



*The look of Love: reception teachers' perceptions of professional love*

PEARSE, Sally <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5522-9089>>

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# **The Look of Love: Reception Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Love**

Sally Pearce

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Education

March 2021

## Candidate declaration

I hereby declare that:

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<b>Name</b>	Sally Pearse
<b>Award</b>	Doctor of Education
<b>Date of Submission</b>	Wednesday 10 March 2021
<b>Faculty</b>	SSA
<b>Director(s) of Studies</b>	Professor Mark Boylan

# **Abstract**

## **The Look of Love:**

### **Reception Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Love**

This collaborative, longitudinal study uses narrative and creative methods to explore five reception teachers' perceptions of the concept of professional love and how it is enacted within the classroom. There is a growing body of academic work on loving relationships or professional love in the context of early years education and the place this has in professional practice; however, this has mainly been focused on early years settings prior to school. This study extends research on professional love into the school context, with teachers who are operating at the boundary between the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the primary phase of education. Perspectives on the inherent tensions between the child-centred approaches of the EYFS and pressures relating to school readiness and preparing children for more formal educational practices inform the analysis of the rich data generated by the collaborative methodology and narrative and creative methods.

Over the course of a school year the participants met as a group and told stories about love, discussed their practice and mapped their relationships with children using a sociogram. The study reveals that the participants identified professional love as a key element of their practice and that, when enacted, it presented a number of faces: tough love, natural love, effortful love, loving touch and as a mask that enables the teachers to meet their own emotional and social needs. The participants articulated their belief that professional love had a positive impact on children's wellbeing, development and learning and supported the teachers in addressing the difficult issues and barriers that children face. However, prioritising professional love involves emotional labour and tensions with colleagues, school leadership and regimes of accountability.

The findings suggest that the opportunity and space to collectively reflect on relationships over a period of time is crucial in supporting participants' understanding and self-knowledge relating to professional love. The collaborative approach enabled the participants to co-construct their perceptions and definitions of professional love as they shifted and altered through this participative process. This study has implications for initial training

and continuing professional development (CPD) as it indicates that approaches to support the development of professional love need to be complemented by additional tools and support structures that allow for the full complex and multi-faceted nature of professional love to be surfaced and discussed over time.

## **Acknowledgements**

My doctoral journey has felt very long and challenging, and I would never have reached the endpoint without the amazing support of my supervisors, Prof. Mark Boylan and Dr Caron Carter. They have followed me through the inevitable ups and downs and periods of self-doubt that seem to accompany the doctoral process, and I cannot thank them enough for their compassion, commitment and erudition. I have also valued the support of my colleagues and friends Lynne, Sarah and Fufy for patiently listening to my endless ruminations on the subject of love.

I would also like to thank the Reception teachers who gave their time and commitment to participate in this study. I was left in awe of the warmth and love they provided for the children in their care and their generosity in sharing their stories, experiences and reflections.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for being alongside throughout this journey and for unquestioningly believing I would get to the end – even when I doubted myself. Thank you so much Terry, Alex and Liberty.

# Contents

<i>List of tables</i> .....	x
<i>List of figures</i> .....	x
<i>List of acronyms and abbreviations</i> .....	xi
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>12</b>
1.1 Chapter outline .....	12
1.2 A story of love in a Reception class.....	12
1.3 Professional love and the Reception class context in England .....	15
1.4 Positionality .....	20
1.5 Research questions.....	23
1.6 Research design and methods .....	24
1.7 Thesis outline.....	25
1.7.1 Chapter 1 Introduction .....	26
1.7.2 Chapter 2 Concepts of love, care, relationships and professionalism in early years .....	26
1.7.3 Chapter 3 Methodology and methods.....	27
1.7.4 Chapter 4 The faces of professional love .....	27
1.7.5 Chapter 5 The benefits and challenges of enacting professional love .....	28
1.7.6 Chapter 6 The impact of this collaborative study .....	29
1.7.7 Chapter 7 Conclusion .....	29
<b>Chapter 2 Concepts of love, care, relationships and professional identity in early years</b> .....	<b>31</b>
2.1 Chapter outline .....	31
2.2 Introduction .....	31
2.3 The value of love and care.....	33
2.4 Concepts of professionalism .....	36
2.5 Care in education .....	38
2.6 Concepts of care in early years .....	40

2.7	Professional love and pedagogical love .....	42
2.8	Professionalism and love and care in school contexts .....	48
2.9	Developing dispositions of love and care .....	49
2.10	Reflections and implications for this research study .....	51
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology and methods .....</b>		<b>53</b>
3.1	Chapter outline .....	53
3.2	Introduction .....	53
3.3	Narrative research methodologies.....	55
3.4	Methods to combine narrative and collaborative approaches .....	57
3.4.1	The writing frame .....	59
3.4.2	The group meetings .....	60
3.4.3	The relationship-mapping tool .....	61
3.5	Attempting a participative and collaborative approach .....	69
3.6	The banyan tree as a metaphor .....	71
3.7	Participants .....	75
3.8	Longitudinal data collection.....	77
3.8.1	Meeting schedule .....	77
3.8.2	Attendance .....	79
3.8.3	Establishing ground rules and levels of participation .....	79
3.8.4	Format of the meetings .....	80
3.9	Ethical considerations .....	80
3.9.1	Formal ethics processes.....	81
3.9.2	Developing my ethical approach .....	81
3.9.3	Researching from within .....	83
3.9.4	Arousing strong emotion.....	85
3.9.5	Confidentiality .....	87
3.10	Data analysis .....	87
3.10.1	Challenges in data analysis in collaborative research.....	87



3.10.2	Choosing the data to be analysed .....	88
3.10.3	Member reflection .....	89
3.10.4	Data analysis of narratives .....	91
3.10.5	Trustworthiness and narrative data analysis .....	92
3.10.6	Analysing the stories of love .....	93
3.10.7	Analysing the group discussions and reflections on the mapping tool .....	95
3.11	Conclusion .....	95
<b>Chapter 4 The faces of professional love .....</b>		<b>97</b>
4.1	Chapter outline .....	97
4.2	The faces and mask of professional love .....	97
4.3	The face of natural love.....	99
4.4	The face of loving touch .....	102
4.5	The face of tough love.....	104
4.6	The face of effortful love.....	106
4.6.1	Love is painful .....	112
4.7	The mask of professional love .....	114
4.8	Reflections on the faces and mask of professional love .....	118
4.9	Conclusion .....	120
<b>Chapter 5 The benefits and challenges of enacting professional love .....</b>		<b>121</b>
5.1	Chapter outline .....	121
5.2	Love as a valued part of professional identity and practice .....	121
5.3	The positive impact of professional love .....	124
5.4	Challenges of prioritising love in a school context.....	127
5.4.1	Love as another aspect of accountability .....	128
5.4.2	Tensions in preparing children for Key Stage 1 .....	129
5.4.3	Tensions with colleagues and school leaders .....	130
5.5	Complexities and dilemmas of professional love.....	137

5.5.1	The emotional labour of love .....	138
5.5.2	Ambivalent feelings towards children .....	139
5.6	Reflections on the complexities of love .....	142
5.7	Conclusion .....	145
<b>Chapter 6 Participation, professional learning and changes in practice</b> .....		<b>146</b>
6.1	Chapter outline .....	146
6.2	Introduction .....	146
6.3	The impact of the collaborative research on practice .....	147
6.3.1	Increased reflection .....	147
6.3.2	Consciously focusing on children's emotional needs .....	148
6.3.3	Proactively meeting children's emotional needs .....	149
6.4	Relationship mapping .....	151
6.4.1	Co-constructing an approach to mapping .....	152
6.4.2	The relationship maps in practice .....	154
6.5	The potential for the relationship map to be used as a development tool in schools .....	158
6.5.1	Extending the use of the mapping tool .....	159
6.5.2	Reported impacts on practice .....	160
6.6	Reflections on the impact of participating in collaborative research .....	162
6.7	Conclusion .....	170
<b>Chapter 7 Conclusion</b> .....		<b>171</b>
7.1	Chapter outline .....	171
7.2	Understanding professional love in a Reception class context .....	171
7.3	Revisiting the research questions .....	173
7.3.1	Developing and maintaining loving relationships .....	173
7.3.2	Managing the competing pressures of the Reception teacher role .... .....	174
7.3.3	The relevance of professional love as a concept and how it is enacted in a Reception class context .....	174

7.3.4	Additional findings .....	176
7.4	Contribution to knowledge and understanding of professional love .....	178
7.5	Reflecting on the research process .....	179
7.5.1	Participant selection .....	180
7.5.2	Existing relationships .....	180
7.5.3	Narrative, collaborative and creative approaches .....	181
7.6	Implications of research .....	182
7.6.1	Implications for early years practitioners and leaders .....	182
7.6.2	Implications for professional development leaders .....	184
7.6.3	Implications for policymakers .....	185
7.6.4	Wider implication for early years education and care .....	186
7.7	Understanding professional love in reception teachers' practice .....	187
7.8	Personal learning .....	188
7.9	Value to practice .....	189
7.9.1	Covid-19 postscript .....	190
7.10	Conclusion .....	191
	Appendix 1 Stories of love .....	193
	Appendix 2 Participant information .....	195
	Appendix 3 Information for participants on professional love .....	199
	Appendix 4 Participant consent form .....	200
	Appendix 5 Additional participant information for relationship mapping .....	202
	Appendix 6 Additional participant consent form for relationship mapping .....	206
	Appendix 7 Writing frame .....	208
	Appendix 8 Blank relationship map .....	210
	Bibliography .....	211

## **List of tables**

Table 1 Research study timeline .....	24
Table 2 Research methods related to research questions and data collected ..	67
Table 3 Timetable of data collection points .....	78
Table 4 Meeting timetable and attendance .....	79

## **List of figures**

Figure 1 Thinking about professional love (Page, 2018, p. 125) .....	44
Figure 2 Blank relationship map .....	64
Figure 3 Example of completed relationship map from March meeting .....	65
Figure 4 The banyan tree of collaborative research on professional love (adapted from Bryden-Miller et al., 2013) .....	74
Figure 5 The ethics of insider research (Floyd & Arthur, 2012, p. 178) .....	85
Figure 6 Faces and Mask of Professional Love .....	120
Figure 7 Developing professional love through reflection and discussion .....	151

## **List of acronyms and abbreviations**

BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CDP	Continuing professional development
CoP	Community of Practice
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
EAL	English as an additional language
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
EPPSE	Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
EYTS	Early Years Teacher Status
GLD	Good level of development
HLTA	High-level teaching assistant
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PLEYS	Professional Love in Early Years Settings
PVI	Private, voluntary and independent
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
SEND	Special educational needs and disability
SLT	Senior leadership team
TA	Teaching assistant

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Chapter outline

In this chapter I introduce my thesis, which is the outcome of collaborative research focused on professional love in a reception class context. I use a story told by a reception class teacher during the study to highlight the importance that teachers place on loving relationships and the tension this creates in the current performativity landscape in early years education and care. I establish what is meant by the concept of professional love and set out why this area of research builds on and extends studies on professional love by exploring the issue in a school context. I consider the professional and life experiences that have led me to identify love and relationships as key aspects of practice. In conclusion I outline the research aims and questions and my methodology, and provide an overview of the thesis.

## 1.2 A story of love in a Reception class

I start this thesis with a story told by one of my participants in response to a request to hear about an incident related to professional love. Diana works as a Reception teacher in a suburban primary school in a northern city.

Each day I experience meaningful, loving interactions with the children and their families in my class. Although I love all the children in my class, I have had a special bond with certain individuals throughout my teaching career. These are children who often have additional needs and need a stronger attachment to feel safe and secure in the setting.

I find it quite hard to pin down an incident because I feel that there are so many interactions during the day – but not only with the children but also with the parents as well, and the whole family. Lots of these are small little incidents and some of them are bigger incidents. I was just thinking about one of the last incidents I had with a little boy, Aaron. He's autistic and really struggles when the classroom is really busy and he's tired. It was one of the hottest days of the year, we'd had a school trip the previous day, and on days where he does struggle, mum, grandma or dad brings him in and they always kind of mouth to me what time he's been up [until] and they do a symbol to say if he's had a good morning or a bad morning or if he's been up the night before. He's been really struggling recently with toileting; he gets very anxious about going to the toilet constantly so he struggles to engage in activities, his self-chosen activities, because he feels like he needs to go to the toilet. It's not

medical – he did have a medical condition which is now cleared up and so he's got into the routine of going to the toilet every couple of minutes. So we've made a toilet chart for him so he can only go five times a day and it's very structured, and that's helping him to engage in activities more.

This particular day he was very tired, very irritated by other children around him and people being near him and touching him and touching the things he was playing with, so I took the decision of keeping him near me for the day and with certain children that I know can handle his outbursts maybe a little bit more [and] can be maybe more patient with him. Aaron spent the first session with one other child making ramps for his car, a few tears were encountered, kind hands were encouraged and the other child was extremely mature in sharing and giving Aaron space and time.

He had a really good morning and then, instead of going out for playtime, he stayed in with me and we had the most gorgeous, just chit-chat and gossip while sharing an apple, and he just leaned on me, on my shoulder and then we all congratulated him because he had set up the show-and-tell, and then he had decided that he wanted to sit on my lap whilst we were doing show-and-tell because he saw himself as my helper for the morning. Aaron doesn't like people in his personal space or touching him; when Aaron leans in, sits, hugs or kisses you I know he feels comfortable and happy. He managed to turn this really difficult beginning of the day through registration, and [the] difficult night and morning mum and dad had had with him, into a really positive rest of the day. It made me feel that me giving him that extra time just to talk and [having] me listening to him and having that little cuddle and sharing a snack, really benefited him and I think that was due to it being the last day of term and we weren't doing phonics after play and we didn't have all those time constraints... it was more of a very chilled out day, those last few days of the term, and it just enabled me and him to have that time together, just being, really. I would love to have the opportunity to do this more, but often I am working in focused groups.

Aaron thrives when given a responsible job and loves compliments from his peers. I know Aaron feels safe and secure in his environment and with the adults around him. I feel like if that was a Monday at the beginning of term it might have been left to the TA [the teaching assistant] to have that interaction with him, or it might have been him helping me in the classroom, maybe setting up phonics – but my main focus probably would have been setting up phonics because the other 29 children would be coming through ready to do phonics. Although we try to make it as informal as possible, that is a quite structured part of the day and you have to get it set up and you've only got that window of

opportunity to get the classroom set up for phonics. I think if that was at the beginning of the week he would have been helping me set up phonics, we wouldn't really have had time for that chat and just sitting and being. I would have been busy trying to set up as well as listening to [him], but not giving him that eye contact and that time that he deserves and he needs. (Diana's story of Aaron - pilot study)

As human beings, we seek connection and love, and it is increasingly accepted that being loved is vital for our emotional and physical wellbeing. As young children, the first relationships we have support the development of our sense of self and our template for how relationships work – and these include the relationships with our care-givers in early years educational contexts. The story above, told by Diana during the pilot study for this research, beautifully highlights both the power of loving relationships to support children's wellbeing, development and learning, and the constraints placed on Reception teachers that may prevent them from prioritising this aspect of practice. Diana relates the impact of the moment of intimacy and love she has with Aaron but recognises that on any other day this would have been undermined by the requirement for her to deliver a set agenda from which data will be collected and against which the teachers and the school will be judged. This story reinforced my commitment to surfacing love as an aspect of practice and supporting teachers to reflect and collaborate to explore the complexity of professional love and how it is enacted in a Reception class context.

To set the Reception class in the context of the English school system it is important to note that the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017) is the phase of education and care for children from birth to age 5, finishing at the end the academic year in which children turn 5. The final year is known as Reception, when children must start school, and takes place in primary school. The primary phase in England covers three age ranges: EYFS (under 5), Key Stage 1 (5 to 7) and Key Stage 2 (up to 11 or 12). There are many professional titles for those who work within the EYFS, but for the purposes of this study I have generally used the phrase 'early years educator' or 'practitioner' to cover the range of roles and qualifications of those working in settings with children aged 0 to 5. Some of the contexts and research studies relate specifically to those who are identified as teachers, and I have used that term when discussing these.



### **1.3 Professional love and the Reception class context in England**

There is a growing body of academic work on love in the context of early years education and the term 'professional love' has increasing currency as a way of defining loving relationships between early years practitioners and the children in their care. Page (2011; 2013; 2017; 2018) developed the concept of professional love and has explored this in relation to the role of practitioners in day care settings. This concept of professional love builds on a longstanding tradition of care in early years practice that includes a focus on the importance of early attachment (Bowlby, 1969) and the ethics of care (Noddings, 1998; 2001). Attachment is also included in some of the statutory guidance and within the teacher standards for early years (DfE 2017) and is one way of exploring loving relationships. Attachment focuses on the relationship of the child to adults from the child's perspective but my focus in this thesis is on the relationship of the adult to children". Page (2018) characterises three key principles of professional love and how this is enacted in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Page (2018) argues that professional love develops when there is a reciprocal feeling between the educator and the child and when the educator is able to shift the focus from their own needs and focus on those of the child, investing emotionally in the relationship. When all these elements exist, this is professional love – but Page also maintains that in order to achieve this it requires time and space for the practitioner to reflect on love. I have used this definition in this research, although within the findings I explore some of the complexities and facets of love that are not fully represented by this model.

The context for this study is the EYFS. The EYFS in England takes place in diverse settings: with childminders in their own homes; in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) nurseries; in maintained nursery schools; in local authority children's centres and in maintained and academy schools. All of these settings work to the same statutory framework document, although this document does contain some distinctions between delivery of education and care in school Reception classes and other early years settings. Early years teachers working in a Reception class context are therefore part of the EYFS with its underlying principles of the 'unique child', 'positive relationships', 'enabling environments' and 'learning and development' (DCSF, 2008). However, in England there is a

growing emphasis (during this final year of the Foundation stage) on ensuring school readiness and producing data on children's progress (Robert-Holmes, 2015; BERA, 2018) with the aim of ensuring that children reach a good level of development (GLD) (DfE, 2017) by the end of the Reception year.

The EYFS highlights the importance of positive relationships with children through the key person approach, although there is no guidance about how this can be meaningfully achieved with a single teacher within a reception class. There is an internal tension in the EYFS as it acknowledges the unique child who will develop at different rates and in different ways but there is a set of Early Learning Goals for all children at end of Reception which places a pressure of performativity on Reception teachers. The role of the key person and the need for warm and loving relationships between the child and key person remain part of the EYFS (DfE 2017) but there is also a pressure for the majority of children to achieve the Early Learning Goals by the end of Reception. This is despite their different starting points and ages and schools set targets for a percentage of children to reach the GLD. The publication of the Effective Primary Teaching Practice 2016 by the Teaching Schools Council (TSC 2016) brought this tension into stark relief as it emphasises Reception as a key year in a child's education and makes an argument for more focused planning and teaching rather than 'aimless activities' (TSC 2016 p.36). This document also makes no mention of the prime areas of development, including emotional development, that form the key aspects of the EYFS. This tension arises out of concerns that young children in England are not 'school ready' and this has led to the Foundation Stage being identified by Ofsted as the place where specific school skills need to be gained (Neaum 2016) rather than the wider lifelong learning skills embodied in the Characteristics of Effective Learning (DfE 2017). In 2015, the DfE introduced a Baseline Assessment into the Reception year, initially on a voluntary basis with a choice of three different assessment tools, with the aim that it would become compulsory from 2016. This assessment was not aimed at providing formative information to Reception teachers but was

to provide a starting point for a measure of schools' effectiveness by calculating the 'value added' to pupils over the next seven years (Bradbury 2019a, p.8)

The introduction of the baseline ignited strong feelings within the sector and led to the development of a coalition of early years organisations to campaign against this policy development. In 2016 the government withdrew the baseline as the three different models it had commissioned were not comparable and a new single version has now been developed and was to be introduced from September 2020 but has been delayed due to Covid-19. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) convened an expert panel to examine these proposals and published a damning report 'A Baseline without Basis' (2018) saying that they were

flawed, unjustified, and wholly unfit for purpose. They would be detrimental to children, parents, teachers, and the wider education system in England (p.5)

Research into teachers' resistance to the baseline (Bradbury 2019b) found that teachers saw the test as a barrier to them forming positive relationships with the children and their families in their first weeks in the Reception class as their time would be taken up administering these individual tablet based tests.

In 2017 Ofsted produced a document focusing on Reception class teaching "Bold Beginnings" (Ofsted 2017), using case studies of what they deemed to be effective practice. This document was controversial as it seemed to focus on a narrow curriculum of literacy and maths and emphasised preparing children for the higher expectations of Year 1, a move to the 'schoolification' of the Reception year (Bradbury 2019a). TACTYC, the association for professional development in the early years responded with their own document "Bald Beginnings" (TACTYC, 2017) which critiqued this approach, highlighting the evidence for a broad and balanced, play-based pedagogy for this age group.

In June 2018 the Department for Education published a revision of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2018) with changes to the Early Learning Goals and the areas of learning which was aimed at improving school readiness. In 2019 a coalition of early years organisations formed to address the sectors concerns about proposed changes to the Early Learning Goals within the EYFS and the lack of expert early years input within the process. The coalition included Early Education, National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years PACEY and the Early

Years Alliance. The coalition commissioned their own review of the research evidence for these changes, "Getting it Right in the Early Years Foundation Stage" (Pascal, Bertram and Rouse 2019) which concluded that they would not support improved outcomes for children.

The government is clearly focused on making changes to the Reception class year in England and the diverse early years sector, facing these challenges to traditional values, pedagogy and research evidence have come together but this is hard to maintain as each sector has specific challenges that may take priority. The Private, Voluntary and Independent sector, along with maintained nursery schools are facing a sustainability crisis, which the impact of Covid-19 will have exacerbated and defending Reception class practice may not now be the overwhelming priority. Performativity and these proposed changes to the early years frameworks up to 2019 will have impacted on the participants in this study and it is important that the context and pressures that they work within are reflected.

In recent years the growth of neuroscience and the development of more sophisticated Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans have given a greater understanding of how young children's brains develop in response to their experiences and relationships in the first months and years of life. The findings from research in these areas have been summarised to emphasise the importance of the early years and the loving relationships between infants and the adults who care for them at home or in ECEC for children's wellbeing and later adjustment to school and positive academic outcomes.

Babies are born with billions of brain cells, but few connections and these synaptic connections develop pathways or maps in response to experiences, with those that remain unused gradually being pruned away (Gammage in Hay 2014). Shonkoff and Phillips (2006) describe how children are born programmed for interaction and the support of a consistent, loving, responsive caregiver will best shape the young child's brain architecture and build their emotional resilience by providing repeated, positive experiences of having their needs met. This area of research, arising mainly in the USA, has been highly influential in the UK. The 2011 cross-party report by Graham Allen used photographs of children's brains on the front cover of the report to illustrate that

central to the report was the importance of brain development in the first three years of life and the need for early intervention:

*The early years are a very sensitive period when it is much easier to help the developing social and emotional structure of the infant brain, and after which the basic architecture is formed for life. However, it is not impossible for the brain to develop later, but it becomes significantly harder, particularly in terms of emotional capabilities, which are largely set in the first 18 months of life. (Allen, 2011, p29)*

The need for young children to receive nurturing support in the first three years of life has been highlighted by recent research using brain scans that has revealed that children who did receive nurturing emotional support from their mothers had a more well-developed hippocampus, an area of the brain that is vital for emotional self-regulation, learning and memory (Luby et al 2016) and therefore wellbeing and academic outcomes. The value of providing love and care in the early years is explored in more detail in section 2.3.

The majority of studies on professional love have focused on practitioners in early years settings outside of the school system, and in many cases with a younger age group of babies and toddlers. This study seeks to extend this area of knowledge by exploring how love is perceived and enacted at the upper end of the EYFS, and the relevance of professional love as a concept in the Reception class context. Focusing on this context reveals the experience of practitioners who work at the boundary between the Foundation stage of education and Key Stage 1. This is currently a contested site in which discourses of care and love are in tension with an increasing focus on performativity, school readiness and preparing children for more formal approaches to teaching. Reception teachers attempting to enact professional love in this context are likely to come into conflict with the current policy focus, and this study explores the different tensions and challenges faced by the participants, including pressure to act in ways that are contrary to their own understanding of effective practice (Osgood, 2006; Robert-Holmes, 2015; Moore & Clarke, 2016). These pressures are reflected in Diana's story about Aaron, where she recognises that, on a normal day, she would have had to focus on phonics rather than the child's emotional wellbeing.

This study involves five Reception class teachers from a range of schools that serve very different communities. The teachers met five times across an academic year and at these meetings they told stories about love, discussed their practice and used a visual mapping tool to represent their relationships with the children in their class. Page (2018) argues that professional love as part of early years practice is currently devalued and excluded from training and policy, leaving practitioners to form their own models of practice without support or opportunities for discussion and reflection. Although my primary focus in my study was on understanding professional love in the reception years context, the research also helps to address the issue Page raises through the use of narrative and collaborative approaches and a relationship-mapping tool. This combination of narrative, collaborative and creative methods supports participant reflection and discussion and the participants' explorations of professional love and relationships and the tensions between this aspect of practice and their wider roles as Reception class teachers. The research design was influenced by participative research methodologies and was a co-operative inquiry in which the participants explored their own practice through reflection and discussion.

As well as the wider early years context, it is important that my own context and positionality are made explicit, as they have contributed both to the selection of the research focus and the design of this study.

#### **1.4 Positionality**

My own personal history and experience of developing and delivering early years education and care – and the personal beliefs that brought me to this career choice – have impacted both my selection of the research focus and my choice of methodology and research methods. Therefore, in this section I acknowledge that I hold a specific perspective about the nature and purpose of ECEC and the role and responsibilities of educators in this field. Allies (1999) encourages the researcher to explore these factors openly:

The researcher, then, should ask what is the image that is held about the research area and what is the conjuncture of personal history and cultural forces that prompted the research interest, and influences the research process. (Allies, 1999, p. 2)

I had a varied career prior to becoming a teacher in my 30s when I had a young family. I had studied sociology at university and then worked for a number of years as a civil servant. In this role I became branch secretary for 500 members working in benefit offices and job centres. I strongly believed that we had to fight to protect our rights and for wider social justice and led one of the longest all-out strikes at that time in civil service history. I enrolled on an MA programme in Women's Studies and my dissertation was about the impact of the strike action on women's lives. Later, I was demoted and compulsorily transferred from my job for trade union activity and spent two years fighting (successfully) to be reinstated to my former grade. Following this, I left the civil service to do a PhD on trade unions and women activists but abandoned this when I had children. These experiences forged my political views and led to my commitment to the need for collective action in the fight for social change and social justice. I trained as a primary school teacher in inner city schools where I believed that I could make the most difference in line with my views on social justice. Tripp (2012) considers that critical incidents such as these shape the theory of practice that teachers bring to and develop within their professional life and they inform professional judgement. As I reflect on the principles that have motivated the type of work I have undertaken, these formative experiences have been hugely influential as I have continued to be drawn to co-operative and collective endeavour to address and overcome challenges.

My own professional career in early years spans a time of huge changes in the sector and the roles I have undertaken have enabled me to see their impact at first hand. During the period of neighbourhood nurseries and local SureStart programmes I worked to implement these initiatives in one specific community where I had initially worked as a supply teacher in the school nursery. This area of the northern city I worked in was characterised by poor housing, poor educational outcomes, low levels of employment and high levels of chronic ill-health. These factors, however, masked a vibrant community that engaged with and shaped the delivery of ECEC policies during my time there. As an area of multiple deprivation it was targeted for the full range of early years initiatives and policy drivers within this period, and I was an integral part of this as I went on to become a community development worker, family centre manager and, ultimately, the project director of a local charity delivering a full range of early

years' services and community resources including a 60-place nursery, adult learning, women's health and a community café. These services were delivered, as far as possible, by building capacity in the community to take on these projects, including supporting community members to become qualified early years practitioners.

These experiences, together with my earlier roles, led me to see nurseries as potential catalysts for change, where professionals (drawn from the community) worked closely with parents and developed services that reflected the local context. These services could support community development and change outcomes for children and families. Within my work I identified that developing positive relationships with children and families was crucial to fully supporting children's learning and development and this kindled my interest in emotional development as the bedrock for learning. This interest was further cemented when I became aware of relational pedagogy and trauma-informed practice through my role as a part-time academic in a university, and I was able to take this practice back into the centre where I worked.

This period of excitement and hope for change covered the ten years of the Labour government in which the early years curriculum was introduced and educators were encouraged to focus on the unique child (DCSF, 2008) and their holistic development, including their personal, social and emotional development. In 2010 the policy pendulum started to swing back: early years funding was cut and by 2014 the family centre and all related services had closed.

These experiences and my own personal, professional and academic development have led me to believe that the current social and educational policy is in conflict with my understanding of children as unique individuals with the potential to grow in a multitude of directions when supported through positive caring relationships within ECEC. In the absence of a move to what Moss (2015) terms 'real utopias' in ECEC where children, families, communities and professionals develop centres that are based on democracy and experimentation, then it is by prioritising and supporting children's emotional wellbeing and development through loving relationships that we will enable them to develop the resilience and self-regulation to engage with life and



learning. This resilience will also be required to deal with the inequalities that many will face. The focus and research questions in this study on professional love are therefore shaped by these experiences and beliefs, and the research design itself is underpinned by the collaborative relationships and principles that I believe are necessary to support changes in practice.

## **1.5 Research questions**

This study is the culmination of a Doctorate in Education programme which commenced in 2016. My focus from the start of the programme has been on relationships between practitioners and children within the EYFS, however the focus on professional love in the Reception class context evolved through my reading and initial taught assignments over the first two years. During this time one of my assignments was to conduct what was described as a pilot study and which became the first phase of the main study. The pilot – conducted with three Reception teachers in spring 2018 – highlighted that although the tensions of performativity and accountability, which my reading had indicated would be significant, were factors that impacted on the teachers' practice, they held on to loving relationships as a central part of their professional role and were committed to it as an ethical approach. These findings shaped the research questions for the final study which took place across the 2018/19 academic year, with termly meetings and discussions. My reading and understanding of the current context highlighted the complexity and multi-faceted nature of perceptions of the love and relationships that exist between early years educators and the children in their care. They also revealed the tensions between this aspect of practice and the emphasis on performativity and data in Reception classes and concerns about school readiness.

Zembylas (2007) proposes that there has been a great emphasis in research on teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, but that the emotional knowledge they hold is an extremely important dimension as it sets the emotional tone for both children and adults. Zembylas argues that future research should focus on this aspect, as the acknowledgement of the emotional dimension of teaching has the potential to

enrich teachers work and lives... and such research will contribute to a fuller understanding of the impact of emotions on the personal wellbeing and motivation of teachers (Zembylas, 2007, p. 366).

Consideration of these factors and the results of the pilot study informed and aided the development of specific research questions for this study which could surface and explore this implicit aspect of early years practice:

1. How do Reception class educators develop and maintain positive relationships with the children in their classes?
2. How do Reception class educators manage the competing pressures of their role?
3. What does love look like in a Reception class?
4. In what ways is 'professional love' a relevant concept in the Reception class context?
5. Are there other terms or concepts relating to relationships with children that have greater resonance for Reception teachers?

Before outlining the thesis and content structure I will summarise the research activities that took place across the pilot and the main study (Table 1).

Table 1 Research study timeline

Date	Activity
Spring 2018	Pilot study involving three Reception teachers using a writing frame to support telling a story of love in a group, followed by a discussion.
Summer 2018	Research questions finalised and additional mapping tool developed for main study. Ethical approval obtained.
2018/19 academic year	Main study involving five Reception teachers meeting across the year to tell stories of love, discuss professional love and map their relationships with the children in their classes each term.

## 1.6 Research design and methods

In designing the research my aim was to adopt an approach that would reveal the complexity of loving relationships in a school context and enable the active participation of the teachers in the study. I employed a narrative methodology and drew on the participatory research paradigm to create a collaborative space for critical reflection on an aspect of practice that is implicit, and rarely brought into the arena of professional discussion. Ultimately, I also wanted the research

to have the potential to have a practical and positive impact on early years teachers and the children in their care.

This is a qualitative study, and the methodology and methods draw on narrative methodology and are influenced by the participatory inquiry paradigm. The narrative methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; 1996) is employed to capture teachers' stories about love in the Reception class, focusing on the secret stories of practice that teachers tell each other in spaces away from the school setting. The study has collaborative elements in that the participants have been encouraged to see themselves as researchers who are involved in reflection and who have gained new insights into their role and practice through group discussion. The methodology is not fully participatory but is informed by the work of Bensimon, Polkington, Bauman and Vallejo (2004), who proposed a form of participatory research in which participation is a key feature once the research questions and methods have been selected.

The methods selected to promote reflection and discussion were a writing frame to support the participants to tell a story of love from their Reception class practice and a mapping tool on which the participants recorded their relationships with all the children in their class across the school year. Following an initial meeting in September the participants attended termly discussion groups where they each told a story of love, shared their maps and discussed their perceptions of the concept of professional love. The specifics of how to use the map and the terms associated with professional love were co-constructed as the study progressed.

The stories and discussions had all identifying features removed prior to thematic analysis. The findings from the data were separated into three distinct areas: the faces and mask of professional love; the benefits and challenges of enacting professional love and the impacts of taking part in the collaborative research process.

## **1.7 Thesis outline**

In this section I set out the structure and scope of each of the chapters in the thesis to illustrate how these arguments are built and developed over the course of the study.

### **1.7.1 Chapter 1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines why this area of research is presently under-researched, as discussions of professional love have largely focused on the first three years of EYFS, rather than the final Reception year. I use an example of a story from the pilot study to illustrate why this aspect of practice is important to Foundation stage teachers and the tensions that are experienced between enacting professional love and meeting accountability and data demands. These tensions are expanded upon in a review of the current early years context and the changes that are taking place in the EYFS in England.

I consider the impact of the current context on Reception teachers' loving relationships. I consider my own positionality and the experiences that have shaped my beliefs and approach to research. Finally, I outline the research aims and questions and the rationale for the research design and the contribution to knowledge made by this study.

### **1.7.2 Chapter 2 Concepts of love, care, relationships and professionalism in early years**

In this chapter I initially consider how Reception teachers may have to consider their professionalism in different ways to other early years practitioners because of the school context in which they work. It is important to understand the implications of this working context and the impact it may have on the way that loving relationships are enacted.

The literature on love and care is primarily focused on early years settings caring for younger children prior to school entry. I consider the research in this field and its relevance to Reception class practice. The main focus of this research study is the concept of professional love, and therefore its origins and principles and relevant studies are explored, identifying the potential implications for how it is enacted in a school context.

To understand why loving practice is prioritised by some practitioners and is a growing area of interest for practitioners and academics, I consider the literature on the value and impact of enacting loving relationships on children's social, emotional and cognitive development. This chapter concludes with a summary of how love is represented and supported in professional education and values.

### **1.7.3 Chapter 3 Methodology and methods**

In this chapter I set out a more detailed justification for the use of a narrative methodology and a collaborative approach influenced by participatory enquiry methodology to explore love as an implicit and complex element of practice. I also explore the challenges that this presents in a doctoral research study. I set out the rationale for the combination of narrative and creative methods and provide a brief outline of the pilot study which leads into the ethical considerations. Alongside the formal ethics processes I explore three specific ethical areas that arose at the pilot stage and in the main study: researching from within; arousing strong emotion and confidentiality.

I outline the activities that took place during the year-long data collection period and explain how a combination of story sharing, group discussion and relationship mapping was used to generate information about the teachers' perceptions of loving relationships and how these are constructed, enacted and articulated.

I provide an overview of the methods of data analysis that were employed to make sense of the data generated and discuss the challenges and limitations these approaches presented. Finally, I describe how these analytical processes supported the development of a series of themes, both from the stories and the discussions they generated.

### **1.7.4 Chapter 4 The faces of professional love**

In the first findings chapter the concept of professional love as it could be applied in a Reception class context is considered. During the study, the group discussions, stories of love and relationship-mapping methods provided the space and time for reflection on this aspect of practice, and enabled the participants to differentiate the different types of love they felt and enacted in the classroom. These different aspects of love are themed as four different 'faces' of love that are presented to children and a 'mask' of love that is more complex, as it involves meeting the adult's emotional needs as well as those of the children. The faces are identified as 'natural love', which the participants characterised as love which flows naturally and easily because of the disposition of the child and their response to the teacher; 'loving touch' or the physical expressions of loving relationships; 'tough' love which, although never

clearly defined in the discussions, appears to encompass setting boundaries, helping children to understand and meet the expectations placed on them and developing appropriate social skills in the classroom; 'effortful' love, which describes the conscious and intentional process of building relationships with children who are challenging in the classroom context or who are difficult to build relationships with because of their previous experiences.

The process of reflection and discussion about love led the participants to start to analyse and question their own motivations and emotional needs and what part loving children played in meeting these. This is the final aspect of love and the term 'mask' is used to describe the complexity of this enactment of love, although this does not indicate that it is inauthentic or manipulative, rather it is the ongoing process of reaching self-understanding through critical reflection.

#### **1.7.5 Chapter 5 The benefits and challenges of enacting professional love**

The enacting of professional love is clearly identified by all the participants as an important element of their practice and one that forms part of their professional identity as Reception class teachers. They identify loving relationships with children as one of the things that drew them into teaching; however, there are tensions in prioritising love in a school context as it may not be seen as essential by colleagues and senior leadership.

The participants all believed that loving the children in their care supported their learning and development in a holistic way and provided powerful examples of what love looked and felt like in the classroom. Participants described how the love they gave enabled children to flourish and, conversely, highlighted the potentially negative impact of feeling unloved.

Alongside the benefits of professional love, the participants also raise and discuss the challenges of enacting this in the current early years policy landscape. The participants provide a variety of examples of tensions between their loving practice and their accountability as Reception teachers to prepare children for more formal approaches in Year 1.

Other challenges in enacting professional love described by the participants arise from the levels of emotional labour involved. The effort that is required to love the children in their care and the relentless nature of this level of

involvement and investment (continuing even during times that the children were not in school) was noted by all participants.

There were other examples of complexities and dilemmas in enacting professional love, and these included teachers' emotional pain in loving a child who faced challenges and the ambivalent feelings that participants felt towards some children because of their behaviours and responses.

#### **1.7.6 Chapter 6 The impact of this collaborative study**

Alongside the findings relating to different types of professional love and the benefits and challenges of enacting these in a Reception class context, there was a considerable amount of data relating to the impact on participants of being involved in this collaborative study.

In this discussion chapter I consider the impact of taking part in this research study on Reception teachers' practice and focus on three specific areas: increased reflection; consciously focusing on children's emotional needs and proactively addressing children's emotional needs. Taking these changes in practice I then explore how the collaborative nature of the study may have influenced these amendments. As the development and use of the mapping tool was a key collaborative element, I explore in detail how the participants used the relationship-mapping tool and extended its use within their teams. In the final section I consider the wider impacts of taking part in this collaborative study, particularly in relation to providing space and time for reflection and discussion.

#### **1.7.7 Chapter 7 Conclusion**

In this final chapter I revisit the research aims and questions and highlight if and how these were met during the study and any additional themes and potential areas for future research. I explore some of the challenges that arose during the research, including the use of collaborative methods and of researching a community in which I play active role. I consider the implications of this study for early years leaders and practitioners, workforce development and policymakers and highlight implications for the wider sector.

I conclude that this study makes an original contribution to knowledge as it provides new insights into professional love in a school context and indicates that love is complex and shifting and that teachers need extended time and

space to explore this complexity and to understand their own motivations and enactments. I propose that the catalytic power of taking part in a collaborative study is evident in the changes in views and practice that took place over the course of the year-long study and beyond, and that this may have added significance in a post-Covid-19 educational landscape.



## **Chapter 2 Concepts of love, care, relationships and professional identity in early years**

### **2.1 Chapter outline**

In this chapter I explore the literature and research on the value of love and care and professional love and the ethics of care in the field of early years education, acknowledging that in the UK this has so far mainly focused on preschool settings and highlighting that exploring this in schools is a potential area for future research. I consider research into the issues relating to love and care for teachers operating in school contexts and concepts of care in education and early years settings. I then focus specifically on the concept of professional love and loving relationships. Finally, I reflect on the literature on love in relationship to professional education and values.

### **2.2 Introduction**

The main focus of this research study is the concept of professional love. The term brings together the concepts of 'professional' and 'love'; in this chapter, the origins and principles of professional love and relevant studies are explored, identifying the potential implications for how it is enacted in a school context. Relevant studies were identified through searches of social science and education databases focusing on the terms 'professional love', 'love and care', 'ethics of care', 'professional identity' and 'professionalism' combined with 'early childhood', 'early years' and 'reception class', as this study lies at the intersection of these areas. The aim of this review was to identify how concepts love and care had been characterised and explored in relation to ECEC and the relationship between love and care as elements of practice and notions of professionalism and professional identity. Although diverse, these aspects are central to this study as it seeks to extend the research on professional love into the Reception class context and explore how and why teachers may enact it within a policy framework environment that does not articulate love as an aspect of practice, professionalism or professional identity. Current school policies and practices may in fact create tensions and challenges for teachers who prioritise love and relationships and see it as part of their professional identity.

