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'Professional Love' in A Time of Cholic: Researching Abstract Concepts in Work with Children & Young People

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# BERA Annual Conference 5-7 September 2017



## ‘Professional Love’ in A Time of Cholic: Researching Abstract Concepts in Work with Children & Young People

Jools Page, University of Brighton

Martin Purcell, University of Huddersfield

Jim Reid, University of Huddersfield

# Introduction



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We want to use this session to explore with you:

- the concept of 'professional love' as an essential element of effective early years practice (**Jools Page**)
- the potential for demonstrating 'professional love' in work with older children and young people, where 'education' is conceived as a transformational process based on dialogue (**Martin Purcell**)
- some innovative research techniques that allow preference for technological, creative and performance to shape the way in which research participants engage with explorations of 'love' (**Jim Reid**)

# Working with Children & Young People in a Time of 'Cholic'



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Professionally loving practice may be needed more than ever because of the crippling challenges of postmodern living that contribute to the 'crisis' in the mental and emotional wellbeing of the 'millennial' generation; including:

- Global upheaval ▷ ☰ **uncertainty**
- Educational reforms ▷ ☰ **stress**
- Economic reversal ▷ ⬇ **opportunities**
- 'Austerity' politics ▷ ⬇ **services**
- Employment patterns ▷ ☰ **precarity**



# 'Professional Love' in A Time of Cholic: Researching Abstract Concepts in Work with Children & Young People

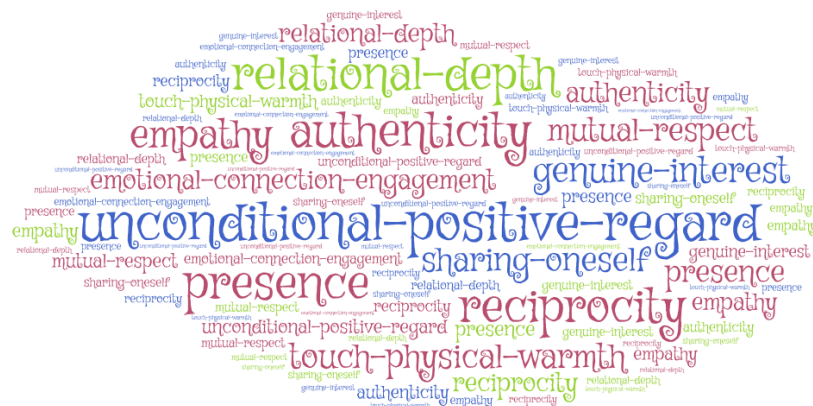
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**BERA Annual Conference**  
**7 September 2017**

**Martin Purcell**  
**University of Huddersfield**



Huddersfield Centre  
for Research in  
Education and Society

# Working with Children & Young People in a Time of 'Cholic'

Some concerns and their impacts:

- Global upheaval – **uncertainty**
- Educational reforms – **stress**
- Economic reversal – **opportunities**
- Austerity – **services**
- Employment patterns – **precarity**
- Mental health 'crisis' – **despair**
- Where does '**resilience**' fit into our thinking?

Educational policy has resulted in:

- the trivialisation of love and care in education
- the downgrading of caring roles vs. educational roles
- the undermining of emotional labour
- a shift towards professional 'distance'
- a requirement to report colleagues' 'inappropriate' behaviour

Page (2014)

# ‘Education’ as an ‘Act of Love’

How can practitioners model ‘education’ as “an act of love?”

- community development, with adults in marginalised communities
- lecturing in a HEI, on Youth & Community Work courses
- supporting students in developing YCW practice on placement
- ongoing practice, supporting youth work (and other) practitioners, primarily in the field of young people’s mental health and emotional wellbeing
- as a parent of school age children, involved in the PTA, etc.

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# Pedagogical Context for 'Professional Love'

Education as:

- Transformation
- Critical Pedagogy
- Dialogue
- Reflective Practice
  
- An Act of Love

# 'Professional Love' in the Early Years (Page, 2011, 2014)

Infants require “sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they have formed a deep and sustaining relationship”

Even more important for children who have experienced poorly attached relationships

All children deserve to feel loved / worthy of being loved, deeply thought about and held in mind with attunement and reciprocity

Young infants require “sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they have formed a deep and sustaining relationship”

What if the caregiver's natural feelings are not instinctively warm and loving toward an individual child?

