Teacherly Love: Intimacy, Commitment, and Passion in Classroom Life

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Teachers often speak about loving their students; academics, too, take teachers' love for students to be a commonplace of education. However, there has been no attempt to theorize how love operates in the classroom lives of teachers and children. In this article I identify and describe a particular constellation of feelings which I have labeled "teacherly love," a distinct and unique variety of love both like and unlike other varieties of love that have been previously explored.

Les enseignants parlent souvent de l'amour qu'ils portent à leurs étudiants; les chercheurs ont considéré et considèrent encore l'amour des professeurs pour leurs élèves comme un lieu commun en éducation. Cependant, il n'y a jamais eu de tentative de théorisation quant à la façon dont opère l'amour dans les vies des enseignants et des enfants dans la salle de classe. Dans cet article, j'identifie et décris une constellation particulière de sentiments que j'ai étiquetés comme relevant de "l'amour enseignant," en tant que variété unique et distincte d'amour, à la fois semblable et différente d'autres variétés d'amour qui ont été antérieurement explorées.

Teachers often speak about loving their students. Reflecting on her relationship with a student, an elementary school teacher reports: "The little girl ... was colorless and I didn't have very much feeling for her for a long time. Then all of a sudden when she began to make discoveries, her personality popped out and I loved her" (anonymous elementary school teacher cited in Jackson 1968/1990, p. 139). Teachers of older children also experience these loving feelings. Jaime Escalante, the well-known mathematics teacher depicted in the film *Stand and Deliver*, asserts: "I exhibit deep love and caring for my students. I have no exclusive claim to these attributes; they are as natural as breathing to most teachers" (1990, p. 9). My personal

conversations with teachers in classrooms, staff rooms, faculty lounges, play yards, and parking lots at day care centers, preschools, and elementary schools around the United States suggest that love for students is an assumption underlying the practices of many teachers.

Academics, too, take teachers' love for students to be a commonplace of education. William Ayers (1989), for example, asserts that loving children is an essential qualification for preschool teachers and that each young child has a right to be loved and understood in his or her school setting. Philip Jackson (1968/1990, p. 29) writes, "we know that a child's relationship with his teacher can at times rival in intensity the union between him and his mother and father," and notes that many of the teachers he spoke with while researching his landmark book *Life in Classrooms* revealed their deep affection for and emotional attachment to their students. In a recent address to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Cornel West described teachers as people who "care so deeply and love so much" (West 1996).

Despite all this acknowledgment, there has been no research undertaken on exactly how love operates in the classroom lives of teachers and children. Love is present, as the quotes I have cited indicate, but it is somehow invisible, transparent, something that has been taken for granted and deemed unworthy of scholarly attention. Everyone seems to know that teachers love their students – it is a given, as fundamental a part of classroom life as the feel of perpetually dull pencils textured by anonymous tooth marks and the greenish light emanating from the ever-buzzing fluorescent lights overhead. Teachers' love is obvious. Why investigate the obvious? Another reason for the lack of systematic inquiry into this topic is that love is problematic from a research standpoint. Love is difficult to define, impossible to measure, and outside the boundaries of generalizability, reliability, and validity. It is fuzzy, subjective, personal, loaded.

The love that informs teachers' practices has the distinction of being both too obvious and yet too difficult to research. But it is too important to ignore. In this article, I theorize the notion of teacherly love, drawing on my research in an upper middle class, primary grade classroom in Northern California (Goldstein,

1997). I contend that teacherly love is a distinct and unique variety of love both like and unlike other varieties of love that have been previously explored.

What is This Thing Called Love?

Love has been exhaustively explored by psychologists. However, virtually all of the scientific research done on love has focused exclusively on heterosexual, adult-adult romantic/erotic love (Sternberg 1988b); there has been little inquiry into the specific nature of the many other loving relationships people encounter in their daily lives. Psychologist Robert Sternberg (1988a; 1988b) has developed a model of love useful for understanding the love found in classrooms: unlike the many models and analyses of love that emphasize attraction and arousal, Sternberg's model can be applied to nonsexual varieties of love.

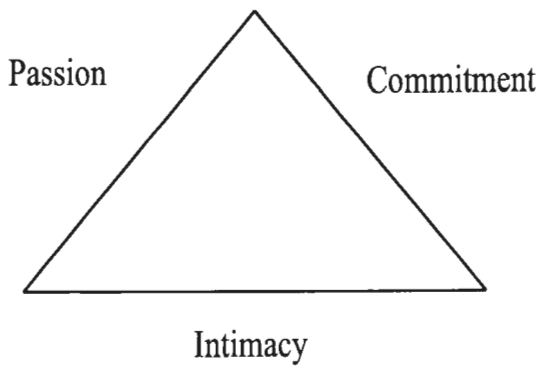

Figure 1.