As outlined in section 1.3, the Reception year in England lies at the boundary between the EYFS and Key Stage 1, and while the statutory framework is the same as in preschool settings, there are different demands made on Reception teachers. This positioning has led to the Reception year being a contested site and the current emphasis on 'school readiness' has led to an increased focus on children gaining specific knowledge and skills during this year. The demands for more formal teaching and data on children's progress within this first year in the school context means that, in order to withstand the pressures of performativity and maintain the principles of 'care-full' and loving practice, Reception teachers may need to 'fly under the radar' and follow their principles while ostensibly following school and national policy demands for data (Cox & Sykes, 2016). This impact on Reception teachers' professional identity is considered later in the chapter.

Many of the studies on love and care are focused on early years settings caring for younger children prior to school entry, and within this chapter I consider the relevance of this research to Reception class practice. To understand why loving practice is prioritised by some practitioners (and is a growing area of interest for practitioners and academics) I consider the literature on the value and impact of enacting loving relationships on children's social, emotional and cognitive development. This chapter concludes with a summary of how love is (or is not) represented in the professional education of early years educators, and how it is supported in practice.

The focus of my study evolved by considering previous research on care and loving relationships in the early years; in an initial review of the research literature I found that very few studies in the area of care and loving practice had been conducted in the Reception class context. The research studies identified were either with younger children in the UK or with the kindergarten age group (children aged between 3 and 6) in other countries. There are references to caring, and there is a large body of work on professional identity that does cover Reception class teachers, but they are rarely identified separately despite working to different curriculum documents. The qualitative research in these areas that is relevant to this study provides richness and depth in the responses, and this has allowed relevant parallels to be drawn and highlighted areas for further study. The quantitative studies into the impact of

positive early teacher-child relationships are drawn from US, Italian and Dutch studies, and their findings support the importance of ECEC in relation to later school success which were also highlighted in the UK Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj, 2015).

Bringing together the discussion of professionalism, care and love I then go onto discuss how Reception teachers may have to consider their professionalism in different ways to other early years practitioners because of the school context in which they work. It is important to understand the implications of this working context and the impact it may have on the way that loving relationships are enacted.

### **2.3 The value of love and care**

As outlined in Chapter 1, love and care in the early years is vital for future outcomes as it supports the development of the brain architecture and executive function and the ability to self-regulate which are crucial for learning. Although love and care are rarely made explicit in relation to early years training practice, there are a range of studies that indicate that they support young children's learning and development and are identified as a key aspect of practice by early years educators. The role of caring in early years teaching and teacher education has been explored in the US and Canadian context (Goldstein, 1999; 2002; Goldstein & Lake, 2000; O'Connor, 2008) revealing that care is regarded as a core aspect of teaching and one that reflects teachers' beliefs about their role, although this may be in the form of an idealised view of teaching. Research in a US kindergarten context (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Schmitt, Pentimonti & Justice, 2012; Murray, Murray & Waas, 2007) indicates that warm, supportive and positive relationships between teachers and children support children's adjustment to the school environment, developing a positive view of school and impacting attainment in areas such as language acquisition, reading and grammar. The same research indicates that conflicted and dependent relationships could be linked to socio-emotional difficulties. The bidirectional nature of the relationship between positive attachment to preschool teachers and children's school readiness and the ability to make optimal use of the preschool learning environment is highlighted in an Italian study of 152 children aged between 4 and 5 (Commodari, 2013)

and raises interesting points for researching this in the Reception age group in England with the related current emphasis on school readiness. In this study children who arrived at preschool with experience of positive, loving relationships were able to make similar relationships with their teachers; this in turn supported their development as they were able to explore and make use of the learning environment from their secure emotional base. Children who had not had these experiences struggled to make this bond with their teacher. Commodari (2013) concluded:

The results of the present study revealed that children's secure base behaviour in relationship to their preschool teachers is related to social competence and most of the cognitive and behavioural skills involved in school readiness (Commodari, 2013, p. 131).

Uusiautti and Määttä (2013) consider the role of early childhood teachers as love-based leaders in the Finnish context and the positive impact this could have on children's wellbeing and outcomes. They argue that there is significant evidence that children respond to love-based leadership that consistently demonstrates love, forgiveness and trust with "engagement, productivity, and satisfaction" (p. 112).

The small-scale nature of some of these studies and a lack of consistency between children's and adults' perceptions of the quality of their relationships (Murray et al., 2007) highlights that this is an area that requires further research. But there is consistency in the findings that warmth and nurture have a positive impact and that a lack of closeness is linked to externalising problems leading to potentially challenging behaviour in later school years (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). The fact that these studies indicate that warm relationships support adjustment to the school environment are important for the study of relationships between teachers and children in the English Reception class context, as this is the first year of statutory schooling and the debate about school readiness is sited here.

The impact of less positive teacher-child relationships is indicated in a Canadian research project that uses a person-centred analysis approach with Reception-aged children (Hughes, Bullock & Coplan, 2014). This research found that children who have either a conflicted or dependent relationship with their teacher are most at risk of socio-emotional difficulties. This research gathered

evidence from the combined perspectives of teachers, children and parents. Children's perceptions of the levels of warmth and support in their relationships with their teachers were also explored in a Dutch study of children aged 5 years. This study found that children who felt that their teacher did not care for them or lacked warmth were more likely to display maladaptive behaviour that manifested as social inhibition in girls and aggressive behaviour in boys (as categorised by their teachers) (Split, Koomen & Mantzicopoulos, 2010). This research has strong implications for practice in Reception classes as "[t]eachers need to be mindful of children's need for belongingness that involves being cared about, valued and recognised as individuals" (p. 436).

This research also highlights that the children's response to the teacher could also be influenced by their experiences of relationships with adults prior to starting kindergarten. However, challenging behaviour need not always be a barrier to forming positive relationships. Rytivaara and Frelin's (2017) study of Swedish teachers' challenging relationships with children in their classes found that, where teachers were asked to write stories about children who had caused trouble and children who had given joy, there was an overlap. The teachers reported that where they had worked to build a trusting relationship they were able to have a significant impact on the child's life, which they found rewarding. The scope of these research projects did not include teachers' attitudes to forming close relationships to the children in their care, or if this was a priority within their practice.

The notion of the complexity of relationships and the impact of the previous experiences of teachers as well as children is explored in the work of Albin-Clark, Shirley, Webster and Woolhouse (2016) in their small-scale study of four early years teachers. This study was conducted using a life history approach and revealed the impact that teachers felt their familial caring roles had on their ability to empathise with and care for children and their realisation in one case that positive relationships actually foster learning and are a crucial part of teaching:

"I was like 'this is it' this is what it is all about" (Victoria) (p. 7).

In their study of Italian early years teachers, Ornaghi, Agliati, Pepe and Gabola (2020) found that teachers' existing beliefs about children's emotions played a

significant role in how they responded to them. They identified two main styles that teachers adopted in socialising children to emotion: either coaching them to help them to process and regulate their emotional state or dismissing or minimising children's emotions. Ornaghi et al. (2020) cite a range of studies that indicate that coaching supports children's ability to self-regulate and that dismissing children's emotions leads to poorer self-regulation. Ciucci, Baroncelli, Toselli and Denham's (2018) study of 382 early years teachers in Italy also found a link between this emotional coaching style and teachers' willingness to engage parents in discussions about their child's emotional development.

There is evidence that focusing on positive and loving relationships benefits young children in terms of school adjustment, social and emotional development and attainment in some areas of the curriculum, and benefits the early years educator in terms of job satisfaction. Enacting loving relationships also brings a range of challenges; in an early years educator's ability to utilise relationships in this way; the competing demands of the teacher role and the previous experiences that the child brings to the relationship. Having established why love and care may be valued, in the following section I return to concepts of professionalism in relation to love and care to explore the interface between these elements in a school context.

## **2.4 Concepts of professionalism**

As stated above, the construct of professional love brings together the concepts of 'professional' and 'love' to consider loving relationships in professional contexts and between professionals and those they are in relationships with. However, professionalism itself is a concept that is much debated. In this section, I briefly outline analyses of teacher professionalism in order to frame later discussions of professional love.

To comprehend the current models of professionalism experienced by teachers in England it is important to understand how these have evolved over time. Hargreaves (2000) argues that there have been four ages of professionalism: the first age was the pre-professional era up to the mid-twentieth century, in which teachers learnt their craft firstly from being students themselves and then from being apprenticed to more experienced teachers. In this period teaching

was a demanding role, but not a technical one. Teachers learnt the classroom craft of transmission and classroom discipline. The second age of professionalism developed in the 1960s and 70s and is that of the autonomous professional. In this era, it was recognised that teaching could take many different forms and could be adapted to meet the needs of individual learners, but the approach was very much left to the individual, which could be isolating. The third age was that of collegial professionalism, from the 1980s to the end of the twentieth century, during which educational reform took place at such a pace teachers needed to work together to respond and to develop their practice. Hargreaves proposes the fourth age was post-modern professionalism, in which teachers were faced with increased policy demands and social issues – creating tensions and intolerable pressures and leading to difficulties with teacher recruitment and retention. This fourth age foreshadowed the current era of accountability and performativity, in which teachers are judged or rated against targets such as the number of children achieving a GLD by the end of the Foundation stage.

The changing nature of professionalism in an era of performativity has been considered in a number of studies encompassing teaching and early years. Accountability can be viewed as having eroded the trust that society previously had in teachers' professional judgement (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002). Halstead (1994, cited in Sachs, 2016) identified two types of accountability that are relevant to this study: the first is contractual accountability, in which educators meet specified targets set by others which in the context of the Reception class would be achieving the Early Learning Goals (DfE, 2017). Sachs (2016) highlights that the pressures of contractual accountability reduce the drive for innovation, risk and change. This view is echoed in Buchanan's (2016) study of US teacher identity, which found that performativity and the production of data was leading to a loss of autonomy and an associated de-professionalising of teaching, as practitioners become technicians rather than professionals. The second form of accountability identified by Halstead is responsive accountability, in which educators themselves set the goals based on needs and preferences. As it sits outside of the policy framework documents and Professional Standards, I would argue that it is within the notion of

responsive accountability that early years educators work through loving relationships to meet children's individual learning goals and needs.

The concept that educators comply with the current system of performativity and accountability and through their compliance achieve career progression has been described as 'entrepreneurial professionalism' (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002; Sachs, 2016). Sachs (2016) argues that this model of controlled or compliant professionalism leads to a risk-averse workforce that follows policy demands (e.g. the production of data) and modifies existing practices to achieve this. There is evidence that the demands being placed on early years educators to be more business-like and entrepreneurial may be rejected as the perceived masculine qualities of being lean, mean and rational related to this model are seen as inappropriate and incompatible with the caring and quality aspects of the profession (Osgood, 2004). Groundwater and Sachs (2002) argue that the audit society that now exists in education could be responded to in two different ways: through the compliant entrepreneurial approach or through resistance as an 'activist professional'. An activist professional is one who contests policy and seeks space for change and transformation through working collectively with other teachers (Sachs, 2016). These studies and concepts of professionalism have implications for researching professional love in a Reception class context as this is the site of policy demands relating to school readiness and performativity targets (such as ensuring a specified percentage of children reach a GLD) that are potentially incompatible with a focus on love, care and individual needs.

## **2.5 Care in education**

One way of considering professional love is as a recently developed way of looking at a longstanding strand of early years practice that is centred on nurture and care. Focusing on love in an educational context, however, brings challenges. The historical discourse of care as feminised, selfless and natural leads to maternalistic assumptions about the role, and this contributes to the view that caring work lacks professionalism (Warren, 2019) and can therefore create concerns about being judged as unprofessional by colleagues or parents (Taggert, 2015) if love and care is a strong element of practice. This concept of care as unprofessional is not a factor in all early years education contexts. In her study of a New Zealand teacher working with children of Reception class



age, Dalli (2011) finds that teachers place great emphasis on making an individual connection with each child based on their shared history and personal relationship, and see developing and maintaining these caring relationships as a key part of their professional role, and as pedagogically important as other aspects of the curriculum.

The research into professional love in an English nursery context has emphasised the importance of attachment and has focused on children in the earlier years of the EYFS. These studies have highlighted the difficulties in prioritising and supporting these individual attachments in nursery settings (Page & Elfer, 2013; Elfer & Page, 2015). One of the complicating factors is the perceived dichotomy between care and education, with the caring role for children under 3 being deemed inferior to the education of 3- and 4-year-olds (Page & Elfer, 2013; Elfer & Page, 2015). Research into the emotional capital that early years workers bring to their role, including empathy, insight and resilience, indicates that these are seen as practical wisdom rather than the more highly valued technical and scientific forms of knowledge (Yarrow, 2015), echoing the perceived opposition of the rational to the emotional. This finding has implications for researching loving relationship in a Reception class context, as this takes place in an 'educational' setting; the views of those working in this context may be influenced by this perceived hierarchy in education and care with this final year of the Foundation stage being a context for the rational and technical rather than the emotional. O'Connor, Robinson, Cranley, Johnson and Robinson (2019) find that pre-service trainee teachers believe love is an essential part of their practice and unanimously agree that children's right to be loved extended into their care and education environments. The trainee teachers were able to articulate the distinction between love and care:

Love is genuine, it is seeing the best in the child. You can care for the child and not necessarily love them... But the child can tell the difference... it's being genuine versus doing what you need to do as a carer (p. 4).

O'Connor et al. (2019) draw on Cloninger's work (2008) on three types of love: romantic love (*eros*), the love of friendship (*philia*) and finally the deepest, unconditional love (*agape*) that could be applicable in a pedagogical context. O'Connor et al. argue that the love his pre-service teachers are describing is

*agape*, as there is no expectation or need to receive love in return. This contrasts with the concept of professional love in which the “one-caring and the cared for are reciprocally dependent” (Page, 2018, p. 131).

Page (2018) develops the notion that there is reciprocity in the love and care provided by educators in ECEC, drawing on Gilligan (1982) and Petterson (2011; 2012) to argue that in a mature model of care that takes into account the needs of the carer as well as the cared-for, both can be met. Indeed, to be reciprocal the young child has to let the adult into their lived experience and be in a relationship with the adult (Page, 2018). Although in my study I am drawing on Page’s definition of professional love, the relationships between a teacher and the 30 children in their class will be necessarily different from the keyworker of babies and toddlers who are working in a one-to-three or one-to-four ratio. This study will support an understanding of how far Reception teachers can achieve reciprocity, or if professional love has different elements or appearances in this context.

## **2.6 Concepts of care in early years**

My consideration of professional love is set against a background where the term ‘care’ is used frequently in relation to early years, often as something natural and largely feminine, as opposed to ‘education’. Vogt (2002) developed the concept of care as a continuum with a gendered notion of ‘mothering’ at one end and a broader notion of caring as commitment that includes a wide range of teacher activities at the other. This concept was developed through the study of Swiss and UK primary teachers and their personal interpretations and perceptions of the concept of caring. This study indicates that research in this area requires a careful exploration of the individual meaning that educators attach to the concepts of loving relationships and care, and these personal definitions in relation to loving relationships will be explored within this study.

Practitioners’ views on care can be influenced by how care is portrayed and the emphasis that is placed on it in the early years curriculum guidance documents that practitioners work to (Davis & Degotardi, 2015). The EYFS (DfE, 2017) does refer to warm relationships, but a closer analysis of this statutory framework reveals no other references as to how they could be enacted or achieved. As with the English statutory framework, there is no mention of love in

the Australian EYLF, and while there are 220 references to learning, there are only three references to care (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011, cited in Rouse & Hadley, 2018).

Early years practitioners in England highlight demonstrative ways of showing love physically such as hugging, sitting children on their lap and kissing. Practitioners in Cousins (2017) talk about touch as a way of showing love and stressed that this was important to build children's self-confidence and self-worth as well as to comfort and reassure. These findings contrast with some of the responses in Page's (2014) study on Professional Love in Early Years Settings (PLEYS) where physical contact was included in some practitioner definitions of professional love:

often with some demarcation between acceptable and non-acceptable actions. A small number of practitioners went further to describe that **displays of affection in general must be initiated by the child** (p. 7, original emphasis).

Due to several high-profile sexual abuse cases involving early years practitioners and celebrities there has been an increased concern about love expressed through touch in early years settings in England building on existing tensions between touch and safeguarding. This has been described as a moral panic (Piper & Smith, 2003) where loving touch has been proscribed because of an overriding need to 'protect' children from abuse. The use of physical affection is an important aspect to consider in the UK Reception class context in light of safeguarding concerns and the move to 'no-touch' policies in some primary schools. As Aslanian (2018) and Page (2017) note, while love and touch are seen as important to healthy child development, they can also be perceived as a threat to children's safety. The moral panic created by high profile cases of sexual abuse by teachers and early years practitioners led to new guidance and policies in settings that ostensibly were aimed at protecting children and preventing false allegations against teachers but this has created a situation where children's' needs are removed from the picture.

This context of fear and defensiveness, and the failure to confront the complex issues involved, merely contributes to a general impoverishment of experience and practice for both children and professionals. (Smith and Piper 2003, p. 890)

Loving touch is one of the ways in which we build connection as human beings, and this perception of threat may lead practitioners to withhold physical comfort to children in distress or to fully realise professional love where a child is physically affectionate, and a practitioner feels unable to reciprocate due to concerns about contravening policies or raising safeguarding concerns. In researching professional love in a school context this study provides insights into loving touch as an element of teachers' practice, which is an area that is currently under-researched.

The documents that provide the Professional Standards that teachers must achieve to be awarded their teaching status in England reveal interesting differences between those for teachers working solely in the Foundation stage (DfE, 2013) – who are awarded EYTS – and those who work across the primary-age phase (between 3 and 11 years) and are awarded QTS. There are explicit differences in relation to how they support young children's learning and development. Early years teachers are required to have an understanding of attachment theory and how to promote secure attachments, but there is no mention of the capacity to care (Taggart, 2015). This understanding of attachment is not required of primary teaching trainees and their teacher standards refer only to managing children's behaviour rather than relating to their emotional wellbeing, although there is a standard that requires teachers to maintain good relationships with pupils (DfE, 2013). The influence of the training educators receive and the related guidance documentation may be an area that requires exploration within this research into the Reception year.

Concepts of care and nurture are a longstanding feature of early years practice, and in the next section I will consider how the concept of professional love builds on and differs from these aspects before considering any additionality it may contribute.

## **2.7 Professional love and pedagogical love**

There is a growing interest in the concepts of 'professional love' and 'pedagogical love' as part of the relationship between those who work in early years and the children in their care. As outlined in section 2.4, this can be seen as an extension of the concepts of care and nurture that have long been considered an aspect of early years practice; however, by articulating it as 'love'

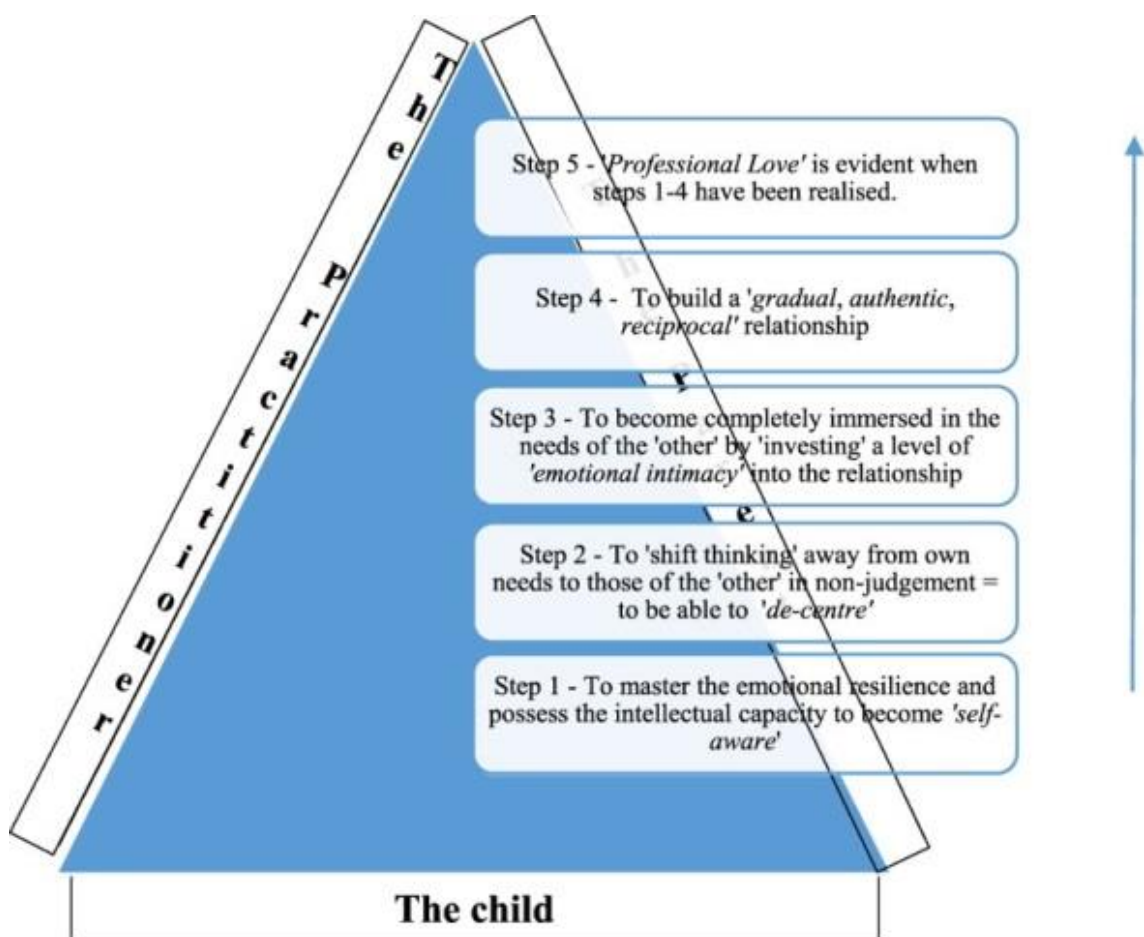
and combining it with notions of professionalism it could also be perceived as contributing a new lens through which to view practice. In the context of the Reception class, enacting professional love to meet children's needs could also create tensions with the current policy focus on each child achieving a specific set of outcomes that are identified as supporting school readiness. In this section I will explore the concepts of professional and pedagogical love and consider their relevance and application in relation to this study.

Aslanian (2015; 2018) argues that, at the birth of the kindergarten movement, the early pioneers conceived of love as a fundamental part of early years practice and that discourses relating to love have diminished as the emphasis on the scientific and the rational aspects of education has grown. Aslanian (2018) reflects on the many aspects and uncertainties of love in early years contexts. This complexity is exemplified in the practitioners' stories of love that Aslanian reconstructs as love poems to surface the different ways in which love is felt and experienced. Aslanian argues that experiences of love are beyond control, in the moment "warmth arises, interest and joy bubble up to the surface" (Aslanian 2018, p.182). Thus, love does not fit into the neoliberal model for ECEC that focuses on rationality, standardisation and results, as it requires individualised and tailored responses to develop relationships with each child. Despite the spontaneous elements outlined by Aslanian (2018) and the individual nature of relationships, there are key elements of close and loving relationships that can be identified and used as tools to talk about love as part of practice.

Page (2011; 2013; 2017; 2018) has been at the forefront of developing the concept of professional love in day care settings, and her research has focused on love, intimacy and care and how this is enacted by the practitioner. Page (2018) acknowledges that this area is challenging to research as there are many definitions of love. As Gratzke (2017, p. 1) notes in his consideration of the meaning of love, "love is what people say it is" and it is complex and open to individual interpretation. Gratzke argues that we cannot grasp love's full potential as it is always evolving; it is performative, as it comes into being through individual occurrences and, finally, the ways in which we experience and present love constantly change through the individual acts of love that are performed.

While acknowledging the complexity, Page (2018) characterises the principles of professional love in early years and provides a tool for thinking about love that she argues will support the development of authentic, reciprocal loving relationships between practitioners and the children in their care. This tool takes the form of a pyramid (see Figure 1) showing the five steps practitioners need to take in their thinking from becoming self-aware, to moving their thinking away from their own needs, to becoming immersed in the needs of the child, through to building gradual, authentic, reciprocal relationships with children.

Figure 1 Thinking about professional love (Page, 2018, p. 125)



Professional love has been realised when these first five steps have been achieved. Page (2018) frames her work as building on Noddings's (1988) 'ethic of care' and proposes that the term is used to describe and explain the reciprocal relationship that develops between practitioner, child and parent. This three-way relationship is described as a 'Triangle of Love' and as complementary, rather than threatening or undermining, to the parent-child relationship. This builds on Page's previous studies (2011; 2013), which

consider professional love in relation to mothers' perspectives of the role of 'love' and 'care' in their childcare arrangements and their view of themselves as 'working mothers'. These research studies found that parents wanted their children to be loved in early years settings. This is also a finding in Rouse and Hadley's (2018) study of Australian early childhood educators and parents' perceptions of love and care, which also indicates that parents wish for educators to love their children.

In addition to identifying the importance of this triangle of love, Page (2018) also argues that professional love should become a component of early years discourse to counter arguments that care and love are not part of professional practice. Professional love should therefore feature in initial training for practitioners and in ongoing professional development and supervision. Page (2018) contends that the stepped model of professional love will support practitioners to develop their own set of values, principles and practice relating to professional love or for settings to generate a collective model or way of enacting professional love.

Page's studies (2011; 2013; 2017; 2018) have mainly focused on early years settings outside of the school system, with a particular emphasis on professional love with infants and toddlers. Page's (2014) study of PLEYS received 793 responses from mainly experienced practitioners, but there is no indication if any of these were practising in a school setting. Currently, professional love does not form part of ITE or the Teacher Standards and therefore introducing this concept and allowing space for reflection and discussion for Reception teachers will support the testing of the relevance and resonance of the concept of professional love in a new context.

Page's work builds on previous work that has identified that the role of the educator involves personal care and the development of a relationship that has depth and involves emotional labour. Lynch (cited in Page, 2011) summarises this as keeping the person who is being cared for 'in mind' and meeting their needs as well as displaying empathy and providing emotional support when they experience distress. The concept of professional love has not been explored in relation to the final year of the Foundation stage in a school context, however the tool for thinking about professional love that Page has developed

(see Figure 1) provides a vehicle to explore relationships between educators and children and identify if this concept resonates with professionals in these settings. In their book, *The Multiple Identities of the Reception Teacher*, Cox and Sykes (2016) identify that love is part of the role and is enacted through consistency, sensitivity, patience and kindness but they also acknowledge that not all teachers will feel comfortable in seeing that as part of their job.

There have been some studies that have considered loving relationships between teachers of children aged between 4 and 5 and the children in their care. In an Australian study of early childhood pre-service teachers (O'Connor et al., 2019) respondents saw love as a central part of their practice and were comfortable to identify this as 'pedagogical love', underpinned by authenticity and a deep knowledge about each child which enabled them to effectively support children's learning. This is consistent with a UK study (Cousins, 2017) of early years practitioners' constructions of love, which found that the participants were comfortable to talk about love as an important element of their own practice. Cousins (2017) develops a definition of love for the purpose of her study: "to love means to have and to express, or show, affection for someone" (p. 17).

The practitioners in the study were able to identify different facets that love in an early years context could present: love to support learning, 'hard' love as a way of teaching life lessons, love to support social development and loving touch. The concept of touch was also important in Haslip, Handy and Donaldson's (2019) US study of how character strengths are modelled to young children. In this study, early years teachers operating in childcare centres (therefore prior to statutory school age) were asked to note examples of their loving behaviour towards children in the classroom and the cases they cited most often were of physical affection in response to children's distress. These were followed by using loving words, joyful activities and actively greeting and listening to children.

Supporting children through loving and care-full practice is not, however, always easy. It comes with challenges from competing pressures and from the level of emotional labour that may be involved in meeting children's needs. The pressures to ready children for the next phase of education in Key Stage 1 can



impact on teachers' relationships with children and their perceptions of the children in their care, particularly in terms of what constitutes a 'good learner' in the Reception class context (Bradbury, 2013). Bradbury (2013) finds that teachers identified children who could self-regulate, make 'rational' choices in their play and display their learning as 'good learners' or 'bright' – as their learning was visible and they could track their progress. Early years educators within a Reception class context identified that it was the children who cannot self-regulate who are often those that are most in need of support with their emotional development through a positive, nurturing relationship with a caring, consistent adult (Aubrey & Ward, 2013). Practitioner interviews revealed an understanding of the benefits of this nurturing approach (Aubrey & Ward, 2013) over behaviourist strategies, but disruptive behaviour can be a barrier to this relationship and children within the Reception class may be labelled as a 'problem' rather than a 'good learner'. MacLure, Jones, Holmes and MacRae's (2012) research into behaviour and reputation in the Reception classroom revealed the tension between the control that teachers had to exert in order for 'learning' to take place and the care they provided for the children.

The conscious effort to create loving relationships with children who are challenging or who have already acquired a negative reputation can be interpreted as a facet of emotional labour. The phrase 'emotional labour' was originally coined by Hochschild (1983) to describe the emotions that professionals experience and work with during the course of their roles. Hargreaves (1998) made the case that teaching is an emotional practice that involves emotional understanding and emotional labour. Teachers' emotions within this practice are inextricably bound with their moral purpose. Hargreaves argues that, when teachers are prevented from achieving their moral purpose because of the imposition of external goals and agendas, then negative feelings of guilt, frustration and anger can be generated.

In their study of a US elementary teacher who identified herself as working through a caring concept of teaching, Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) found the participant reflected on the impact of suppressing many of the emotions she felt in response to children's behaviour to create the positive relationship that would best support learning and progress. This area of ambiguity between the expressed intention of supporting children's emotional development and the

pressures to produce young children who can conform to classroom and curriculum requirements has significant implications for researching professional love in the Reception class context.

Professional love can be seen as a recent articulation of concepts of care and nurturing that are established elements of early years education and care. Love and care are also identified by early years educators as being an important aspect of their practice. Despite this combination of factors, the lack of explicit guidance or support to develop professional love in practice and its absence from training leaves early years educators without the language or space to consider or develop their practice. The concept of professional love developed by Page provides a tool for early years educators to think about, explore and reflect on this aspect of their practice. This is a valuable addition given the inherent tensions in practice outlined above and in section 1.3 in relation to the Reception class context.

## **2.8 Professionalism and love and care in school contexts**

As outlined in section 1.3, Reception teachers are at the interface between two phases of education and are currently facing a range of proposed changes that will lead to more formal teaching approaches within the Reception year and could have an impact on teachers' ability to prioritise loving relationships. The practice of being emotionally engaged and enacting professional love could be seen as an act of cultural resistance and an assertion of our basic human values (Taggart, 2015) in the face of a drive for children to attain a uniform set of competencies. The power to resist the performativity and accountability agenda can come from having a strong shared vision at a school level. In the US, elementary teachers have also faced an increase in standardised testing for their students. Buchanan's (2016) study of teachers in this context found that those with a shared vision with colleagues felt able to resist and push back. There is evidence that teachers' experience of working through relationships and seeing the benefits of relational pedagogy in supporting children's learning can give them the confidence to challenge the drive to abandon play-based learning:

"I think learning about learning gives you a different view of children and makes you see them as more capable (pause) it gave me a bit of balls" (Suzanne) (Albin-Clark et al. 2016, p. 8).

The concept of “critical emotional praxis” (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008, p. 276), drawn from feminist thinking and critical theory, can be related to loving practice in early years school contexts. In critical emotional praxis educators identify the power relations that are at play in relation to emotions in their teaching as well as the local context, and then practically address issues of social justice through their pedagogy. Reception class teachers who prioritise relationships with all children – including those who are perceived as challenging – and who resist the drive for data and to typify students as good learners or otherwise could be deemed as engaging in critical emotional praxis to support all children in their care. Chubbuck and Zembylas highlight that this is emotionally challenging for educators and needs the skills of critical reflection, which again has implications for the training and continuing professional development of early years teachers and for the creation of reflection space.

Operating at the boundary between two phases of education has specific implications for Reception teachers. Orlandi’s (2014) study of the conflicting influences experienced by teachers at the interface between Reception and Key Stage 1 suggests the need for critically reflective professional development to empower teachers and enable them to address the conflicting and competing pressures they face. Orlandi proposes that action research by early years teachers would improve the levels of their knowledge and impact on their actions while empowering them to defend their practice and providing opportunities for continued critical reflection. Through this process the competing pressures experienced by Reception teachers could in fact act as agents for change. Orlandi’s findings have implications for this study, as the time to meet and discuss love and relationships across a school year provides this opportunity for extended critical reflection.

In this chapter I have explored the concepts of professionalism and love and care in early years practice. Finally, I will explore how dispositions to enact love and care may develop.

## **2.9 Developing dispositions of love and care**

How love is introduced in early years educator as an aspect of professional practice is raised in several studies and, as has already been highlighted, it does not appear in the current EYFS (DfE, 2017) or the Professional Standards

for teachers of early years or primary-age phases. Although Albin-Clark et al. (2016) had a limited number of participants; this study raises important questions about how the role of loving relationships should be included in ITE so that teachers enter the profession with this knowledge rather than their understanding evolving through experience. Research with trainee early years teachers found that they were fully aware of the importance of love in their practice (Taggart, 2015) but that consideration of this was totally lacking in their training. The lack of explicit recognition of this aspect of practice then requires each individual teacher to develop their own working model as they move into the profession, a challenge that Page (2018) also highlights for early years educators.

It may be that the care of children has to be lived and experienced in a familial setting (Albin-Clark et al. 2016) to be fully understood and enacted, and studies have found a link between early years teachers' willingness to talk to parents about children's emotions, having experienced parenthood themselves (Ciucci et al., 2018). However, if early years educators, including Reception teachers, experience this in the relationship with their tutors while training and have an understanding that positive relationships facilitate learning and act as a protective factor for children, this may lead them to prioritise this aspect of practice over the demands of performativity and the drive to produce data. Page (2018) argues that professional love as a concept should be introduced in training for early years educators and explored in continuing professional development (CPD) and that supported self-reflection should take place through ongoing supervision to ensure professional love is embedded and supported in practice.

There is a paradox at work in that the drive to narrow the gap between the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their peers by 'driving up' attainment may undermine the relationships that could actually facilitate and support their learning and development and have a lasting impact on attainment. The research findings discussed here also raise interesting questions about why educators still appear to prioritise care and love if it is not part of their training and does not feature within the early years frameworks and standards they work to. These questions will form part of this research study.

With the younger age group within the English Foundation stage there is a body of research about notions of professional love, but this has not been extended into the Reception year that forms the end point of this continuous phase of education. The range of research into the relationship between the teacher and child within the Reception-year age group indicates that it is significant, both in acting as a protective factor, where it is warm and nurturing, and as a risk factor for later school failure, where it is conflicted or where the child is over-dependent. Despite these findings of the significance of the relationship, this has not been translated into guidance for teachers on how to form positive, warm relationships and the implications are that children who may enter school without the levels of emotional development to become 'good learners' may also be those children who do not develop the protective relationship with their teachers and could be labelled as 'problems' even at this early stage of their school career (MacClure et al., 2012). The studies into the teacher-child relationship did not examine teachers' motivation to develop warm, nurturing relationships or how these are established or maintained.

## **2.10 Reflections and implications for this research study**

The range of literature reviewed highlights that the concepts of love and care-full practice are the continuing subject of debate in early years. The increasing demands for teacher accountability, the issue of school readiness and the demands for data have brought this into stark relief in Reception classes in the last three years, but there are very few studies relating to this specifically. The importance of care and warmth is acknowledged by many of the educators in the studies, despite the absence of these aspects of practice in framework documents and training courses. It is not clear how the emphasis on these elements of practice is being perpetuated in the current climate, and some of the studies have highlighted the possibility for this to change as new educators emerge from an education system which emphasises accountability and performativity. There is a need for research in the specific area of Reception classes as this is young children's first experience of the statutory school system and is also the site of these competing demands on educators.

The research into the impact of warm and loving relationships indicates that they have a positive and protective impact on children in terms of school success. Despite these impacts there is little indication of how these positive

relationships are developed or the skills and outlook that ensure that these are fostered for all children, not just those who bring positive experiences of relationships into the classroom and are deemed to be good learners. This study is focused on how these relationships are developed, and this could have implications for how early years educators are trained to work within the Foundation stage. The use of warm and loving relationships to support children's learning and development could also be articulated as a force for social justice as the studies indicate that it acts as a protective factor in school adjustment and future academic success in some aspects of learning. Research – such as this study – into how educators perceive and enact this, could provide important insight into their motivation and aims.

The continuing importance of love and care is a common thread in the research into early years professional identity – despite the growing emphasis on the technical or rational aspects of practice. Early years educators who maintain care and love as a central tenet of their practice in Reception classes are in some ways resisting the technical and rational and maintaining an ethical practice that is not promoted in policy or in terms of the school readiness data for which they are held accountable. What we do not know in relation to Reception class teachers who prioritise love in their practice is how they perceive these loving relationships, why they prioritise them and the different ways in which they enact them in the classroom. Page (2018) has presented a tool for thinking about professional love with a clear set of linear steps that can be worked through that has been tested with early years educators in settings in England. This study will test this model in relation to how Reception teachers perceive the enactment of professional love within the school context. In the following chapter I set out the methodological approach adopted to surface this complex and emotional subject, and the methods employed.

## Chapter 3 Methodology and methods

### 3.1 Chapter outline

I outline the methodology, discuss a narrative approach and highlight the challenges of combining this with elements of collaborative methodology to address the complexity of professional love for Reception teachers. I set out the rationale for the combination of narrative and creative methods. I introduce the participants and detail the combination of story sharing, group discussion and relationship mapping that they participated in. These methods were used to explore the teachers' perceptions of loving relationships and how they are constructed and articulated over a year. I reflect on the ethical considerations, including those that arose at the pilot stage and in the main study. Finally, I describe the approaches to analysis that were employed to make sense of the data generated and discuss the challenges and limitations that these approaches presented. I describe how these analytical processes supported the development of a series of themes, both from the stories and the discussions they generated.

### 3.2 Introduction

At the start of my research, I was concerned to undertake a study that could have positive, practical outcomes for educators and children; that embraced a collaborative ideal and provided a space for Reception teachers to reflect on their practice and identify the ways they develop positive and loving relationships with children in the current context; and to explore how this could be maintained in their practice.

The social research texts and studies that I initially explored appeared to mystify the research process through complex language and terminology, thus removing it from the practical sphere where I hoped that my research could be shared and have an impact. Thomas (2007) explores the dangers of creating a dichotomy between theory and practice and highlights the danger of following particular social theories in education to the extent that they can become disassociated from practice or lead to inappropriate practice:

In summoning theory lies the potential for artificially separating and ranking the intelligent performances demanded of all of us in education -

children, students, teachers and researchers- and subjugating those performances to some elusive, illusionary explanatory phenomenon to which we give the name theory (p. 74).

I did not want the methodology of my research to remove me from the sphere of practice or render my findings unintelligible to those currently in practice. Lather (2006) neatly summarises this challenge: “I am against the kind of methodolatry where the tail of methodology wags the dog of inquiry” (p. 40).

The aspiration to work with practitioners to develop loving practice that supports all children – especially those who may require the support of a loving relationship – to overcome challenges drew me to writers on utopian education.

Researching in early years contexts, Moss (2014) argues that research should be a partnership between academics, practitioners and children that reflects the complexity of early years education and care and does not reduce research to a technical role that produces a given end. Moss proposes that research could play an important role “in developing a democratic politics of education, by applying critical thought and alternative perspectives” (2014, p. 189).

Moss argues that research through this democratic process can aid practitioners to come to an alternative understanding of complex elements of their practice, particularly through critical case studies that have been selected to explore new ways of working. This echoed the disquiet I had felt when exploring ways of researching the focus for my study and provided a gateway into research methodologies that politically and emotionally fitted with the aims of this study. This study is qualitative and includes a narrative approach and collaborative elements to capture some of the emotional aspects, tacit knowledge and complexity of the role of the Reception teacher in both caring for and educating children. Adopting a narrative methodology for this study enabled the participants to articulate and make-meaning of an implicit aspect of practice that is not represented in training or policy frameworks through the retelling of incidents that they felt represented loving relationships between themselves and the children in their care. Genuine stories from the real lives of teachers “offer opportunities for reinterpretations, and allow for exploration into the underlying principles of teaching practice” (Appl & Yorde, 2005, p. 310).



The subject of professional love is hidden within the community of early years practice and absent from training but is acknowledged as of crucial importance to children's emotional wellbeing and forms part of the tacit knowledge of practitioners. Making this aspect explicit by recounting stories of love and providing space and time to explore the stories and the concept of professional love collectively through a collaborative research approach was in keeping with both my personal commitment to a democratic approach and my understanding of the power of participative research. As there was no previous research on professional love with Reception teachers, I wanted to hear their stories to understand how they perceived and enacted this aspect of practice. As professional love is a very personal and complex issue, the use of personal, narrative methodology is appropriate. My intention was to combine narrative methodology with a collaborative approach that would enable the participants to contribute to the research design and analysis. In practice, this aim proved to be ethically and practically challenging and I was forced to re-evaluate how far I could draw on participatory research methodology within the scope of this study. In the next sections I justify and outline the use of a narrative methodology; explore the challenges of combining this with collaborative methodologies and explain the adaptations that were made to address these.