***At what age do these needs cease?***

# Characterising 'Professional Love'

(Page, 2011, 2014)

- requires deep motivational displacement, attunement and reciprocity
- involves developing deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- the rights of the child (are) wholly embedded at the centre of every aspect of practice
- shift in practitioners' thinking to intellectualise the experience as loving

Page (2011, 2014)

# Collaboration in Researching 'Professional Love'

<b>Parents / Guardians</b> <b>Extended Family</b> <b>Family Friends</b>	
<b>Professionals</b>	
<b>Providing Generic Services</b>	<b>Providing Targetted Services</b>
Early Caregivers (Childminders, Nursery Workers, etc.) Health Professionals (incl. Health Visitors) Early Years Educators <b>Primary School Teachers and Pastoral Care Providers</b> Secondary School Teachers and <b>Pastoral Care Providers</b> <b>Youth Workers</b> Tertiary Education Teachers and Pastoral Care Providers Higher Education Tutors and Pastoral Care Providers Community Education / Development Workers Clerics	<b>Family Support Workers</b> Child & Family Social Workers Residential Social Workers Foster Carers Care Leaver Support Workers CAMHS Workers: Emotional Wellbeing Support Workers; Counsellors; Child Psychiatrists Young Carer Support Workers Drugs & Alcohol Workers Youth Justice / Offending Workers
<b>Volunteers</b>	
<b>Young People</b>	

# Focus of Pilot Study

Shared draft paper exploring concept of 'professional love' in work with young people\*

Unstructured interviews, shaped broadly by questions such as:

- How important / desirable (to you, your service users, society) is professionally loving practice ... ?
- How does 'love' feature as an element of your practice?
- Can 'professionally loving' practice feature in work with children and young people in 21<sup>st</sup> century UK?
  - How? Why not? What are the challenges? How overcome? etc.

(\*see final slide for details)

# Confirming the Challenge

## What are the issues?

- High proportion of 'vulnerability' or 'need' among *cyp*
- Emotional void ... lack of 'something internal'
- A bit adrift ... not very connected
- Young people coming to school as 'empty vessels', not feeling valued, not feeling loved

## Some possible causes

- Parents (of all social class) live busy lives, and de-prioritise the needs of their children ... lack of nurture
- Adults in professional relationships have agendas, something they want out of this child (education, parents' wishes, etc.)



# Needs of Children & Young People

## Children & young people need:

- someone to ground and re-set them
- to feel -
  - valued / that they are of value
  - loved by somebody
  - nurtured
- help in building their resilience
- calmness, quiet time, sanctuary, solace
- enthusiasm about / for them and their interests
- someone who will take their shit, and let them come back with more
- consistency



# ‘Professional Love’

- is based on reciprocal\* relationship (based on trust and mutual respect) with relational depth, emotional engagement and connection on both sides (developed in person\*)
- feels authentic (i.e. the practitioner appears genuinely engaged because you want to be, not because they're getting paid)
- is unconditional / requires the practitioner to offer unconditional positive regard naturally
- empowers young people
- allows the child or young person to feel that they're being heard

\*reciprocity cannot be interpreted in order for the practitioner to pursue the relationship as a means of addressing their own needs

\*something Jim has contested previously

# Demonstrating 'Professional Love'

Demonstrate that you are working with the child or young person on a different relational level to other professionals, by:

- welcoming them (stop what you're doing, give them a hot drink, etc.)
- being genuinely interested in what has happened since you last saw them (remember things they told you, however 'minor')
- making sure the time you spend together is 'proper time'
- advocating on their behalf (either with or without their knowledge)
- seeking out their wavelength, finding common ground to connect
- giving something of yourself / being genuine
- demonstrating empathy
- unleashing the power of touch\* and physical warmth

\*laden with caveats

# Characteristics of a Professionally Loving Practitioner

A 'professionally loving' practitioner is able to demonstrate to the child or young person that:

- you are a person who means something in their day, in their life (and that you mean more to them than professional recognition / status)
- they can help 'ground' you / 'fix' you / bring you back / reset you
- they genuinely care about you, your concerns and your interests

They must:

- have a sense of humour
- be tenacious
- feel fulfilled (and supported) outside school
- be prepared to be punished by their charges / be resilient



# Caveats Emptor

- The concept of 'love' has been corrupted: saying "I'm here to work in a professionally nurturing way" may be more acceptable than saying "I'm here to work in a professionally loving way"
- The expression of 'professional love' (especially touch) may be constrained by practitioner's gender (reference 'maternal love'; and to the dangers of one's professional integrity if it is misconstrued)
- Professionally loving practice may be limited to those practitioners for whom it comes instinctively
- It is impossible for junior or high school teachers to demonstrate 'professionally loving' practice ... !?!?!?!?



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