Sternberg calls his model "the triangular theory of love" (1988a), and suggests that love can be understood in terms of three components – intimacy, commitment, and passion – that form the three sides of a triangle (see Figure 1).

Intimacy, in Sternberg's words, describes "the close, connected, and bonded feelings in loving relationships" (1988a, p. 120); commitment entails both the decision to love someone and the commitment to maintain that love; and passion is "the drive that leads to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation and the like" (p. 120). I would suggest Sternberg's three components of love – intimacy, commitment, and passion – defined in slightly different ways, accurately describe the type of love experienced by teachers who create loving educational environments.

As the literature which applies the ethic of care to educational settings (Noddings 1992; Martin 1992) would suggest, loving teachers and their students are involved in close, sustained, reciprocal relationships. In the teacherly version of Sternberg's triangle, intimacy still represents those "close, connected, and bonded feelings" that are found in loving relationships, but the concept must be writ large enough to move from a one-on-one setting to the sort of large-scale intimacy that is found only in a classroom.

Intimacy embodies trust, the sharing of meaningful experiences, a degree of mutuality and reciprocity among participants, a commitment to open communication, and a depth of feeling, regardless of the number of people participating in the relationship. Sometimes a teacher experiences this type of intimacy with a single student – in a one-on-one writing conference, for example – but it can also be experienced by a teacher with a whole class, and even by the class as a community, with the teacher as a member of the larger body.

Commitment is a crucial part of a teacher's professional life: commitment to the students and to the subject matter being taught is a fundamental part of a teacher's responsibility. Teachers commit time, effort, and resources to their preparations and their teaching (Hargreaves 1994; Lortie 1975). Teachers also have to make a commitment to their students. In her research on primary teachers, Nias (1989, p. 31) found that "commitment" is the term teachers themselves use to distinguish "real teachers" from those who do not take the job seriously: it is a crucial part of a teacher's professional sense of self.

The commitment component of Sternberg's triangular model, which he describes as the decision to love and to maintain that love, seems well suited to teacherly love. Hargreaves (1994) asserts the commitment to care is especially strong among teachers of young children; it is often a main reason they became teachers, and persists throughout their careers as a major source of job satisfaction. In applying this commitment component to the case of loving education, the teacher would move a step beyond the most fundamental professional commitments and, in addition, enter into a commitment to engage in a loving relationship with all of her or his students and to attempt to uphold that love, even if it is unrequited.

This commitment is the driving force in the establishment and development of teacherly love. Teacherly love begins as a commitment to love, and that commitment is fulfilled as it interacts with the teacher's passion for her or his work and with the intimacy that develops over the natural course of classroom life.

Passion, Sternberg's final component, is the most dangerous to take at face value: it is too sexually charged to apply directly to discussions of teaching and teacherly love. Under no circumstances is it appropriate for a classroom teacher to be driven toward romance, physical attraction, or sexual consummation in relationships with students. And yet passion, albeit in a different form, plays an important role in excellent teaching – and, by extension, in loving education. It is this component of Sternberg's triangular model that needs to be redefined for use in the description of teacherly love.

The *American College Dictionary* defines "passion" as any kind of feeling or emotion, when of compelling force. Thinking of passion as a driving force that compels action eliminates the sexual connotations that often surround the word. In the context of teaching with love, passion could be defined as a teacher's compelling desire to teach, to work with children, and to facilitate interactions between children and content.

Robert Fried points to passionate teachers and passionate teaching as the essential elements in meaningful school experiences. He writes: "To be a passionate teacher is to be someone in love with a field of knowledge, deeply stirred by

issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class each day" (Fried, 1995, p. 1). Fried asserts "it is this quality of caring about ideas and values, this fascination with the potential for growth within people, this depth and fervor about doing things well and striving for excellence" (p. 17) that sets passionate teachers apart from the rest of their profession.

Building on Fried's excellent work, I would add that a passionate teacher is energized by her life with her or his students and is fulfilled by the work with them. A passionate teacher teaches with joy, from the heart. This form of passion is intense but not sexual. It is similar to the passion artists feel toward their work, or parents feel toward their children. The passion in teacherly love may not necessarily need to be felt for the individual students, but for learning, for the content being taught, and for the act of teaching.