I use the metaphor of the banyan tree to further elucidate the collaborative professional development elements of my methodological approach and how it holds the possibility of impacting on practice. I detail the research methods and the longitudinal research activity undertaken from the pilot to the end of the main study. Finally, I have explored the ethical considerations arising from this study in some detail, as well as the ways in which the data has been analysed.

### **3.3 Narrative research methodologies**

This study uses narrative research methodologies to surface the complexities of loving relationships through individual stories of love. Gubrium and Holstein (2009) highlight that analysing stories allows the researcher to note the similarities and differences that exist between lives and worlds, noting that:

The substance of one social world can differ in both kind and degree from the substance of another. Here, too, the extent to which they are categorically differentiated is the basis of tales about types of social worlds and how they differentially affect individuals (p. 3).

Clandinin and Connelly (1996) recognise that teachers make sense of their practice and their working context through stories. They divide the stories teachers tell into three types: the sacred (theory-driven and shared by practitioners, policymakers and theoreticians), the secret (the stories of actual practice told mainly to other teachers in secret places) and cover stories (stories in which teachers portray themselves as expert and fit within acceptable stories of that particular school).

Regardless of whether this is an accurate or complete typology of teachers' stories, the idea of secret stories resonates with the purpose of the study. The narrative element of this study's methodology was selected as the focus of professional love is not an element of practice that is commonly discussed and therefore, potentially, falls into the 'secret story' category (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). The stories told by the teachers in this study are the secret stories of their own personal practice, told to other teachers in a 'secret' space away from the school context. The use of narrative within the study is congruent with the focus on professional love, as the participants provide rich information on an otherwise hidden aspect of practice to fuel reflection and group discussion.

The stories provided by participants in this study relate to the hidden world of love and relationships as underlying principles of their teaching practice. Although my focus here is on the 'secret' stories, in telling these narratives the participants also gave insight into their 'cover' stories (as they tried to fit into the school system) and 'sacred' stories (related to the performative outcomes expected of them). The tensions and strategies relating to these aspects is explored in section 5.4.

Researchers who use stories and narratives see these as meaning-making strategies by the teller and reconstructions of events rather than a representation of facts or of a single truth (Bailey & Tilley, 2002). Lemley and Mitchell (2011) set out the key ideas of narrative inquiry, many of which are specifically congruent with both the subject matter and the collaborative nature of this study. They emphasise that the approach enables researchers to analyse human experience while challenging the positivist notion that there is a single truth. They identify a critical event approach, in which critical events that have impacted on the participant can reveal issues about power and privilege.

The important events relating to love and practice that the participants were invited to contribute to this study are consistent with the notion of critical incidents as they have the ability to make explicit tensions, issues of power and hidden elements of practice (Lemley & Mitchell, 2011).

Although the epistemological foundations of narrative research are contested, I concur with Caduri (2013) that we are entitled to accept outcomes of narrative research if they are plausible and persuading, if they include stories about actual classroom practice and meet an ethical criterion that connects the teacher's actions to a 'vision of the good':

These teleological explanations refer to the ethical ends upon which people act, therefore they hold justificational force, i.e. they function as reasons one provides in order to justify one's behaviour (Caduri, 2013, p. 48).

In inviting participants to tell their stories of love, I hoped to expose the 'visions of good' (Caduri, 2013) that underpin the participants' practices. Narrative analysis may be particularly powerful in understanding motivations for practice (Jones, 2019).

Norum (2000, p. 5) argues that ensuring that these voices are heard forms part of the "heresy of narrative inquiry" as it can highlight what is actually happening within classrooms as a result of policies and frameworks, rather than focusing only on their stated intention. Teachers' narratives can therefore play an important role in bringing about new understandings in education and the stories they tell about education can challenge the status quo:

It is possible that if we do not seek out and listen to each other's stories about public education, our children's children will have to accept an education system we consider atrocious (Norum, 2000, p. 8).

Telling stories about loving practice from the contested site of Reception class practice offers the possibility of revealing the tensions and challenges teachers face there on a daily basis.

### **3.4 Methods to combine narrative and collaborative approaches**

The literature review on relationships between teachers and children highlighted myriad factors that could impact the educators' perceptions and enactment of professional love and/or loving relationships. This review indicated that the

complexity would be best explored using a combination of research methods including narrative, discussion-based and creative elements to capture a holistic impression of some of the factors that impact the relationships between educators and children. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note: “the principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways” (cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 14).

However, this approach alone would not support the level of discussion and reflection required to gain understanding of the complexity of professional love and a combination of research tools were required to achieve this. The methods selected were a writing frame to support the writing of a story about a relationship with a specific child (Appendix 8), information about professional love (Appendix 4) and a visual sociogram (Appendix 9) to map relationships with all children in the class across the academic year. These methods were selected to allow participants to give voice to their experiences and perceptions in a variety of ways so that those who prefer to talk in groups and those who would prefer time to reflect quietly on personal experiences and feelings can express them in their preferred way.

The writing frame, storytelling and discussion were tested during the pilot study conducted in the summer term in 2018. The pilot study brought together a group of three Reception class educators who had expressed an interest in the subject area at a regional meeting of a national early years charity where I had talked about my research area. During the course of the pilot study the participants identified that the focus on telling stories about incidents relating to love prevented an exploration of how loving relationships developed and changed over time, and the range of relationships teachers have with the children in their care. The participants in the pilot also identified that the process of telling a story about a specific incident or child did not allow them to express their concerns about children who did not readily come to the attention of the teacher, and that these children also needed attention and support. As the stories relate to a critical incident, there was the risk that the relationships with these ‘invisible’ children would not be revealed unless participants chose to focus on them. This issue resonates with some of the critiques of narrative analysis as it can focus on what makes a ‘good story’ rather than more

mundane incidents (Smith, 2009). This further highlighted the need to adopt research methods that capture the range of relationships between the Reception teacher and the children in their class. (A more detailed consideration of the running of the pilot study, ethical considerations and the influence this had on the main study is contained in Appendix 2).

To address this potential weakness in the research design a sociogram in the form of a relationship-mapping tool was added to the methods for the main study.

In the following section I consider each of the methods used in bringing together narrative and collaborative approaches and the rationale for the inclusion of the mapping tool.

### **3.4.1 The writing frame**

To support the participants to tell their stories relating to love, a writing frame was developed (Appendix 8). The frame opened with some contextual information about the participant to set the scene for the stories. This was only shared when the group met for the first time. The frame asked the participants to describe a significant incident that related to loving relationships with a child or children in their Reception class, and to reflect on it using the following questions to help guide the writing:

1. Why do I view the incident like that?
2. What did I say to the child?
3. What would I have liked to say to them but left unsaid?
4. What other action would I have taken but felt unable to do?
5. What did I say to the management team about what happened?
6. What would I have liked to say to them but left unsaid?

The participants also received information about Page's (2017) definition of professional love to provide context for the study and explain the concept (Appendix 4). These stories could be described as critical incidents. Orlandi (2014) identifies that the sharing of thoughts about significant incidents is an important tool for reflection: "It is the sharing of thoughts, often instigated by critical incidents or 'disturbances' (Mason, 2002), that leads to critical reflection" (p. 305).

The participants prepared their stories in advance on the writing frame document and then told these stories at the termly group meetings with additional details provided as they discussed them with the group. The stories provided the starting point for discussions about professional love and the participants provided additional thoughts, reflections and details verbally. For completeness I used the transcripts of the stories that were told and the written stories to create a 're-storied' version that contained all the material relating to the specific incident and returned to the participants for member reflection (see section 3.10.3).

### **3.4.2 The group meetings**

The participants met across the school year to tell their stories of love, discuss issues relating to professional love that arose from these stories and to discuss their relationships with children using the mapping tool as a pictorial representation of the above.

Page (2018) highlights that professional love is not currently part of initial training or professional development, and therefore practitioners have to develop their own working model in isolation. Page suggests that practitioners need space for reflection and discussion with others, through supervision, to articulate and develop this aspect of practice. Scaife (2010, cited in Hewitt, 2015) notes that, while personal reflection is important in professional development, group discussion and reflection can create an environment that raises consciousness about the beliefs that underpin practice. Kuusisaari (2013) found that group discussions away from the school setting enabled teachers to break away from existing practice by providing a social context for collaboration. Rearick and Feldman (1999, cited in Fazio, 2009) argue that collaborative reflection can bring greater clarity to aspects of practice or issues that may only currently be individually perceived, leading to problem solving and possible changes in practice.

As the concept of professional love is one that is implicit and individual, it was important to provide a space for reflection and discussion that would allow this aspect of practice to be surfaced and made explicit. The inclusion of group discussions as a method within the study enabled the participants to develop

their understanding of their own working model of professional love, and that of the other participants.

The group discussions supported the narrative methodology as they provided an opportunity to develop and discuss the stories from the writing frame and for participants to identify commonalities and differences in their experiences and relationships that furthered their individual and shared understanding of professional love.

### **3.4.3 The relationship-mapping tool**

The pilot study revealed that the participants aimed to build close and loving relationships with the children in their classes, but there were many factors that impacted who they focused their attention on and their ability to meet these children's needs. These included the complexity of children's needs, pressures of the curriculum, class size and approaches to behaviour. Discussions with the participants indicated that relationships shifted and changed over time, and this informed the selection of methods for the main study as the stories alone only captured an individual relationship at a moment in time, although the writing frame supported an explanation of the build-up and some subsequent events. After exploring possible ways of capturing the teacher-child relationships over the course of the year-long study, a form of visual sociogram was selected that consisted of concentric circles – with the teacher at the centre and each ring representing the level of intimacy of the relationship, decreasing in closeness as the circles get larger.

The concept of visual sociograms as a means of representing complex social relationships originated in the work of Moreno (1953), who developed the concept of the 'social atom'. Moreno hypothesised that the smallest unit of humanity was not the individual but the social atom, which is comprised of the personal relationships essential to the individual's daily life (cited in Buchanan, 1984). Moreno developed the concept of sociometry, which refers to the mapping and measurement of "the attraction, rejection and neutral patterns" (Buchanan, 1984, p. 156) between people within a group. Moreno argued that every individual is born into a set of relationships, and these expand as the child grows and moves into wider society and then dwindles in old age as members of the social atom die and are not replaced. The social atom is linked to other

social atoms that form social molecules or subcultures, and these come together to form cultures (Buchanan, 1984). Moreno argued that the sociogram was not simply a means of presenting data, it is “first of all a method of exploration” (Moreno, 1953, p. 95, cited in Tubaro, Ryan & D’Angelo, 2016, p. 3).

The most traditional way of representing and exploring people’s social atom is through drawing, and these visual depictions of relationships between individuals has been an element of social network analysis for many years (Hogan, Carrasco & Wellman, 2007). The individual nature of these representations has presented difficulties in interpretation, reliability and validity in the field of psychotherapy (for which it was initially developed) and in the area of network research (where it is often used) (Treadwell, Leach & Stein, 1993). There have been attempts to design sociometry instruments that meet these challenges, such as the Social Network Inventory (Treadwell, et al., 1993) and the Name Generator model (Hogan et al., 2007), but there has also been an increasing interest in the use of visual sociograms in qualitative and mixed-methods research.

Hogan et al. (2007) used a concentric circle model in their participant-aided study of personal networks and communication media. This research is particularly relevant to this study as it used a paper-based method of concentric circles which required the active collaboration of the participants to complete and focused on the levels of intimacy to the participant. Hogan et al. (2007) concluded that this paper-based approach, where the respondents had the opportunity to place and move the people they were connected to as they reflected on the level of intimacy in their relationships, supported personal insight and provided rich data about the relationships. Tubaro et al. (2016) reviewed the use of sociograms in a number of their own qualitative studies and propose that they are empowering to participants as they enable them to gain a more global view of relationships that is visual and accessible and that would not emerge spontaneously through an interview. They argue that visual sociograms also allow for the tracking of relationships over time, reflecting “the desire to take what is normally outside the scale of human senses and to make it visible and manageable” (Manovich, 2002, cited in Tubaro et al., 2016, p. 3).



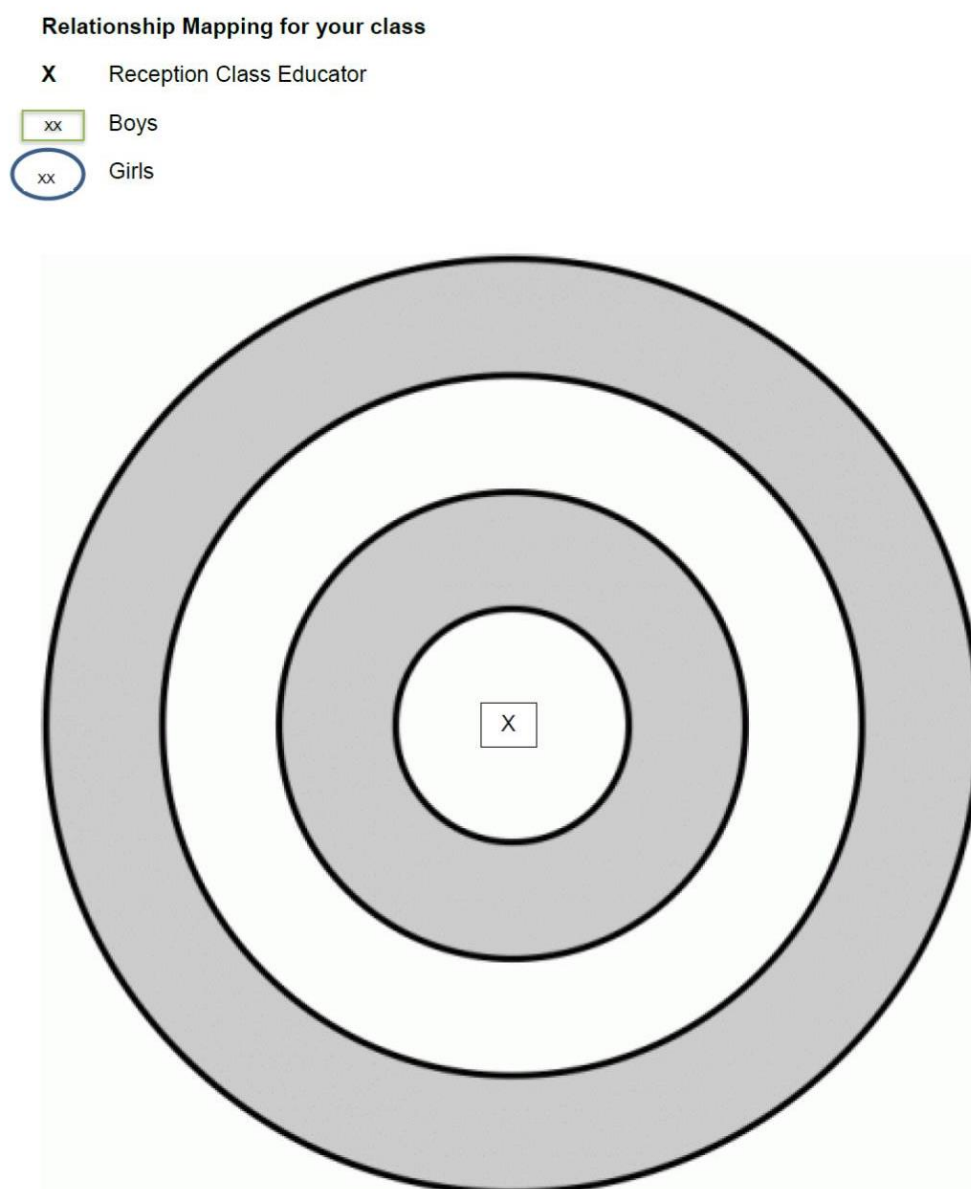
This method is therefore complementary and congruent with the aims of this collaborative study, in which the maps are used to capture the relationships in the classroom over time and support reflections and discussions about the complexities of love and care.

There are examples of the use of sociograms to research relationships within the field of education (Lyle, 2003; Elden, 2013; Sobieski & Dell'Angelo, 2016; Kim & Capella, 2016; Carnes, 2019) to map teacher-child, child-child and child-family relationships and as a tool for teacher reflection and professional development. Kim and Capella's (2016) study of the impact of relationships and classroom quality on disadvantaged Latino children in a US elementary school mapped relationships between teachers and children using a scale of closeness, and observed the negative impacts of teacher-child conflict on classroom engagement. Sobieski and Dell'Angelo (2016) researched peer relationships with secondary school-aged students across an academic year to develop a peer mentoring programme for disengaged students. Lyle (2003) and Carnes (2019) are relevant to this study as they found that the use of sociograms as part of a CPD programme for serving teachers generated discussion and reflection and supported the development of a community of enquiry. The Harvard School of Education (2020) has established the 'Making Caring Common' project with a strategy for schools to adopt in which teachers map their relationships with children using a concentric circle model and cross reference how close they are to a child with the personal or academic risk factors of each child, with the aim that all children have a relationship with a positive supportive adult.

Relationship mapping was introduced to the participants at the first meeting to check if they felt it would be a useful tool to capture the changing relationships with children in their classes, as this had been raised as an issue for exploration during the pilot. I explained how the map had been used in other research studies, and the participants expressed that they would be interested in using it across the academic year. The map had separate symbols for boys and girls so that it could reveal any gender differences in levels of intimacy between the teacher and children, and also for ease of identifying the children they were talking about as they had up to 30 symbols on each map, some with the same initials. There was a discussion about what each of the concentric circles

represented in terms of levels of intimacy, with themselves as the 'X' in the centre, but we could not reach a consensus when defining these as the perspectives were by definition very personal and individual (see Chapter 6). The participants decided to try using it to capture their relationships at the start of the term and then repeat this in preparation for each of the data-gathering meetings, reviewing what they felt each circle represented to them when they had last had the opportunity to use the map.

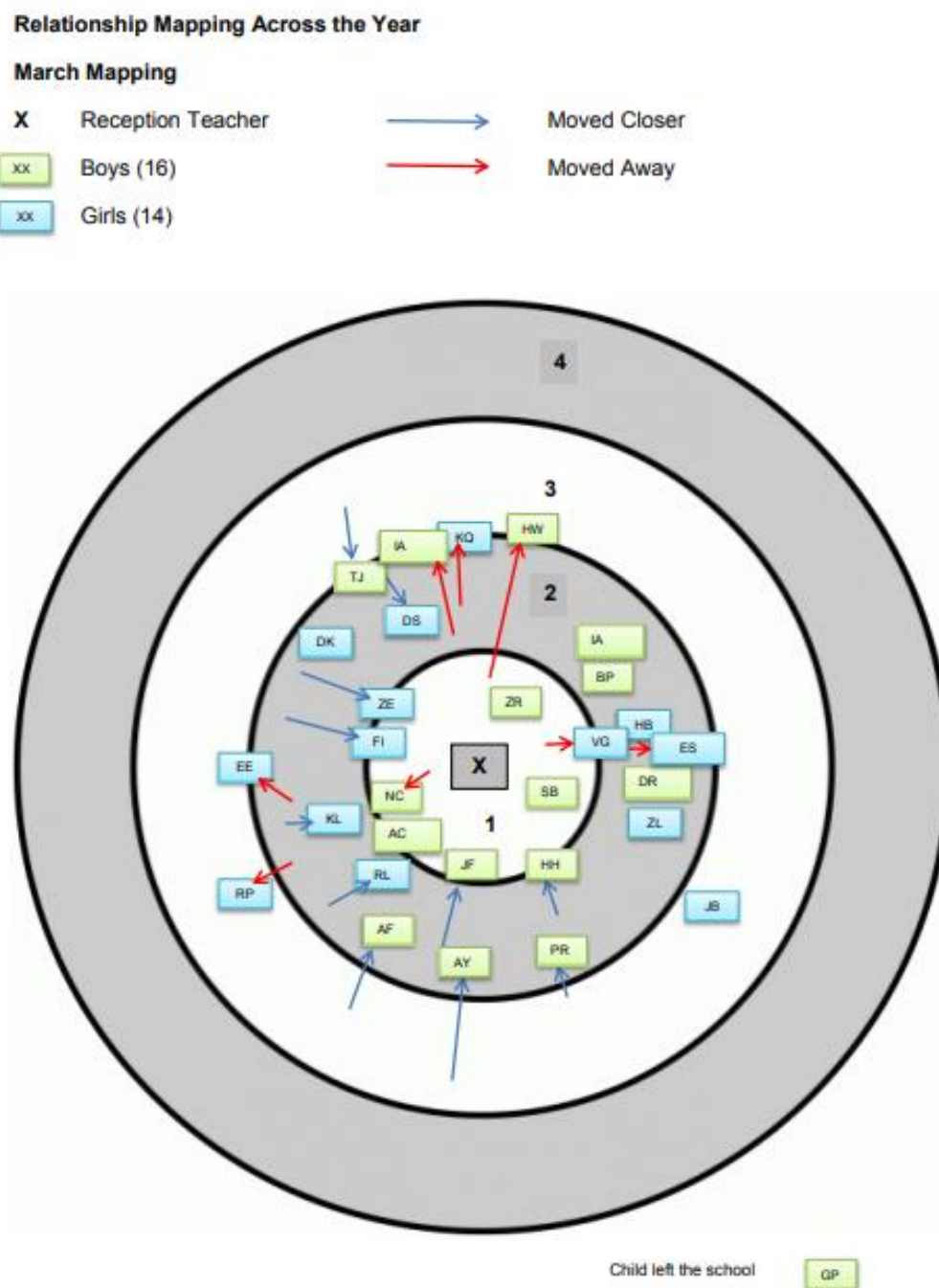
Figure 2 Blank relationship map



At the November meeting, the participants brought their November maps and the group discussion focused on how they had decided to place the children on the map (see section 6.4). The conclusion of the group was that they needed to place the children according to their own individual definition for each of the

circles, and there was a consensus that the map needed to be completed intuitively – on ‘gut instinct’ – as, if they reflected for too long on each relationship, they became lost in the comparisons and contrasting of different types of relationships. I converted the handwritten maps into Word documents and returned these to the participants at the next meeting so that they could see the movements made in relationships (Figure 4).

Figure 3 Example of completed relationship map from March meeting



These maps formed the basis of discussions about individuals and groups of children. At the March meeting, one of the participants asked if they could use the maps with the rest of the school as part of addressing children's emotional wellbeing. This use resonated with the other participants, who were interested in the relationships that colleagues within the same class had with the children they had been mapping. This was agreed for the July meeting subject to additional ethical approval, which was granted. The impact of using the maps is reviewed in Chapter 6.

The mixed-method approach was designed to ensure that the data collection methods selected were congruent with the research questions which aimed to explore perceptions and influences on Reception practitioners' relationships with children, and this combination enabled individual and group opportunities to consider this aspect of practice. Table 2 highlights the relevance of each method to the specific research questions and the data that was collected using each method.

Table 2 Research methods related to research questions and data collected

Research question	Method	Data collected
<b>1. How do Reception class educators develop and maintain positive relationships with the children in their classes?</b>	Group discussion	Verbatim transcripts of the discussions following the storytelling (3). Additional group discussion at the start of the study and at the midpoint.
	Relationship-mapping tool	3 maps from each participant.
<b>2. How do Reception class educators manage the competing pressures of their role?</b>	Writing stories of love	3 stories of love from each participant (1 per term). The final re-storied versions combined the written and oral storytelling.
	Group discussion	Verbatim transcripts of the discussions following the storytelling (3). Additional group discussion at the start of the study and at the midpoint.
<b>3. What does love look like in a Reception class?</b>	Writing stories of love	3 stories of love from each participant (1 per term). The final re-storied versions combined the written and oral storytelling.
<b>4. In what ways is 'professional love' a relevant concept in the Reception class</b>	Group discussion	Verbatim transcripts of the discussions following the storytelling (3).

Research question	Method	Data collected
context?		Additional group discussion at the start of the study and at the midpoint.
5. Are there other terms or concepts relating to relationships with children that have greater resonance for Reception teachers?	Group discussion	Verbatim transcripts of the discussions following the storytelling (3). Additional group discussion at the start of the study and at the midpoint.

Having established the methodology and the methods for the study, in the next sections I introduce the participants and longitudinal research data collection that took place across the school year 2018/19.

### **3.5 Attempting a participative and collaborative approach**

As outlined above I approached this study with the intention of combining narrative and collaborative approaches.

Participatory research identifies that the production of knowledge is a collaborative process and that “all people in a particular context (for both epistemological and, with it, political reasons) need to be involved in the whole of the project undertaken” (Bryden-Miller et al., 2013, p. 349).

Brydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke and Sabhlok (2013) explore the roots of participatory research, specifically Participatory Action Research (PAR), in the critiques of positivist social science research that developed as social science research emerged as a new discipline. These critiques came from different perspectives that were linked by their acknowledgement of the importance of the identity and positionality of the researcher and their engagement in collective action for social justice, including feminist perspectives, organised labour and peace movements.

Freire is cited as an influence in PAR (Bryden-Miller et al., 2013) in terms of the use of education as empowerment for oppressed groups. PAR has at its core values of developing trust and relationship building, learning together and empowerment, to provide mutual benefit through long-term commitment. These values contribute to a rebalancing of power relations between the researcher and the participants. While not being conceived as a fully participatory study, this research aspired to embrace these values and the process of the research had the possibility to empower change for the individual and their practice through reflection and discussion.

Heron and Reason (1997) articulate the participatory enquiry paradigm as one in which the participants can articulate their own reality and reach out beyond it to make changes. What is fundamental to this approach is that the individual is not alone; they are part of a whole which allows for co-operative enquiry into aspects of life. Building from this foundation, Bryden-Miller et al. (2013)

acknowledge that there are different theories, methodologies and methods in participatory inquiry, but summarise their common principles as:

- collaborative approaches
- respect for the knowledge held by the participants
- commitment to social justice
- commitment to bring about change through democratic processes.

These aspects had the potential to be represented in this study through the co-construction of knowledge about professional love in a Reception class context, bringing together and making explicit the professional expertise of the participants.

Despite the appropriateness of a collaborative approach to the focus of this study, it became clear during the pilot study and the design of the main study that there were significant challenges to it being fully collaborative or participative. These challenges can be characterised as falling into two distinct categories: ethical challenges and pragmatic challenges.

Considering first, ethical challenges: the pilot study highlighted a specific issue around confidentiality and the collaborative approach I wished to take. The pilot involved gathering stories of love from three participants as a precursor to the main study. A fully participative approach would involve opportunities for self-representation. However, during data collection it became apparent that the detailed nature of the stories of relationships the participants told would have led to the potential for children, settings and colleagues to be identified if the participants had been involved in the dissemination of findings.

The second set of challenges linked to the participative approach was the level of demand that it would make on participants' time during the year-long study. The design already involved meetings at the start of the year, and then each term, and given the intense nature of a Reception teacher's workload I was very wary of making additional demands on their time for research design, data analysis and dissemination. There are different approaches to the development of participants as teacher-researchers (Murphy, Bryant & Ingram, 2014) including involving them after the research questions have been established (Bensimon et al., 2004). This was the intended approach for this study in



recognition that there would have to be boundaries to the research to ensure that the resulting work would meet these pragmatic considerations and the timescales of the EdD process.

Despite these challenges, the research study did contain collaborative elements, and the participants worked together to make sense of professional love as an aspect of their lives (Heron & Reason, 1997). This form of co-operative professional development did impact significantly on their practice (see Chapter 6). This form of collaborative enquiry can encourage the participants to see themselves as researchers seeking self-change and empowerment (Bensimon et al., 2004) and also developing what Yang (2015) refers to as 'participant reflexivity' as practitioners gain new insights into their role and practice through group discussion. Collaborative enquiry can also uncover unwelcome truths in education (Kemmis, 2006) and this resonates with the subject matter in this study as it revealed the challenges and tensions faced by Reception teachers who prioritise loving relationships in a school context.

Maintaining a collaborative element felt congruent for this study as the aim was to surface the unspoken practices that exist within early years education and care through a process of group activity and discussion. In practice, what evolved during the study could more closely be identified as collaborative professional development, and the impact it had on the participants practice is fully explored in Chapter 6. The study fell short of full participatory enquiry as the responsibility for setting the focus, data analysis and the dissemination of the findings remained mine as the doctoral researcher.

### **3.6 The banyan tree as a metaphor**

In reflecting on the influences that have shaped the research focus and the epistemological and methodological approach taken, the image used by Bryden-Miller et al. (2013) of the participatory worldview as a banyan tree resonated strongly. Although I was unable to pursue a fully participative or collaborative study, this metaphor summarises the actual experience of the process of research and the impact it has had on the participants and their practice which is fully explored in Chapter 6.

The banyan tree is a traditional symbol of enlightenment and is one of the most venerated trees in Hinduism. It has the ability to grow and survive for centuries

and is referred to as 'God's shelter' by devotees. It has aerial roots that grow down from its branches, forming additional trunks and anchoring the tree to the ground; therefore, this tree is also known as *Bahupada*, or 'the one with several feet'. Within the communities where they grow the banyan tree also provides a common meeting place for discussion and decision making.

By spreading out its branches and putting down deep roots, the banyan tree extends its reach and creates new spaces for living and learning (Bryden-Miller et al., 2013, p. 348).

The tree as a metaphor for networks and relationships has been critiqued as too structured and hierarchical to represent the complexity of relationships and connections that exist in the social world, particularly in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1976, cited in Robinson & Maguire, 2010):

Arborescences are hierarchical, stratified totalities which impose limited and regulated connections between their components. Rhizomes, by contrast, are non-hierarchical, horizontal multiplicities which cannot be subsumed within a unified structure, whose components form random, unregulated networks in which any element may be connected with any other element (Bogue, 1989, cited in Robinson & Maguire, 2010).

The focus of this study is the complexity of relationships and connections, but the specific nature of the banyan tree captures the collaborative nature of the discussions and meaning making that took place and the way this fed back into practice.

Adopting the metaphor for this study allowed me to synthesise more effectively the information gained from the research studies on professional love and the emotional aspects of care that highlighted the implicit nature of these concepts and the lack of opportunity to discuss them. The collaborative research elements adopted provide the space to explore and reflect on these aspects of practice in a way that could effect change; the space for learning and growing under the protective canopy of the tree.

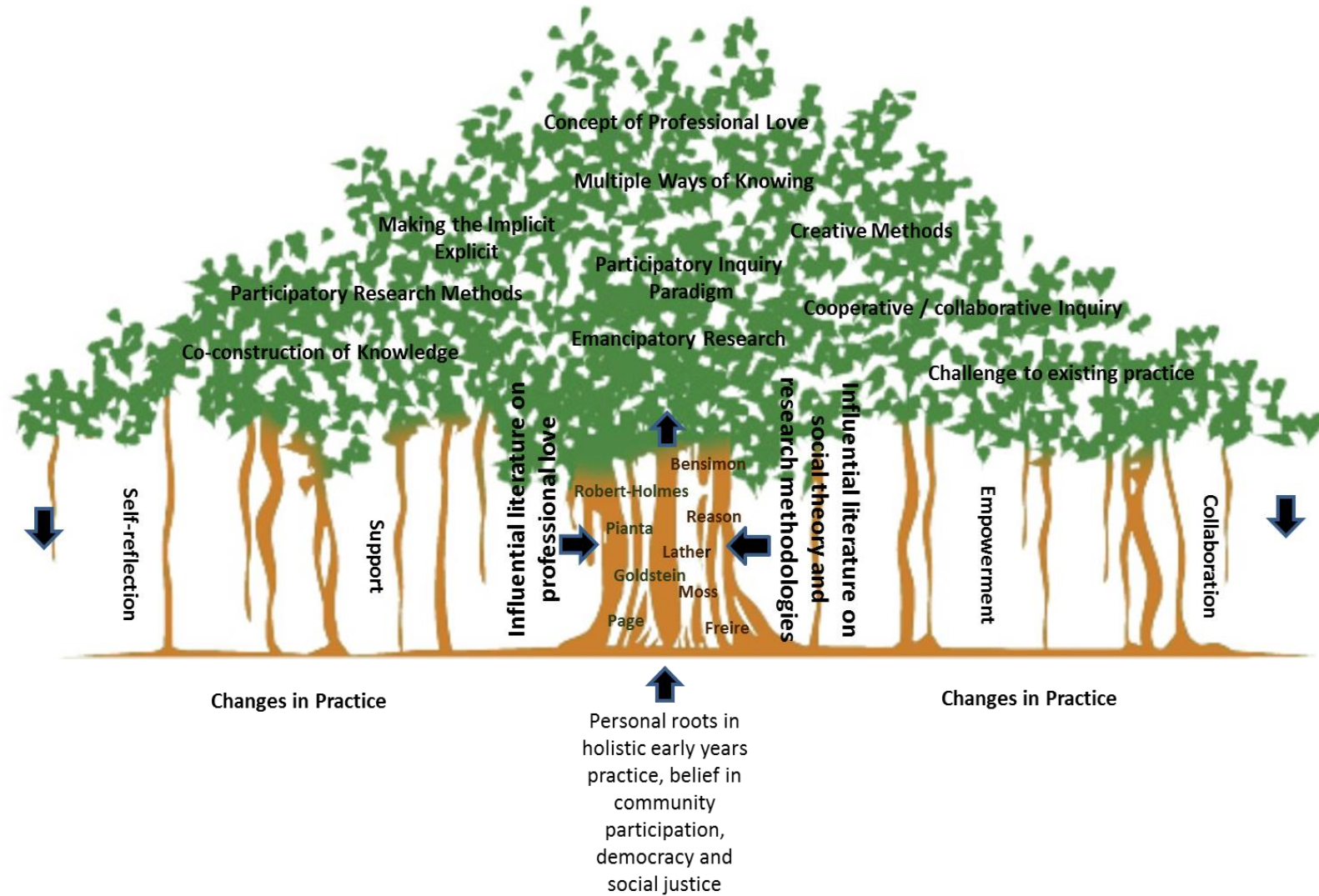
The initial roots of the tree are my own experiences and convictions that have led me to believe that democracy and community participation are effective in bringing about change and that these can form a vehicle to address issues of social justice in early years education and care.

The trunk at the centre represents the thinkers and researchers who have resonated with these beliefs and experiences and been most influential in providing the support and framework for the research on professional love.

The research itself is represented by the (still growing and developing) foliage that allows these aspects to be brought together in a space for discussion.

As banyan trees put down aerial roots to continue their growth, this represents how the developing group and self-knowledge of the participants has fed back down into the ground to support them in adopting changes in beliefs and practice.

Figure 4 The banyan tree of collaborative research on professional love (adapted from Bryden-Miller et al., 2013)



### **3.7 Participants**

The participants were initially a group of four Reception teachers who put themselves forward for the pilot, or phase 1 of the study, as a result of a request I made to the regional branch of a national early years charity of which I am an active member. Only three could attend the phase 1 meeting and these became the first three participants. This sample were very likely to share concerns about the current accountability demands in early years as the charity they were active in advocated a holistic view of children's development and care and were therefore likely to share similar views on early childhood education and care. This sample however allowed the exploration of one of the key research questions concerning how reception teachers managed the current tensions in their role. The participants in the main study were the three participants from the pilot study and two additional Reception teachers who responded to a call for participants at an early years CPD event of the same charity where I presented the focus of my study and the initial findings from the first phase and again were therefore likely to hold similar views. There are potential issues with including the pilot participants in the main study, as there can be concerns that they have already been exposed to an intervention or experience “and, therefore, may respond differently from those who have not previously experienced it” (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2010, p. 2). In this research it felt appropriate and important to offer the pilot participants the opportunity to take part in the main study as this is a collaborative study of relationships and the participants had already become interested and engaged in the subject. Furthermore, their responses in the pilot had helped to shape the methods for the main study. As with the pilot, these participants were likely to share concerns about the current accountability demands in early years as they were members of an early years charity that advocated a holistic view of children's development and care and they had chosen to attend a CPD session on the importance of relationships. These participants therefore allowed the exploration of one of the key research questions concerning how Reception teachers managed the current tensions in their role. The ethical considerations relating to prior relationships with research participants are discussed more fully in section 3.9 and appendix 2, and the consent forms and participant information for the study are contained in appendices 3–5.

Throughout the thesis the names given to the participants are pseudonyms, as are the names of the children and the schools.

### **Angela**

Angela is a Reception teacher aged 46. Formerly an engineer, she trained as a teacher as a mature student. Angela works at a school in an affluent part of a large northern city. She has worked in this school for eight years. At the time of the research Angela was the Reception teacher in the school and has since become an Assistant Head and Foundation Stage Lead at an infant school. Angela took part in the main study.

### **Diana**

Diana is the Foundation Stage Leader in her large primary school in an affluent suburb of a northern city and was 31 at the time of the study. Diana had been at the school for ten years and had started there as a newly qualified teacher. Diana took part in the pilot study and wished to participate in the main study, but as she went on maternity leave in the December of that year she did not submit any further stories after the November meeting and was not able to map the relationships with her class across the year. Diana's contributions to the first two meetings are included in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

### **Ed**

Ed is a Reception teacher, aged 34. Formerly an early years professional (having completed a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education [PGCE]) he worked in a Children's Centre nursery for six-and-a-half years. Ed subsequently retrained on a salaried PGCE route to gain QTS in the school in the same community as the Children's Centre when it closed due to funding cuts. Currently, Ed is a Reception teacher in the same primary school which is sited in a socio-economically challenged area. Ed took part in the pilot study and the main study.

### **Laura**

Laura is a Reception teacher, aged 56 at the time of the research. Laura had been a teacher for 30 years and spent the majority of her time teaching in nursery and Reception classes but had also spent a period of time as a Children's Centre teacher with children aged 0–5 and as a university lecturer in early years education. Laura's teaching post at the time of the research was in a

small Reception class in an independent school. Laura took part in the pilot and the main study.

### **Natasha**

Natasha is a Reception teacher, aged 47 at the time of the study. Natasha started her career in education as a volunteer in her child's nursery school before training as a nursery nurse. She subsequently worked in a Children's Centre, becoming Deputy Manager, and then worked as a high-level teaching assistant (HLTA) in her current school before completing her teaching qualification. She had worked for one year as a Reception teacher. Natasha took part in the main study.

## **3.8 Longitudinal data collection**

The main research study took place over the 2018/19 academic year, with a data collection point in each term and an initial and midpoint meeting to discuss the focus and format of the research and emerging themes and issues.

### **3.8.1 Meeting schedule**

An initial meeting was scheduled for September to bring the group together, share the proposed research methodology and methods, agree ground rules and establish the meeting timetable. The group agreed to meet in November, March and July and set the dates and times themselves to accommodate their working patterns and personal commitments. An additional meeting was scheduled for January to discuss the research to date and any emerging themes. Three types of data were collected at the key termly meetings: a story of love from each participant, a completed relationship map and an audio recording of the group discussion. The audio files were all stored in line with BERA (2018) ethical guidelines on confidentiality and data protection legislation.

Table 3 Timetable of data collection points

Term	Timeframe	Methods	Attendees
<b>Term 1</b>	September	Group discussion 1: focus on setting expectations, timetable, introducing methods.	<i>Ed*</i> , Laura, Diana, Angela, Natasha
	November	Narrative method: story of love from each participant. Group discussion 2: focus on stories, mapping tool and concept of professional love. Mapping tool completed by each participant. Stories returned for member reflection.	<i>Ed, Laura, Diana,</i> Angela, Natasha
<b>Term 2</b>	January	Group discussion 3: focus on emerging themes from first two discussions.	Angela, <i>Ed</i>
	March	Narrative method: story of love from each participant. Group discussion 4: focus on stories, mapping tool and concept of professional love. Mapping tool completed by each participant. Stories returned for member reflection.	<i>Ed, Natasha</i>
<b>Term 3</b>	July	Narrative method: story of love from each participant. Group discussion: focus on stories, mapping tool, concept of professional love, closing thoughts at end of study. Mapping tool completed by each participant. Stories returned for member reflection.	<i>Ed, Laura, Diana,</i> Angela, Natasha

\* Italics indicates took part in pilot and main study



### 3.8.2 Attendance

Due to work and family commitments, full attendance at each of the meetings was challenging. All participants took part in the September and November meetings, after which Diana went on maternity leave and took no further part in the study. There was full attendance again at the final July meeting. In January and March two of the remaining four participants met and the remaining March data was collected at individual meetings with participants to accommodate their work and life commitments.

Table 4 Meeting timetable and attendance

Meetings scheduled across the year	
<b>September</b>	Angela, Diana, Ed, Laura, Natasha
<b>November</b>	Angela, Diana, Ed, Laura, Natasha
<b>March</b>	Natasha, Ed
<b>July</b>	Angela, Ed, Laura, Natasha
Additional meetings	
<b>January</b>	Angela, Ed
<b>March</b>	Angela, Laura at separate individual meetings

The lack of consistency of attendance across all meetings meant that there were different group dynamics at play, and at two of the meetings there was only myself as the researcher and one participant. I was mindful that this could change what was discussed and revealed, but I had to be flexible to accommodate the work and life commitments of the participants.

### 3.8.3 Establishing ground rules and levels of participation

Participants were sent a consent form with information about the research study, the writing frame and the mapping tool prior to the first meeting in September (appendices 2, 3 and 4).

