they have to let their children move on to join the next teacher's class.

As one of the teachers in our study pointed out, *"It's emotionally exhausting. Takes so much more...when you show more love."* Yet, most of the teachers in our study reported a willingness to love and some, to love with abandon. The teachers who experienced satisfying relationships despite the challenges found ways to ease the separation by celebrating the past and preparing the children for the future. Through rituals that acknowledged the place these children have assumed in their lives, these teachers created ways to cope with the grief they felt.

Some teachers felt less able than others to cope with the sense of loss. Their willingness to enter into relationships with the children appear to be influenced by the teachers' understanding of the emotional costs involved not just throughout the development of the relationships but also when it was time to say good-bye. Beginning teachers in particular talked about not being prepared for the pain of parting. Some resolved not to love the next batch so much because they dreaded the inevitable ending of the teacher-child relationship at the end of the year. Of these, several shared that they inevitably did form caring relationships once again, despite

knowing that parting would be difficult. One teacher explained:

"Every year it happens...I start by saying this year I'm not going to get so emotionally attached to them or it's going to be so hard when they leave. I'm not going to love them so much...I'll just teach and finish with that but it happens (again) ...I get close to them...emotionally it's hard for them and hard for me as well."

Why do many teachers find themselves loving children even when they resolve not to? Reasons given included the long periods of time spent with the children throughout the year, the children's dependence on teachers' for emotional support, an inclination to find children lovable and the deep conviction that good teachers should teach with love.

Thus, at one end of the continuum are teachers who try to avoid painful separations by vowing not to care so deeply: to be competent, efficient teachers but not to love too much. At the other end are teachers who realise that teaching with love has its costs but nevertheless, choose to do so. Of these, many develop healthy coping strategies along the way. However, there are those for whom the process of loving results in an immature dependence on the relationships with children.

Cases of Immature Dependence on Children

In our study, there were teachers who described their relationships with the children in ways that illustrated an immature dependence on those children. Here again, the beginning teachers appear to be at greater risk. Two novice teachers

talked about needing frequent assurance that the children who had moved on to the next class still loved them. One of them said:

“Then sometimes I go to the next class and ask the children, ‘You still love me? You forget me?’ Most of them will say they love me because children understand who is the teacher who cares and understands them... One boy was my neighbor. So after that, I always ask him whether he still loves me and he says he does and that he remembers my name. So I was happy.”

Another novice teacher admitted that, at the start of every new school year, she found herself resisting the new class because she missed the previous class so much. She said:

“I will not accept my new kids at all. I cannot accept them as individuals. I don’t want to show my love to them. I just draw my line straight. I feel like my love for the last batch is still there so much that although when they left I will not cry but in January when I see my new batch, it hits me. I miss my old batch. So January is when I feel a lot. Then in February I accept all of them (new batch) and then I try to love them. It’s like I don’t want to love them so much because it’s really hurting, you know. Just teach them and go, don’t love them so much. But eventually, by the end of the year you know that it’s no point.”

Beginning teachers were most vulnerable to the pain of separation either because they had not learned to prepare themselves or they were themselves dependent on the love of the children for the validation of their own worth.

In contrast, an experienced teacher described her loving relationships with children as being well managed. She felt she was always emotionally prepared for the end of the year, “*parting is very smooth*” and that saying good-bye “*makes me feel very sad...sad but yet happy...there is a joy of departure*” because she could feel happy for the children moving on to another exciting new class. To this teacher, what was important was that “*I’m still teaching children...it’s still children so it’s the same*”, implying she would be happy as long as she could work with children.

Levine (1989) cautioned that if a teacher is in a state of immature dependence on children, then the teacher may get lost in the relationship with children and this could be as debilitating as refusing to enter relationships. Teachers who are not spontaneously able to establish healthy, appropriate relationships with children may need additional support and guidance before they can do so. As our study bears out, there is value in teachers being able to handle with maturity the forming, development and ending of relationships

Learning to Teach with Love

Many teachers learn to handle relationships through experience, including experiences of relationships beyond the school. Be it through structured programmes or on the job, continual learning to teach with love should be an integral part of what it means to be a caring, competent teacher.