Though loving teaching can be characterized as the interplay of intimacy, commitment, and passion in a classroom setting, it is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Loving teaching is not monolithic, and the particular details of this interplay are linked to the teacher's personality, teaching style, and central images of practice (Goldstein 1997). All three components – intimacy, commitment, and passion – must be present, but will play out in ways specific to the teachers and students and setting being observed.

Characteristics of Teacherly Love

Because both arise from adults living and working in close association with children, it is inevitable that teacherly love will be compared to motherly love. Teacherly love is similar to motherly love, though there are important distinctions between them.[1] Lilian Katz (1981) articulated seven dimensions along which mothering and teaching part company: scope of functions, intensity of affect, spontaneity, scope of responsibility, partiality, attachment, and rationality. To extrapolate from her dimensions, motherly love can be characterized by a wide scope of functions, high interpersonal intensity and strong, almost irrational, attachment. Teacherly love, by contrast, is much narrower in

scope, lower in interpersonal intensity, and weaker and more objective in general.

Teacherly love is certainly less expansive than motherly love; however it is not as limited as Katz (1981) and the small body of literature that touches on the relationship between mothering and teaching[2] (Biklen, 1992; Freud, 1952; Grumet, 1988; Lightfoot, 1977; McPherson, 1972) would suggest. When Katz (1981), for example, speaks of the limited duration of teacherly love, she is referring to limits of scope: teachers are only responsible for certain facets of a child's development and for a circumscribed portion of each day. She does not acknowledge, however, the hours many teachers spend thinking about their students outside of class time (Nias, 1989; Hargreaves, 1994): caring feelings cannot be turned on and off, as if controlled by the school bell.

Further, teacherly love is also not always limited in its intensity. Caring for children, whether as a parent or as a teacher, can be demanding and exasperating. Sandra Acker (In press) describes the frazzled state of a primary teacher after a particularly long day: "She loves the class, she says, though she could tear her hair out." Further, teachers are prone to perfectionism, and may face feelings of frustration and guilt when they are unable to meet fully all the needs of the children in their care (Hargreaves, 1994).

Though they are similar, there is a danger in conflating teacherly love and motherly love. Motherly love is a construct so well known (and so complex and open to interrogation) that teacherly love is easily cast into its shadow, causing the subtle yet clear distinctions between the two to fade. Teacherly love's contours and dimensions are distinctly different from those of motherly love – and all other forms of love – in several significant ways.

Because of the intense commitment teachers make to their students, and because of the sheer amount of time spent with them in the classroom, teacherly love develops more quickly than other forms of nonfamilial love. Teacherly love also has a highly unusual shape. A commonly held understanding of most loving relationships involves simple pairs of individuals, with an occasional and complicated three-person "love triangle."

Teacherly love, on the other hand, could be considered a "love polygon," a loving relationship involving one teacher and a group of children.

But the most significant difference between teacherly love and all other forms of love is that teacherly love is shaped and constrained by the academic calendar and the structures of the institution of schooling. Almost inevitably, when the school year ends, the children leave. Though this loss is inevitable, it is painful nonetheless: one early childhood teacher reports, "It is very hard. You feel like you're losing a part of you" (Nelson, 1994, p. 199). All year long, teachers grow fonder and fonder of the children and are simultaneously preparing them to move on. The constant replacement of one group of loved ones by the next is an ironic phenomenon unique to teacherly love (Henry, 1963). Thus teacherly love has an unnatural rhythm, starting and stopping abruptly in response to the unfolding of the school year. Teacherly love is shaped not only by the feelings of those involved, but also by the structure of the institutions in which it occurs.

Does Love Belong in School?

Teacherly love has existed for as long as there have been teachers and students. It is widely experienced, informally acknowledged, but rarely discussed. It is true that some researchers have suggested that it is not possible or desirable for teachers to love their students (Freud, 1952; Kidder, 1989; Lightfoot, 1977). Jules Henry (1963) asserts that even those teachers who claim to love their students do not but are really just exaggerating their affectionate feelings:

> If that were not so, children would have to be dragged shrieking from grade to grade and most teachers would flee teaching, for the mutual attachment would be so deep that its annual severing would be too much for either to bear. (p. 30)

Mem Fox also takes issue with the notion of teachers loving the children entrusted to them. She writes:

> Let me tighten my definition of love and passion, lest I be misunderstood. I am not asking the unreasonable from literacy teachers. I am not, for instance, asking that all

> the children in a class should be loved since love cannot be mandated and anyway not all children are lovable. I am asking rather for a loving atmosphere in which students and their interests are treated with dignity; an environment in which they are seen as exciting, fascinating beings who are alive with anticipation and longing for real communication that has great meaning in their current lives, not in some far-distant adult life; a system in which they never sit in corridors and suffer lovelessness; a classroom from which worksheets and basal readers have been withdrawn and burnt with ritual and ceremony in the schoolyard; in which there is a throbbing heartbeat of passion connecting the class to itself and the teacher to the class. (1995, p. 13)

Mem Fox eschews actual love for students in favor of the creation of "a loving atmosphere," throbbing with the heartbeat of passion. But how significant is this distinction?