At the initial meeting of the participants in September I again explained the purpose of the research, the research methods and the collaborative approach we would be using. I explained that the level of participation would be necessarily shaped by the ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity for their colleagues and the children and families they worked with. I also set out the level of commitment this approach would require and checked that they were comfortable with this and the data-gathering methods. There was

little discussion following this outline, and all participants signalled that they were happy to proceed and were interested and excited by the research focus. I reflected on the amount of input I gave on these issues when I reviewed the transcript and felt that I needed to raise this again at the next meeting to ensure that I had given them time to reflect on their participation and to give them the opportunity to discuss any issues that had occurred to them since the first meeting. At the November meeting I outlined my reflections and shared the transcript of the September meeting so that they could see how this had been conducted and raise any issues. Again, all the participants signalled that they were comfortable within the group and with the approach taken. I was aware that there was a potential power differential, and that we had existing relationships that may influence their willingness to voice concerns (see section 3.9.3). However, I felt I had addressed this as far as I could at this point in time, and the level of participation and willingness to discuss the issues reflected a degree of comfort with the approach taken.

#### **3.8.4 Format of the meetings**

The three data collection meetings followed the same format, with the participants initially sharing their stories, followed by comments and discussion if there were particular points that other participants found interesting or which resonated. Each participant then shared their completed relationship map and there was further discussion about the changes in relationships or about the mapping process itself. As facilitator and researcher I guided the meetings and brought them to an end when the discussion had drawn to a close.

The methods I selected raised some ethical considerations prior to and during the data-gathering phase. Some of these considerations were raised at the pilot stage, particularly in relation to the group discussion format.

### **3.9 Ethical considerations**

In this section I will outline the ethical processes for this study, including consent and approval, before considering how my approach to ethics developed from the pilot stage. I will also explore in more detail some of the specific ethical considerations that arose during the pilot and the main study from the subject matter, my pre-existing relationships with participants and the collaborative nature of the research.

### **3.9.1 Formal ethics processes**

Before I commenced the pilot study, I sought ethical approval from the Sheffield Hallam University Ethics Committee. I prepared an information sheet and a consent form for participants to ensure that they understood the scope of the study and could therefore make an informed decision about whether or not to take part. I included information about existing relationships and support for participants if the research aroused strong emotions. The collaborative nature of the research originally planned would include involvement in dissemination, which raised concerns from the ethics committee (see section 3.9.5). This was removed from the design of the study at this stage.

At the start of the main study, I again sought ethical approval and updated the information and consent forms (appendices 3 and 4) to take account of the longitudinal nature of the research study so that the participants fully understood the level of time commitment involved and their right to withdraw at any stage. As the study developed, I sought ethical approval again to extend the research to involve team members of the original participants, as they wished to discuss the mapping with colleagues and gain their perspectives on this aspect of the research (see appendices 5 and 6).

At all times I was aware of the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) and in my applications for approval I considered the potential ethical issues relating to informed consent, non-maleficence, confidentiality, anonymity, the right to withdraw and data protection.

The experience of the pilot and issues arising out of the development of the research and my wider reading supported the development of my own ethical approach.

### **3.9.2 Developing my ethical approach**

This study involved participants revealing information about the relationships they had with children in their care and the emotions they felt towards them, as well as developing relationships between us as a research group, and this raised particular ethical considerations. The complexities of ethical considerations in a study involving the emotions and details of the lives of participants means that there is no clear guide to take one through as the

researcher; rather it is a continual process of reflection and review (Josselson, 2007).

At the start of the pilot, I had seen the focus group as a method of data collection. The process of undertaking the pilot and reflecting on collaborative inquiry led to a change in my perspective on the focus group. I perceived that these discussions should be about making meaning through discussion, rather than participants disclosing information and providing data. This required a much more careful establishing of ground rules and exploration of the roles of the researcher and the practitioners as researchers. These reflections informed the design of the main study, as we had an initial meeting where we discussed the ground rules and my role in the discussions, and this achieved a clarity of purpose that had been lacking in the pilot meeting.

I had also questioned the potential negative implications of my existing relationships with and between participants, as this could lead them to give perspectives and views that they felt would be acceptable rather than necessarily what they felt. However, as the research progressed, I realised that the fact that there were already existing acquaintances and relationships between the members of the group also had some benefits in terms of providing a safe and supportive space to surface difficult emotions. The participants were warm towards each other, and positively supported each other's contributions and ideas. This finding is consistent with Wilson's (1997) reflection on how a focus group could develop:

In general, focus group participants took on the role of consultants to each other; by listening, mirroring back what had been said and generally facilitating each other's understanding of the issues, they performed an educative function (Wilson, 1997, p. 220).

Although initially ethically troubling, I came to see these relationships as important to the collaborative nature of the study. Kitzinger (1994) encourages researchers to focus on the interactions within the group, and noted that by using naturally occurring groups the researcher was able to tap into collective remembering about incidents or contexts, and that the participants were able to relate to each other's contributions: "Above all it is useful to work with pre-existing groups because they provide one of the social contexts within which

ideas are formed and decisions are made.” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 105). This collective meaning making became a critical part of this study.

An aspect of ethics that I had considered at the start of the main study was the year-long commitment this collaborative approach would require from the participants. In January 2018 I presented the research and literature on loving relationships and the findings from the pilot at a regional training event for a national early years charity. The audience consisted of experienced early years teachers and practitioners, the majority of whom had worked or were still working in Reception classes. During the discussion section of the event, the participants told similar stories and highlighted how important they felt this element of practice was when working with young children. However, when asked if this had been included in their training or discussed explicitly in practice, no one could think of an example of when this had happened. The discussion turned to the practicalities of how relationships were developed and maintained, and the need for practice guidance. This experience reaffirmed my commitment to drawing on a collaborative approach to the main study so that the participants are able to explore practice and collectively draw together and make explicit the elements that contribute to loving relationships with children.

There were three ethical considerations that are specific to this study that I felt required further exploration: my position as a researcher known to the participants, arousing strong emotions in the participants and maintaining confidentiality.

### **3.9.3 Researching from within**

In deciding on the research methodology and selecting appropriate methods, one of the issues I was aware of was the knowledge I had of the participants who would be taking part and the careful, ethical consideration that was required when researching from a position that felt both within and without.

The number of different positions I hold within the local early years community gave me access to potential participants for the study, but there were also existing relationships with the participants that required careful ethical consideration to ensure that they did not impact on participants’ ability to freely give their consent to take part. Although there were no current, direct power relationships between myself and the main study participants, I had previously

managed one of the participants, worked alongside another, been the academic tutor for one and chaired a committee alongside another. The former power relationships could still impact on participants' willingness or otherwise to engage in the research, and although it was clearly stated in the consent form that any decision they made would not impact on our relationship outside of the research, I remained mindful of these dynamics. These close and continuing relationships indicated that the participants would also have a good understanding of my pedagogical approach to early years and to the concept of professional love. Having considered this ethical implication carefully I determined that the benefit of being able to approach participants who were currently in the role and experiencing the tensions created by the pressures for data afforded me the best opportunity of a collaborative discussion about these factors.

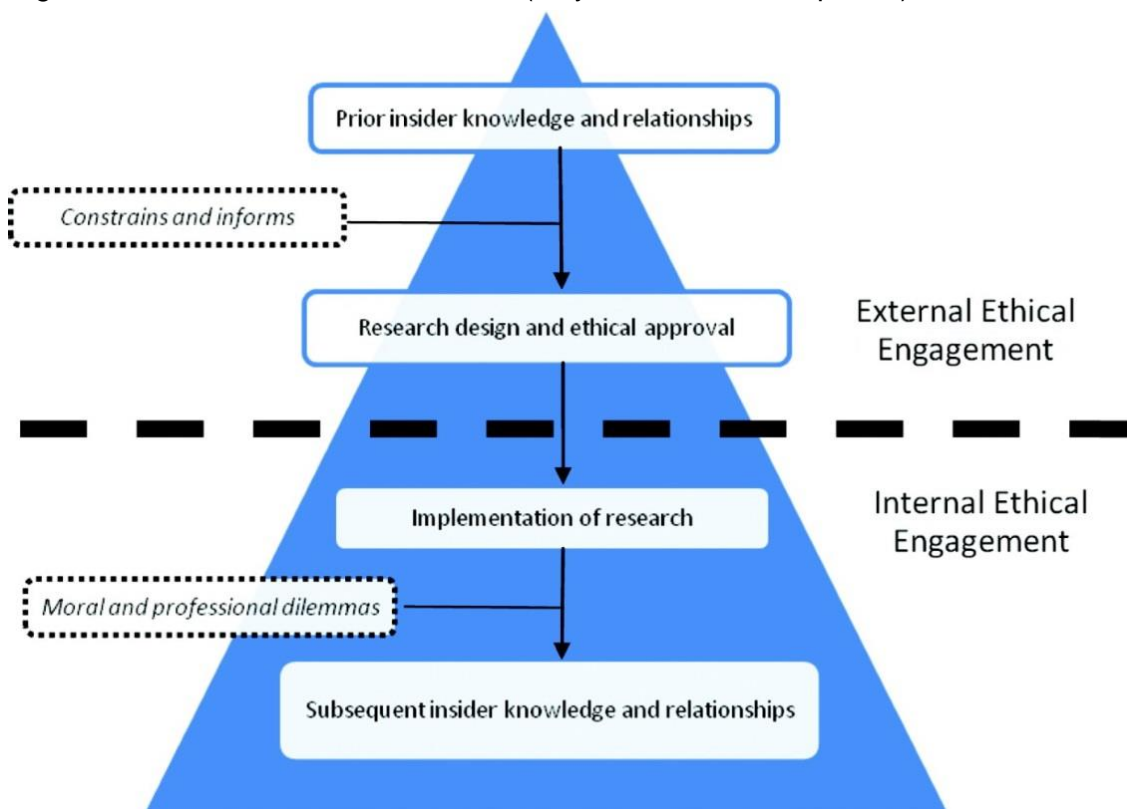
Drake (2010) cautions that conducting research with people known to you in a professional capacity may compromise the researcher's ability to engage critically with findings, but that this can be addressed through keeping detailed notes during the process and seeking external views as a form of 'self-triangulation'. The discussions with supervisors at the development stage enabled me to see the benefits and inherent dangers of my existing relationships with the participants so that I was aware and alert to these during the research. This awareness is particularly important as I also identify myself as a friend, to a greater and lesser extent, to some of the participants. Taylor (2011) notes that, in her own experience of researching with friends, that there are no field maps or guides:

To guide us in our research, we must equally value and rely upon our strength of character, goodwill, our gut instincts and emotional intelligence as we do our formal training (Taylor, 2011, p. 18).

During the focus group discussion in the pilot stage, one of the participants alluded to our previous close working relationship. I immediately felt uncomfortable that I had not disclosed the level of our relationship to the other two participants; indeed, I had not acknowledged how the group had been brought together or the underlying reasons behind their selection. Floyd and Arthur (2012, p. 177) refer to these dilemmas of researching with colleagues and friends as the "murkier" water that sits below the ethical approval process.

These issues often only come to light once the researcher is engaged in field work with the people they know. Their iceberg model (reproduced in Figure 5) is a helpful reminder to the researcher that prior knowledge needs to inform the research design, and that these deeper and personal dilemmas that emerge during research need to be brought to the surface, recognised and engaged with.

Figure 5 The ethics of insider research (Floyd & Arthur, 2012, p. 178)



At the start of the main study I acknowledged the existing relationships with the participants and took time within this and the next focus group meeting to check that all participants were comfortable with the group setup, and again reassured them that withdrawal from the research would not impact our existing relationship.

### 3.9.4 Arousing strong emotion

At the design stage it was apparent from the literature that the focus of the research could arouse strong feelings among the participants, including leaving them feeling helpless that they are unable to meet the needs of the children in their care. Existing studies had highlighted the moral conflicts that could arise from not being able to respond to children as teachers may wish to due to the pressures to produce 'good' data (Robert-Holmes & Bradbury, 2015) or that

teachers may harbour negative feelings towards children who did not comply with the classroom requirements to be a 'good learner' (MacLure et al., 2012). In discussing relationships with children there was also the possibility that this could bring to the surface issues relating to the participants' own childhood or the parenting of their own children. In order to mitigate against any possible negative consequences of taking part in the research, participants were signposted to a support telephone number as part of the informed consent process. During the focus groups there were no outward signs of distress, but one of the participants did highlight that she had been very upset by the incident she recounted in her story:

When he said it he did nearly make my cry though. I had to hold back the tears because I just thought this poor child has got no attachment at home and I'm the only attachment he's got and now I'm making him lessen that and move on to someone else. (Natasha's Story of Ethan)

This was addressed at the start of the study by providing details of a helpline, but this did not actually feel congruent with the research's emphasis on relationships. As Childerhouse (2017) recognised in her narrative study of teachers working in the field of special educational needs and disability (SEND), participants give their consent to take part in studies before they can fully realise how emotional or revealing their contributions are going to be. This means that the relationship between the researcher and participants can become an intimate one (Josselson, 2007) which requires the building of trust so that the participant is comfortable that the material that they provide will be treated with compassion and respect. This study is about love and relationships and, as already discussed, the aims were that the research would be collaborative and the development of the relationships between participants as well as with me as the researcher appears to have become an important factor in providing reassurance and support. The participants treated each other's contributions with compassion and respect and the questioning and discussion following the stories appeared to be sensitive and thoughtful. It is not possible to know if participants were adversely affected by the process of revealing sensitive information or surfacing difficult emotions, but their willingness to engage across the whole year could indicate that they felt the process was worthwhile.



### **3.9.5 Confidentiality**

An incident during the pilot did bring to life the ethical dilemmas that could arise from a lack of anonymity. During the actual focus group, participants did start to talk about colleagues who may struggle with close relationships with children due to their own experiences. The use of this material in the research may have led to the identification of these people if the main participants had chosen not to be anonymous. This experience reinforced the complexity of the ethics of confidentiality within collaborative research, which can occur at any stage (Petrova, Dewing & Caamilleri, 2016) of a small study with democratic principles. These experiences influenced the design of the main study as I became increasingly aware that, although it would be informed by the participatory inquiry paradigm, it would also have to be adjusted in recognition of ethical requirements. Participants' discussions about these ethical issues took place at the start of the research process and the potential difficulties were explained. Participants in the main study agreed to take part in relationship mapping and discussions across the academic year, but they remained anonymous to protect the anonymity of their colleagues and the children and families they work with.

### **3.10 Data analysis**

#### **3.10.1 Challenges in data analysis in collaborative research**

The intention in this study was that participants would be involved in ongoing data discussions and analysis during the study. This participation involved individual reflection on the re-storied narratives which were returned to the participants; ongoing discussions about emerging themes at the regular meetings during the year-long study; responding to each other's stories and generating new insights into them during the discussions and the shaping of the relationship-mapping process as the study progressed. This level of involvement ensured that some of the key features of collaborative inquiry were embedded with the intention that this study did not fall into the traps of pseudo-democracy outlined by Hansen, Ramstead, Richer, Smith and Stratton (2001), in which issues are not explicitly recognised and addressed. However, during the final data analysis phase when all the data had been collected, I took the responsibility for analysing the transcripts and stories and identifying the themes that emerged, building on the discussions that had taken place.

### **3.10.2 Choosing the data to be analysed**

In addition to the story contained in section 1.2 an additional story or narrative from the study has been included in the appendices in its entirety as it is all the elements that they include that contribute to the overall emotion of the stories (Appendix 1). Henderson (2017), in her powerful autoethnographic exploration of the emotions in early years education and care discusses the issues of how the data analysis of personal stories can interrupt “speaking and reading from the heart” (p. 103); a very relevant concern in telling stories about love.

Henderson argues that the process of coding and analysing removes the reader of the research from the power of the words to move people and shift opinions, and calls on researchers to reflect on and question what is relevant in analysis when the data is formed from narratives and “vibrant life experience” (p. 103). Although Henderson’s (2017) research refers to self-narrative, the powerful stories told by the participants in this study could also lose their impact and essence through the process of breaking down for analysis. Henderson (2017) invokes a classical metaphor that education should be about lighting fires rather than filling vessels: “While buckets have their place, we stand in need of fires to light the way forward, to shift paradigms in education.” (Henderson 2017, p. 104).

As the stories told about love were coherent and powerful in their own right, the data generated in the study has not been subject to “narrative of analysis” in which events, happenings and other forms of data are drawn together into a narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995, cited in Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 577) see section 3.10.4. Rather I crafted individual narrative accounts from their writing about an incident and the retelling of this in the focus group. This crafting was undertaken by myself using the original written story provided by the participants and the verbatim transcript from the meeting where they expanded on the story verbally within the group. Although I did not add any words to the accounts, combining both versions of the account was an interpretive act of narration by me. I presented the combined story to the participants for member reflection. This re-storying and the member reflection involved detailed reading and consideration of the story and forms the first level of data analysis.

### **3.10.3 Member reflection**

Returning the data to the participants for their reflections and views was in keeping with the collaborative approach underpinning the research. 'Member checking' is a well-established practice in research that is often used to indicate the credibility of the research being conducted, as participants have the opportunity to comment on the data selected by the researcher. The collaborative nature of this study and the tension between this and a narrative approach in which the researcher returns data they have selected for checking rather than the whole story led to the term 'member reflection' being adopted, as it is more applicable to the process involved. Moen's (2006) review of teachers' stories as a unit of analysis highlights the importance of this being an explicit dialogic process that is given time and space and is conducted in a caring manner so that both the researcher and the participants feel comfortable. Moen (2006) argues that

a sense of equality between the participants is particularly important in narrative inquiry, because teachers have traditionally experienced that they do not have their own voice in the field of educational research and might find it difficult to feel empowered to tell their stories. The ideal is that the narrator and the researcher reach a joint intersubjective understanding of the narratives that occur during the research process (Moen, 2006, p. 62).

The participants also had the opportunity to reflect on their stories and for their peers to ask questions and discuss each other's narratives as part of the research process.

The way in which member checking or member reflection is conducted is rarely fully explored or explained (Doyle, 2007; Thomas, 2017). Thomas (2017) reviews the ways in which member checks are used and the claims that are made for them enhancing the credibility of qualitative research. He notes that in the majority of cases this process refers to participants being sent information for review or comment and/or correction. In most cases this will be transcripts of their own interviews, emerging findings and draft reports. Thomas (2017) argues that what is less clear is how this process occurs or in what way it could enhance credibility – and this lack of clarity can lead to scepticism about the value of member checking (Harvey, 2015) and difficulties in engaging participants in a meaningful way (Carlson, 2010).

In Thomas's (2017) review of the literature on the use of member checks in research he identified four main themes: generalisation, representation, participation and change. The participation and change most accurately reflect the intention of the continued involvement of the participants in the data analysis stage of this study, as the purpose of the research is to make explicit what is implicit in practice, and this has the potential to lead to both personal and practical changes. The implications for member reflection in this process are that they will form

part of the change process through reducing inequality between the researcher and participants and empowering participants (Thomas, 2017, p. 28).

Once the narratives had been drawn together from the written and verbal presentation of the stories, the research participants were sent copies with an explanation that no words had been changed but that the information from both sources had been brought together. They were asked to check that this represented and reflected the meaning that they wished to convey. The information sent to participants did not contain terms such as 'validation', to avoid implying that there was a single 'correct' version of the narrative. Tracy (2010, cited in Thomas, 2017) highlights the importance of avoiding these terms as

[t]he labels of member checks, validation and verification suggest a single truth reality. I instead offer the umbrella term member reflections – which may be applicable to a wider range of paradigmatic approaches (Tracy, 2010, p. 844, cited in Thomas, 2017, p. 27).

None of the participants wished to make any changes to the narratives that were sent to them. This may reflect that they felt that I had provided a narrative that was consistent with the story they wished to tell, but it could be that other issues were at play. Carlson (2010) explores some of the traps that can lie within member checking if it is not carefully planned and explained fully to participants at the start of the process. The potential pitfalls that were identified included a lack of shared understanding of how the interviews had been transcribed and what was expected during the member reflection process. At the start of the main study and at the first meeting to share stories the participants were given the transcripts of the previous meeting so that they

could see how their contributions had been transcribed to inform their understanding of how their verbal stories would be presented.

#### **3.10.4 Data analysis of narratives**

The stories about love that the participants contributed in both written and verbal formats formed part of the data collected in this study. Frank (2012) draws a distinction between narratives and stories, citing Tilly (2006) to explain that the distinction is that not all narratives are stories, as narratives may include technical accounts which require specialist knowledge, whereas stories are non-specialised. Frank argues that what a story consists of is not entirely clear, but that it can be viewed horizontally and vertically:

Horizontally, a story is a segment of talk, writing or other communicative symbolism that has at least a complicating event and a resolution. Vertically, stories have enough of the aspects that include characters, suspense and imagination (Frank, 2012, p. 11).

Using this definition, the narratives on love presented by the participants are stories – each one presents a difficulty or challenge in enacting the relationships they want to have with children, and each seeks to find a resolution, with greater and less success depending on the context and structures that they work within.

Forms of analysis in narrative inquiry are extremely varied. Polkinghorne (1995, cited in Coulter & Smith, 2009) draws a distinction between two basic categories of analysis in narrative forms of inquiry – analysis of narrative and narrative analysis:

The former includes approaches close in form and function to more general kinds of qualitative studies in which 'narratives are analysed into themes and categories' (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, p. 636). The latter includes 'studies whose data consists of actions, events, and happenings, but whose analysis produces stories' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 6, cited in Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 577).

Coulter and Smith (2009) argue that narrative analysis has benefits, in that it enables the researcher to present multiple viewpoints and interpretations, and this addresses concerns in research about the privileged interpretation of the researcher. Smith (2009) presents a critique of this approach, in which he argues that the need to sequence and produce a coherent story may produce

an emphasis on 'tellability' rather than the inclusion and consideration of the ordinary and the mundane. This process of the researcher constructing the narrative from the data also has consequences for the process of member checking previously discussed. Smith (2009) highlights the power differentials:

After all, as Coulter and Smith note, researchers often have societal privilege that their participants do not have, which surely would make it difficult for participants to object to how researchers portray them (p. 606).

Smith (2009) also raises the issue of 'authorial surplus' of data in narrative research. The researcher, in constructing the narrative, selects material for inclusion and therefore, despite the commitment to representing different voices and perspectives, the process of selection and presentation is not necessarily transparent, and the researcher leads the reader to come to similar conclusions about the participant's stories. The member reflection process and inclusion of the participants' discussions about their stories partially addresses this issue, but ultimately I have shaped the stories into their final format.

### **3.10.5 Trustworthiness and narrative data analysis**

The process of deciding what forms part of the narrative and the transparency (or lack of it) in the analysis of the data raises trustworthiness issues for research using narratives or stories. Polkinghorne (2007) takes the view that the concept of validity drawn from positivist methodologies can be repurposed in narrative inquiry. He identifies two potential threats to validity that are inherent in narrative inquiry:

The threats particular to narrative relate to two areas: the differences in people's experienced meaning and the stories they tell about this meaning and the connections between storied texts and the interpretation of those texts (2007, p. 471).

Polkinghorne (2007) argues that, through persuasive argument and the presentation of supporting evidence, the researcher makes a narrative knowledge claim. It is up to the reader of the research to decide on the plausibility of the claims based on how the analysis of the data is explained and presented. Threats to the validity of the knowledge claim come from a number of sources: the level of reflexivity of the participant in considering the focus of their story; how much the participant is prepared to reveal due to potential

concerns about social desirability; the limit to which words can fully capture the personal experience, and finally the process of co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participants.

Koch (1998) in contrast to Polkinghorne, calls for a wider consideration of the rigour of narrative research as terms such as validity, credibility and transferability may not be relevant to research that uses stories of a specific context. Koch argues that the researcher needs to be reflexive and acknowledge that “interpretation exists in a complex matrix of alternative representations” (1998, p. 1188). Koch’s expanded definition of rigour to include “moral, political and ideological value-commitments” (1998, p. 1188) is congruent with the aims of this research to be collaborative and emancipatory. In addition, the level and depth of discussion undertaken by the participants in this research and the inclusion of the themes arising from these discussions – as well as the actual stories themselves – supports the trustworthiness of the research. The impact the research has on participants’ self-understanding and practice (Chapter 6) also potentially gives it 'catalytic validity' or value (Lather, 1991). Lather's term of catalytic 'validity' is based on a post-structuralist paradigm and here using 'validity' aims to disrupt the positivist definition by highlighting the potential for research to help those who take part to understand their world in order to change it.

### **3.10.6 Analysing the stories of love**

This process of analysing data to identify themes is often described quite briefly, and the actual decisions made remain mysterious and hidden. Everett and Barrett (2012) describe a process which is in keeping with the re-storying process, and was adopted for the stories of love and for the group discussions about the stories, professional love and relationship mapping:

During the second stage of analysis, individual stories were compared and contrasted to identify themes and similarities and differences in experiences (Seidman, 1998). As a result of the data analysis processes, participants’ individual stories were retold and further thematic connections within and between cases were identified (Everett & Barrett, 2012, p. 36).

The approach taken to the stories of love told by the participants took the form of repeated reading of the re-storied accounts to become fully familiar with

them, before proceeding to try to identify themes within them. The themes were identified from repeated phrases and descriptions of similar incidents and tensions. These themes were then grouped, and the stories re-read to identify other examples of these themes and test if they were key to the narratives being told. This process of breaking down the stories into the format outlined did identify common themes and aspects of love but also led to the omission of other aspects of the story that may have proved significant to the participants if they had been involved in the data analysis. The strong themes that emerged in relation to love included the effort required to build relationships and meet the needs of children, different types of love and relationship and tensions between this aspect of practice and the other demands of the role. This process generated themes that echoed the findings of other research studies that were considered during the literature review, but the breaking down of the stories appeared to rob the words of the power they had when viewed in their entirety. Henderson's (2017) comment that this process of 'freezing' removes the power of stories to "move hearts and minds" (2017, p. 104) resonated, although the addition of the illustrative quotes when considering the categories restored some of the meaning and are included in any presentation of the findings. An example of a story in its entirety is included in Appendix 1.

The tensions that were apparent in the stories relate to the participants telling stories that are salient to a specific element of practice and enacting love in a context where this element is not usually discussed or acknowledged.

Sengupta-Irving, Redman and Enyedy (2013) outline how their analysis of stories makes the dimension of reform explicit:

Struggle indicates what the teacher identifies as inequitable, protagonist represents who the teacher sees as positioned inequitably, and resolution signifies whether the teacher sees reform as redressing the struggle (Sengupta-Irving et al., 2013, p. 3).

Reflecting on the stories teachers told about love, it was clear that inequity is present in each, and that the teacher struggled to resolve this within the confines of their role and context. Reflecting on the process, it is clear that the writing frame provided encouraged participants to select stories about love that brought out the tensions in building loving relationships in a Reception class context. These tensions reflected struggles that were experienced by both



children and teachers in negotiating relationships, expectations, time and autonomy.

### **3.10.7 Analysing the group discussions and reflections on the mapping tool**

Following the analysis of the re-storied stories of love told by the participants during the research, the second element of data analysis focused on the discussions the participants had across the year at the meetings where they told their stories, discussed love in the Reception class context and presented their maps.

I initially highlighted each individual participant's contribution within each discussion transcript and read (and re-read) these discussions so I could take note of and identify a range of relevant themes. These themes were grouped under relevant headings as they emerged, and the related quotes were grouped under these headings. As new headings emerged, the transcripts were read again to see if there were other examples of speech that reflected these. At the end of this process the headings were ordered and grouped to reflect the focus of the research questions and the impact of the experience of the collaborative research methodology and the research methods used. The themes were reordered and renamed as continued re-reading revealed new links and insights into the participants' contributions.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have laid out the development and rationale for the combination of narrative and collaborative methodologies, and the challenges this presents. I have described the specific research methods that were employed in the main study and how selecting these tools enabled me to gather data on a complex and emotional aspect of early years practice. There were a number of ethical considerations that arose during the research and I have explained how these have been addressed. I concluded this chapter with the details of how the data gathered was analysed, and in the next three chapters I will detail the rich data that emerged through the implementation of the methods and how the analysis of this data served to address the research questions and highlighted additional, unanticipated issues.

I have chosen to divide the findings into three chapters as the analysis revealed distinct aspects of professional love that were worthy of separate consideration: the different ways in which love appeared and was enacted; the benefits and challenges of enacting professional love in a school context and the impact on participants of taking part in a collaborative research study on professional love. In all of the findings I have used pseudonyms for the participants and children to maintain anonymity.

## **Chapter 4 The faces of professional love**

### **4.1 Chapter outline**

In this chapter I analyse the different faces of professional love that the participants enacted with the children in their care and which emerged from the stories and group discussions during the study. The elements described are depicted as the 'faces' of professional love that the teachers show to the children in their care. These aspects of professional love have been grouped and themed as the faces of 'natural love', 'loving touch', 'tough love' and 'effortful love'. There is also a fifth aspect of the participants' descriptions of professional love, which I have defined as a 'mask' rather than a 'face', as it is professional love that the participants articulate may also meet their needs as well as, or potentially in place of, the needs of the child. I describe the ways in which the participants developed and clarified their own views of professional love during the study, highlighting that this is a highly complex area that requires extended reflection and discussion to surface and understand this complexity. The faces of professional love are examined in light of previous research.

### **4.2 The faces and mask of professional love**

In this chapter I introduce the four faces of professional love that were identified during the year-long study through the participants' stories and discussions. I use the term 'faces' to describe these aspects of love, as they are the changing faces that teachers show to the children as they support and build relationships with them. The different faces of love that emerged from the discussions during the study highlight the complexity of professional love. As well as the four faces, I also identified what I refer to as a mask of professional love – by 'mask', I mean a presentation of love towards the children that also meets the emotional needs of the participant and which became apparent through increased self-knowledge as the study progressed.

Before discussing the faces and the mask in detail, it is important to note that the term 'professional love' was not used by any of the participants or within their settings before taking part in the research. The group meetings, storytelling and relationship-mapping methods provided the space and time for critical

reflection on this aspect of practice. The concept of professional love was introduced to the participants at the start of the research in the pilot study and the main study. All participants received a short text on professional love before the first meeting in September (Page, n.d.; Appendix 3) and discussed this term at subsequent meetings. The participants all saw love as a key element of their practice, and the term professional love initially sparked a debate about whether it reflected the love the participants felt for the children in their care. Over time, the term provided a focus for the participants to understand more about this aspect of their practice. Ed welcomed the opportunity to discuss love:

I think it's nice. When does it ever get acknowledged that there might be something called professional love? (Ed, initial meeting, September)

The participants expressed that the love that they felt for the children in their care was a key part of their practice, and they appeared comfortable within the research group to discuss its different aspects and enactments. The opening discussions about love in the initial September meeting immediately identified the complexity of love and the different faces that this emotion could present, which required qualifying words to be attached to distinguish them. For example, Diana referred variously to 'label' love, 'deep love' and the stereotypical 'picture' of love that people may hold to try and define the love that she believes exists between a teacher and the children in their care:

I think this is like a deep love, it's not a label love, it's quite a deep love we're maybe talking about where it's not that picture of love we have in our heads when we first say love, it's not that. (Diana, initial group meeting, September)

Ed made a distinction between children who he would use the label of love to describe them and their appeal or personality and those children that he feels a deeper love for as they most need the support that he believes is provided by a loving relationship.

But then there's some, you know, oh, they're maybe a little bit more label-y type love, 'Oh, they're lovely, oh, don't you love this about them?' And then there are some children that you really do love in that context we were talking about, in that deeper love. (Ed, initial group meeting, September)

Through consideration of the different ways participants described professional love and through analysis of their stories of love, I identified the four faces of professional love and the mask which I now go on to describe. While I contest the five faces are distinct, it is important to recognise that each participant's interpretation of professional love remains individual and personal.

#### **4.3 The face of natural love – “I would say that I just loved them because I adored them because of who they were.”**

During the research process, participants often made a distinction between love that flowed naturally because of the disposition and response of the child, and the love that resulted from an effort by the teacher to build that relationship. The participants described the former as natural love, and it was often depicted as almost the flipside of effortful love, as it happens without any effort at all. In this section there are descriptions of effortful love in order to illustrate this contrast; however, effortful love is considered in more detail in a separate section.

Diana reflects on the effortlessness of natural love in relation to a boy she describes as a “little ray of sunshine”. She obviously felt affection for him, but reflected that he would not need her because of his happy disposition and attitude to school:

Yeah, he's like a little ray of sunshine and you just think, well. But I know that he won't need me through the year. He'll fly through. He's very young, a little boy, but he'll go through Reception just loving everything we do because he's just that character. (Diana, initial group meeting, September)

There appears to be a connection between ‘need’ and ‘effort’ in this observation, with natural love connected to lower levels of need and effortful love connected with high levels of need, as will be shown later in this chapter. Natasha explains that she has a combination of children in her inner circle on the relationship map and makes the distinction between the sociable, loving children for whom she feels natural love and those who are facing challenges and are challenging to love:

I've got a child who's in care, that's a looked after child. A child who is very challenging behaviour wise and a child who is absolutely adorable to her peers and also her characteristics with a friend, she's very sociable and she's just one of those very loving children who want to

please everybody. My inner circle, as you would say, are very different children and are there for very different reasons. So, this one's there because I feel she needs my support and my love and affection. (Natasha, group meeting, November)

Natasha makes the distinction between love that flows naturally because she is drawn to children's personalities, and professional love where she has to make an effort to build a loving relationship. For Natasha, the effortful love to meet children's needs was related to professional love at the start of the research study, whereas Angela started the research process expressing her belief that the term 'love' covered these different relationships and there was no need to make these distinctions:

I would say that was a natural love, not a professional one. If we're talking about professional love for me it would be the needy ones but I'm like you and I had a couple of girls who were particularly very, very approachable and really nice personalities, just lovely children but I would say that I just loved them because I adored them because of who they were and what they exuded, whereas other children were more of a professional love. (Natasha, initial group meeting, September)

But there again then is professional love different from natural love or whatever? I don't think it is. I think love is love. (Angela, initial group meeting, September)

The idea of the class being a 'second family' is raised by Angela and Laura, and Natasha likens her love for the children to familial love that could also be perceived as natural love. A number of research studies focus on the links between love and care in ECEC and the discourse of maternalism. Warren (2019) argues that concepts of care in early childhood teaching draw on historical discourses of maternalism, with care being seen as natural, selfless, feminised and largely dyadic. Noddings (2005, cited in Jones, 2019) suggests that the classroom could be thought of as a "large, heterogenous family" (Jones, 2019, p. 23) and Laura's comments about her class as a fractious but ultimately loving unit and Angela's 'second family' indicate that this image resonates with teachers. This identification of the role of early years teaching with maternalism creates tensions with the current emphasis on the professional role of the teacher as technical and rational (Buchanan, 2015; Ball, 2013). The participants' reflections on the different faces of love contain numerous

references to family and parenthood, and although this is not the focus of this study, it is potentially an area for further research.

Participants noted some gender differences in how children sought connection with them as the teacher, and how much love and support they believed boys and girls needed. Natasha identified that girls in her class found ways of gaining her attention through compliance with classroom rules, and this may explain why they are identified as eliciting a natural love response from the teacher. In contrast, Natasha noted that the boys she was close to at times displayed challenging behaviour which drew her attention to them:

I think you're right but they're just looking for it in a different way. Because one of my children who was in my inner circle would, to get that attention, throw something across the room, whereas those girls have found a different way to get my attention which is more socially acceptable and a lot less dangerous! (Natasha, group meeting, November)

Laura identified a group of 'independent girls' who did not need as much love and support because they were progressing well and commented that it was often girls that fell into this category:

And some of them like the independent girls, and it is very often girls isn't it who are happy and settled and making good progress and getting along, you almost feel that, well, do they need as much of my love? They're going to do well anyway. Whereas these children who really need a lot of help and support, you put more of yourself into them. (Laura, group meeting, November)

In some cases, the children who the participants made an effort to love became a pleasure to them, indicating that the face of natural love could emerge from the original effortful love. In discussing a boy in her class who presented with challenging behaviour and had been identified as having special educational needs, Laura makes a powerful statement about the "immense love" felt for him by her and her TA, and how well he had responded to their care so that now "he's a joy really":

We just, I say we, I'm talking about me and my TA, we work very close together and we've talked about this and we do feel this immense love for him. We just want to make sure that we do the absolute best that we can for him, as for all children but he in particular has got such needs

and he's responding really well now and enjoying being in school and he's a joy really. (Laura, group meeting, November)

This flow to natural love from effortful love as the relationship develops reflects the complexity of professional love, the changing faces it can present and the connection between challenging relationships and those that bring joy is consistent with Rytivaara and Frelin (2017).

#### **4.4 The face of loving touch – “I usually just touch his hand; he just hugs me and then leaves.”**

In some previous studies (Haslip et al., 2019; Cousins, 2017) touch was highlighted as an important aspect of loving practice. In this study, physical manifestations of the loving relationships described by the participants are not often explicitly commented on in the stories or discussions, but where it does appear, it carries significance. The incidents that are described – as in Angela's story of Billy and Natasha's story of Brianna – it is an illustration of the growing depth of a relationship, and therefore could be characterised as emerging from the other faces of love. The relationships Angela describes in her stories move through different phases, and her description of how her relationship with Billy reaches the point where he appears to emotionally 'refuel' during the school day through brief physical exchanges is particularly powerful:

He actively seeks out touch these days, which he did not in the early stages of our relationship. He always greets me with a hug in the morning and if I am working with a focus group, he will just come and get a quick hug – he doesn't require any obvious interaction although I usually just touch his hand, he just hugs me and then leaves. (Angela's story of Billy)

In Natasha's description of affection towards Lara, it appears to be a conscious decision to enact loving touch as she perceives this as a need, believing the child may not have been receiving this from the other adults in her life:

She was on the inner circle (relationship map) because I know that she needed that love and I was very affectionate with her and she was very affectionate with me, but she was quite aloof with everybody else and didn't really speak to anybody. (Natasha's story of Lara)

Ed acknowledges that, since he has become aware of the prognosis for Owais following his diagnosis with muscular dystrophy, he has become physically



more affectionate towards him, although he qualifies that this is also in response to the closeness that Owais now appears to feel to him in seeking out hugs:

I think I'm certainly now more physically loving with him. When he comes in in the morning he goes 'Mr Zane, Mr Zane' and I always give him a little hug. Mind you, he comes for that, so I just reciprocate. (Ed, Autumn story)

This qualification indicates that Ed does not feel entirely comfortable with loving touch as an aspect of his practice. Ed also raised some concerns about talking to parents about love, and noted that he made decisions about which parents he would feel able to talk to about love and loving their child. Ed does not make connections to his gender during the discussions, but highlights his surprise when a dad tells him that his son loves him:

And the same goes for when you say to a parent, however you phrase it, that you love their child. I think rightly or wrongly you make decisions about which parents you'll say that to but also be surprised when the parents that say that back – 'He loves you Mr Zane' – and that coming from a dad as well thinking 'Oh my God, I wouldn't have thought that that dad would have acknowledged that personally to me.' So, there are always surprises as well, I think. (Ed, group meeting, March)

When reflecting on the closeness of his relationships with the children in his class, Ed notes that those closest to him were needy and that the love he had for them could be 'tough love'. The next group were children who expressed their affection for the teacher by being quite "clingy" and physically loving towards him, which represented a loving relationship but with the agency and impetus for the relationship coming as much from the children as from Ed. It is interesting that he feels he has to qualify that the physical closeness is by the children's choice and again, although not overtly stated, it does potentially indicate some disquiet about this element of his role:

These in the middle aren't particularly tough love but the three of the four, other than the one we've just mentioned are generally those that are quite clingy. Physically loving children, of their choice, not mine. (Ed, group meeting, November)

Warren (2019) notes that the maternal view of practice that is prevalent in early childhood contributes to the role being seen as lacking in professionalism and

as primarily natural and instinctive. This has implications for how male practitioners are viewed and how they view themselves: “As a gendered discourse, maternalism can position men teachers as courageous and admirable, or conversely as naturally unsuited to the role, or as dangerous” (Warren, p. 263).

In contrast to Page’s findings in early years settings (2011; 2013; 2014), concerns about touch in relation to safeguarding and love were not raised directly during the discussions, but were alluded to and connected to the use of the word ‘professional’ when talking about love. Natasha identified that placing the word in front of love provided some protection for teachers, as it brings it into the professional realm:

I feel like I have to put the word ‘professional’ in front of it to protect yourself because you are working with those children. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

Loving touch is subject to justification and qualification where it is mentioned by Ed, the male participant in the study. This could reflect safeguarding concerns; Aslanian (2018) and Page (2017) note that while love and touch are seen as important for healthy child development, they can also be perceived as a threat to children’s safety.

#### **4.5 The face of tough love – “I’m not a namby-pamby. I’m not soft-hearted but I love my children and I want the best for them.”**

The term ‘tough love’ was used by some of the participants during the course of their discussions and is central to one of the stories (Ed’s story of Tomas). There was little discussion about what each participant meant by this term, but some of the elements and behaviours can be inferred from their descriptions and from the contrasting loving behaviours they outline.