Teachers’ other life roles can contribute to learning to teach with love. In her book, Lisa Goldstein (1998) frequently reflects on her dual roles as an early childhood teacher and a mother of two young children. Before she had her own children, she felt she loved the

children she taught. After a break of a few years – during which she became a mother – she found herself redefining teacherly love by distinguishing it from motherly love. Having the experience of both helped her see and appreciate each more clearly.

A teacher in our study reflected on her dual roles of mother and teacher as well. After many years of teaching, she became a mother of two young children and subsequently her teaching ideals changed. In her case, her experience of being a mother gave her dramatic insights into what children need. The teacher said:

“I used to be edgy with children. Irritated. You know how it is, if they don’t know how to do this, don’t know how to do that... I feel I’ve changed a lot in the sense that I’ve learned to show more love to them rather than work, work, work.”

What triggered the change? Her own child had difficulty with a teacher who was harsh and work-focused. The mother realised, with some horror, that the daughter’s teacher resembled herself as a teacher. Her motherly love made her see children’s need for teacherly love. After

sixteen years of teaching without love, she wondered why it took her so long to realise the importance of teacherly love. She concluded:

“I’m beyond all that now and it feels wonderful when a child can come and hold my hand, not fearing me, the teacher and give me a hug.”

CONCLUSION

As is evident from the selected findings of the two studies presented in this paper, teacher-child relationships vary in many ways. Teachers’ willingness to enter into loving relationships with children is influenced by, for instance, their early teaching experiences, other loving roles they may be in, personal needs for dependence and a host of other factors. Despite the challenges, the inherent value of teaching with love is hard to dispute. However, teaching with love does not guarantee good teaching. Teaching with love is highly desirable but it is not enough. Teacherly love should be coupled with teaching competence and maturity and only then would teacherly love be in the best interest of the child.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

To teach with love – care, concern, commitment and passion – is a challenge to both beginning and experienced teachers. The research on teacher-child relationships illuminates the complexities that are involved. What are the implications for teachers who teach with love? Our recommendations are for both beginning and experienced teachers. They are neither new nor radical. Most of us would readily endorse these recommendations but to translate them into practice requires effort.

1. Continually reflect on your teacher-child relationships

Critical to teaching with love is the willingness to enter into healthy, loving relationships with the children. In the education sector, we frequently speak of the importance of recognising and responding to individual differences amongst children. It is equally important to recognise and respond to the uniqueness of every teacher as well. Each of us should start with ourselves. The more we know ourselves – our apprehensions, our dreams, our strengths and our weaknesses, our needs - the better able we would be to prepare ourselves to create classroom climates conducive to individual and group growth (Levine, 1989).

2. Take responsibility for your own emotional development and sustenance

In order to teach with love year after year, we need to pay attention to our own affective development and respond to our own needs for support and nurturance. Teacherly loving demands a great deal of the teacher and yet, comes to an end in a relatively short time. The recurring cycle of starting and ending relationships with cohort after cohort of children can be exhausting. Beginning teachers, prepare yourself for the process by first being aware of your personal vulnerability. Experienced teachers, be vigilant about your ability to continue to love afresh every new class that comes your way. Take personal responsibility for sustaining yourself, growing and continuing to mature emotionally as a teacher (Ingvarson & Chadbourne, 1994).

3. Support your teaching colleagues

Reach out to beginning teachers, in particular. The need for psychological support is never so apparent than with the novice teacher. Regardless of how sound pre-service teacher education may be, true realisation of the teacher's challenges sinks in when a teacher starts with a class of her own. Your colleagues who are beginning teachers may need your help as they try to make cope with relationships with children. Writing about stress and burnout amongst teachers, Gold and Roth (1993) make a strong case for treating beginning teachers as a special needs group and planning for their support. Provide that support by caring, modeling and also providing opportunities for catharsis.

Both novice and experienced teachers need support to teach with love and both must take responsibility for knowing themselves relative to the demands of teaching with love. Let us encourage each other in our efforts to teach with love. In doing so, we are that much more likely to continue to love to teach.

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