Progressive educator Herb Kohl also eschews love for students, in his case in favor of the notion of "loving students as learners." He writes:

> It is important to pause over the idea of *loving students as learners*, which is not the same as simply loving students. Each of us has only a limited amount of love we can offer, for love is not cheaply won or given. I care about all of my students, and respect them, but love grows slowly and requires attention and effort that cannot be spread around to twenty or thirty people simultaneously. Love also engages all parts of one's life, and teaching, for all its demands, is still just a part of one's total life as a parent, lover, citizen, and learner. I don't trust teachers who say they love all their students, because it isn't possible to love so many people you know so little about and will separate from in six months or a year. (1984, p. 64)

Both Fox and Kohl, though quite interested in love, reject the idea of teachers genuinely loving their students. I believe this is because they share an implicit assumption at the root of their distinctions between "love" and engaging with students in some other kind of loving way that is more appropriate for classroom life. When Kohl and Fox use the word "love" and refer to it as something that is not acceptable for describing relations or interactions between teachers and students, they are assuming

that there is only one monolithic, general kind of love. They list some of its characteristics. It is a love that cannot be mandated, a love that is not cheaply won or given. It grows slowly and requires attention and effort. It cannot be spread around to a large group of individuals at the same time. It engages all parts of one's life. Not all children call it forth. It cannot start and stop arbitrarily.

Mem Fox and Herb Kohl both seem to believe that there is only one type of love, namely an emotion or feeling that would be appropriate to apply to relationships with family and close friends, but not with students. However, they are conflating a variety of possible types of love. There exists a distinct state of mind or set of feelings which can be called "teacherly love." It is a unique kind of love, and only one of a number of possible varieties of love – eros, agape, motherly love, brotherly love, spousal love, love for friends, and so on. A teacher may certainly feel love for her students, but it will be a kind of love different from the love she feels for her spouse, children, parents, or friends. Teacherly love is like other kinds of love in some ways, but it is also unlike other forms of love.

Kohl's idea of loving students as learners is teacherly love by another name. Mem Fox's depiction of a loving classroom environment is one suffused with teacherly love. In their descriptions of the ways that love is not appropriate for teachers and students, both Fox and Kohl have actually given us their own definitions of teacherly love. The teachers to whom Jules Henry referred in the passage I quoted earlier are not exaggerating their feelings as he suggests. Those teachers actually do feel love for their students: they feel teacherly love. Much of the literature on teaching in which teachers, both real and fictional, tell their own stories, are tales of teacherly love: *Teacher* (Ashton-Warner, 1963), sections of Bill Ayers' *To Teach* (1993), *To Sir, With Love* (Braithwaite, 1959), *Up the Down Staircase* (Kaufman, 1964), *Among Schoolchildren* (Kidder, 1989), *36 Children* (Kohl 1967), *Being With Children* (Lopate 1975), and some of the stories retold in Schubert and Ayers's *Teacher Lore* (1992). The research on elementary schools as workplaces and on elementary schoolteachers' job satisfaction (Acker, In

press; Nias, 1989; Hargreaves, 1994) is also rich with narratives of teacherly love.

However, I do not wish to suggest love is a completely unproblematic set of feelings when applied to education. For example, some parents might not feel comfortable with the idea of a teacher loving their children. Mother-teacher relationships are complicated by feelings of competition, rivalry, and possessiveness relating to the children (Galinsky, 1988; Greenberg, 1989). Mothers may feel some kind of jealousy as they relinquish their children to the teacher, who is not only another woman, but also the Other Woman (Lightfoot, 1977). A teacher whose practices are overtly rooted in love could exacerbate this already tense situation. The literature on the relationship between teachers and mothers (Biklen, 1992; Freud, 1952; Grumet, 1988; Katz, 1981; Lightfoot, 1977; McPherson, 1972) supports this assertion. Parenting and teaching are thought to have clearly different scopes and purviews; teaching with love stands in the murky gray area between the two.