Ed introduces his story about Tomas saying, “My incident, upon reflection, falls into the ‘tough love’ category,” and his story outlines how he has to introduce boundaries to Tomas who had not been used to these being set in his home environment, and struggles to follow them in the classroom. Ed describes his approach as requiring patience and gradually extending the time Tomas is required to wait. Although he describes this as ‘tough love’, from Ed’s description, this appears to be applied with compassion as he outlines that his

approach does not involve 'time out' for problematic behaviour (which he implies is the response that would be expected of him) but rather 'time in' with Ed:

It's about time in and really, I think that's probably what we were giving him but extended time in rather than extended time out which is what everyone expects you should give to children who don't comply with adult requests don't they, I think. (Ed's story of Tomas)

Natasha does not use the term 'tough love', but makes the point that her loving approach was often misunderstood by colleagues who saw her as too soft-hearted in her relationships with children. Natasha strongly repudiated this view of her love as "soft" or "namby-pamby" and made direct links between her love and being strict and having high expectations of the children in her class, perhaps a form of 'tough love' that provides clear boundaries:

I've heard people say to me, 'Ah, she's such a namby-pamby'. They use those words, 'She's such a namby-pamby, she's too soft-hearted.' Well actually I'm really strict in my classroom and if they came and watched me teaching, they'd know that my children know exactly what's expected of them and I have very high expectations. I'm not a namby-pamby. I'm not soft-hearted but I love my children and I want the best for them. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

This view resonates with that expressed by the early years practitioners in Cousins's (2017) study, which identified that 'love' in their practice was a means of preparing children for the future by supporting learning, building self-confidence, supporting wellbeing and teaching 'life lessons' through 'hard' love. In summary:

[p]art of loving children was to contribute towards their healthy social development, and learn the difference between right and wrong, and this might involve 'hard love' or telling them off at times (p. 22).

Diana indicates that 'tough love' may be required to meet some children's needs as part of a repertoire of responses, but does not indicate what this would involve:

I think just when they are more needy or whatever need they have you know you've got to put more love, whatever that love looks like, whether that's tough love, whether that's other peers to love them and give them

those skills, you're putting more of yourself into that child. (Diana, group meeting, November)

From the examples given during the discussions, the common elements of 'tough love' appear to be setting and maintaining boundaries and, in the case of Natasha, having high expectations of the children. In this study, the participants used the term 'tough love' without explanation, which could indicate that they believed they had a shared understanding of its meaning:

Some of them were – like, he's a tough love. (Ed, group meeting, November)

The relationships and compassion that underpin the participants' concept of tough love are in stark contrast to the way in which this term has been used in recent years to characterise the approaches adopted by some schools influenced by the American Charter School model. These schools follow strict behaviour management policies and 'no excuses' for infringements of school rules. The Open School's article, 'No Excuses', (2016) highlighted the appeal this has for the current Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, and his view that this demand for 100 per cent compliance 100 per cent of the time is tough love. The participants in this study emphasise that children need boundaries and need to conform to expected behaviours within school, but recognise that children need positive relationships and support to develop the emotional and social skills to achieve this and – for some – this will take time.

#### **4.6 The face of effortful love – “Maybe the more difficult they are to reach the more love that doesn't look like love you give.”**

The love that these Reception teachers discussed often involved an effort to love children who were challenging and who might not reciprocate initially or at all. In many examples, these children were perceived to have the highest need for love from their teacher:

Yeah, maybe that's it, maybe the more difficult they are to reach the more love that doesn't look like love you give (Ed, initial group meeting, September)

Laura still identifies the emotion that these children engender in her as love arising out of recognition that they are struggling or facing challenges, but

accepts that this is not easy and may require different approaches to build the connection:

Crickey, this little chap, it's not their fault and you really feel that love towards them, you know, I must try harder, I must try something different, it's not their fault but actually in the moment it's really hard isn't it?  
(Laura, initial group meeting, September)

To build a loving relationship with children who have not experienced this previously requires a great deal of emotional investment, effort and time. Cousins (2017) identified that caring behaviours may arise out of educators' ethical considerations rather than feelings of love. This resonates with the participants talking about the 'need' to love some children and the distinction between the effortful and natural faces of love. The feelings that the participants describe are consistent with Page's (2018) description of authentic love, as they come from the teacher focusing on the child's needs rather than their own, develop over time and are illustrated as being reciprocal for some children. They also reflect that coming through a challenge can make a stronger relationship (Cousins, 2017).

Laura gives an example of working with a child who required this intensive support, and recognises that her giving of love was not fully reciprocated, but it did start to build trust. She felt that effortful love was an effective description of this particular relationship:

I remember having this little boy a few years ago who was so, so difficult, very aggressive and he seemed to have no love for anybody at all but he came from a situation where he wasn't shown any love at all, really, really bad circumstances and I just kept thinking, well, the more love you give him the more love he will start to show and that was a huge effort but he did, he started very slowly to build a relationship, you know, tiny little signs that he was beginning to trust me. So, things like that, you know, it does spur me on a lot of the time so we couldn't term it reciprocal love could we because it's not always but effortful love is good.  
(Laura, group meeting, January)

The participants' focus on loving children who are challenging or face challenges and the satisfaction and positive feelings this generates when the children make progress and develop a strong relationship resonates with the study by Rytivaara and Frelin (2017). In this study of Swedish teachers' stories about challenging classroom relationships, they found that the teachers'

knowledge about the child's family situation was an important factor in providing support for them and developing relationships which impacted positively on the child and were rewarding for the teacher: "...the teachers positioned themselves as very understanding and considerate with respect to the student's problems, rather than simply labelling the student as bad" (p. 18).

This empathy with children's experiences and efforts to understand behaviour as communicating difficulties is present in the stories told by the participants and contrasts with the early labelling of children as 'problem learners' (MacLure et al., 2012). The wider knowledge that the participants sought from parents and carers also enabled them to better understand the behaviour of the children in their care (Laura's story of Hattie; Angela's story of Sam; Ed's story of Tomas; Natasha's story of Lara). The participants also reported shifts in their views about these challenging children and a growing pleasure from their relationships, and this resonates with many of the stories told in the Swedish study:

Difficult relationships can also be rewarding relationships, if the teacher has the appropriate capacity in the right conditions (personally, professionally, and especially with respect to autonomy) to put effort into the student (p. 18).

The qualifying conditions that Rytivaara and Frelin (2017) place on teacher capacity are aspects of their working life that the participants in this study have identified as significant to them. They personally believe that they need to love the children who face challenges, see it as an important part of their professional practice and have the autonomy (to some degree) to enact this love. The participants' belief that they need to support the needy is echoed in Jones's (2019) narrative study of primary-age teachers in the US, in which one of the participants powerfully described her focus on students facing challenges, as they speak to the heart more strongly. This speaking to the heart could also been seen as a reflection of the teacher's own emotional need to perceive themselves as good and nurturing, and this will be discussed in more detail in the section on the mask of professional love.

The words 'need' and 'needy' were used repeatedly in relation to children who the participants felt required the most support and love, and there was a link between children who were identified as facing challenges in their lives and who

were often challenging in a classroom situation, and those who the participants made an 'effort' to love. In the stories told by the participants, the children fall into these two categories: those that the teacher needs to protect and care for as they have deemed them to be needy or vulnerable, and children described as 'hard' or 'challenging', who the participants identified as needing love and support to adjust to school life and achieve their potential. In contrast, when reviewing children who were not in the closest circle to the teacher on the relationship map, this lack of closeness was regarded as a potential positive, as these children were more autonomous and less needy:

Maybe then is it such a bad thing if children are further away because it means that, you know, it might mean that they're autonomous and they don't need someone as much as other children do. (Ed, group meeting, November)

The view that loving children enables them to fulfil their potential echoes Uusiautti and Määttä's (2013) argument that love-based leadership supports children to achieve their potential and supports their wellbeing and happiness. Citing Coleman (2009) they note that there is an increasing interest in wellbeing and non-cognitive as well as cognitive outcomes: "the balancing of instrumental with less readily definable purposes of education, concerns with resilience and happiness" (Coleman, 2009, p. 281, cited in Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013, p. 110).

The holistic and positive view of children's skills and attributes which characterised all the participants' stories about loving children is identified by Uusiautti and Määttä (2013) as a practice of love-based leaders, as it is based on recognising the whole child and the "multitude of talents and strengths a child possesses" (p. 115). Angela identifies the full range of qualities and attributes the children in her stories possess, and how these qualities contribute to the class as a whole:

I explained all these great things that Maisie has – amazing empathy, she's helped a child who's got no speech in my class to settle in and I totally believe that he wouldn't have settled as well if it wasn't for her because she's been his attachment in the classroom for quite a long time. (Angela's story of Maisie)

Laura makes the distinction between the children highlighted as 'needy' by the other participants and the children at her independent school who may present

as self-confident. Laura emphasises that some of these children are “needy of love”, and this is where she places her focus in terms of professional love:

So, on the whole the children that I work with, it's an independent school, they're not needy, they're quite self-confident, not all of them obviously but it's always the ones that are more needy or more needy of love I think and care that I would perhaps say that I feel a professional love towards. (Laura, initial group meeting, September)

As the academic year progressed, Laura noted that it was the children who she believed most needed her support that she identified as having the closest relationship with:

Again, he's a little boy with quite a few additional needs; it seems to be these children who need a lot more support that I've become closer to. (Laura, individual meeting, April)

Throughout her stories and within the group discussions, Natasha reflected on which children she was drawn into close relationships with and which she struggled to connect with, but she does identify that some of the children she placed in the inner circle of the relationship map are there because they need to be loved:

So, this one's there because I feel she needs my support and my love and affection. (Natasha, group meeting, November)

The description of the effort involved in effortful love indicates that it is emotional labour, and the terms ‘drain’ and ‘draining’ are attached to indicate this. These terms could be applied to the other faces of love (see section 5.5.1), but the emotional intensity of loving children who are challenging or facing challenges is a strong theme in participants’ stories and discussions. Diana finds a sense of relief when some children move on to the next class, as another teacher will become responsible for this love. She questions if this laboured emotion is love, but cannot think of another term that will adequately or accurately describe it:

Some children you put a lot of yourself into but it's not always love, it's not anything else, I can't think of any other emotion that it is but you put a lot of yourself into but they might be a child that moves on and you think, ‘Gosh, thank goodness, someone else can put that in that child now, I'm drained.’ (Diana, initial group meeting, September)



The level of emotional labour involved in effortful love was identified by Diana as a reflection of the perceived level of children's need and the amount of herself that she needed to invest to meet these:

Sometimes those children in your inner circle, you feel that they need you and you need to protect and you need to look after them and that's why they're – Sometimes they're the hardest children in your inner circle but they're there because you put so much more of yourself into them. (Diana, group meeting, November)

In each of his stories, Ed recounts how his relationship with a child has developed and become closer, as he and they have worked through difficult issues and situations. In the case of Owais, the child himself is not aware of the challenges he will face in the future and the dilemmas this creates for Ed in supporting his development and behaviour. At other times, when Ed has to impose boundaries, the tensions came from knowing that imposing these structures created a barrier between himself and Tomas that he would not be able to understand, as they are intended to achieve a longer-term learning and development goal:

You know when you're in the situation and you're part of it and you think, 'Oh God, come on, just do what I'm asking you to do, it's for your own good!' kind of thing. (Ed's story of Tomas)

As well as developing loving relationships with the children, the effortful love that participants engage in also appears to enable them to develop positive views about the children themselves – and their skills and attributes. In some cases, the positive view of the child appears to be directly linked to the effort taken to form the loving relationship and represents a shift from the original view held by the participant. In Brianna's case, Natasha starts to see her behaviour through a different lens as she seeks to understand its cause. At the beginning of her story, Natasha expresses her dislike for aspects of Brianna's personality, but as new aspects of Brianna's behaviour are revealed, Natasha becomes curious at the apparent contradictions and seeks to understand them. By the end of the story Natasha views Brianna much more positively, and is actively seeking to support her social and emotional development:

So, I think inside she's probably feeling very insecure. Trying to control things because she's feeling insecure, so we are doing some Thrive work with her now with some safe activities just to build up that self -

confidence. I just find it so odd that such an eloquent able child feels that insecure inside. I just find it really odd. It's totally changed the way that I feel about her.

I thought all of this negative stuff I've had going around in my head, it really made me flip and think, actually, why is she behaving in that way? I am investigating it at the minute. She's just a bossy person I think and that's just her personality but now I can see a whole child rather than just focusing on what was affecting me in my teaching role. So that's totally flipped the way that I feel about her. (Natasha's story of Brianna)

#### **4.6.1 Love is painful – “No, we can't fix it, it's because you're not going to love me when I've gone into Year 1.”**

An aspect of the face of effortful love is the pain it can cause to both parties as they become emotionally invested in each other, and the authentic, reciprocal relationships that constitutes professional love (Page, 2018) are achieved. In some cases, this was the teacher dealing with the child's or a parent's pain, in others the relationship itself (or the potential loss of it) caused pain or upset to the participant or child.

Ed told the story of Owais, who had been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, a degenerative disease for which there is no cure. Ed felt the tension that came between the priority to prepare him for the more formal teaching and the restrictions on play and movement that would happen in Year 1, and Ed's knowledge that this child would not be able to be as physical as he got older and his condition affected him more. Ed's empathy and concern for the child and his prognosis are evident in his comments:

It's not going to be easier for him when he gets into Year 1 or Year 2 because then that physical-ness and those opportunities are going to be less and less and much so as he gets higher up school. That's made me love him. I just think, 'Oh, no, I love you now'. Not that I didn't love him before, but I love you now because I feel like, 'Oh, Owais' (Ed's story of Owais)

Natasha revealed that the difficulties her children faced had a significant impact on her own feelings. She appears to feel their hurts and the perceived unfairness of their situations, and these upset and anger her. The treatment of Lara by her foster carer in destroying the models she created at school appears to have particularly affected Natasha:

It broke my heart because sometimes she spent the whole week making an elaborate, it's usually buildings, an elaborate building or a park, it's usually places and I just thought this is not on, it's outrageous. I felt that the child had accepted that she had very little power over her environment and belongings but that she had decided that if she had to throw away her creations that she would do it on her terms whilst in school. (Natasha's story of Lara)

The strongest example of this is the pain Natasha feels when Ethan tells her that his situation cannot be 'fixed' because he believes she will cease to love him when he moves to his new class. Natasha worries that she has added to his pain by making him too dependent on his strong attachment to her:

He said, 'I don't want to go to Year 1 anymore'. I said, 'Okay, explain why, give me some reasons and we'll see if we can fix this.' So, he said, 'No, we can't fix it, it's because you're not going to love me when I've gone in to Year 1.'

When he said it, he did nearly make me cry though. I had to hold back the tears because I just thought this poor child has got no attachment at home and I'm the only attachment he's got and now I'm making him lessen that and move on to someone else. (Natasha's story of Ethan)

Natasha uses her stories to reflect on her practice and beliefs, and this is particularly powerful in Ethan's story in response to his outburst. His statement elicits a strong response from Natasha as she questions whether building a loving bond with a child who she believes does not have this elsewhere in his life is actually doing him a disservice as it will, by necessity, have to be reduced or broken when he moves class:

He has such poor attachment to his parents and his carers. It made me think have I done him a disservice because now he's going to struggle leaving me because it is me that he doesn't want to leave, leaving me to then have to develop another relationship and build another relationship with a different person. (Natasha's story of Ethan)

Although this is the most powerful example of love being linked to pain, Laura's story about Hattie and Angela's story of Sam also contains elements of pain for the child and for the mothers that the participants acknowledge and try to ease through their actions and through their relationships.

#### **4.7 The mask of professional love – “It definitely fulfils my need to nurture.”**

Through the discussions of children’s needs, the needs of the teachers were also brought under the spotlight as participants had the time and space to reflect on relationships. In their discussions, the participants started to question their own emotional needs and how these may potentially underpin how their relationships with children developed and were expressed. The loving and caring aspect of their role as Reception teacher was identified as potentially meeting a need within the participants to feel that they were nurturing children – an aspect of practice they felt positively about. There was also a recognition that their loving relationships with children generated positive feelings and feedback from the children for the participants themselves. I have characterised this aspect of professional love as a mask, as the participants identified that enacting love may also provide a cover for teachers to meet their own emotional needs. It is not to be inferred that this type of love is manipulative or disingenuous – rather the reflective process of discussing love has allowed a surfacing of previously hidden motives and emotions that sit behind the outward face of love.

The participants identified that loving the children in their care drew them to the role as Reception teacher, and debated how much this expression of love met their social and emotional needs, as well as those of the child. Page (2018) identifies that professional love is reciprocal, and argues that it needs to be conceived as care-sharing rather than care-giving, as it meets the needs of the adult as well as the child. Angela’s story of Billy and Natasha’s story of Ethan demonstrate the reciprocity of love between teacher and child, and in Ethan’s case how strong this can be and potentially problematic when the bond has to weaken when the child moves class. This reciprocity is in contrast with other discourses about love and care in the early years that identifies it as altruistic and selfless: “A gift-paradigm may underpin values of caring by positioning teachers as givers who satisfy others needs without expectation of exchange” (Warren, 2019, p. 263).

The group discussions about professional love generated reflection and changing views about the relationships participants had with children. Natasha started to question her own motivations in developing close relationships with

the children in her class, and identified that it could be meeting her own social and emotional needs. She acknowledges that this may have been what drew her to her job as a Reception class teacher:

So, it made me think seriously about my needs and is it about me or is it about the children? When I'm developing relationships with the children whose need is it? I've always gone from, 'Oh, it's the child's need, it's what they need and what they require,' but actually this has made me think, 'Oh, maybe I'm in this job because it's what I need for my social and emotional development as much as for them.' (Natasha, group meeting, November)

The placing of children who are seen as needy in the inner circle of relationships was consistent across all participants and also reflected in the stories of love they told. At the first meeting to look at the relationship maps, this common aspect was highlighted within the group and linked to the need it fulfilled in the teacher to feel that they were supporting children holistically and not just with their academic development:

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Angela | I don't know. I really don't know. I don't think I need to be needed but here must be something in me with that though.  |
| Laura  | I think it's interesting, all the children that we've picked are children who we feel have got specific needs.   |
| Diana  | We said that last time didn't we. We said it's almost the ones we put more into that we feel really need to help them or look out for them or protect them. (Group discussion, November) |

The ways in which loving the children meets the individual needs of the teachers was explored in more detail in the discussion between Natasha and Ed, in which they agree that it meets a need they have to nurture:

Natasha      It definitely fulfils my need to nurture.

Ed              Yeah, mine too I think.

Natasha      My intrinsic nature is to nurture, nurture anyone and everything. (Group discussion, March)

During this discussion they also reported finding pleasure in the relationships that they have supporting children's successes and ensuring that they find school enjoyable. Ed also reflects that this leads to positive feedback from parents, which he also enjoys. Angela's stories are very reflective, and she readily considers her own motivations and feelings about the loving relationships she describes and the absence of the child's perspective on the relationships she is describing and mapping:

I don't think I've considered what the child thinks of me in that relationship, it's very much what I'm doing, how I feel about them.  
(Angela's story of Sam)

Natasha believed she could empathise with what specific children were feeling, and this drew her to try and meet their individual needs in a way that was appropriate to them, but she also started to question if this was also meeting a need within herself:

I really felt lots of empathy for her and I think, 'Do you know we were talking about who's the most needy, is it me as the practitioner or is it the child?' I think it's a mutual thing. I think I need to feel needed, but I also need to make sure that that child's needs are being met so it really opened my eyes to making sure that you read between the lines and you use any opportunity you can to build those relationships. (Natasha's story of Lara)

Natasha reflected that this need to be needed meant that she loved children who were obviously needy rather than those who displayed more independence and found those children who challenged her powerful role as the teacher problematic,

She's very, very articulate but she's got to be in charge of everything and it grates on me. She is a very able child who does not need or want very much interaction from myself on a social level. (Natasha's story of Brianna)

Writing her stories of love and reflecting on her own feelings and needs led to a shift in Natasha's views about which children she was able to love from just those who obviously needed her to include children whose needs may be masked by their behaviour. This realisation led to a change in her attitude towards a child she had previously had negative views about:

You know before when we were talking about the different types of love and we were talking about whether it was that we needed to feel needed and that was my point of view. When coming into this I thought, 'Okay, I love the children who I feel need me.' Thinking about it before I came in this was my point of view and I wanted to explore that a bit more but since watching this child I've sort of changed my mind a little bit.  
(Natasha's story of Brianna)

The discussions of love did reveal a different type of loving mask that could be worn in the Reception class when teachers practice exaggerated delight towards children. The participants themselves distinguish between the love that they believe to be deep and authentic and this mask of loving expressions and behaviours that they enact to support children's confidence and self-esteem in the classroom. Diana and Natasha both identified that "acting" in a loving way to show children they are valued and viewed positively was part of the role of the Reception teacher:

You know, that's your acting kind of role isn't it as a teacher, it's still a love but it's more of an acting every day but it's not deep. (Diana, group meeting, November)

Because when I say, 'Oh, that's amazing,' that's my job. It's my job to make those children feel valued and empowered and successful, that's my job. (Natasha, group meeting, November)

The strength of Natasha's statement and the repetition of the statement "it's my job" signify that this is seen as an important part of her role and she sees her loving enthusiasm as having a positive impact on the children's self-esteem. The fact that Natasha feels that this is a required part of the role, even if she is not feeling positive or enthusiastic in reality, could also indicate that this element of practice is emotional labour. The distinction made between this and the love felt for children in other situations implies that they believe there is a greater depth and authenticity to the love they describe in other examples and in their stories.

#### **4.8 Reflections on the faces and mask of professional love – “I think I need to feel needed, but I also need to make sure that that child’s needs are being met.”**

The stories shared by the study participants and their subsequent discussions about what these reveal about love in a Reception class highlight the complex and shifting nature of the loving relationships between the teachers and the children in their care. Love is described as a key element of practice, and professional love is accepted as having a resonance for these practitioners but describing and discussing the enacting of this love required qualifying terms to enable participants to fully explain the different faces that love could present. The categories of love that emerged covered the differing faces that these participants enacted; however, they acknowledge that these are not universal and there are other complexities and challenges to realising loving relationships in the school context, particularly in the current landscape of performativity, accountability and concerns about school readiness.

The stories and termly discussions revealed that the enactment of love was multi-layered and complex, and that attempts to define and analyse drew in many different terms and associated concepts: relationship empathy, emotional labour, familial love, professional love and ‘love’ performed as an act in the teaching role. Professional love was felt by the participants to be a useful and important term and provided a key starting point for the evolving discussions. Page (2018) describes her progression model as a tool to support practitioners’ reflection and thinking about professional love, and it fulfilled that function during this study. In her work Page (2011; 2013; 2018) does not attempt to define love; rather, she provides a framework for reflection that “takes account of these fleeting, yet crucial exchanges which occur between young children and their professional primary caregivers.” (Page, 2018, p. 136).

However, discussing and reflecting on the different faces of love that emerged in this study enabled the practitioners to explore their loving relationships with children more deeply as they surfaced the nuance and complexity of concepts of love and the ebbing and flowing of relationships over time. As Aslanian suggests, “[w]e can explain love and describe how best to provide it, but love unfolds beyond the delineations between theoretical perspectives and concepts,” (Aslanian, 2018, p. 182). In the case of the participants in this study,



there is also considerable effort required to love children who are challenging or who have significant needs, and this was a strong theme throughout our meetings and in their writing.

The participants did not question their own ability to love the children in their care – although they do highlight that not all practitioners demonstrate this in their practice. Cousins' (2017) participants described expressing and giving love to children as more natural in some practitioners than in others, citing Harwood et al. (2013) that this represented practitioners 'embodied knowledge' from their own experiences of being loved and cared for and giving love and care:

The participants constructed their own actions in the workplace as natural rather than derived from external guidelines. Love is visible through people's actions which are more or less loving, and a propensity to love children is something that people have to a greater or lesser extent (Cousins, 2017, p. 28).

There was a degree of consensus between the participants about the faces of professional love, but there were differences in how they described enacting them and the emphasis they placed on each. Natasha was the only participant to raise concerns about being seen as "soft" when discussing tough love, whereas the concern for Ed was other people's expectations of him enacting tough love.

The discussions highlighted that developing professional love for children was not necessarily a linear process, but one that shifted and changed as the practitioners came to understand more about themselves and their practice through storytelling, discussion and relationship mapping. The group discussions about love reflected the key elements of professional love as described by Page (2018), but also often involved more detailed distinctions between the types of love that were expressed and enacted towards children. The participants would label the emotion under discussion as love but identified that it may not 'look' like love if the definition was restricted to only an easy, flowing, natural affection. However, the stories and reflections also reveal the complexity and nuanced nature of the emotions involved in love, which require a focused effort to develop. The relationship is not necessarily reciprocal, particularly in the early stages where participants report the difficulties and challenges in making a connection, although the end result was often a strong

relationship with mutual regard. At times, such as in the case of Natasha and Ethan, the relationship can suffer a reversal, and it requires time and focus to repair – something not represented in the linear model presented by Page (2018) in her tool for thinking about professional love.

The faces and mask of love identified in this study could be depicted as facets of Page's broader definition of professional love:

Figure 6 Faces and Mask of Professional Love



#### 4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have developed an argument that love between a Reception teacher and the children in their care can present in different forms, but that these are all aspects of professional love and reveal the complexities of this aspect of practice. Through discussion and reflection, these different faces of love emerged and through this process of developing self-knowledge, participants were able to see how their own emotions and motivations influenced the enactment of professional love.

In the next chapter I explore how professional love forms part of the professional identity of the participants, the benefits they believe it brings to their role as Reception teachers and the conflicts and tensions of enacting love in a school context and at the boundary of the EYFS.

## Chapter 5 The benefits and challenges of enacting professional love

### 5.1 Chapter outline

Building on the consideration of the complexity of professional love as a concept in the previous chapter, in this chapter the complexity of enacting professional love is analysed in terms of how it is valued by the participants, its positive impacts and the challenges and dilemmas it presents in a school context. I consider how the stories of love and group discussions in the study revealed that the participants feel strongly that love is central to their practice and to their professional identity. I then analyse the range of benefits that the participants believe loving relationships provide to children and to themselves, before examining how the discussions reveal the challenges that professional love generates. These challenges include personal doubts and external tensions with colleagues, policy and regimes of accountability.

As discussed in the last chapter, enacting professional love is an important element of participants' practice, and forms part of their professional identity as Reception class teachers. In this chapter, I build on the analysis in terms of faces and a mask of professional love to consider the benefits and challenges of professional love from the perspective of this group of Reception teachers.

### 5.2 Love as a valued part of professional identity and practice –

#### **“But isn’t that why we’re in this profession in the first place?”**

The importance placed upon love reflects the impact the participants believe it has on the children in their care and, as Natasha implies, this ability to have an impact may be what drew the participants into teaching:

But isn't that why we're in this profession in the first place? Is that what drew us to the profession that we're in? We want to help children develop, whether it's academically or through their wellbeing. (Natasha, group meeting, November)

Angela identifies relationships as key to teaching in the early years, and recognises that the skills take time to develop and that not everyone can become adept at this:

I feel like actually teaching, although it can be undervalued, not everybody can do it well, so I hope that over time you just get better and better and better at it and I think it's all about the relationships, particularly in the early years. (Angela, group meeting, January)

Angela identifies that it is the age of the children that may lead Reception teachers to be so involved in their lives, and indicates how intensive and all-consuming these relationships can be:

The younger the child the more involved we get, like what you said a bit earlier on, it's all-consuming isn't it rather than just, 'Oh, that's my class and it's a job.' (Angela, group meeting, January)

In identifying love as an important and central part of her own practice, Laura raises that this is possibly an essential attribute in a Reception teacher, and that she struggles to understand how people can fulfil this role without loving the children in their class:

I still have always felt I love the children and that's why I do the job, that's the best bit. Personally, I can't understand people who can do the job and not feel that. So, whether that's something that Reception teachers need to have within their personality, or the way that they are in order to do the job... (Laura, group meeting, January)

Angela reinforces this perception that people who are able to have loving relationships with children are drawn to work with this age group as she reflects on the shared characteristics of the early years team within the infant school where she works:

We are all obviously an ilk I would say in my school. We're probably the softer, more rounded edges maybe! (Angela, group meeting, January)

This contrasts with Natasha's comments that, although she is seen as 'soft' by some of her colleagues, she is not 'namby-pamby' (see section 4.5). The tensions with colleagues (and in some cases senior leadership) that the participants identify indicate that prioritising love is not a universal practice (see section 5.4) and, in maintaining a focus on love, these participants are claiming this as part of their professional identity could lead to them being identified as 'activist professionals' (Groundwater & Sachs, 2002; Sachs, 2016). Ed relates the strong and loving relationships he values to the 'key person' role that practitioners are expected to fulfil as part of the statutory EYFS (2017),

reflecting on his previous experiences as an early years professional in a Children's Centre. However, he acknowledges that love is not a written part of policy or practice documents:

I suppose we, as early years practitioners, are talking about the key person approach. Is that something that's – is love an unwritten thing of the key person approach? (Ed, initial group meeting, September)

Participants stated that loving children is an especially significant aspect of practice in the early years, as children transition from home or other caring settings into the statutory school system, and have to adjust to the new demands that this environment will place upon them. Approaching relationships with children from a position of love and care in Reception class supports this transition as children start to experience an environment where they are required to communicate and collaborate with a range of others. In this context, teachers have the opportunity to teach children how to approach these experiences with "tolerance, respect and consideration" (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013, p. 114).

The positive impact of love on children's development and learning is a strong theme within the group discussions. For Laura, the most experienced teacher in the study, this is actually what she views to be the best part of her job as a teacher and the part that has the most positive impact on the child. When something changes or something positive happens, she believes that the time and care that she has invested in the relationship lies at the heart of this:

For me it is the best bit of the job, the relationships with the children. I think when you really feel that you've made a difference or something happens to make you think, yes, that's because we've built this relationship, we've taken the time and the care and now you can see the results that it's having on a child. (Laura, group meeting, January)

The wider benefits of loving relationships for the children are explored in more detail below. The effort and time invested in building loving relationships with children who were previously viewed as challenging had some interesting additional impacts. There were examples of where the participants' positive view of the child led them to act as advocates for them to colleagues. Laura describes how she defends a child she has developed strong affection for to a colleague who finds her behaviour annoying:

She says, 'Well, why is she behaving like this? Why can't she behave? She's dreadful, she's so badly behaved!' I said, 'Yeah, but she's 4 years old. There must be a reason why she's feeling like this and just think how bad she must be feeling for her to be behaving in that way.' Which made her think more about, you know, she's more patient with her now. (Laura, group meeting, January)

This is consistent with Rytivaara and Frelin's (2017) study, which found that there was a correlation between relationships that challenged and also brought joy and satisfaction. In Natasha's story about Brianna, she also acts as an advocate to colleagues as her relationship with the child deepens and she comes to understand what may sit behind her behaviour:

Because it isn't just me in the teaching staff that finds it difficult to interact with Brianna, other members of staff say the same thing and now when they say 'Oh, she's done this again', I'll be like, 'Yes, but she did that', so I find myself now being her advocate and saying, 'Well, actually have you flipped it on its head and thought about why she's done that?' So now I'm trying to get the rest of the staff to twist their thinking a little bit. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

The emphasis the participants place on meeting children's perceived needs with love indicate that this is a central tenet of their practice. This resonates with Page's stage of decentring to focus on the needs of the child as part of the progress towards realising professional love.

### **5.3 The positive impact of professional love – “We’ve built this relationship, we’ve taken the time and the care and now you can see the results that it’s having on a child.”**

The difficulty in defining what professional love looks like and encompasses was a recurrent theme for participants, and they provided compelling and powerful instances to explain what it looked and felt like in practice, and the positive impacts it had on children. The descriptions and examples indicated a strong consistency with the pedagogical love, articulated by preservice teachers in O'Connor's (2019) study. This love:

centred on connection to the children, knowing them, understanding them, wanting deeply what is best for them, working hard to support them to achieve it and offering plentiful opportunities for them to experience positive emotional journeys as well as social and cognitive ones (p. 5).

There is a degree of consensus between the study participants about the importance of loving children as a teacher and the power this love has to enable children to develop, fulfil their potential and think well of themselves. The love described by the participants is in many cases deep, supports a holistic view of the child and took time to develop. These are all key elements of the final stage of professional love as articulated by Page (2018). Angela and Laura both described how the love they gave enabled children to flourish and “be the best they could be”, and reflected on the negative impact of feeling unloved as well as the positive impacts of feeling loved, valued and respected:

I think they do [need love to flourish] because if they don't feel loved by me, I don't think they give their best or feel as comfortable as they need to in order to develop. (Laura, group meeting, January)

All the participants make strong statements about the importance of love and its power to support young children's holistic development and learning. Their views are in line with Rouse and Hadley's (2018) proposal that the early years educator's role needs to be reconceptualised to see learning in the context of care rather than care in the context of learning, as love (keeping children emotionally safe) and care (keeping children safe and meeting their needs) are central to early childhood education.

Laura and Angela believe that learning takes place when children feel safe, loved and valued. The 'love' that teachers give to children is reflected in children's development or, as Angela describes it, it is “emitted” by the children in their behaviour and performance as they become “the best they can be”. This is a powerful image of the love the children have received from the teachers then radiating out from them as they feel loved, valued and respected:

It's all part of the package of love I think, all those things. If you don't feel [valued and respected] then you dwindle a little bit and worry and become self-critical and all those things whereas if you're given a lot of that input about love and being valued and respected and all those things then they can start to emit that can't they and be good, be the best they can. (Angela, group meeting, January)

The positive impact of these relationships is identified as having a benefit wider than on the child and the school. Angela places great emphasis on relationships and, although she believes that she does not personally 'need' those positive

relationships with children, she 'loves' it when it does happen and sees it as a way of contributing to society, implying that she believes the positive benefits of her relationships with children are felt beyond the classroom and the family:

I don't think I necessarily need to have those relationships, but I love it when I have them. I think that's where I came to from it, because I used to do different things and stopped all that to do the teaching because I've always worked with children and I think it's that element of being there for those children and feeling like you're contributing in some way to society. (Angela, group meeting, January)

The participants also identified that their loving and supportive relationships with children who are facing challenges also impacted specific areas of development and learning. Natasha's approach to supporting children indicated that she saw developing children's social and emotional development as a key aspect of her role as a Reception teacher. The approach taken to this aspect of development varied in each case, and included play therapy, modelling behaviours and adapting responses to behaviour to the child's level of social and emotional development. This flexible and nuanced approach reflects the complexity of the children's situations and Natasha's knowledge and understanding of each of their lives:

For her, I think it's typical play therapy because she's re-enacting lots and lots of situations which has been very interesting because I've then been able to build up a picture of what her life was like before without asking her questions and putting her on the spot and she's developing an understanding. (Natasha's story of Lara)

We've been working on it quite a lot, so we've been doing a lot of modelling and talking to her about how it's important to listen to other people and everybody's point of view is equally valid, so we've been doing a lot and because she's articulate and her understanding is really good, she's understood what we've been saying to her and she's taken it on board. (Natasha's story of Brianna)

In her story of Hattie, Laura's feelings of love towards her leads her to spend more individual time with Hattie, building their relationship and giving her positive feedback about her reading and writing. Laura believes that this, in turn, supports the development of Hattie's skills in these areas, as well as supporting Hattie's emotional wellbeing:



So, she has really taken off with her reading now, and her writing. She's loving it, because she's enjoying it and getting a lot of praise for it but wanting to do it because she enjoys it, rather than feeling that it's something that she's being forced to do. (Laura's story of Hattie)

Within the group discussion prior to the research starting, Ed highlighted that the children that it was harder to form a bond with – those that required effortful love – often became the ones he had the strongest relationship with by the end of the year, when he could then reflect on how much progress they had made:

Maybe for those children it's a retrospective stronger bond. Just thinking back to some difficult children from last year, when they're in the moment you don't realise, well I certainly didn't always realise that it's what you miss now they've gone and what they've become that I think about now, rather than thinking about it – like, when you're in the moment you're thinking, 'Oh God, what have I done to get to this point?' But now, knowing what they're like now they've gone to Year 1 and thinking that you've played a part in that, that's when it's... They still love you now, you know, they're always, 'Oh, Mr Zane, whatever.' (Ed, group meeting, September)

Gaining insight into a child's life from the information shared by parents and the process of coming to understand the challenges that a child may be facing appears to strengthen Ed's relationships. In the case of Miroslav, this enables him to view the child more positively:

Since learning more about his family background, but also hearing from his parents that he enjoys coming to school every day, I feel I have an increased awareness and understanding of him now, which appears to have resulted in our relationship becoming stronger. I have noticed that he has become an even more sociable individual who enjoys the company of others. He's just lovely. (Ed's story of Miroslav)

#### **5.4 Challenges of prioritising love in a school context – “I worry slightly that giving it a name like that means it could be seen as just another thing that we've got to do.”**

In this section I describe three specific challenges to enacting love in the Reception class context that the participants reflected on during the study: making love another potential area of accountability, tensions in preparing children for Key Stage 1 and tensions with colleagues. As outlined in Chapter 1, the English Reception class is increasingly the site of a focus on teacher accountability. The concerns expressed by the DfE (2018) and the Office for

Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (2017), that children are not ready for school when they start Reception and are not making sufficient progress within this year for the increased demands of the Year 1 curriculum, have led to a number of actual and proposed policy changes. The participants express a number of points which indicate there are specific tensions relating to the school context that impact on the enactment and prioritisation of all of the faces of professional love.

#### **5.4.1 Love as another aspect of accountability**

This study was intended to surface and name the aspects of loving practice that teachers enact in Reception class, but the participants expressed concern that this process could have unintended consequences. Laura raised the issue that explicitly bringing love into the teacher's role and adding the term 'professional' may make it another aspect of teacher accountability that they could be measured and judged against. Laura questions whether love should be quantified or defined in this way, as she believes it is part of what some people do innately, while others feel a need to do as part of practice:

I don't know. I worry slightly that giving it a name like that means it could be seen as just another thing that we've got to do, we've got to meet that now and we've got to – as well as everything else we've now got to give them professional love and we're being measured on how much professional love we're giving, whereas really, it's just – I don't know that you can quantify or classify it so specifically. I think it's just part and parcel of what people who have that capacity do or feel the need to do rather than – I mean does it have to be given a name, or...? (Laura, group meeting, January)

This is an interesting insight into a teacher's perception of the increasingly wide responsibilities of teachers to meet the needs of children and be held accountable. The growing interest in the role positive relationships and emotionally available adults play in the healthy social and emotional development of young children could bring love into the scope of accountability and performativity.

This reflection from Laura is the most explicit reference to the impact of accountability and performativity on the participants' views of their role as Reception class teachers but there are a number of passing and implicit references that indicate that these pressures have been absorbed into their

understanding of the context in which they operate. In Diana's story in section 1.2 she recognises that she would not normally have been able to respond to Aaron's needs on a normal day because of the pressure to deliver a structured phonics session; Ed comments that he feels the pressure of being judged on outcomes for phonics and maths but would prefer to be judged on the quality of his relationships; Angela meets with a parent to request they do extra work at home with a child who is falling behind in her expected level of development and reflects on the difficulties this creates. The participants raise the pressures they feel to operate in a particular way that they do not feel is necessarily supportive of the child because they will be judged on specific metrics and outcomes. In this context Laura's concern that surfacing professional love as a required part of practice could lead to her performance in loving being judged seems both relevant and insightful.

#### **5.4.2 Tensions in preparing children for Key Stage 1**

Orlandi's (2014) study of the conflicting influences experienced by teachers at the interface between Reception and Key Stage 1 suggested the need for critically reflective professional development to empower teachers and enable them to address their conflicting and competing pressures. A recurrent theme for Ed was his innate and loving response to the challenges faced by his children and the expectations he felt were placed on him as a Reception teacher. In the case of Owais, who had been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, the tension is between the priority to prepare him for more formal teaching and the restrictions on play and movement that would happen in Year 1 and Ed's knowledge that this child would not be able to be as physical as he got older and his condition affected him more:

It's not going to be easier for him when he gets into Year 1 or Year 2, because then that physical-ness and those opportunities are going to be less and less and much so as he gets higher up school. (Ed's story of Owais)

Ed appears to be prioritising 'responsive accountability' over the 'contractual accountability' of producing specific data or outcomes, but this is problematic for him (Halstead, 1994, cited in Sachs, 2016). Ed describes these tensions as a physical pull on him in different directions as he tries to balance the school's expectations and the needs of the child:

Part of me thinks, you know, when it's time for him to come and sit down on the carpet and not be running around and whatever he wants to do physically that I know time's running out for him to be able to do things like that, I want to say to him, 'Go on, Owais, you go and run off,' but I can't, and I feel like I'm pulled in all directions because he's got to conform to the school boundaries anyway because that's what all children have got to do. (Ed's story of Owais)

The tensions between Ed's professional priorities and the expectations he perceives were placed on him by the school also created tensions with colleagues. In the case of Tomas, Ed describes feeling as if colleagues expected him to have a ready solution to challenging behaviour, while his own approach involved building a relationship over time:

We had these football coaches in at school and they were like, 'Oh, what do you do with Tomas? He's quite mmm isn't he? What's the strategy for him?' Well, what do you want me to say? Give him a smack? Sometimes people expect that you're going to do something that's drastic to these kind of children, don't they? (Ed's story of Tomas)

During a discussion about accountability and being judged, Ed commented that he would rather be judged on love than on phonics or maths as he believed it was so important to development. Ed directly links love to early years practice and the unseen and unarticulated work that makes up teaching within this age phase and may not be understood by teachers who have not had this experience:

To me, it's because I don't feel that they've got that understanding of the unseen stuff that we have in early years. (Ed, group meeting, March)

#### **5.4.3 Tensions with colleagues and school leaders**

The participants did not question their own ability to love children in their care, although they do highlight that not all practitioners demonstrate this in their practice. Cousins's (2017) participants described expressing and giving love to children as more natural in some practitioners than in others, citing Harwood et al. (2013) that this represented practitioners' 'embodied knowledge' from their own experiences of being loved and cared for and giving love and care. This perception is consistent with the fact that, although the participants appeared at ease discussing love within the research study group, they identified that love was not something they felt comfortable talking about with all their colleagues,

and that they selected who would be more receptive or interested in the concept:

I can talk about it with some people at work, at school because I know they'll understand but there are some people that you think, oh, maybe I won't tell them what sort of meeting I'm going to because you don't think – I might be wrong, but you get the impression that it wouldn't be as well received or appreciated with some people as it would with others. (Ed, group meeting, March)

In Natasha's case, although she identifies love as an essential part of her role, she feels the need to defend her practice from what she perceives as her colleagues' criticisms that she is too soft and "namby-pamby". This defensiveness about how others may perceive loving practice resonates with Davis and Degotardi (2015) who identify that the omission of love and care from guidance on practice diminishes its importance, and this can have a negative impact on the sense of professionalism for those who prioritise care in practice.

In Laura's case, the tensions between approaches to behaviour is also felt in discussions with parents. In Laura's story of Hattie, she believes that parental conflict about reading and punishment is having a negative impact on her general wellbeing as well as her academic skills, and this generates a strong, empathic response:

Speaking to mum and dad and seeing how difficult they are finding it to deal with Hattie's behaviour and the amount of unhappiness and worry they are feeling made me feel a huge amount of love for Hattie as she is clearly feeling very mixed up and unsure about all sorts of things. (Laura's story of Hattie)

Laura is committed to making school a positive experience for children, and is distressed when her desire to plan a supported transition for two children starting in her class is overruled by the school leadership:

When I knew that two new children were starting on the Monday of activity week, I was very worried that they wouldn't have a good settling-in experience. I thought that they would feel confused, anxious, possibly scared and traumatised by the whole experience. (Laura's story of Lewis and Scarlett)

The tension between the participants' professional identity and practice, and the different types of practice within a school, is also a recurrent theme in stories

and discussions. Ed acknowledges that the affection and emotional support he has provided in Reception will not be present for the children as they move into Year 1:

For me in that respect though, I know what they're going to experience in Year 1 is very, very different to what they have experienced in Reception. Yeah, we are across the corridor which in a way makes it even worse when they're perhaps not having a good time and they want to come back. (Ed, group meeting, July)

The importance placed on love as part of their professional identity and practice leads some of the participants to value meeting the individual needs of the children in their care above the school policies that are set out for dealing with behaviour. Indeed, for Natasha, behaviour that in other circumstances could be perceived as problematic (such as noise in the classroom) is treated as a sign of progress in the social and emotional development of a child:

She's quite loud and when you hear someone making a really loud noise in the classroom, it's her, and she's getting so excited with these because she's still got them, she still needs them, she's getting so excited with other children re-enacting different things and its nice things now. (Natasha's story or Lara)

In Ethan's case this leads to a refusal by Natasha to use 'time out' as a response to challenging behaviour, as she recognises that this would not be developmentally appropriate for him and that he is still making progress with his behaviour despite some lapses:

So, for instance I never use a time-out chair, because I think if you don't understand why you've done something sitting a child on a chair to think about what you've done wrong is not an appropriate strategy, so I never, ever use it. (Natasha's story of Ethan)

Ed approached behaviour with the children in his stories through a trauma-informed practice lens from a training course he had attended, meaning that he prioritised the importance of warm, trusting relationships as a foundation for learning and development. The emphasis on building these loving relationships at times created tension with the behaviour policies of his school that emphasised consistent consequences to unwanted behaviour, such as 'time out', that were not predicated on working with the child to enable them to understand the cause and impact of their behaviour. Tomas struggled to accept

waiting and sharing, and was quite disruptive initially. This behaviour had to be addressed through what Ed described as “tough love”, insisting on the boundaries but remaining open and affectionate to Tomas:

Well, to be honest it's never about time out is it? It's about time in and really, I think that's probably what we were giving him but extended time in rather than extended time out, which is what everyone expects you should give to children who don't comply with adult requests, don't they, I think. (Ed's story of Tomas)

Laura's story about Lewis and Scarlett highlights the different views held about the importance of love and relationships within her school, and different competing priorities. In her story, Laura believes that their transition experience into her class late in the academic year needed careful planning and was deeply concerned about the potential detrimental impact of this being unsupported if the children joined during an 'activity week', when she would not have the opportunity to spend time with them and build her relationship. Laura feels accountable and responsible for the children's wellbeing, and is angry and upset when her approach is undermined by the decisions of the senior leadership team (SLT) within her school:

I was quite cross about the fact that the attitude of SLT was, 'Oh, it will be absolutely fine, you worry too much.' (Laura's story of Lewis and Scarlett)

These concerns stemmed from Laura's experience of early years practice and her belief about transition as an individual experience for each child that needed to be tailored to meet their needs. Laura also appears to be frustrated at senior leaders' lack of understanding of early years practice and lack of care about the children's emotional wellbeing:

I have always seen transition as a hugely important process and one that it is so important to get 'right' for each child. I felt that the SLT attitude of 'they'll be fine' showed a total lack of understanding of the importance of a good transition process and a lack of feeling towards the children. (Laura's story of Lewis and Scarlett)

The challenge of the differing views on professional love that were found among colleagues and school leaders was a strong theme across the group discussions and in some of the stories of love. The group discussion at the start of the year highlighted that participants thought that the priority they placed on

love was not necessarily a view of practice shared by the leadership teams in their schools. Diana talked about how generally supportive her headteacher was of her practice; however, when she discussed transitioning a child to Year 1, his response surprised her:

I had a conversation with our SLT team about a child in my class last year who was a difficult to love, you had to learn to love him, you had to really get him to love him, he wasn't someone you just loved straightaway and whilst we talked about transition I said, 'Oh, you know, his next teacher just needs to get that little bit that she's going to really love about him and then he'll be fine but you need to work on it with that child'. My head said, 'You don't need to love anyone; you just need to treat them equally'. (Diana, initial group meeting, September)

Implicit in the response is the perception that love is not a necessary part of teaching, and potentially loving a child undermines treating all children equally, perhaps connecting it to favouritism. As can be seen from the discussions on needs, the participants themselves saw loving children who may be challenging or facing challenges was required to meet their needs and to facilitate their learning and development. In contrast, Natasha revealed that her headteacher was in sympathy with her approach and had supported her taking part in the research. During a discussion, her headteacher had offered his own views on the importance of love to meet children's wellbeing needs, and the different types of love that may be present in the classroom, linking it to aspects of familial love:

I think it's really important to meet the wellbeing of children before you can even teach them anything and we had a huge conversation about different types of love. He was totally opposite and really stressed the importance that you've got to meet the children's emotional wellbeing and you do that through gaining a positive loving relationship in different forms that you would with your own children or your grandchildren or your niece and nephew. (Natasha, initial group meeting, September)

Ed reflected on the views within his leadership team and felt that colleagues in this group may not overtly disagree with love as part of practice. He believed that they would not feel comfortable talking about love, or that it may superficially be acknowledged and "paid lip service" to:

I suppose that's a bit harsh to say they wouldn't agree with it, but I don't think it would be something that would be comfortably discussed or



acknowledge, but it might be paid lip service, do you know what I mean?  
(Ed, initial group meeting, September)

The attitudes towards love within other year groups, with early years colleagues and the wider school workforce, were discussed during the focus groups. The perceived difference between early years teachers and those of other age groups was highlighted when Angela recounted the frustrations of an early years colleague about a child she had loved and supported and felt that the KS1 teacher who now had the child in their class was speaking in a negative way about them. She was particularly concerned that the KS1 teacher was focused on the curriculum rather than the child's emotional needs:

She was getting quite annoyed with this other teacher who obviously was – She didn't feel she was giving her the nurture and the love that she thought that that child needed in order to flourish. (Angela, group meeting, January)

Laura believed that the explanation for this difference in approach could lie in the different expectations of children beyond the Foundation stage and the reduced contact with parents, which she proposed supported the close relationships she developed in her Reception class:

Like you said, expectations are different, and I think the relationship is different maybe, so they don't have so much contact with the families so they don't get the opportunity to build those relationships that we do in Foundation stage when we have contact. (Laura, group meeting, January)

A theme throughout the discussions about colleagues was the different feelings they sometimes expressed for the children that the participants had developed loving relationships with. Angela recounted the difference in attitudes towards one particular boy between her and her job-share partner. Angela had taken the lead in this particular case and had spent time working with the child and his family to nurture and support him, but his behaviour had meant that the job-share teacher did not share Angela's view of him:

I've done all the stuff with the family, it just so happened that it's been me in and I've taken the lead on that, so he actually just drives her mad. He's quite a challenging child, so I've got this real closeness to him now and she's like, 'Oh gosh, he actually just drives me mad,' because he's so

there all the time, but he is settling down a bit. (Angela, group meeting, January)

Laura also provided an example where she felt love for children and identified that their challenging behaviour arose from needs that were not being met, but this behaviour was preventing her TA from forming a bond with them.

Interestingly, this led to discussions about why one of the children may have been behaving in this way, and this had an impact on the TA's behaviour towards her:

There's two little girls in my class. I think I talked about one last time, who I feel love for both of them and yet my TA, they really wind her up! I said, 'Look, we've got to think why this little girl's behaving like that.' I said I actually feel sorry for her because she's such an angry little girl and she's not very pleasant with other children at all, and it winds my TA up. She says, 'Well, why is she behaving like this? Why can't she behave? She's dreadful, she's so badly behaved!' I said, 'Yeah, but she's four years old. There must be a reason why she's feeling like this, and just think how bad she must be feeling for her to be behaving in that way.' Which made her think more about, you know, she's more patient with her now. (Laura, group meeting, January)

While the participants in the research identified love as an important part of their practice – and particularly identified that effortful love for children who may not reciprocate and whose needs might be expressed in challenging behaviour was part of their professional responsibilities – they recognised that this was not necessarily the case with their colleagues. Linking to the concepts of natural rather than effortful love, Laura commented that the TA in her class formed close relationships with the children who were more loving towards her:

She's drawn more to the ones that are loving towards her, so the ones that always go up to her and, you know, they want to do things to please her. She's more drawn to those children. (Laura, group meeting, January)

The discussions that participants had with colleagues about love highlighted that, for some, surfacing and discussing this hidden aspect of practice carried the risk of exposure and judgement. Natasha had talked to a fellow Reception teacher about the research she was participating in, and she expressed that she would not feel comfortable taking part in this research project and exposing her own emotions:

She wouldn't want other people judging her or not judging her or listening to why she doesn't love someone or does love someone. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

This could link to Laura's comments about discussions of professional love leading to this being another aspect of practice that teachers and practitioners would be held accountable for, but it also highlights the need to create safe, supportive spaces for critical reflection (see Chapter 7). These concerns could also arise out of a fear of exposing ambivalent feelings towards children or accusations of favouritism towards those who are loved (see section 5.5.2).

### **5.5 Complexities and dilemmas of professional love – “We’re saying no, you’re needy, you’re close to me because I say so!”**

During the course of the discussions across the year, the participants started to question and explore the complexities and dilemmas that enacting professional love presented. In some cases, this extended to questioning their own initial positions and assumptions about love in their practice. This uncovering of complexities is highlighted in Ed's contribution, where he questions the reliability of teachers identifying children's needs. Ed tentatively offers a different perspective: that the needs of the children who are not in a close relationship with the teacher may remain unknown, and the children they have identified as needing love and as being in a close relationship with may not feel close to or loved by the teacher:

But I've just been thinking now though, as well as the physical closeness is it need as well? Are the most needy the ones that aren't as close? Or are some that are needy, you make them, you think – we're saying, 'No, you're needy, you're close to me because I say so!' (Ed, group meeting, November)

During discussions, the participants also identified that there may also be gender differences in how children's needs were identified and acted upon (see section 4.3). Of the stories told by the participants, seven were about boys and four were about girls (the remaining story was about a boy and a girl), which may indicate that the participants generally identify boys as having greater needs, or that their ways of managing their needs made them more visible in the classroom. This has implications for ensuring that all children's needs are met and links to Ed's observations that teachers determine who is needy, but

that they may miss underlying needs as they only respond to those whose needs manifest themselves in more obvious ways. The relationship-mapping tool revealed that this could be the case, as Laura only identified a child's needs after the map showed them to be on the periphery of the map across the school year, and subsequent efforts to build a relationship with her and her family revealed she was suffering from hearing loss (see Chapter 6).

Two of the strongest examples of complexities and dilemmas in enacting professional love were the level of emotional labour it required and the difficulties in overcoming negative feelings towards children.

### **5.5.1 The emotional labour of love – “Because some of the children who need that love are the hardest ones to love.”**

Loving children in a Reception class context was characterised by the participants as hard work because of the relentless nature of the emotional investment and level of involvement with children and their families. This could be seen as part of effortful love, but emotional labour appears to be required whatever face it presents to the world. This element of practice was identified at the initial meeting as an aspect of the participants' role as Reception teachers. The emotional investment continued during times that the children were not in school and were difficult to detach from:

You never switch off those feelings you have for the children who are in your care. You're always thinking about them and if you know someone's going through a difficult time, you're thinking how their holiday's getting on or, you know. (Diana, initial group meeting, September)

Laura alludes to the emotionally exhausting nature of working with young children, and identifies that there are many emotions involved – of which love is one:

It's emotionally draining isn't it? Working with very young children often and I think, yeah, one of the emotions is love but there are lots of other emotions alongside that. (Laura, initial group meeting, September)

Angela's level of personal knowledge and her close feelings toward the family members as well as the children in her class manifests itself as having a perceived duty of care to the adults as well as the children. This leads to her emotional labour extending beyond the child to support other family members.

In her story about Sam, Angela takes steps to be available to comfort Sam's mum because she knows her well enough to understand that her absence from the family portrait that Sam has drawn is significant and potentially hurtful:

I felt anxious about displaying the picture, as I knew his mum would see it and be upset. She had already talked to me at length about Sam's outbursts and how he saw his dad as an idol. (Angela's story of Sam)

Laura recognises that, despite her emotional labour, she as the teacher cannot always meet a child's needs through her professional love, and that she may need to sometimes step away or involve others if the relationship becomes too intense or is taking a toll on her wellbeing. Laura identifies that this distancing is part of ensuring that a child's needs are met, and in this case could still be viewed as part of professional love:

So that's when your professional judgement has to come in and you have to – you might have to involve other specialists to make sure that they get what they need, but making sure that they get what they need probably might also be part of professional love. (Laura, group meeting, January)

Laura acknowledges that in her current situation of a small class of 11 children in an independent school, the relationships can be emotionally intense. Laura makes the link to familial relationships in this instance, noting that they can be fraught at times, but the family members still love each other:

And I think it is a real advantage having such a small class in terms of building relationships and sometimes it almost feels too intense. Yes, and we often say that we're like a family and sometimes families fall out with each other, but it doesn't mean they don't love each other. (Laura, individual meeting, April)

#### **5.5.2 Ambivalent feelings towards children – “She was a mean girl when she first came.”**

Despite the emphasis and focus on loving the children in their classes, there was recognition from some of the participants that they responded to some children with ambivalent or negative feelings. This again could form part of effortful love as it requires a concerted attempt by the participants to overcome these negative feelings. But the examples given appear to arise from a response to characteristics that the children display in the classroom rather than the effort to give love to meet children's needs alone.

Natasha reflects on this complexity and introduces the concept of children who 'need' love but are not necessarily lovable. Natasha links this issue to children's behaviours and difficulties in forming bonds, but still sees it as her professional responsibility to support them to overcome these difficulties:

For me, a lot of it's about empathy because some of the children who need that love are the hardest ones to love... They're the ones for me that I think, 'Okay, why is that child displaying those behaviours? Why is it so difficult for me to get to know him?' ...Sometimes I don't feel like I love a child but I want to do my professional best to help them get over whatever difficulties they have. (Natasha, initial group meeting)

When discussing the location of children on the relationship maps, the children who were not in a close or loving relationship with the participants at the time of the discussion were at a distance for a variety of reasons. In some cases the children had joined the class late or been off for a period of time, but in others it was the behaviour of the child that repelled the participant and prevented them from bonding with them. Ed's story of Tomas brings up complex feelings that seem to challenge Ed's need to have positive relationships with all the children in his care. Ed reflects that, although he would not have felt comfortable acknowledging it at the time, he had felt that he did not like being with Tomas when his behaviour was at its most challenging, and that these negative feelings were reciprocated by Tomas:

He's more patient when he's playing with his peers, even better when there's an adult mediating and we enjoy each other's company more now I feel. It's that reciprocal relationship whereas before, even though other than through this I don't think I would have ever acknowledged it, that we were perhaps not liking each other's company at times but now we do and it's nice to think, 'Yeah, we've made a little breakthrough.' This seems to have improved our relationship, from being frustrated with each other to enjoying interacting with each other and appreciating each other's company. (Ed's story of Tomas)

Ed refers to the closeness that has been reached with Tomas as the year has progressed as 'love', but this does make him consider what his previous feelings may have been, and if these are acceptable to him professionally:

I struggle in the present, but looking at it in the past we've done well I think. And in the thing of professional love rather than just, 'Oh, yeah, I accept him a bit more now,' it's made me think, 'Yeah, I love him now but then did I not love him then, and is that my fault?' (Ed's story of Tomas)

Natasha also describes how certain behaviours in children repel her and prevent her forming a close bond:

She was a mean girl when she first came in, to the other children, and I find that a really undesirable characteristic in a child and I just find it really difficult to bond with them. (Natasha, group meeting, November)

In describing another child who was in one of the outer circles of the relationship map in March, Natasha identifies a personality clash preventing the relationship from becoming closer. This appears to stem from his crossing a line into what Natasha perceives as her role:

He's a bit of a tell-tale, personality thing again, he's a bit of a tell-tale and he's constantly telling other children what they should and shouldn't be doing which is quite irritating. Because he's not the teacher! (Natasha, group meeting, March)

Laura, in contrast, provides a long list of the challenging behaviours exhibited by Hattie in her story of their relationship, but does not reveal if these characteristics inhibit her relationship with her or affect her view of the child. In contrast, she focuses on the positive aspects of her personality and seeks to understand what may sit behind the behaviours:

She's quite aggressive towards other children, and quite unkind in the things that she says. Hattie is often a very angry little girl who is finding it difficult to make and maintain relationships with other children. She is frequently unkind (pulling faces, saying unkind things to and about other children and is sometimes aggressive). She can be very defiant, rude and stubborn with adults. She is fiercely competitive and can't handle not being first, not being chosen to do things or if other children receive more attention or praise than she does. (Laura's story of Hattie)

She also has a lovely side to her personality which is happy, funny, caring and very loving towards others. She is a little girl who is clearly struggling to deal with her emotions and just struggling to maintain relationships really. (Laura's story of Hattie)

Laura's response to Hattie may stem from a reluctance to expose any negative feelings she has about children, but there is no indication that this is the case. Natasha reveals that her strong feelings relating to the children in her care can be negative as well as positive, including in her story about Brianna. Her description of her feelings towards Brianna at the start of the year is very honest:

She's very, very articulate but she's got to be in charge of everything and it grates on me. She is a very able child who does not need or want very much interaction from myself on a social level. (Natasha's story of Brianna)

These negative feelings undergo a transformation as Natasha reflects on her starting position that she loved the children who needed her and that there were other children who, due to personality clashes, she would not be close to. By the end of Brianna's story, she has come to understand what may sit behind her behaviour and has become an advocate for her to other members of staff who may still view her negatively.

## **5.6 Reflections on the complexities of love – “I love him now but then did I not love him then and is that my fault?”**

The participants in this study strongly articulate that loving the children in their care is central to their practice as Reception class teachers and, in some cases, the ability to prioritise this element of practice is what drew them to teach this age phase. The participants' discussions reveal that they see love as part of their professional identity and value love both as a vehicle to connect and build relationships and also for the wider benefits it brings in supporting all aspects of child development.

The importance these participants place on love creates a range of tensions and dilemmas in the school context they operate in, with the current focus on the role of Reception teachers in preparing children for more formal schooling in Year 1, particularly focusing on phonics and maths and compliance to school rules and behaviour policies.

The variation between the participants in how far they felt supported by or in conflict with the wider ethos of their school is consistent with a number of recent studies that have used extended interviews with teachers to assess the tensions and impact of the mandated requirements of their role and their own beliefs and motivations (Moore & Clarke, 2015; Buchanan, 2015). In some cases, this situation is manageable, as some teachers find a good fit between their own views and those of the schools they are employed in (Buchanan, 2015). This is the case for Angela and Natasha, but for others the mismatch is more profound and troubling (Moore & Clark, 2015) as teachers perceive that they are being asked to contribute to a system that they see as perpetuating



inequalities. The tensions felt by Ed and Laura could be said to fall in the latter category; and they fly “under the radar” by following their principles while still ostensibly following the school’s policy and ethos (Cox & Sykes, 2016). In Page’s studies of professional love (2011; 2013; 2014) in other types of early years settings there are specific tensions between loving practice and safeguarding concerns relating to loving touch. In examining perceptions of professional love in the Reception class context, the challenges and tensions appear to be more focused on the demands made on teachers by senior leaders and the wider school culture.

The participants acknowledge and articulate these tensions and challenges, but still maintain love as part of their professional identity – even where this brings them into conflict with school leadership and colleagues. In considering similar teachers’ responses, Moore and Clarke draw upon the work of Berlant (2011, cited in Moore & Clark, 2015) and her term ‘cruel optimism’ as a means of defining how these teachers remain attached to the hope and aspiration of bringing about real change in the world through their teaching while having to operate within a neoliberal system which may work against this vision. This prioritising of love does not mean that the participants find its enactment unproblematic, and they reflect at length on the emotional labour involved in this practice and the pain they feel in response to the significant challenges children in their care face. There are expressions of frustration and anger in the participants’ responses in this study, particularly when their support for children facing challenges goes unacknowledged or is undermined, and this is consistent with the findings in other studies where teachers are working within systems that may not support their moral purpose and where they have to suppress some of the emotions they feel (Hargreaves, 1998; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

Cain (2016) draws on Biesta (2007; 2010) in arguing that teaching is based on values and is a moral and political act. These values may vary, but are likely to draw upon empathy, acceptance and care – particularly for those learners deemed to be disadvantaged – and these values resonate with those expressed by the participants in this study. This notion of the extent to which educators may hold onto their principles and values and try to enact them despite the conflicting demands placed upon them has parallels with this Reception class

study. The school readiness agenda may be an external goal that runs counter to educators' moral purpose and the symbolic representation of how early years educators wish to see themselves and have others see them (Moore & Clarke, 2015), and there are tensions among the participants about how they are seen or judged by colleagues as they prioritise love in their classrooms.

Although the participants talked comfortably about their love for the children in the focus groups, it was not clear how much they would have used the term love or professional love in their discussions with parents, and Ed expresses surprise when a father talks about how much his son loves Ed. Laura said that using the term professional love in a Reception class context could be useful when talking to parents, as it reassured them that their child would be cared for within a professional context:

It lets the people know that those children will be nurtured, and they will be loved, but it is still professional. (Laura, group meeting, January)

This comment implies that there may be love that is 'unprofessional', or perhaps inappropriate, as discussed under 'loving touch' (section 4.4). Rouse and Hadley (2018) found in their Australian study of parents' and educators' perceptions of practice that it was the parents who spoke most often about love, and wanted their children to be loved by their teacher. Educators focused much more on learning and development, perhaps reflecting the emphasis placed on this aspect of the role – rather than care or love – in their framework documents. The lack of reference to love and care in the English EYFS could explain why the term love was not reported as being used with parents in this study, although Angela does say that she would now tell the children directly that she loved them, which was not the case at the start of the research. Natasha and Angela both say they can talk to their colleagues about love, and that there is a shared understanding of the importance of this aspect of practice within their schools, whereas Ed and Laura do not feel comfortable to share their views about love with all their colleagues, but would select people that they thought would be sympathetic to their approach. These concerns have implications for leaders within the EYFS.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored how loving practice forms part of the professional identity of the participants, and the ways in which they believe it supports children's wellbeing, learning and development. I have also outlined the challenges in maintaining this aspect of practice within a school context due to tensions with accountability, the pressures of operating at the boundary of the Foundation stage and the differing values and priorities of colleagues and school leadership.

The process of taking part in the study appears to have supported a gradual uncovering of additional levels of complexity in enacting love in an early years context, as participants revealed the ambivalent feelings they could hold towards children while still making the emotional effort to love them and support them. This process could be perceived as the participants working through the levels of Page's (2018) tool for thinking about professional love; however, the level of complexity they uncover and the ambiguous feelings they disclose does not feel wholly compatible with this linear model of moving towards authentic and reciprocal love. In this chapter and the last, an implicit theme is the value of participating in the research process for participants developing an understanding of professional love, and the relationships with the children they teach. In the next discussion chapter, I make this implicit theme explicit, examining how and why participation in the research led to changes in participants' understandings and practices.

## **Chapter 6 Participation, professional learning and changes in practice**

### **6.1 Chapter outline**

In this discussion chapter I consider the impact of taking part in this research study on Reception teachers' practice, and how the collaborative nature of the study may have influenced these changes. I explore in detail the space that the study offered for reflection and the development and use of the mapping tool. I explore how the participants used the relationship-mapping tool and the ways in which this tool informed the group discussions on love, supported reflection on relationships and practice and the participatory nature of the tool's development. Finally, I reflect on the implications and wider impact of taking part in collaborative research.

### **6.2 Introduction**

In the previous two findings chapters I considered how the research study has contributed to an understanding of how professional love is enacted in a Reception class and how the research supported the participants to gain a deeper understanding of professional love, and their own motivation, emotions and challenges in enacting it in a school context. In this discussion chapter, I explore the changes in practice that took place as a result of this study and speculate as to how the different elements of this collaborative study supported these specific changes to take place.

In Chapter 1 I highlighted that, at the start of this research study, I considered how my previous life experiences had led to a positionality and belief that working collaboratively on issues and goals could transform situations and address issues of social justice. I formed the intention that, if possible, this research would be collaborative, and have an impact on practice – and that the potential changes would be shaped by the participants. This discussion chapter is more speculative than the previous two, as the impact of elements of the collaborative approach on professional development, particularly the use of the mapping tool, were not fully anticipated at the start of the study.

### **6.3 The impact of the collaborative research on practice**

During the group discussions, particularly towards the end of the study, the participants highlighted a number of ways in which their practice had changed as a result of taking part in the research. In this section I consider three key areas of practice that participants reported changes in over the course of the school year: increased reflection on loving practice, consciously focusing on children's emotional development and taking a more proactive stance on meeting children's emotional needs. I consider each of these in turn, and their relationship with each other.

#### **6.3.1 Increased reflection**

There was consensus among the participants that being part of the research study had provided the opportunity and time for the participants to reflect on love, relationships and their enactment in practice.

The participants talked extensively about the research impacting on their reflective skills, as well as some specific changes in practice with children. This opportunity to reflect has led the participants to change their views about incidents and particular children, which implies that the outcomes of these reflections will also be felt in the classroom:

I think also I've allowed myself a bit more time to think about what the relationship is with the children that I'm struggling with a bit more. Also doing this piece of work, I think, has been really interesting for me because it makes me think, well, why? (Angela, group meeting, January)

Like I said before, without being part of this group I don't think I'd have made the conclusions in the stories that I've shared that I have done. (Ed, group meeting, March)

The shift in thinking arising from reflection is clearly illustrated in Natasha's example of a specific child, in which she acknowledges that placing her in the inner circle of her map was about her own need to be needed, rather than the child's need:

She's moved out because she doesn't need me anymore, she's a bit more independent. I like her, it's nothing to do with her personality, I just think she's not as needy and that was the needy part of me here and that's how I justified it there, the neediness. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

Natasha reflected that the child did not need her and had become independent, and her support of this independence is a change in practice, despite an assertion during the same meeting that the change she noticed in herself was an increase in reflection:

It's not changed in my practice but I think it has made me more reflective.  
(Natasha, group meeting, March)

The increased reflection reported by the participants appears to be a first stage, prior to actual changes in practice as they clarify their thinking about children's emotional needs and practice in relation to this becomes more intentional.

### **6.3.2 Consciously focusing on children's emotional needs**

The increased reflection on professional love and children's emotional needs led to a more conscious focus on meeting children's emotional needs within the classroom. This surfacing of what had previously been an implicit, rather than an explicit, element of practice, enabled the participants to consciously explore and address children's needs. Ed's stories indicated that the research process and space for reflection had affected how he viewed his loving relationships and his role. His appreciation of the opportunity to take time to focus on the emotional needs of the children and the lack of opportunity for this within school as compared to the Children's Centre he had previously worked in was raised during the first meeting of the group in September. Taking part in the research appeared to have provided Ed with an opportunity to think more deeply about children's behaviour and the importance of relationships, and provided a different vocabulary with which to analyse them:

It's made me think how much do other children just come to understand what you want? I can't remember ever saying to the class as a whole, 'Right, we're all going to wait our turn and you're all going to wait and we're going to take it in turns,' or whatever it is. Generally children are quite good at regulating themselves aren't they, it's just that when children like him that aren't you realise, 'Oh, we need to do something about this.' To be honest I don't know whether I would have even thought about it if it wasn't for doing something like this, you know, to take time – I would have, but I wouldn't have thought of it in these professional love terms. (Ed's story of Tomas)

Ed highlighted that the emphasis was usually on safeguarding and protecting yourself as a teacher rather than focusing on what children need, including the need and the right to be loved:

In this world of safeguarding you can't do... everything's about what you can't do and about protecting yourselves as professionals and practitioner teachers but what about what the children need? (Ed, initial group meeting, September)

Natasha revealed that taking part in the research had impacted on her practice in a broader sense, as she now more consciously supported the emotional development of the children in her class, being curious about their behaviour and providing opportunities for them to talk about their feelings with her. This change in approach had already had an impact that had been noted by school colleagues:

Actually, it has made my practice change slightly. I'm telling a bit of a fib there. So instead of not charging in there but interfering in children's interactions when they're in disagreement, I stand back now and I observe them and only step in if they need me to, but afterwards I will talk to them about why they did something and I think they're much more emotionally literate because of that, because we talk much, much more about emotions. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

### **6.3.3 Proactively meeting children's emotional needs**

The increased reflection on loving practice and focus on children's emotional needs also seems to have created a sense of agency in the participants, as they reported taking a more proactive role in meeting children's emotional needs. Ed noted that, as a result of his participation, he would now take a more proactive stance when he realised that a child was struggling with something, to see what he could actively do to change or address the issue. Ed implies that he now has increased agency to meet the child's needs

[o]r attached a bigger impetus on you as a teacher, as a practitioner in part of that thinking, 'Oh well, they're like however they are because something's going on at home or because this has just happened or because they don't like what we're doing,' whereas this has made me consider what I can do to change that. (Ed, group meeting, March)

Angela noted that the discussions about love had made her feel comfortable about telling children that she loved them, which she would not have done

previously, although she does qualify this statement by saying 'even if its professional love':

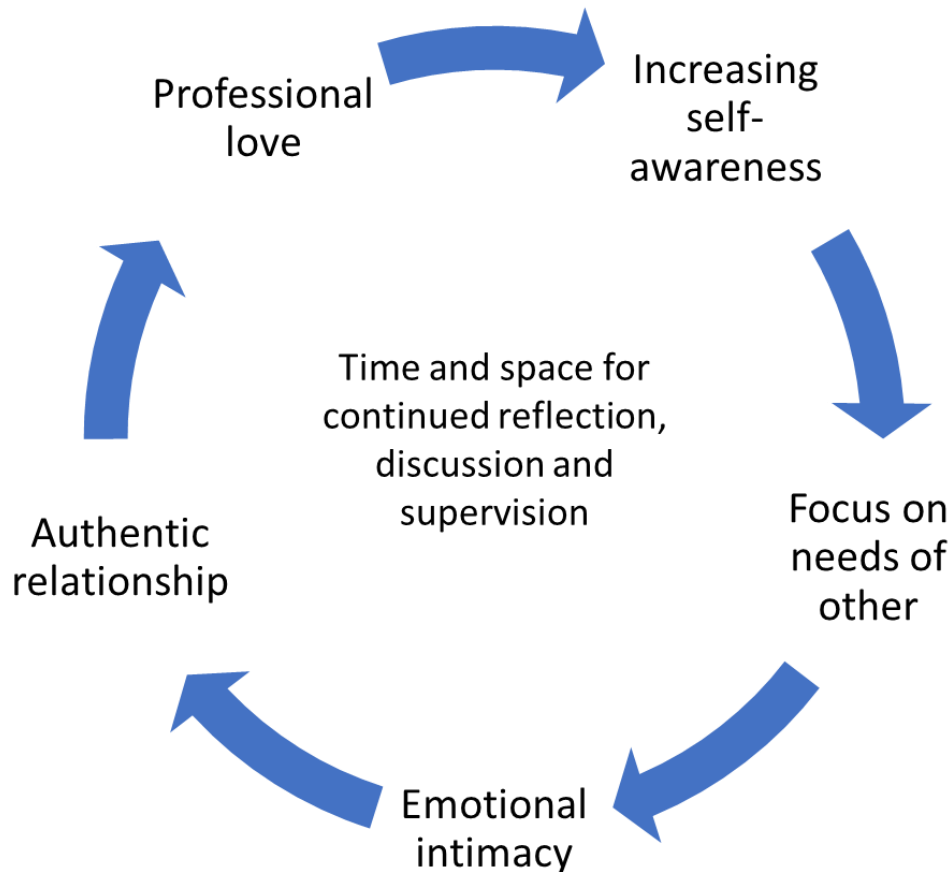
Yeah. I tell the children that I love them now. I never used to! 'Come here, we love you!' I wouldn't have said that before and I thought actually, it's okay to say that because I do love you, you know, even if it is professional love, it's okay. (Angela, group meeting, January)

The focus on the benefit of relationships and love was also found by some of the participants to be empowering, Ed reported that he felt he now had more agency to act on what he felt and observed, rather than empathising or sympathising with a child's situation. Angela felt empowered to raise and address issues with families.

Having the time and space for continued reflection and discussion about professional love enabled the participants to uncover their own motivations and approaches to professional love and enact their relationships in different ways in the classroom. Page's tool for thinking about professional love is depicted as a pyramid (see section 2.7) however, the experience of these participants indicate that this may be better represented as a continuous circle with the time and space for reflection and discussion continually revealing new insights and these in turn impacting on how the different faces of love are enacted. The following depiction of the cycle is tentative as with Figure 6 as future reflections and discussions may reveal further faces of love or stages of the process.



Figure 7 Developing professional love through reflection and discussion



The participants reported the changes that they had made to their practice during the study, and in the next section I will consider the elements of this collaborative study that may have contributed to these changes.

#### 6.4 Relationship mapping

The process of collaboration in discussions about professional love in Reception classes in this study was powerful in surfacing perceptions and implicit practice; however, another collaborative element that appears to have had a significant impact on participants' practice is the relationship-mapping tool. In this section, I consider the way in which the use of the tool developed through participant discussion, and how this led to an additional change to practice which was the extension of the use of the map to colleagues. The development and use of the tool holds out the possibility that it could be of significance for professional development in teams, and to make professional love an explicit part of practice – which in turn could catalyse changes in school practice. As this tool has not been used in this context before, I explore in some

detail how the participants took a lead in deciding how it should be used, and the extension of its use with colleagues in their teams.

In section 3.4.3, I noted that the mapping tool was selected as a method in this study in response to concerns expressed by participants in the pilot that telling individual stories about love did not reveal the range of relationships teachers had with the children in their class, or how these changed over time. The participants discussed and shaped how the maps were used during the study. In the following sections I explore how the use of the maps was co-constructed with the participants and speculate how this level of involvement and agency in the development may have led to an increased sense of ownership of this element as the participants extended the use of the maps in their own settings.

#### **6.4.1 Co-constructing an approach to mapping**

Initially, the participants had been asked to think about how they would define each of the circles and then to place children on the relationship map according to these definitions and how they fitted with the closeness of the relationship with that child at the given moment when the map was completed. At the first meeting, participants reported that this was quite challenging, as the class was new and many of the children were unknown to them before the start of term. Understandably, the children closest to the teacher at this stage were the ones who had visited the class with their older siblings:

The kids I feel closest to right now, having them only being in a few days, are the ones I know the families of. They've been in my classroom in the past, they've sat on my carpet with a whiteboard and pen refusing to leave with the[ir] mum[s] so I know their name[s] already, they know me, I know a little bit about them, they're not new to me. (Natasha, initial group meeting, September)

The discussions revealed that, as with their definitions of professional love, these definitions were not straightforward; it was very hard to reach a common understanding of what each circle stood for. Angela put forward a practical suggestion that was adopted by the group and was based on their "gut instincts" about how close they were to the children:

If we just think about [it], these are the kids we're closest to, these are the ones we're not and somewhere in between are the others. Just put there where we feel they are. (Angela, initial group meeting, September)

At the next meeting – in November – this approach was reinforced by the experiences of members of the group who found that trying to conform to definitions for the types of relationships each ring represented led to them overthinking, and took away from the very individual and unique reasons for the levels of intimacy the participants had with children in their class:

But like you, I had so many different reasons for putting them in each of the sections that I couldn't write a definition because each child, it was for a different reason. (Natasha, group meeting, November)

Ed reflected that we were defining the relationships and rings in some way by deciding exactly where to place the children, but that ultimately it came down to his own instinct about how close the child was to him using the image of a piece of elastic that connected them to him in the centre of the circles:

But then, in a way, even though you don't know what you're defining, we're defining something because we're saying, 'Yeah, but that child goes on that side of the line as opposed to that side.' (Ed, group meeting, November)

During the November meeting the placing of children close to the teacher because they were using loving relationships to meet their needs was raised. Natasha described these as "basic" needs, and identified that the children closest to her were ones whose basic needs were not currently being met. This could be interpreted as a claim that there is a basic human need for love and relationships, or that other needs can be met through loving relationships:

When I sit alongside a child to make sure that their basic needs are being met, that is love for me. If I feel that a child's basic needs aren't being met, I think, those are the ones that I put in my inner circle. (Natasha, group meeting, November)

The theme of 'needs' as a reason for placing close to the teacher and of natural and effortful love was reflected in Diana's account of deciding where to place a group of girls that were able, confident and independent and put her as the teacher on a pedestal. She comments that she could easily love them and place them close to her but that these children did not 'need' her love or the depth of love that other children required so Diana placed them further away:

I've got a group of very able, very independent girls who all know each other and they're in my outer circle, and a group of them are still in my

outer circle but they are also girls who could very easily, if I got a bit stuck on definitions, would be in my inner circle, but that's because they're so teacher's-on-a-pedestal, we want to do everything to please Miss Taverner, and you could so easily love them but they don't really need that love from me. (Diana, group meeting, November)

A striking example of the impact of mapping relationships and reflecting on where to place children was provided by Angela at the November meeting, when she realised that the child she had been most struggling to form a relationship with at the start of the year had been missed off the map completely. Angela felt that this omission was significant, as he was a child without language, still in nappies and deeply distressed at starting school. Therefore, the relationship with him at the start was about meeting very basic needs, and was upsetting both for the child and the teacher. Angela described herself as having blanked out this relationship because it was so difficult:

So, he started, he couldn't feed himself, he wasn't potty trained, all that kind of stuff, and I hadn't even put him on there. He was totally not even on my radar, because the relationship was so difficult because he was coming in, he was vomiting all over my carpet every morning, over other children, it was so stressful for him and I hadn't even put him on there and I was like, 'Where is Umar?' I was like, 'Oh my God, I haven't even written him on there.' (Angela, group meeting, November)

The participants decided at the November meeting to complete the maps based on their instincts about how close they felt to each of the children, without reference to their previous maps, and so the March and July maps were completed in this way. Angela acknowledged that this was not an attempt to reflect the reciprocity of these feelings; this process was the teacher deciding on the closeness of the relationship without the view of the child being considered or represented:

But I think, like I described, what I've seen from those children that I put in there, just gut instinct, were the ones that I think I need to look out for, so it's very much from my point of view. I don't think I've considered what the child thinks of me in that relationship, it's very much what I'm doing, how I feel about them, I think. (Angela, group meeting, November)

#### **6.4.2 The relationship maps in practice**

By the November meeting, the participants were able to see the movement that children had made and identify the children they were focusing their energy on

in terms of developing loving relationships. In Ed's reflections on his map, he recognises that one boy he was concerned about had moved closer but, interestingly, he commented that the boy was not yet ready for the relationship with him. This comment on reciprocity is consistent with Page's (2018) recognition that professional love is about care-sharing rather than just care-giving:

This boy here, very, very much there are things at home, the relationships at home aren't very strong and I think he's one that I'm trying to give that, I'm trying to say, 'Come on, I want to support you,' but he's not ready. He's moved, but now he's going to Pakistan for a while. He's not coming as quickly as other children do. (Ed, group meeting, November)

Ed reflects that some of the children he was closest to were ones with whom he had to set boundaries and expectations at the beginning of the year, but they were now close, while others expressed their closeness to him by being physically clingy.