Alice Miller's (1983, p. 3) work on poisonous pedagogy – the syndrome of doing harm to children, physically or psychologically, and then thinking you have done so "for their own good" – reminds us that very unloving things can be done to children in the name of love. From seemingly minor classroom management issues such as expecting the children to walk silently down the corridor in straight lines and with their hands clasped behing their backs to more problematic teacherly decisions such as using "time out" or corporal punishment in the classroom, teachers are free to claim that their actions are rooted in their caring feelings for the children and their desire to educate them appropriately. "Love" is a term that can be twisted and stretched to cover an inordinately large area of behaviors and feelings. In addition to its potential to pose a threat to parents and to students, love might also be difficult for teachers. As Robin Leavitt points out in her powerful and disturbing book *Power and Emotion in Infant-Toddler Day Care*, there are times when, due to its unequal nature and to children's understandably limited ability to contribute to it, the caring relationship may not be enough to sustain even the most committed loving teacher's capacities for ongoing caregiving. This

can lead to a great deal of emotional strain, anger, and alienation for the teacher. When teachers become burdened in this way, their loving feelings are transformed into "emotional labor – the publicly observable management of feelings sold for a wage" (1994, p. 61).

Leavitt's observations about the dark side of caring echo concerns raised by feminists and early childhood educators: some feminists argue that putting women in a caring role traps them in a socially constructed image of femininity that is oppressive and limiting (Tronto, 1989; Flax, 1991); early childhood educators shy away from caring because it seems too soft, too unprofessional (Bloch, 1987; Goldstein, 1993). There are feminists and early childhood professionals who conceive of the choice to teach with love as a step backward into a more traditional and less powerful position, rather than a step forward toward a more responsible and responsive professional stance.

Why Teach With Love?

If love raises such problematic questions, why do so many teachers allow love to play a role in their teaching practices? First of all, it benefits the children being taught. Teaching with love provides teachers with the opportunity to teach children more than academic knowledge and skills. Since, as Noddings (1984) points out, we learn how to care through the experience of being cared for, children taught with love will learn to be caring people. Teaching with love brings intimacy into the classroom equation, moving education a tremendous step ahead of what is possible through passion and commitment alone.

A teacher might choose to teach with love out of his or her desire to enhance the emotional and personal lives of the students, or to enhance his or her own experiences in the classroom, both personal and professional. Teaching with love recognizes the emotional lives of teachers in their classrooms, after a long period during which teachers' feelings of attachment to their students have been dismissed or ignored (Henry, 1963). As I have pointed out, even teachers who feel love sometimes are unwilling to admit it. Documenting teacherly love legitimizes these feelings.

Further, loving teaching acknowledges that relationships with students are a significant source of professional satisfaction for teachers, one of what Lortie (1975, p. 104) calls the "psychic rewards" of teaching. Jennifer Nias (1989) found overwhelming evidence that teachers of young children felt the opportunity to be deeply and personally involved with children was very satisfying and beneficial. One teacher highlighted the mutuality of the student-teacher relationship by saying, "Don't think I'm the one who's doing all the giving ... I know that by the end of the day several people will have shown that they love me" (Nias, 1989, p. 87). Teaching with love allows teachers to use the benefits of classroom intimacy to balance out and to compensate for the intense levels of commitment and passion required to succeed in this demanding profession.

The idea of teacherly love is not new or dramatically different. It has been at the heart of the educational experience all along, quietly enhancing teaching and learning relationships. It is a facet of the practices of many teachers, surfacing in the form I have labeled teacherly love. But it is a facet that is usually ignored or dismissed as being unworthy for study because of the academic community's tendency to study phenomena that can be quantified and measured, things that are less "warm and fuzzy" than emotional relations.

Putting teacherly love at the center of the educational enterprise enhances the experiences of both the children and the teachers involved. The decision to teach with love has the potential for impact beyond the classroom walls. If broadly adopted, loving teaching could have implications for teacher education and for school reform. It is also possible to imagine reshaping educational policy, social policy, and even government legislation, around the notion of placing love for children at the center of our practice. Teaching with love can also give a sense of intellectual authority to the emotional, interpersonal work that is the heart of teaching. We have nothing to lose by teaching with love. And we – and the children we teach – have everything to gain.

NOTES

1. It must also be acknowledged that neither teacherly love nor motherly love are monolithic, uniform constructs. There is a wide range of possibilities inherent within each of these forms of love.
2. As Biklen (1992) points out, the term "mothers" and "parents" seem to be used interchangeably both by teachers and in the research literature on this topic; it is rare to find specific mention of the interactions between fathers and teachers.

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