The discussions about the maps revealed interesting insights into how relationships move through different stages of closeness, and that children travelled into and out of closer intimacy with their teacher over the course of the school year. In some cases, the direction of travel was inwards – to greater closeness, as the teacher and child came to know each other or the teacher gained a greater insight into the child's life and the levels of love and support they believed they needed. In other cases, children moved outwards as their confidence and independence grew during the school year. There were instances where children moved a long way in, moved out again and then back in as new challenges and needs emerged. Natasha's story of Ethan is a specific example of this movement in a relationship. Initially, he was reluctant to form relationships but gradually moved closer. He moved away again as his confidence grew, and then the challenge of transitioning to Year 1 led to a renewed closeness.

In exploring the movement that children made from the September to the November map, Laura notes some gender differences, as although initially she had the girls in the class closer and the boys further out, this had changed considerably. The boy who was on the outside due to his challenging behaviour

was now one of the closest, as the adults had got to know him as a result of their effortful love:

Looking back at the September one, I've got five boys and six girls, and it's the boys that were on the outside when I look at it and the girls were closer, and then now that's changed quite a bit. One of the little boys that was on the outside has very challenging behaviour and [is] difficult to warm to and form a bond with, but now we've really got to know him, he's now one of the closest. (Laura, group meeting, November)

At the March meeting there were a number of comments that indicated the group were starting to see a number of benefits and potential uses for the maps. Ed reflected that the fact that there still children on the outside at this point in the year was upsetting, as it could indicate that each year there were some children who may "fall through the net", and never have a loving connection with their teacher. As the participants in this research volunteered to take part because of their interest in this aspect of practice, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ed would find this troubling:

You've got some around the edge haven't you? Are there always going to be children every year? You know you talk about children falling through, not falling through the net in a serious safeguarding way, but are there always some un... not unloved children but... children who you're less connected with, which is a bit sad. You don't feel like you want to admit that do you, or find that out. (Ed, group meeting, March)

This reflection led to a discussion that the children who remained on the outer edge could in fact be the neediest, but their needs remained unidentified as they were not in loving relationships with their teachers, and could actually be avoiding relationships with adults. Ed noted that the practice of mapping relationships within the class would identify these children earlier on in the year, and then action could be taken to address it. Natasha had also started to see possibilities for using the map more widely within her school as she was taking the lead on children's emotional wellbeing and thought that mapping relationships within each class would be a useful starting point:

I'm going to do a... training session for school on wellbeing, children's wellbeing, and I'm going to use this with them as just a quick starter, map your children where you feel they are in your classroom. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

For Laura, the process of mapping mainly reflected what she would have said about each child if asked – particularly because she had such a small class – but there was one exception to this which troubled her, and led her to question her practice. There was a child on the third map Laura completed who had not moved closer from September to April, and Laura believed that she may not have noticed or reflected on that without the use of the map:

Well, it is very interesting. A lot of it, when I look at it, it's what I would have felt, but actually putting it down on paper and looking at it, you see this one, now you've pointed that one out I shall mull that and definitely think about why it is that I feel like that. (Laura, individual meeting, April)

Following this meeting, Laura took action to build a relationship with the child, and at the July meeting recounted how this focus (and discussions with mum) had led to the child having her hearing checked and it being discovered that she had hearing loss. This barrier to a relationship may not have been identified without the mapping tool and the space and time to reflect on relationships.

When Angela considered the movements children had made on the map she recognised that some of this movement came from her having to balance her professional responsibilities to meet the needs of all the children in her class. When Angela discussed the movement of the child with additional needs who she had missed off the initial map but had subsequently become close to, she highlighted that she was now less close by necessity, as she could not give him everything he needed and still meet the needs of all the other children in the class. She believed she had supported him to transition to being happy in school, but then she had to withdraw a little and let others take on this responsibility. Looking at the movement he had made on the map supported Angela's reflection on her changing relationship with this child:

It's because I've got him to a state where I was happy that he was happy in school, and I've had to let it go a little bit because it's so much attention. I felt that other people weren't getting what they needed in the classroom, so I've had to let him go a little bit because he requires specialist one-on-one really, so I've had to let someone else take that role. So that completely tells the story. (Angela, individual meeting, May)

When Natasha explored the movements of children across the first half of the school year she identified a child who she felt prioritised relationships with other children rather than the adults in the class and, therefore, it was the child's

choice not to have formed a bond. Natasha seems at ease with the child making this choice, in contrast to Ed's concern that this avoidance of adult relationships may come from having hidden needs:

Very different with children and interacts with children, but if an adult came near her, she'd stop talking. So that's why she's right out there – because she didn't want anything to do with me, so it was very difficult to form a bond. She's not moved in very far at all. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

At the July meeting, the participants looked at the movements children had made across the year and identified that the movements reflected the changing nature of the relationships. Natasha talks about most children moving slightly away from her on her July map, partly because they are now more independent, but also because she is preparing them to leave her. Some children were struggling with this, and as Natasha followed Ethan's movements she could see that he was initially very close as she built a strong, loving relationship to meet his needs, then he then moved away from her as he settled and became more independent. But his upset at the idea of losing his relationship with Natasha as he transitioned to Year 1 had brought him closer again:

So, he went out because he was becoming more independent, he wasn't needy anymore, he was just getting on with his normal day and didn't need much support anymore, so he went quite far out and then he's come back in to the middle just because of the issue with transition, because I feel that he needs more support at the moment. So I am getting close to him to give him that support that he needs. (Natasha, group meeting, July)

Big movements on the map often reflected the teacher working with the child and family to overcome difficulties and challenges. Angela commented at two meetings that this growing closeness was similar to becoming closer to friends who support you through hard times. The two children who had moved the most on Angela's map at the end of the year corresponded with the ones she was working with to overcome challenges.

## **6.5 The potential for the relationship map to be used as a development tool in schools**

I have outlined how use of the mapping tool developed during the research study, and the changes in views and practice that this led to. In this section, I



consider the ways the participants started to use the map to support discussions about relationships and love with colleagues. This was not an intention at the start of the study, and this extended use was exploratory, with each participant shaping how and when it was introduced, which varied from a discussion with a job-share partner to the tool being introduced across a whole primary school. The insights this extension provided indicate that the tool may well have wider applications in raising the profile of love and relationships as a key part of practice. However, the concerns raised in Chapter 5 about the different views on professional love held by other staff members and leadership also indicate that the tool will also require the development of clear protocols for its use.

### **6.5.1 Extending the use of the mapping tool**

At the March meeting the participants suggested that the maps should be used with the other adults working in their Reception classes. Additional ethical approval was sought and given so that the data gathered by the participants from their colleagues could form part of this study (see appendices 5 and 6). All four participants introduced the tool to their teams and outlined how they had been using it to map how close they felt to the children within the class at different points during the school year. This introduction built on informal discussions they had been having with colleagues about the research they were involved in and the concept of professional love. The participants explained that the maps were a representation of how the adult felt about their relationship with the child in that moment, and asked if colleagues wished to complete one. Those who wished to take part completed one when the participants next completed their own in July, so that the participants and their colleagues could compare and reflect on the different relationships.

The participants' ensuing discussions with team members revealed contrasting approaches to the decisions of where to place children, and differences in which children staff felt they had loving relationships with. Natasha's colleague placed children according to how well she got on with them, raising the issue of personality clashes which had also appeared in Natasha's decisions at the start of the research. This member of staff placed the children closest to her who sought contact with her and needed her approval and reassurance. This focus

contrasts with Natasha's stated approach of seeking close relationships with the 'neediest' children, including those who it was hard to form a bond with:

She said the children on the outer ring, 'I feel I don't get on with their personalities,' so she came to it from a different angle. She didn't get on with their personalities as well as the children on the inner rings, and she said some children look for reassurance and support more or look for approval and seem to need more adult contact, and those were the ones that she put on the inner circle. (Natasha, group meeting, July)

### **6.5.2 Reported impacts on practice**

The participants reported that, in extending the use of the relationship maps to their wider teams, they facilitated discussions about love and children's emotional needs and behaviour that may not otherwise have taken place. Laura highlighted that, even where staff work very closely (as in her small Reception class), the adults' perspectives on the children could be very different, but were not usually discussed. The map discussion enabled Laura to explain what she felt for a particular child, and her colleague gained an insight into a different perspective:

It has, it's definitely made me reflect more on how I feel about the children and why I feel that way, whether in a good or a bad way, and like you say – it's a reflective thing, isn't it, and I have been able to share this with my TA and interestingly she didn't feel the same, even though we work very closely with the same group of children day in and day out, and this little girl in particular, when she saw that (pointing to a child that was on Laura's inner circle) she said, 'Blimey, she's right out here on mine,' and when I explained why I felt like that about her and how I do feel a lot of love towards her because I feel that she's suffering, I feel sorry for her and I want to really try and help her through it, and she can see that. (Laura, individual meeting, April)

For Natasha and her team, using the map fostered discussions about children's emotional needs and how they respond to them. The team members recognised that the children did not appear in the same place on different members of staff maps but there was consensus that the children who were the most 'needy' were closest to the middle, and therefore closest emotionally to the staff members. Natasha also reflected that this could also be said to correspond with the children that spent the most time with the teacher, as they were deemed to need one-to-one or two-to-one support.

The recognition that some team members were drawn to children who were more compliant and required less effortful love raises questions about children who cannot conform to classroom rules and expectations failing to receive relational support from the adults in the class because they do not present as looking for support and approval. The use of the maps brought these issues to the surface for Laura and Natasha and, without tools to actively reflect on relationships, these children may be perceived as challenging or naughty or as not wishing to be in a relationship with the adult because they do not actively seek a connection, but this could in fact mask needs that could be addressed through a positive relationship with their teacher.

In comparing her own July map with that of her job-share partner, Angela noticed that children who were less close to her were closer to her colleague. This difference and division would not have been noticed without the mapping process, as it did not form part of their handovers or reflections, but it reassured Angela that each child had a loving relationship with an adult in the class for at least part of the week:

So actually, all the children have got one of us... yeah, but that's maybe why job-share can work. (Angela, group meeting, July)

There was one exception to this, which Angela noticed when comparing the maps: a child who was not close to hers, her job-share partner or other children. Again, this would not have been brought to Angela's attention without the mapping process, and although efforts had been made to connect with him, Angela felt concerned about his lack of relationship:

He is EAL [English as an additional language] and the mum doesn't speak English, so he's another child that we've actually targeted but neither of us have felt close to him, but he does things by himself. He hasn't really made massive connections with other children in the class either. So that's a bit sad isn't it? (Angela, group meeting, July)

Discussions with colleagues revealed differences in how the maps were used even within the same small team; for Laura, the placing of children close to her was in some cases aspirational, and indicated where she was going to focus her attention. For her TA it reflected her sense of closeness to the children in the here and now:

When I asked my TA about why she'd placed them right out there she said, 'Well, I don't know them yet,' But for me, I said, 'Oh, well I've placed them there because I'm quite worried about them. I really want to get to know them.' (Laura, group meeting, July)

## **6.6 Reflections on the impact of participating in collaborative research**

The collaborative nature of the study, in combination with the use of relationship mapping, has opened up additional areas for consideration that were not fully anticipated at the start of this study. In this section I make some initial links between these and the relevant literature considered in chapters 2 and 3, while acknowledging that there will be others – particularly relating to teachers' professional development – that are also worthy of consideration, but which fall outside of the scope of this study.

The increase in reflective practice that the participants reported is a significant aspect of this collaborative study, as the reflection took place through discussion with other practitioners over an extended period of time. Page (2018) considered the ways in which professional love could be developed or supported in practice. She suggests that, in order to practice professional love, practitioners must first become self-aware and that this will only come about through a continual process of reflection. Page highlights the use of a reflective journal and dialogue with others, ideally through a revised model of supervision that includes discussions about the emotions involved in caring for young children. My study offers an additional possibility to this element of professional development which has two important features: first teachers working together to make sense of the complexity of professional love and their own emotions and enactments, across their diverse settings, and then the collaborative approach is sustained over time.

During the course of the research study the opportunity and space for reflection supported the participants to start to question their initial views on love, and how the love they had for the children in their class could best be described. This reflection included questioning if the term professional love could have categories within it that covered the different types of relationships that developed. The changing views that Natasha and Angela express about love demonstrated that this space for critical reflection could have an impact on

perceptions about roles and practice (Orlandi, 2014). There was an appreciation of having the space to talk about and reflect on love, and Angela started to reflect on the different faces or categories of love:

There's lots of different categories of love aren't there? Natural love and effortful love, reciprocal love. Perhaps that one comes under the umbrella of professional love. I don't know. (Angela, group meeting, January)

In contrast, Natasha shifted from her starting point of having distinct categories, to seeing them all as love:

Yeah, I think it's just love. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

As Page (2018) notes there is a dearth of guidance about how love could be enacted; indeed, love is rarely mentioned within guidance, and the focus is placed on 'positive relationships'. In response to this point, Angela reflected that her initial primary teacher education course had focused more on the need for teachers to keep a 'professional distance', which she saw as the "other side of the coin" from professional love (Angela, group meeting, January).

For Laura, the research study was the only place for her to talk about love as an element of her practice, a fact she believed could stem from her being the only early years teacher in her current school, and her perception that teachers in other year groups might not "feel as much as we do":

Also, I don't think I've ever had the conversation with anybody else in the school, possibly in my previous school, but certainly not in the one I work in now. Whether that's because I'm the only early years teacher and I'm not part of an early years team as such, that might be something to do with it, or do you think maybe that's something that teachers who teach older children perhaps don't feel as much as we do in the Foundation stage? (Laura, group meeting, January)

For Ed, the prospect of being able to talk about and reflect on love was exciting, as he highlighted that talking about love would not generally happen in practice. Ed also acknowledged that this might not be an exciting or comfortable prospect for other teachers and practitioners, and reflected that the participants in this study could or should feel guilty for being comfortable with the concept, perhaps in response to other people's views on 'love' as an appropriate term or emotion within an educational context:

Because it's something that's not regularly talked about or, you know, you don't generally say, 'We're going to go and talk about how we love our children,' so, I don't know. I think it's exciting, but I suppose not everyone does do they? Other people might not feel comfortable to talk about it so do we feel guilty for feeling comfortable to talk about it? (Ed, group meeting, November)

The perception that love could be discussed with early years colleagues but cannot be comfortably raised in a school context indicates that developing space for professional development for professional love is more challenging in schools than in other settings. As discussed in Chapter 2, this tension may result from the focus on performativity in Reception class, but could also reflect the fact that the children are older, and the teacher has up to 30 of them to form relationships with.

The participants reported that taking part in the participatory research study had provided them with time and the opportunity to reflect more on their loving relationships with children, and to think of them in different terms as part of the role:

To be honest, I don't know whether I would have even thought about it if it wasn't for doing something like this, you know, to take time. I would have, but I wouldn't have thought of it in these 'professional love' terms. (Ed, group meeting, March)

Ed implies that this reflection would not have happened alone. The space and the ensuing discussions with colleagues in the same role had brought this hidden aspect of their practice into the open and into their consciousness, leading to an intentionality in their loving relationships that was not previously there:

It makes you a bit more intentional, because you're actually actively thinking about the question of love a little bit more. (Angela, group meeting, January)

The intentionality indicates that, through the discussions, Angela is moving through the phases of professional love described by Page (2018) as she has become aware and is more consciously enacting love in her practice. The discussions also led Laura to analyse more deeply where there was a lack of relationship or closeness with children in her class, as well as those instances where she felt and expressed her love:

It's made me think a lot more about the relationships I have with them and why, particularly the ones that I don't feel as close to. It makes me question why a lot more since we've had these discussions. (Laura, group meeting, January)

Natasha appeared to have undergone a shift in perspective about love and relationships during the course of the research study. At the March meeting, Natasha reported that her views about which children she loved (and why) had significantly changed, as she now felt that she loved children who on the surface did not need her and who she may not initially have felt affection for (Natasha's story of Brianna):

Has totally changed just because of that, which is why I now think that it's not just about children. It's not just about loving people who I think need me because that's what I thought it was. I thought it was quite selfish. I thought I was quite a selfish person in the fact that I needed children to need me before I could love them, but I've realised that it's not always the case. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

Natasha believed that this changing perspective led her to develop a more "realistic" view of loving relationships. She now recognises that she may be irritated by particular behaviours, and these are barriers to relationships, and that some children would choose not to have a relationship with her, and she could accept this:

I think my views have definitely evolved, because I'm looking at it in a more realistic way now, rather than just from a self-centred point of view, which is what I was looking at when I first came. I was looking at... I love children who need me, I need to be needed and that's why I love them, but actually I've realised through a lot of reflection that it's not only that, a lot of it has to do with the personality of the children as well, and things that – I sound like I get irritated by everything, but there are certain things that irritate you and those are the children that I find difficult to bond with, or the children who don't want anything to do with me, and that's not through any fault in trying but sometimes you have to accept that children don't want that physical closeness or that emotional closeness with an adult. (Natasha, group meeting, March)

The statement on the children she finds irritating sits in contrast to the story of Brianna that Natasha told at the same meeting, as in this case she became the advocate for a child she had previously found irritating, as she came to understand the experiences that might sit behind her behaviour.

The impact of taking part in the research was not confined to the individual participants or even to their immediate colleagues. Angela reported that everyone she talked to was interested, and that the discussions rippled out into the school and into life beyond the classroom:

Everybody else was interested, but we'd never had that conversation before about love or professional love or anything. It went into lots of other little branches beyond school as a consequence, you know, around love and things. (Angela, group meeting, January)

The choice of the phrase “little branches” provides a link back to the metaphor of the banyan tree as a representation of participatory research, in which the research/tree produces aerial roots that feed back into the earth and back into practice (Section 3.6).

The participants appreciated the space to reflect on and talk about love as they all identified that this was a key part of their practice, but not one which was part of professional discussions in their schools. The participants also valued the time and opportunity to focus holistically on individual children as they usually had to compartmentalise children into the EYFS (DfE, 2017) areas of learning to meet performativity needs and report on their individual progress – which Ed describes as a “criteria that is imposed” (group discussion, July). The value placed on this opportunity to think about children individually and holistically is revealed in the term ‘precious’, which Natasha uses to describe this aspect of the study (group discussion, July). This valuing of professional love and recognition that the demands of performativity detract from a focus on children’s holistic development resonates with the consideration of these teachers’ professional identity in Chapter 2. The collaborative work of the group to develop their understanding and thinking about professional love could be said to correspond with a previous era of collegial professional identity (Hargreaves, 2000) or in challenging the current focus on performativity to maintain and extend professional love as part of their practice they could be deemed to be acting as ‘activist’ professionals (Groundwater & Sachs, 2002; Sachs, 2016).

This space for group discussion was also necessary for the participants to understand the varying nature of the love that they felt for children and the factors that influenced and motivated their approaches. This focus on reflection corresponds with Page’s (2018) stage of becoming self-aware and reflexive in



order to focus on the needs of others, but appears to be more a circular process than a stepping-stone towards professional love, as the participants continued to discover more about themselves and their relationships across the year. The reflective process that the participants engaged in impacted perceptions about love, relationships and aspects of practice. The changing views and emerging self-awareness of the factors that impacted the participants' relationships with children indicate these perceptions of love were still shifting, and that this would continue. The complexity of the concept of love and how relationships unfold means that there is no end point – rather a constant negotiating of complex individual relationships affected by myriad factors.

The telling of the stories provided rich discussion points, as they often highlighted the tensions experienced by the teachers in attempting to meet the emotional needs of the children in their care. These stories, prompted by the writing frame (Appendix 7) could be described as critical incidents. Orlandi (2014) identifies that the sharing of thoughts about significant incidents is an important tool for reflection: "It is the sharing of thoughts, often instigated by critical incidents or 'disturbances' (Mason, 2002), that leads to critical reflection." (p. 305). Participants commented appreciatively about having the time and space to talk about love, as it is an unacknowledged part of practice.

The benefits to early years teachers becoming involved in a Community of Practice (CoP) was highlighted in Kirkby, Walsh and Keary's (2019) Australian study, which highlighted that this form of professional learning led to the sharing of practice and increased engagement with parents and reflection on professional identity. The use of the mapping tool also supported the development of a CoP, as the participants extended the use to their team and reported the findings back to the group. Other studies have found that sociograms such as this have supported reflection and discussions in teachers' CoPs (Lyle, 2003; Carnes, 2019).

The participants' engagement with the research and desire to expand the discussion beyond the immediate research group indicates the benefit they felt they gained from the process, and highlights the value of studies that encourage participation:

Teacher research allows us to not only expand our knowledge on a situation or topic that affects our everyday classroom experience but provides us with the opportunity to network and share what we have discovered. In many ways it raises the bar in early childhood settings, cultivating intellectual and passionate pursuits that leave teachers feeling like professionals. (Murphy, Bryant & Ingram, 2014, p. 34).

The level of engagement of the participants in developing the mapping tool also resonates with Moss's (2014) vision of research which challenges current practice and in which researchers and practitioners work together to understand the complexity of practice.

The relationships that teachers attempt to forge with children are not necessarily reciprocal, particularly in the early stages, where participants report the difficulties and challenges in making a connection, although the end result was often a strong relationship with mutual regard. At times, such as in the case of Natasha and Ethan, the relationship can suffer a reverse, and it requires time and focus to repair, which is not an aspect that is articulated in the linear model presented by Page (2018).

The experience of collaborative research appears to have had a significant impact on the participants' understanding of love and relationships and how they approach enacting them in the classroom context. This is consistent with Goodnough (2011), who explored the long-term impacts of collaborative research on teacher identity and practice and found that the teachers had come to see themselves as critical learners through collaboration and viewed students more holistically. Positively for this study, the impacts in Goodnough's research continued when teachers were interviewed two and four years after the study.

Page (2018) argues that the concept of professional love should be introduced during the training of early years educators, and that their development and reflection in this aspect of practice should be supported once in post through ongoing supervision and CPD. At present, supervision is not common practice for early years educators or Reception teachers. This study has highlighted the complexity of love, and the amount of time and discussion that was involved to help the participants understand the differing types of loving relationships they had with children, and their own motivations in developing these. Page (2018) notes that each setting, through the process of reflecting on professional love,

can generate its own model for enacting this, and corresponding policies and procedures which give support to practitioners. This study indicates that in schools where this concept is less well understood, rarely discussed or may be in conflict with approaches to relationships and behaviour, it may take a more collegial, collaborative approach to bring together like-minded practitioners to surface and discuss love and provide mutual support.

In this study, the use of the mapping tool provided a visual prompt that facilitated discussion and enabled the participants to see quickly which children were closest to them and identify children who they did not currently have a close relationship with. For the participants, the relationship map became perhaps the most participative element of the study as they shaped the use and held the knowledge about the impact of its use and its relevance and significance for practice. The suggestion to widen the use of the map to teams came from participants, and this provided a forum to have discussions about relationships and love that would not otherwise have taken place. The mapping process led to further reflection on practice, as the participants could see patterns in their relationships with children which would not have been visible through discussion alone. The use of the map to depict the closeness of relationships enabled the participants to explore and discuss their relationships with children, which reflects Moreno's intended use for them as a means of exploration, rather than simply the representation of data (Moreno, 1953, cited in Tubaro et al., 2016). The patterns the exploration revealed in some cases reflect gender, and in others the process of either 'letting go' or 'holding tight' as the time came for children to transition to the next class. These findings are consistent with other studies that found that the use of visual tools to map relationships brought out information that is usually outside of our consciousness, supports personal insight and provides rich data (Hogan et al., 2007, Tubaro et al., 2016).

The participants identified the benefits of using the map, and decided collectively to widen the use to the rest of their teams both to check if children had another adult they were close to, and as a means of starting discussions about professional love in their own workplaces. In the absence of a current supervision model for Reception teachers that includes professional love and relationships, this tool can be adopted to provide that visual representation and

catalyst for team discussions that will surface and make explicit this aspect of practice. The participants' discussions of their use of the map revealed that, without a systematic approach to exploring relationships, there may also be some children that slip through the net and are never fully supported by an emotionally available adult. Cousins uses the circle analogy to highlight the importance of holding children close in a way which echoes the use of the relationship map: "Adults need to consider how to respond to each child as if they were 'a member of [their] ... inner circle.'" (Cousins, 2017, p. 26, citing Noddings, 2007, p. 223).

This study indicates that it is important for the adults to be able to recognise where they feel children are in terms of their relationships so that they can reflect and act on this if appropriate.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This discussion chapter draws together the elements that this study contributes to the body of knowledge on professional love. In summary, this study has highlighted the importance of the concept of professional love to this group of Reception teachers and the different ways it is enacted within a school context. The study has provided significant insights into the perceived value and benefits of developing loving relationships with children as well as the challenges that the school environment and differing views of colleagues present. These rich findings and insights are partially the result of the research design, as the collaborative and narrative methodologies and the extended time period for data collection enabled trusting, collegial relationships to develop that supported the discussion of this sensitive and emotional subject. In addition, the mapping tool surfaced the closeness of relationships across the whole class and facilitated discussions about them. The co-construction of the use of the map appears to have engendered a sense of ownership and agency that led the participants to roll this out with colleagues to support practice.

In the following chapter I will explore how far the research study answered the original research questions, its contribution to knowledge and the wider implications of this study for the early years sector.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Chapter outline

In this chapter I revisit the research aims and questions and highlight if and how these were met during the study and discuss additional themes and areas for further study. I also explore the challenges of research using collaborative methods and of researching within a community that I play an active role in. Finally, I consider the key contributions this study makes to understanding the complexity of the concept of professional love and the implications of this research for early years educators, workforce development and policymakers.

### 7.2 Understanding professional love in a Reception class context

This collaborative, longitudinal study combined drew on participative methodology and narrative and creative methods to explore Reception teachers' perceptions of the concept of professional love and how it is enacted within the classroom.

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, within early years the concepts of loving relationships or professional love is of growing academic interest. Studies have explored how professional love is represented and enacted in the context of early years education, and how this relates to professional identity and practice; however, this has mainly been focused in early years settings prior to school. This study has extended research on professional love into the English school context with a group of teachers who work at the interface between the EYFS and the Key Stage 1 phase of education. Working at this boundary means that Reception teachers are subject to inherent tensions between the child-centred approaches of the EYFS and competing pressures to ensure that children achieve a set of Early Learning Goals (DfE, 2017) that are aimed at ensuring children are prepared for the more formal educational practices of Key Stage 1. This study, therefore, aimed to explore how Reception teachers conceptualised and enacted professional love in a context where there are clear tensions relating to performativity and accountability and the school readiness agenda. The methodological approach taken was a collaborative study drawing on narrative methodology which would enable the participants to discuss and

reflect on their beliefs and practice, using narrative and creative methods to support this process. I selected a collaborative approach, as I strongly believe that research should aim to inform practice and be based on relationships, trust and democratic processes. The narrative methodology enabled teachers to draw on and discuss the rich material that emerged from the stories they told about love.

Over the course of a school year the participants met several times as a group and told stories about love, discussed their practice and mapped their relationships with children using a sociogram. This relationship-mapping tool was used at points across the year to reveal how relationships developed and progressed. The way in which the mapping tool was used by participants was developed through discussion, and was a key part of the collaborative process.

Most of the participants were known to me in a professional and in some cases a personal capacity prior to the study, and this created some ethical concerns. However, with hindsight these relationships helped to form a strong and supportive group dynamic that allowed participants to talk openly about the different faces of love, challenges in enacting it and the emotional labour and ambivalent feelings that could be involved. The subject area for this study is professional and pedagogical love, and it is appropriate that strong, trusting relationships should underpin the study.

The methods selected produced a range of rich data that revealed the complexity of professional love (Page, 2018; Aslanian, 2018), the range of benefits that loving relationships could bring to practice and the challenges and complexities of enacting love in a school context. The discussion and dialogue elements of the research enabled the participants to develop participant reflexivity (Yang, 2015) as they gained new insights into their role and practice during the course of the study.

The study revealed that the participants identified professional love as a key element of their practice, and that when enacted it presented a number of faces: tough love, natural love, effortful love, loving touch, and as a mask that enabled the teachers to meet their own emotional and social needs. The participants articulated their belief that professional love had a positive impact on children's wellbeing, development and learning and supported the teachers to address the

difficult issues and barriers that children face. However, prioritising professional love involved emotional labour and tensions with colleagues, school leadership and regimes of accountability.

The opportunity to discuss love and relationships and to develop ideas and concepts over a longer period was welcomed by the participants, and generated additional data about the impact of taking part in a collaborative study on practice.

### **7.3 Revisiting the research questions**

In this section I revisit the research questions and consider how far they have been addressed through this study and any additional issues that have surfaced and aspects that are worthy of further consideration and research.

1. How do Reception class educators develop and maintain positive relationships with the children in their classes?
2. How do Reception class educators manage the competing pressures of their role?
3. What does love look like in a Reception class?
4. In what ways is 'professional love' a relevant concept in the Reception class context?
5. Are there other terms or concepts relating to relationships with children that have greater resonance for Reception teachers?

In previous studies, professional love has largely been explored in preschool settings. However, the findings in this study demonstrate that this concept is applicable in the Reception class context. Reflecting on the research questions for this study, the data generated with the participants provides some clear indications of how professional love is conceived of and enacted by Reception teachers, but it also reveals difficulties in providing a single definition of the concept, as it is far more fluid, complex, nuanced and shifting than this would indicate.

#### **7.3.1 Developing and maintaining loving relationships**

The participants prioritised love and focused on building loving relationships with the children in their care, particularly those they felt would benefit most from having a caring and consistent adult supporting them. The participants

were comfortable discussing the part love played in their early years practice, and clearly identified the ways in which these relationships were important to children and to themselves. As Page (2018) summarises, “Early Years professionals, meanwhile, know only too well the emotional, intellectual and cognitive value of love and intimacy to their work with children.” (2018, p. 123).

The stories and termly discussions revealed that this concept was multi-layered and complex, and that attempts to define and analyse drew in many different terms and associated concepts: relationship, empathy, emotional labour, familial love, professional love and ‘love’ performed as an act in the teaching role. The discussions also highlighted that developing or achieving professional love for the children in their care could be circular, rather than linear, as the practitioners uncovered deeper layers of self-awareness and came to understand more about themselves and their practice through storytelling, discussion and relationship mapping.

### **7.3.2 Managing the competing pressures of the Reception teacher role**

All the participants identified competing pressures that could undermine or prevent them from forming the close relationships they aspired to, and these include pressures of the curriculum, tensions with behaviour policies, difference in approaches to other team members and concerns that their approach was not supported by senior leadership. Despite all these tensions, the participants prioritised and maintained loving relationships with the children in their class, and the mapping tool enabled these to be viewed systematically across time.

### **7.3.3 The relevance of professional love as a concept and how it is enacted in a Reception class context**

The participants focused a large part of their discussions on the concept of professional love and acknowledged that it was a relevant concept for Reception class teachers, but that it was also very difficult to articulate the different ways it is enacted within this single term. The participants developed additional labels or ‘faces’ to describe the different aspects of love while accepting that all of these were part of professional love. The participants were able to articulate when and why they presented these different faces in order to meet the different needs of children. The opportunities for discussion and reflection also revealed personal knowledge about their own needs and



motivations to the participants themselves. This aspect is differentiated as a 'mask' of love, as it still presents as loving practice, but the participants recognised that it also met their own emotional needs. This study indicates that professional love is a meaningful concept for the Reception class teachers in this study, but its meaning and enactment can shift and change, and significant time and support for reflection is required to enable practitioners to come to a degree of self-understanding.

This study builds on Page's concept of professional love (2011; 2014; 2017; 2018) and her process model certainly provided a catalyst and focus for the discussions but, in being presented as a staged process, it did not appear to represent the flowing and changing nature of relationships that the participants reported. The relationships with children changed over time, and levels of intimacy ebbed and flowed in response to the changing needs of the children and the changing demands being made on the participants, but the relationships also changed as the participants became more self-aware and questioned their own motives and needs as a result of the collaborative, ongoing nature of the research. This critical reflection then fed into changes in practice and professional identity, as participants reported feeling empowered to act according to their values as a result of taking part in the research process.

The participants considered the stages that Page (2018) suggests practitioners need to move through by conscious consideration to achieve professional love, but their discussions indicate that the actual relationships they have with children are messier than this linear progression represents. At the group meeting in March (with Ed and Natasha), they discussed their understanding that professional love involved becoming self-aware, reflecting on relationships and de-centring to consider the child's needs. Ed reflected that relationships could be about the teachers' needs rather than the child's, but he struggled with the concept of stepping outside the relationship, as this had already evolved and existed:

Maybe that's part of that, wanting to be wanted or is it our need, is it their need? To try really hard I feel like we've gone deeper rather than – I don't know. Trying hard within rather than trying hard from outside and then going in I think. (Ed, group meeting, March)

Ed articulated this as being akin to observation, where you are present and already involved with the child:

I know we talk about stepping back and observing but you're not observing from another room over a video link or anything are you? You're there and how removed can you ever be when you're there? (Ed, group meeting, March)

The group discussions about love reflected the key elements of professional love as described by Page (2018), but often involved more nuanced distinctions between the types of love that were expressed and enacted towards children. The participants would label the emotion under discussion as love, but identified that it may not 'look' like love if the definition only involved an easy flowing natural affection.

The difficulty in defining love and the necessity of developing a personal working model is consistent with the findings of other studies and research on love as a phenomenon (Cousins, 2017; Page, 2018). Aslanian (2018) argues that love is not a definable phenomenon, rather it is "ephemeral, produced through the relations children, teachers, things and ideas are entangled in." (Aslanian, 2018, p. 175). The amorphous and changing nature of love is reflected in the multiple faces identified in this study and in the evolving and changing views of the participants.

The answers the study provided to the original questions demonstrate that the concept of professional love is highly nuanced and, as the year-long study progressed, the participants uncovered new layers of complexity that surrounded the subject for themselves as individuals and as Reception teachers operating at the boundary between two phases of education. As the study concluded, there was no sense that the participants had reached an end point or a final answer to these questions; rather, the study revealed the changing nature of love and the need for ongoing supervision or reflection to enable practitioners to continue to explore and come to greater self-understanding.

#### **7.3.4 Additional findings**

One of the additional or unanticipated findings of this research study that was not identified in the original questions was the part enacting love played in the professional identity of the participants – although some of the relevant

literature was considered in Chapter 2. There are a number of studies that have explored the impact of accountability and performativity on teacher identity. The US study by Buchanan (2016) explored how practice changes to accommodate the demands for data and individual performance of children in standardised testing, which has parallels for English Reception teachers and the drive for school readiness. They found that the increasing use of standardised testing altered teachers' pedagogical approaches in order to ensure that their students performed as well as they could in the tests, but where there was a strong, shared sense of professional identity, some teachers attempted to resist and pushed back against the system. The Reception teachers in this study appeared to hold on to their belief in and enactment of professional love as individuals. Considering these actions in terms of Hargreaves's (2000) four ages of professionalism, the teachers in this study could be considered to be drawing on a number of eras: the pre-professional age; the autonomous age and the collegial age. They may have come to value love due to the influence of colleagues who supported them during their early career - Ed refers to his early experiences in a Children's Centre- which relates to the pre-professional age. However, they could also be operating as autonomous professionals as they are considering as individuals the model of pedagogy (in this case relational or loving pedagogy) that will best meet the needs of individual children. The research study itself presented an opportunity for collegial professionalism, in which the participants achieved a deeper and co-constructed understanding of the role love plays in their practice.

The Reception teachers in this study varied in age, and two had trained very recently as teachers (although they had considerable experience of working in other early years contexts). The far-reaching impact of performativity on teacher identity for those coming into the profession was noted in the Australian study of trainee teachers by Jovanovic and Fane (2016). This study indicated that trainees prioritised technicist knowledge that would enable them to meet the teacher standards rather than the development of skills to become autonomous learners, as they lacked confidence in their own judgement. This lack of confidence perhaps represents the deprofessionalising impact of performativity (Buchanan, 2016). This research study demonstrates that, where a space for professional discussion and reflection is created, it can support a different type

of teacher identity based on relationships and relational pedagogy, and which supports teachers with differing levels of experience to articulate and maintain what is important in their practice despite the pressures of performativity and accountability.

The model of professionalism that will support practitioners to enact change and create an early years model that is democratic, prioritises love and which sees children as robust learners may require the reframing of early years in line with the 'Robust Hope' project (Singh, 2006, cited in Woodrow, 2007). This project aimed to investigate ways in which the dominant discourse could be unpicked and new, utopian possibilities could be imagined to counter neoliberalism and performativity. In suggesting this radical move, Woodrow (2007) acknowledges that the quest for a definition of professionalism in teaching in the early years will always face the challenges of a moving policy context and therefore remain a work-in-progress (Sachs, 2003, cited in Woodrow, 2007). The desire to challenge and resist as a professional could also be seen as a challenge to unjust practices and the struggle for social justice for children who have typically not been well served by the educational system. Children who struggle with their emotions, display challenging behaviour and do not attract the label of 'good learners' could be identified as falling into this category, and the teachers in this study could be said to be using their loving and positive relationships to address this injustice.

#### **7.4 Contribution to knowledge and understanding of professional love**

This study provides new insights into the concept of professional love that indicate it is complex and shifting in a Reception class context, and that teachers need extended time and space and tools to explore this complexity and come to understand their own motivations and enactments. This study makes three key contributions to knowledge and understanding of professional love: it builds on Page's (2018) existing model for thinking about love; brings new understandings about how love may be enacted; it provides a new tool that surfaces the range and complexities of relationships and supports practitioner reflection.

#### **Building on the existing model of professional love**

Page (2018) developed a pyramid model to use as a tool to support thinking about professional love that identified a number of stages that practitioners would move through as they reflected on this aspect of practice. This study provides an additional or alternative way of viewing this process as circular rather than linear as the process of reflection, and importantly discussion, continuously reveals new insights and increased self-knowledge that in turn impact on practice (see Figure 7 in section 6.33).

### **Understanding of the complexity of professional love**

This study also brings new insights to the different ways in which love is enacted in a Reception class context and provides specific definitions of the characteristics of these varying faces of love. In defining these different types of love this study reveals the complexity and nuance of loving relationships between Reception teachers and the children in their care. These faces of love are represented in Figure 6 In section 4.8.

### **Developing a tool to map relationships**

The relationship mapping tool developed for this study has proved to be a powerful method to reveal the range of relationships between a teacher and the children in their care. It reveals the changing nature of relationships over time and surfaces in a visual and accessible way information that usually rests below human consciousness. This tool was embraced by the participants as they helped to shape how it was used and came to see how it revealed new insights about how their relationships with children developed and changed. This tool can be used for reflection and discussion within teams and across whole school settings and has already being adopted by settings in this way (see section 7.9).

In addition to these contributions to knowledge the catalytic power of taking part in a collaborative study is evident in the changes in views and practice that took place over the course of the year-long study, and beyond.

## **7.5 Reflecting on the research process**

In Chapter 3 I noted the complexities that arose from the methodological approaches I combined within this study and how their selection reflected my own positionality. In this section I reflect on how these and other issues that

were the subject of ethical considerations played out in the actual study, and the implications for future studies that may employ these approaches.

### **7.5.1 Participant selection**

The participants appeared very comfortable in discussing love and the ways in which it is enacted in their practice. This may have been due to the fact that they had volunteered to be part of a study on love and that they were all linked to a national early years charity that prioritises relationship and champions a positive, holistic view of children. As such, they are atypical as Reception class teachers, which presents issues for generalising from this study. However, both Laura and Angela comment that they feel that early years teachers are 'softer' and drawn to the profession because they prioritise relationships, so it could be inferred that many others would prioritise love, but that it remains absent from guidance and training and there is little, if any, opportunity to discuss and reflect on this element of practice. This appearance of comfort in discussing love as part of practice is also consistent with other studies. The preservice teachers in O'Connor's (2019) Australian study felt that love was an appropriate emotion within education, and a key part of their practice that would make them better educators, although other studies have shown that UK early years educators are less comfortable than their European counterparts in discussing love as an element of practice (Barr, Georgeson & Varga, 2015).

### **7.5.2 Existing relationships**

The participants were known to me (to a greater or lesser extent) at the start of this study, and this led me to question how I would manage these existing relationships and the impact they may have on how the research would develop. I was very sensitive to the potential power relationships that may exist within the group and used my supervision sessions to reflect on and discuss the ethical considerations as they arose. However, over the course of the study I came to see the existing relationships and the developing relationships between the participants as a strength of the study, as it appeared to provide a safe environment in which the participants were willing to share potentially sensitive and emotional information and provide mutual support. Researching with people who are your friends, acquaintances and colleagues is murky water (Floyd & Arthur, 2012) but as this research is about relational pedagogy and love, it is right and appropriate that trusting relationships have been built that support a

safe discussion space for an issue that can lay bare vulnerabilities, conflicts and tensions.

The ongoing nature of these relationships was an enabling factor in gaining such rich data and continuing these relationships beyond the study is in the spirit of the collaborative approach that was adopted. The participant who has gone on to train her whole school team in the use of the relationship map clearly feels she has ownership of the tool that was developed, and the agency to do so. I am aware that the converse side of these existing relationships could be that, despite setting ground rules to create a safe space, the participants did not feel able to express counter views about love or more negative feelings towards children because my views were known to them. The impact of the existing relationships remains unknown and, as the researcher, I believe that by remaining constantly alert to their existence and potential influence I took appropriate steps to fulfil my ethical responsibilities while still regarding the participants as active collaborators in this study.

### **7.5.3 Narrative, collaborative and creative approaches**

In Chapter 3, I outlined the rationale for designing a study that drew on participative methodologies and combined narrative and creative methods. Bringing these approaches together created some tensions, firstly in how far the study could be truly collaborative given the constraints of the doctoral process and the fact that to meet these I had taken the main decisions on research design prior to the participants' involvement.

During the design of the main study I concluded that the research could not be fully participative but I intended that the data-gathering phase would be as collaborative as possible. Through the presenting of their stories and the subsequent discussions, the participants actively shaped the collective knowledge of the group on professional love and refined and clarified their understanding as the study progressed, adding additional labels and qualifying terms to represent the complexity of the lived experience of love in a Reception class. The area where further collaboration would have been helpful and felt appropriate was in finalising the faces of love. The labels for these faces were drawn from terms used by the participants, but I am aware that if there had been the opportunity for further discussion there may have been others that

they felt more accurately reflected their experiences of enacting love. I had to balance making these decisions with the ethics of asking for further input from the participants, which they may have felt obligated to give due to our relationship.

The decision to include the creative element of the study flowed directly from feedback from participants in the pilot study, and the use of the mapping tool was shaped by the participants (as outlined in Chapter 6). The development of the use of the mapping tool was collaborative, and the level of involvement the participants had in this aspect appears to have had an impact on their sense of agency and ownership as they extended the use of this tool within their teams.

The combination of methods resulted in very rich data as the methods complemented each other in bringing out different aspects of loving relationships. The narratives supported the group discussions as they provided snapshot examples of practice to unpick from a common context, and the mapping tool provided a visual representation of relationships across the class and over time. The maps enabled wider discussions about the changing nature of relationships and patterns of relationships that would probably have remained below the level of consciousness without this tool.

## **7.6 Implications of research**

Although small in scale, this study provides a range of insights that have implications for those working in, leading, developing and making policy in early years settings and schools.

### **7.6.1 Implications for early years practitioners and leaders**

This study supports Page's studies (2011; 2013; 2014; 2017; 2018) that highlight that professional love is part of practice in early years settings, but is rarely articulated in training or policy and therefore requires individual reflection and consideration to surface its meaning and complexity. This study has provided additional insights into professional love in a school setting, and has revealed the high value the participants placed on loving relationships and the resonance of the concept of professional love while at the same time exposing the tensions of enacting this in the current Reception class context.



The participants in this study highlighted that there is considerable effort required to love children who are challenging or who have significant needs, and this was a strong theme throughout the study. Leaders in early years need to recognise this demand and support practitioners to manage the emotional labour inherent in their role. This support could be provided by providing a safe space for reflection with colleagues or through ongoing supervision that has the emotional aspect of teaching as a clear focus, as suggested by Page (2018).

In this study the messiness or complexity of the loving relationships was revealed over time as the participants had the time and space for reflection and a safe space for discussion – an opportunity that is recognised as important, but is not usually afforded to early years teachers. In their study of the personal and professional emotional characteristics of early childhood teachers, Ciucci et al. (2018) concluded that there is a need for preservice and in-service training to support teachers' critical reflection on their own emotional competence. This study highlights the impact of an extended opportunity for discussion and reflection as the participants' views of relationships and their own motivations and emotional needs were only gradually revealed to each other and to themselves.

This study indicates that practitioners and leaders could consider adopting a tool to aid reflection and discussion, such as the mapping tool. The mapping tool used in this study acted as a catalyst with which to surface the participants' feelings and relationships with each of the children in their classes. Prior to using the mapping tool in a team there needs to be careful preparation and the establishment of ground rules so that practitioners feel safe to talk honestly about the complexity and difficulties in establishing positive, loving relationships with the children in their care. Not all early years practitioners will feel comfortable talking about how close or loving their relationships are with the children in their group or class, as it may make them feel vulnerable or unprofessional if they reveal that they have negative feelings towards some children or that their behaviour triggers a negative response. Practitioners will need reassurance from leaders that these are professional discussions designed to increase awareness of the power of relationships and to improve practice.

To give loving relationships the priority and prominence they deserve, early years leaders themselves need to be supported to understand their power. This includes professional development on brain development and the lasting impact of adverse childhood experiences and trauma and the role of the emotionally available adult to buffer against these. In order to support the workforce, leaders need to identify that a loving relationship with an adult in an early years setting can provide a secure base for development and learning and provide a template for trusting relationships with adults that the child takes with them into school and the wider world. In some cases, the children who most need this buffer will avoid relationships with adults in the setting, as their experiences have taught them that adults are not to be trusted.

Relationships are complex, and practitioners need time, tools and support to explore this hidden aspect of early years work if the positive potential of relationships is to be realised.

### **7.6.2 Implications for professional development leaders**

In this study, the depth of the discussions, the richness of information about current practice contained in the stories of love and the growing self-awareness and changes in practice that have resulted provide strong messages for those providing professional development for early years practitioners.

The findings relating to taking part in a collaborative study indicate that the key elements that supported professional development were as follows:

- The ongoing nature of the year-long study provided space and time for discussion and the opportunity to revisit the subject matter as understanding and self-awareness developed.
- The extended nature of the study also provided the time for the participants to get to know each other and develop trusting relationships in which they could discuss sensitive and emotional issues.
- The focus on a critical incident provided rich data for discussion and surfaced the troubling tensions that existed between participants' values and the school system they operate in.
- The narratives told by the participants also revealed the power of stories as tools to support teachers in making sense of their professional world.

These 'secret stories', told in a secret place, provided a common, shared understanding of professional love as enacted in Reception class.

- As the stories alone could lead to a narrow focus on specific children, the mapping tool was a significant element in supporting the participants to consider the myriad changing relationships they had with children over the course of the school year. This tool also ensured that the teachers reflected on all the children in their class, thus ensuring that those quiet or self-contained children who may have unmet emotional needs did not slip through the net.
- I acted as an external facilitator to the discussions, drawing out themes and clarifying understanding through questions. This can be of value within professional development to support self-reflection and draw together different contributions and ensure all voices are heard.

Future professional development for early years practitioners could draw on a combination of these elements to support understanding of the power of professional love and how it is and could be enacted in different early years contexts.

### **7.6.3 Implications for policymakers**

At present there is a clear concern from policymakers that children are not ready for school when they start in Reception classes, and their response has been to focus on a more challenging curriculum for children during this year rather than harnessing the potential long-term benefits of focusing on strong and loving relationships between teachers and the children in their care.

Participants identified that loving children is an especially significant aspect of practice in the early years as children transition from home or other caring settings into the statutory school system and have to adjust to the new demands that this environment will place upon them. Approaching relationships with children from a position of love and care in Reception class supports this transition, as children start to experience an environment where they are required to communicate and collaborate with a range of others. In this context, teachers have the opportunity to teach children how to approach these experiences with "tolerance, respect and consideration" (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013, p. 114)

The participants make strong statements about the importance of love and its power to support children's holistic development and learning. Their views are in line with Rouse and Hadley's (2018) proposal that the early years educator's role needs to be reconceptualised to see learning in the context of care rather than care in the context of learning, as love (keeping children emotionally safe) and care (keeping children safe and meeting their needs) are central to early childhood education. As Laura and Angela state, learning takes place when children feel safe, loved and valued – but these are not central to the current policy context and the changes being made to the EYFS.

Feeling comfortable with discussing love within the research group did not equate with having a clear definition of what love looked like or consisted of in a Reception class context. Over time, the participants identified that love had different faces depending on the individual needs of the child and the stage of the relationship and views developed and changed through the discussion process. Page (2018) argues that the absence of professional love in training and frameworks in England ensures that this remains an informal part of practice in which "practitioners intuit that attachment and reciprocity are vital but they practice this outside of the formal and official framework of best practice." (Page, 2018, p. 137). Page (2018) contends that it should not be left to practitioners to develop their own working model; rather, policymakers need to acknowledge this aspect of practice and provide the support needed for reflection and discussion of the practical implications.

#### **7.6.4 Wider implication for early years education and care**

There appear to be two areas of tension relating to accountability. First, there are areas that the participants feel they are accountable for but that are not valued or acknowledged by colleagues and are not part of government priorities and frameworks. Secondly, there are aspects of learning and development that the frameworks, schools and colleagues hold the participants accountable for, but they do not feel are as important as their relationships with the children.

The fact that the participants in the study continue to prioritise love despite its absence from the teacher standards and guidance indicates that they are resisting the prevailing emphasis on performativity (Ball, 2003), the 'datafication' of early years (Robert-Holmes, 2015) and the current school readiness agenda,

and are acting as activist professionals (Groundwater & Sachs, 2002). The stories told by the participants in this research reveal situations in which teachers strive to respond to children's feelings, needs and wants in a system of early years education that applies pressure on teachers to create a homogenous class in which all children reach the same end point despite an avowal in the statutory framework that each child is a unique learner.

Orlandi (2014) proposes that research into practice by early years teachers would improve the levels of their knowledge and impact their actions while empowering them to defend their practice and providing opportunities for continued critical reflection. Through this process, the competing pressures experienced by Reception teachers could in fact lead them to act as agents for change as they become conscious of the importance and complexity of this aspect of practice, and their own emotional needs and labour. This process would reveal, as it did in this study that as "[a] many-faced mask, love does not fit neatly into the neo-liberal model for ECEC" (Aslanian, 2018, p. 182).

## **7.7 Understanding professional love in reception teachers' practice**

The original aim of this study was to extend research on professional love to the final year of the Foundation stage, which takes place in Reception classes, as most studies until this point have focused on preschool settings. I believe that this study has achieved this aim as it has provided critical insights into how professional love is enacted by Reception teachers who operate at the boundary between two phases of education. The study has revealed different tensions operating to those identified by Page (2011; 2014; 2014; 2017; 2018). The Reception teachers were less concerned with tensions relating to safeguarding policies or concerns that parents may not want practitioners to have a loving relationship with their child, and more concerned about pressures of accountability and the different views and values of colleagues and senior leaders. This study has also identified different ways in which love is enacted and the complexities, dilemmas and nuance involved in loving relationships in the classroom, as well as the perceived benefits of prioritising love. Previous studies have identified the complexity involved in loving practice, and this study builds on these by identifying potential categories of love as well as the underlying emotions and motivations that may appear as loving practice, but which also meet the needs of the adult.

The collaborative methodology adopted for this study and the combination of storytelling, discussion and mapping generated rich data and could be adopted in other studies that aim to surface emotional dimensions of practice. The methods selected for this study have also created an original set of tools to support the reflective process that Page (2018) identifies as necessary for practitioners to de-centre and achieve authentic, reciprocal, loving relationships. The level of engagement in the discussions and the agency demonstrated by the participants in extending the use of the mapping tool within their settings indicate that this innovative approach resonates with practitioners and could be used widely in professional development to explore approaches to professional love.

## **7.8 Personal learning**

The process of completing the doctoral programme has been a rich learning experience throughout. Although I always intended to focus on relationships in early years, the focus of this final thesis is a significant shift from my starting point. This move is the result of the taught sessions on methodological approaches and methods and careful guiding by my supervisors to enable me to see the wider body of work that already exists and that influenced and informed the studies I was aware of at the start of the programme.

As outlined in Chapter 3, my initial reluctance to engage with theory arose from my desire to develop a study that would resonate with practitioners and have a practical application that could support young children. My learning through the doctoral programme enabled me to see that the stance I was instinctively taking was part of a methodological approach with a strong history in early years education and care. Engaging with writing on utopian education and narrative and collaborative methodologies enabled me to shape my final study in a way that I hoped would support the participants to see themselves as researchers, and to engage fully with the research.

The metaphor of the banyan tree (drawn from Bryden-Miller et al., 2013) described in Chapter 3 supported the design and shaping of the collaborative approach of this research study. Reflecting on the applicability of this image after completing the research, I feel it provides a clear and relevant summing-up of how the research progressed and the impact it has had in practice. My life

and professional experiences drew me to the collaborative approach, and my academic reading and reflection informed the research focus and design and are represented by the main trunk of the tree. The tree canopy is the safe space that was created, where participants could spend time reflecting on love as part of their practice and share their growing understanding through their stories and discussions. The clear impact on self-understanding and practice are the aerial roots feeding back into the ground that the tree grew out of. The continuing impact as the participants share their understanding and the mapping tool with colleagues is the creation of a wider canopy and new aerial roots.

## **7.9 Value to practice**

Before I started the main study, I felt that drawing on Freire and Moss and utopian education as a starting point for the methodology was potentially inappropriate due to the scope of their ambitions for change and the small-scale nature of this study. However, I also felt strongly that the study did share the starting point of a need for change and a belief that this can happen through dialogue and shared commitment. Smyth (2011) notes that proposing a pedagogy for social justice that builds on a vision of utopian education is humbling, but is also necessary if current, potentially damaging practices are to be challenged. This research study aimed to facilitate practitioners' reflections, discussions and potential changes in practice. I reflected on these feelings at the end of the study and felt that the collaborative approach and the relationships that had developed supported reflections and changes in practice.

Freire's view of utopian education and his approach to valuing what is known intuitively and comes from emotion has proved to be congruent with this study. The focus on love as a key element of education is in keeping with this; indeed, Freire believed that for teachers to be committed to a utopian education they must have love as part of their practice

love of one's subject and the process of seeking to understand it more deeply; love of the possibilities for human communication and connectedness through dialogue; and love of the students with whom one is working (Roberts, 2015, p. 383)

Freire identified education as a potential means to change this world order through the 'conscientization' of the oppressed, so that they recognise the nature of their oppression (Dressman, 2008). I am not claiming that the participants in

this study necessarily came to understand themselves as oppressed, but they certainly came to a greater understanding of their own practice and a reaffirming of the importance of love in early years practice. This process and reaffirmation of values has also acted as a catalyst for continuing and expanding these changes in practice. While in the final stages of writing up this thesis I sent an update to my participants and asked how they were. I received a verbal reply from Angela saying that she had introduced mapping across the Foundation stage in the school she had recently moved to, and the following reply from Natasha:

We are still using this tool as a whole school, we have given training to teachers on how to use the map and this is cascaded to TAs working in the class. We use the team model as we feel that by identifying the link person who can connect emotionally to the child we can meet children's needs much quicker and can avoid some children falling into crisis by picking up on their difficulties before the point of no return. We also feel that this allows us to reflect on why we develop good relationships and more importantly the barriers we face. We have found that it is vital that we create 'safe' environments where staff feel comfortable within their teams, in order for them to be confident enough to be honest about the relationships they have with children. (Natasha, follow-up email, September 2020)

This embracing of the research tool and extension of discussions about love across a whole school community indicates that this research study has catalytic value, as its impact is being felt beyond the original participants as they act as agents for change:

The argument for catalytic validity lies not only within recognition of the reality-altering impact of the research process, but also in the desire to consciously channel the impact so that the respondents gain self-understanding and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation, (Lather, 1991, p. 68).

### **7.9.1 Covid-19 postscript**

During the period of writing up this research study, the Covid-19 pandemic took hold. Part of my role at the university during this period was supporting local authorities to develop trauma-informed relational responses to support young children and their families and the early years workforce. During discussions with senior advisers, I spoke about this research and the relationship-mapping tool and was invited to present a session on the research findings and provide



guidance on the tool. This session led to approaches from schools and settings to adopt the tool, and this is continuing – with two local authorities asking for further sessions for their teams. This growing interest in the power of relationships to act as a protective factor for children who are facing trauma and challenge looks set to grow further. The activist professionals who took part in this study are potentially now at the vanguard of what is becoming a wider movement that sees behaviour as communication, and that all children (but especially the most challenged and challenging) will benefit from love and compassion rather than a focus on the narrow educational outcomes of some interpretations of school readiness.

## **7.10 Conclusion**

This collaborative, longitudinal study with Reception teachers employed narrative and creative methods to explore their perceptions of professional love and how it is enacted within the classroom. Over the course of a school year, the participants met as a group and told stories about love, discussed their practice and mapped their relationships with children using a relationship-mapping tool developed for the study.

This study extends knowledge and understanding about professional love in a school context, building on previous studies that have mainly focused on practitioners in preschool settings. This study revealed that the Reception teachers participating considered professional love to be a key element of their practice and one that they prioritised. It highlighted the complexity of enacting professional love and the different aspects or faces it may present: tough love, natural love, effortful love, loving touch and the mask professional love may wear to enable teachers to meet their own emotional and social needs. The participants identified a range of positive impacts that they believe professional love provides for children, particularly in the areas of emotional wellbeing and development and learning. The participants also identified that professional love enabled them to support children who are facing challenging circumstances and barriers to learning. Despite these personal beliefs about the power and benefits of enacting professional love, the participants also raised issues about the emotional labour involved in prioritising this approach and acknowledged that it led to tensions with colleagues, school leadership and regimes of accountability.

The findings concerning impact on practice indicate that a safe space to collectively reflect on relationships over an extended period of time is vital in supporting participants' understanding and self-knowledge relating to professional love, as views fluctuated and changed over the course of the year. The collaborative storytelling and discussion-based approach supported the participants to co-construct their perceptions and definitions of professional love as they shifted and altered through this participative process. The mapping tool added an additional dimension as it enabled the participants to reflect on the range of relationships they have with children in their class and to see how they changed over the school year. This study has a number of implications for initial training and CPD, as it indicates that current approaches to support the development of professional love as part of practice need to be complemented by additional tools and support structures that allow for the full complex and multi-faceted nature of professional love to be surfaced and discussed over time.

The stories told by the participants in this study bring to life the powerful, positive effects that love can have in a classroom context and the challenges of maintaining this approach when it remains a hidden and undervalued aspect of practice. As we face a world with increasing concerns about children's mental health and absorb the impacts of a global pandemic there needs to be a shift to acknowledge and embrace the positive difference that loving relationships with teachers can make to children's lives and learning.

## **Appendix 1 Stories of love**

### **Natasha's story of Ethan**

My child's a bit of a transition one as well but it's rather a transition from me to someone else. So the child in question has always been on my inner circle because he's very, very needy from a behavioural and emotional point of view and so we've had to build a very loving relationship with him and approach behaviour strategies from a positive angle rather than a negative because that's all he ever gets at home, so we've consciously gone the opposite way and it's worked a treat. He's an absolute star. Over the last few weeks we've been transitioning him in to Year 1, taking him every single day for five minutes or so, every single day he's done something disruptive in the class and then two days ago he had a full morning in his new Y1 class. He flooded the bathroom, he wrecked the playdough area, he just basically trashed the classroom.

When I went back and collected him and brought him back to classroom I spoke to him about it, I tried to get to the bottom of it because it's not normal behaviour anymore, he stopped all that very, very soon after coming to our class. He said, 'I don't want to go to Year 1 anymore'. I said, 'Okay, explain why, give me some reasons and we'll see if we can fix this.' So he said, 'No, we can't fix it, it's because you're not going to love me when I've gone in to Year 1.' He has such poor attachment to his parents and his carers. It made me think have I done him a disservice because now he's going to struggle leaving me because it is me that he doesn't want to leave, leaving me to then have to develop another relationship and build another relationship with a different person.

So it really made me think am I doing some children a disservice by getting so close to them and building such a strong relationship with them. I have talked about it with my Teaching Assistant's and they seem to think that, and I do agree with them after talking about it, that we met his needs at that moment in time and now he has different needs and it's time to think of different strategies to help him move on. We have talked about some different things that we're going to do but it did initially make me think, oh my goodness, have I done this child a massive disservice by making him have that strong attachment to me that then we've got to not break it but put on that little bit of elastic so that we're not so close. It does make you think about what you're doing doesn't it?

How close do you get to those children in order to meet their needs but also thinking longevity. At some point they've got to then leave you and go on to someone else, unless I went up to Year 1 which I can't do this year because I've been told where I am! When he said it he did nearly make me cry though. I had to hold back the tears because I just thought this poor child has got no attachment at home and I'm the only attachment he's got and now I'm making him lessen that and move on to someone else. When I'm not in there, when I have PPA time he can be more challenging behaviour wise and my Teaching Assistant's really good because she does the same behaviour strategies as myself. It depends who's covering me as far as the teacher's concerned because some teachers don't have the same behaviour strategies that I use. So for instance I never use a time out chair because I think if you don't understand why you've done something sitting a child on a chair to think about what you've done wrong is not an appropriate strategy, so I never, ever use it. But I do know that some of the staff who come in do use it. I've spoke to the Head Teacher about that, but he said that people have to do what strategy suits them. It's really tricky, really, really tricky. Especially when it doesn't suit a particular child it's even harder because he just sits on the chair getting angrier and angrier. He needs a repair and reparation, not a time out to think about what you've done wrong when he's got a justification for – I mean it might be something stupid, he might have pushed someone over and then when you say to him 'why did you push that child over?' 'Well, I wanted to get there'. He wanted to get somewhere, that child was in his way, he pushed them out of the way. He doesn't understand that he needs to use words all the time and not just some of the time when he remembers. Sitting him on a chair, he's just thinking, 'No, I needed that, I wanted that, I needed that, and I wanted to get it and that's why I did it', so he doesn't realise it's wrong. So that's my story.

## Appendix 2 Participant information



### RECEPTION CLASS EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL LOVE RESEARCH PROJECT Research Participant Information Sheet June 2018

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of **public tasks that are in the public interest**. A full statement of your rights can be found at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research>. However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with ID ER6802317. Further information at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice>

#### Invitation

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project about how Reception Class Educators perceive loving relationships with the children in their care. You should only participate if you want to. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

#### Research Aims

Reception Class is the first statutory year of a child's education and it is also the final year of the 0-5 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The EYFS has positive relationships as one of its overarching principles but there is increasing pressure on Reception Class Educators to ensure that children are ready for KS1 and achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of this year. There is evidence (Robert-Holmes and Bradbury 2016) that the tension between these two aims is changing how Reception class educators teach and may be leading to an emphasis on formalised rather than a play-based approach. I am interested in finding out how teaching staff in this context perceive and enact their relationships with young children. Do you prioritise loving relationships? Has your approach changed? Do you feel there are tensions in your role? Does the specific context influence your practice? What

training or guidance have you had on relationships and professional love? How does your own personal history impact on your approach?

**1. Why have you asked me to take part?**

Because you will be working as a Reception teacher in the academic years 2018-19 when the study will take place.

**2. Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide if you want to take part. A copy of the information provided here is yours to keep along with the consent form if you do decide to take part. You can still decide to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

**3. What will I be required to do?**

This is a participatory research project by which I mean that as a participant you will help to shape the research and what the findings mean. You will be invited to be part of a community of enquiry of Reception teachers that will meet initially to discuss how you want to work together at the start of the 2018-19 academic year. You will then be invited to record incidents/stories about loving relationships with the children in your class in 2018-19 in a written format and share these with a small group of other Reception teachers at a meeting each term. At these meetings there will also be a discussion about these stories and what they may mean.

**4. Where will this take place?**

At Sheffield Hallam University

**5. How often will I have to take part, and for how long?**

There will be an initial meeting of approximately one hour in September 2018 and then a meeting each term that will last 1-1.5 hours. In between the meetings you will be asked to think about the relationships that are developing between you and the children in your class and to record any significant stories on the writing frame provided before the group meets again. The stories, discussion and emerging themes will be shared with you between meetings for your approval and comment (if you wish to make any).

**6. Are there any possible risks or disadvantages in taking part. (Need to specify if there are any)**

You may already know me from my role at Sheffield Hallam University or in previous roles within the early years sector. Your decision to take part in the research or your decision to decline to take part will not have an impact on my professional or personal relationship with you.

The subject matter of the research is by its nature emotional and it may raise issues that are difficult for you. I will provide information about support services that are available to you should you require them

([www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/helpline](http://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/helpline) )

**7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There may be benefits to taking part in the research as the participatory nature will allow opportunities for self-reflection and developing practice but there will be no material benefit to taking part.

**8. When will I have the opportunity to discuss my participation?**

You can contact me at any point before or after the study and you will have the opportunity to attend a debrief session to discuss the research at the end of the academic year 2018-19.

**9. Will anyone be able to connect me with what is recorded and reported?**

Everything you tell me will remain completely confidential within the limits of the law.

The information you give during the meetings will be completely anonymised, with the use of pseudonyms where appropriate as in the rules of confidentiality, as defined at the bottom of this form. Any audiotapes I make of the meetings will be securely stored and will be made available only to my supervisors. At the conclusion of the study I may share the findings at conferences or in research papers but there will be no means of identifying you.

**10. Who will be responsible for all of the information when this study is over?**

I will be responsible for all the information when the study is over.

**11. Who will have access to it?**

Only myself and my supervisors. All individuals involved are bound by the rules of confidentiality as defined at the bottom of this form.

**12. What will happen to the information when this study is over?**

The data will be used to inform future research activities in this area with a view to anonymous publication. All data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within a restricted access building or encrypted and stored on a password protected PC. Raw data will be kept as long as is necessary in relation to the study. Raw data will not be passed on to other people or used in other studies. Published anonymised data may be referenced in other studies from published works.

**13. How will you use what you find out?**

I intend to use the data in my doctoral thesis and may publish the findings through the submission of articles / conference attendance.

**14. How long is the whole study likely to last?**

Data collection will end in June 2019.

**15. How can I find out about the results of the study?**

When the final thesis has been completed I will make copies available as requested.

**16. What if I do not wish to take part?**

Your participation is completely voluntary; there is no obligation on you to take part in this study.

**17. What if I change my mind during the study?**

You are completely free to withdraw from the study at any time up to the write-up of the data as part of the thesis. If you do wish to withdraw please let a member of the research team know. Their contact details are provided below.

**18. Do you have any other questions?**

If you do then please contact a member of the research team:

**Researcher/ Research Team Details:**

Please contact myself, Sally Pearse (01142256257), [s.pearse@shu.ac.uk](mailto:s.pearse@shu.ac.uk)

Or my Supervisor Mark Boylan (01142256012), [m.s.boylan@shu.ac.uk](mailto:m.s.boylan@shu.ac.uk)

Below are the details of who to contact if you have any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study are given below.

<p><b>You should contact the Data Protection Officer if:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• you have a query about how your data is used by the University</li><li>• you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately)</li><li>• you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data</li></ul> <p><a href="mailto:DPO@shu.ac.uk">DPO@shu.ac.uk</a></p>	<p><b>You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Professor Ann Macaskill) if</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated</li></ul> <p><a href="mailto:a.macaskill@shu.ac.uk">a.macaskill@shu.ac.uk</a></p>
<p>Postal address: Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WBT Telephone: 0114 225 5555</p>	

**Further clarification on terms used in this information sheet:**



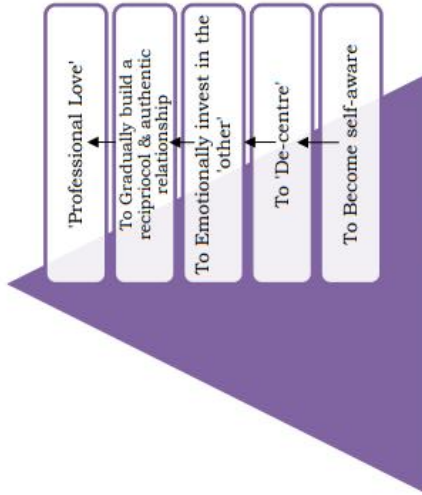
**Anonymous:** information given cannot be traced back to you by anyone.

**Confidential:** Information given can be connected to you by the research team only. They will never pass this information on to anyone outside the team, unless any information is shared which gives safety concerns.



# Appendix 3 Information for participants on professional love

(<https://playsproject.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/thinking-about-professional-love-tool1.pdf>)

	<p>When practitioners have built <b>enduring mutual</b> relationships with children with whom they have formed a close, affectionate bond, developed over many hours, days, weeks, months or even years of the child's attendance at their early years setting, then it is likely that they will have come to love them.</p>		<p><b>'Thinking about Professional Love'</b></p>
	<p>The first step in this process of <i>'Thinking about Professional Love'</i> is for practitioners to become more <b>self-aware</b> by <b>stepping outside of their own personal frame of reference</b> so that they are <b>available</b> to reflect upon the consequences of their actions and interactions with others.</p>		
	<p>Step two is to <b>de-centre</b> – to be compelled to act for the good of the other person. In doing so the practitioner needs to shift their thinking <i>beyond</i> their own needs, and become completely absorbed in thinking about and acting with the needs of the other person in mind, in a completely non-judgmental way</p>		
	<p>Step three is when practitioners are able to <b>emotionally invest</b> something of themselves in the relationship-rather than to distance themselves from the child and/or parent.</p>		
	<p>Step four is for practitioners to build a <b>gradual, authentic, reciprocal relationship</b> with children and parents. It is this reciprocal relationship which determines the level of acceptance and trust between the child and the practitioner but also between the practitioner and the parent.</p>		
	<p>This triangular model of thinking about love in the early years is intended to offer practitioners a process to have in mind which complements a parent's love for their child rather than undermine it; hence step 5 <b>is to recognise the existence of 'Professional Love'</b></p>		
			

## Appendix 4 Participant consent form



### PROFESSIONAL LOVE RESEARCH PROJECT

#### Research Participant Consent Form

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated June 2018	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation in it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being part of a community of enquiry and the discussions we have being recorded and transcribed by the researcher or a member of the research team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I understand that non-participation will not adversely affect my relationship with Sheffield Hallam University. ☐ ☐

I understand that the research covers emotional subject areas and that I have been signposted to appropriate forms of support should I need them. ☐ ☐

I know the name of the independent person that I can contact if I feel worried about participation / non-participation in the project. ☐ ☐

I understand that other researchers will have access to the data from this project only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form. ☐ ☐

I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team ☐ ☐

Name of participant [printed]      Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher      [printed]      Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 5 Additional participant information for relationship mapping



### RECEPTION CLASS EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL LOVE RESEARCH PROJECT

#### Relationship Mapping Research Participant Information Sheet May 2019

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of **public tasks that are in the public interest**. A full statement of your rights can be found at

<https://portal.shu.ac.uk/departments/srd/other/Sec/IG/Pages/Data-Governance.aspx> However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with ER6802317. Further information at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice>

#### Invitation

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project about how Reception Class Educators perceive loving relationships with the children in their care. You should only participate if you want to. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

#### Research Aims

Reception Class is the first statutory year of a child's education and it is also the final year of the 0-5 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The EYFS has positive relationships as one of its overarching principles but there is increasing pressure on Reception Class Educators to ensure that children are ready for KS1 and achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of this year. There is evidence (Robert-Holmes and Bradbury 2016) that the tension between these two aims is changing how Reception class educators teach and may be leading to an emphasis on formalised rather than a play-based approach. I am interested in finding out how teaching staff in this context

perceive and enact their relationships with young children. Do you prioritise loving relationships? Has your approach changed? Do you feel there are tensions in your role? Does the specific context influence your practice? What training or guidance have you had on relationships and professional love? How does your own personal history impact on your approach? The tools I am using to explore this include a relationship map and this is what you will be completing for the children in your class if you choose to take part.

**19. Why have you asked me to take part?**

Because you are working in a Reception class in the academic years 2018-19 when the study will take place.

**20. Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide if you want to take part. A copy of the information provided here is yours to keep along with the consent form if you do decide to take part. You can still decide to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

**21. What will I be required to do?**

This is a participatory research project by which I mean that as a participant you will help to shape the research and what the findings mean. You will be invited to complete the relationship map of your relationships with the children who have been in your class for the 2018-19 academic year. This map will be anonymised and will form part of the discussion with participants in the wider study I have been conducting across this academic year.

**22. Where will this take place?**

You can complete the map at a time and place convenient to you before the 4<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

**23. How often will I have to take part, and for how long?**

The map can be completed in approximately 20 minutes.

**24. Are there any possible risks or disadvantaged in taking part. (Need to specify if there are any)**

You may already know me from my role at Sheffield Hallam University or in previous roles within the early years sector. Your decision to take part in the research or your decision to decline to take part will not have an impact on my professional or personal relationship with you.

The subject matter of the research is by its nature emotional and it may raise issues that are difficult for you. I will provide information about support services that are available to you should you require them ([www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/helpline](http://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/helpline) )

**25. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There may be benefits to taking part in the research as the participatory nature will allow opportunities for self-reflection and developing practice but there will be no material benefit to taking part.

**26. When will I have the opportunity to discuss my participation?**

You can contact me at any point before or after the study and you will have the opportunity to attend a debrief session to discuss the research at the end of the academic year 2018-19.

**27. Will anyone be able to connect me with what is recorded and reported?**

Everything you tell me will remain completely confidential within the limits of the law.

The information you give in the map will be completely anonymised, with the use of pseudonyms where appropriate as in the rules of confidentiality, as defined at the bottom of this form. At the conclusion of the study I may share the findings at conferences or in research papers but there will be no means of identifying you.

**28. Who will be responsible for all of the information when this study is over?**

I will be responsible for all the information when the study is over.

**29. Who will have access to it?**

Only myself and my supervisors. All individuals involved are bound by the rules of confidentiality as defined at the bottom of this form.

**30. What will happen to the information when this study is over?**

The data will be used to inform future research activities in this area with a view to anonymous publication. All data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within a restricted access building or encrypted and stored on a password protected PC. Raw data will be kept as long as is necessary in relation to the study. Raw data will not be passed on to other people or used in other studies. Published anonymised data may be referenced in other studies from published works.

**31. How will you use what you find out?**

I intend to use the data in my doctoral thesis and may publish the findings through the submission of articles / conference attendance.

**32. How long is the whole study likely to last?**

Data collection will end in July 2019.

**33. How can I find out about the results of the study?**

When the final thesis has been completed I will make copies available as requested.

**34. What if I do not wish to take part?**

Your participation is completely voluntary; there is no obligation on you to take part in this study.

**35. What if I change my mind during the study?**

You are completely free to withdraw from the study at any time up to the write-up of the data as part of the thesis. If you do wish to withdraw

please let a member of the research team know. Their contact details are provided below.

**36. Do you have any other questions?**

If you do then please contact a member of the research team:

**Researcher/ Research Team Details:**

Please contact myself, Sally Pearse (01142256257), [s.pearse@shu.ac.uk](mailto:s.pearse@shu.ac.uk)

Or my Supervisor Mark Boylan (01142256012), [m.s.boylan@shu.ac.uk](mailto:m.s.boylan@shu.ac.uk)

Below are the details of who to contact if you have any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study are given below.

<p><b>You should contact the Data Protection Officer if:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• you have a query about how your data is used by the University</li><li>• you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately)</li><li>• you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data</li></ul> <p><a href="mailto:DPO@shu.ac.uk">DPO@shu.ac.uk</a></p>	<p><b>You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Professor Ann Macaskill) if</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated</li></ul> <p><a href="mailto:a.macaskill@shu.ac.uk">a.macaskill@shu.ac.uk</a></p>
<p>Postal address: Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WBT Telephone: 0114 225 5555</p>	

**Further clarification on terms used in this information sheet:**

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**Confidential:** Information given can be connected to you by the research team only. They will never pass this information on to anyone outside the team, unless any information is shared which gives safety concerns.

## Appendix 6 Additional participant consent form for relationship mapping



### PROFESSIONAL LOVE RESEARCH PROJECT

#### Research Participant Consent Form

<i><b>Please tick the appropriate boxes</b></i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated May 2019	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation in it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include completing a map or relationships with the children in my care to be shared with the researcher and participants in this study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



I understand that non-participation will not adversely affect my relationship with Sheffield Hallam University. ☐ ☐

I understand that the research covers emotional subject areas and that I have been signposted to appropriate forms of support should I need them. ☐ ☐

I know the name of the independent person that I can contact if I feel worried about participation / non-participation in the project. ☐ ☐

I understand that other researchers will have access to the data from this project only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form. ☐ ☐

I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team ☐ ☐

Name of participant [printed]                      Signature                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher                      [printed]                      Signature                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 7 Writing frame

**Sheffield  
Hallam  
University**

Sheffield  
Institute  
of Education

Participant Number:

**Professional Love Research Project**

**September 2018**

### **PART 1**

**Age:**

**Gender:**

**How did you become a Reception Class Educator?**

**How long have you worked in education?**

**What different roles have you held in education?**

**What have been the significant influences on your practice?**

**The information from Part 1 provides useful background information for the research and could form part of your introduction to the other members of the enquiry group.**

## **PART 2**

### **Reflective writing about loving relationships with a child/children in your class.**

This will be shared at the enquiry group if you wish and it will form part of the data for this study.

Please think about a significant incident that relates to loving relationships with a child / children in your Reception class since the start of this term. The incident need not be a dramatic event but it is one which has significance for you. It could be an event which made you stop and think, or one that raised questions for you about your beliefs, values, attitude or practice in relation to loving relationships. The event could be a positive or a negative experience.

**Please describe briefly the background to the incident and what happened:**

### **Reflecting on the incident**

When you think back about the incident and reflect on the situation it may be useful to ask yourself questions such as:

- Why do I view the incident like that?
- What did I say to the child?
- What would I have liked to say to them but left unsaid?
- What other action would I have taken but felt unable to do?
- What did I say to the management team about what happened (if appropriate)?
- What would I have liked to say to them but left unsaid (if appropriate)?

**Please write your reflections / responses below:**

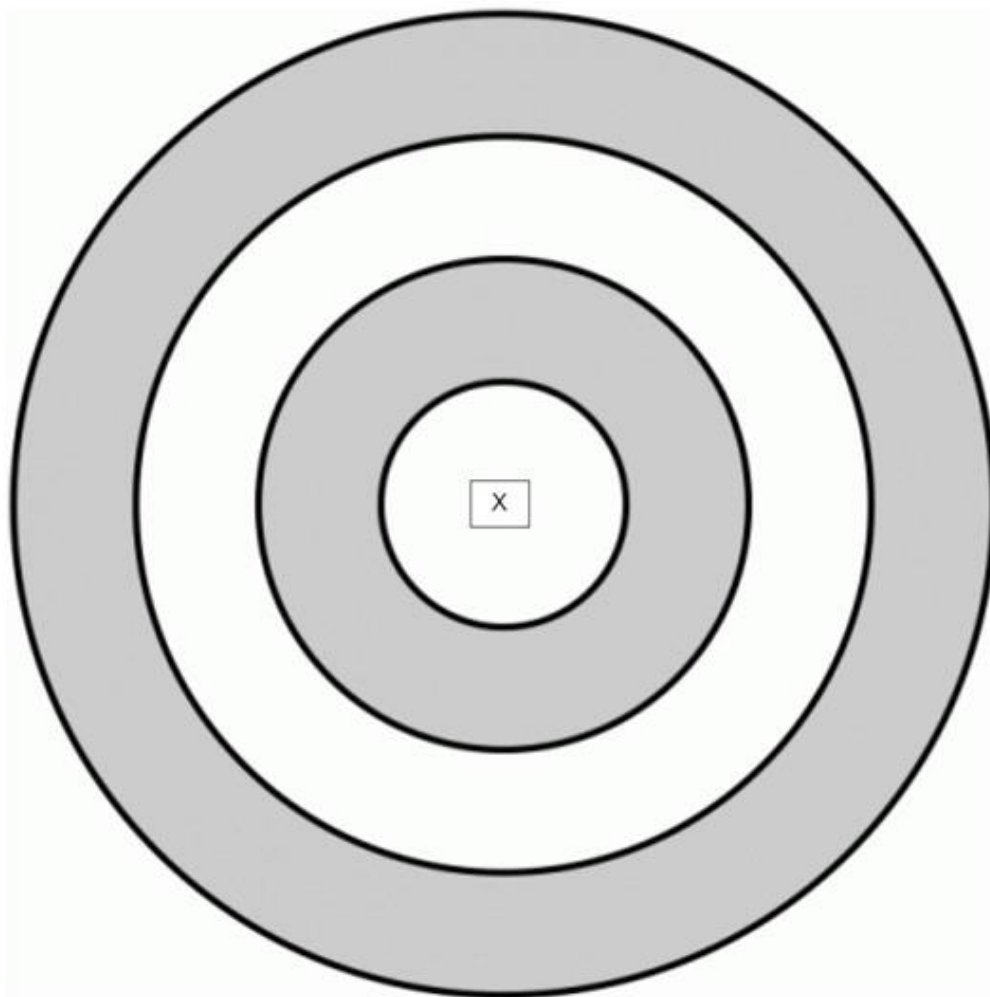
## Appendix 8 Blank relationship map

Relationship Mapping for your class

X Reception Class Educator

xx Boys

xx Girls



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