

# The growth of love

**Keith J. White**

## **Abstract**

This article explores how and why child care theory and practice has been separated from the idea and concept of love since Dr John Bowlby used the word in his book, *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (1953). The author attempted to reconnect child care theory and love in his book, *The Growth of Love* (2008) the title of which was deliberately chosen to reflect the debt owed to John Bowlby, and his son, Sir Richard Bowlby contributed the Foreword. Some of the challenges and implications of this approach are described, before reference to the writings and work of others that he discovered in the process. Three mentioned are Janusz Korczak, Paulo Friere and Friedrich Froebel. Recent research on cognitive development creates space for thinking about love, for example Sue Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters* (2004). The article concludes with reference to children in hospital and love in religious traditions, with a final mention of how Johannes Brahms saw love as the key to all of his music.

## **Keywords**

Love, child development, education, philosophy of history

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## Introduction

In 1952 Dr John Bowlby produced his report for the World Health Organisation, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (Bowlby, 1952). This monograph found its way to a global professional audience through the version published by Penguin, *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (Bowlby, 1953). In time the principles stemming from this research came to be known universally as 'attachment theory'. And in this theory the word love came to be dropped. It figured (as a noun or participle) in the text of the Geneva Monograph (for example, pages 11, 12 and 13), but in time more specific words and concepts were used and developed.

The reason for this is given by John Bowlby's son Sir Richard Bowlby in one of his videos describing his father's work:

The science of family bonds, which researchers call attachment theory, was started in the 1950s by my father John Bowlby who died in 1990. He was a child psychiatrist who was also a scientist and in 1952 he wrote a book called *Child Care and the Growth of Love*. But love had too many different meanings for a scientist and later he called the kind of love that children feel for their parents, attachment: children's attachment to their parents. (Bowlby, R., 2010).

This might seem like a rather arcane point to raise, more related to etymology and vocabulary than the stuff of child care, but it may have a greater significance in the field of child care and child development than has hitherto been acknowledged. I first began to explore this in an article in *Childrenwebmag* in July 2015 (White, 2015). My argument was that whatever the good reasons for Bowlby's chosen change in terminology, it has had the unintended consequence of cutting off the discipline of child development (psychiatry, psychology, social work, education) from poetry, literature, religion, music, imagination, nature and the many aspects of children's lives, experience and feelings where love is a commonly used word.

In this current paper I describe a few of the discoveries in my journey guided by the question, 'Where is love in child care, child development and education?'

## Stages of Child Development

Several years before writing the *Childrenwebmag* article (and making this 'discovery') I had written a book on child development in which I sought to distil a lifetime's experience of residential child care, and the guiding principles that had emerged from my studies in child development theory. The title I chose for this book was *The Growth of Love* (White, 2008). Of course this was a deliberate echo of Bowlby's Penguin book, and his son Richard kindly agreed to

write a Foreword. In my introduction I spell out the debt that I owed to John Bowlby (White, 2008, p.14-15), whom I had the privilege to meet when doing post-graduate research at Edinburgh University. Attachment theory is integral to the whole book.

The choice of title was anything but an exercise in hair-splitting. It represented a conscious attempt to present a radical alternative to prevailing theory, concepts and vocabulary. Put simply the dominant discourse in human development theory (spread across a number of differing theorists from Freud and Erikson to Piaget) revolves around what are usually called 'stages of development'. These are given a range of names and cover different ages and aspects of growth (physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive...). They have in common the assumption that development involves a progression through a series of definable and observable phases. If there is any doubt about the pervasiveness of this paradigm, a brief google search using the phrase 'stages of child development' and filtering out images will provide compelling evidence that this is a default mode in the field.

When teaching child development I am constantly reminded by students just how popular and attractive this approach is (Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' is perhaps the most popular of all – which of course was originally a framework for understanding motivation!). I have tried to explain elsewhere why this is (White, 2012 [2016]). The essence of the argument is that this notion of child development as a progression through stages fits neatly within a liberal western meta-narrative of human civilisation. They reinforce each other. Of course I am not the first to observe and critique this assumption. Two of my predecessors in this are Professors Karl Barth (1886-1968) and James E. Loder (1931-2002).

We who are engaged alongside children in whatever particular roles tend to be immersed in both of these ways of seeing children and the world, that rather like fish in water, or birds in the air, we take them for granted. They seem like common-sense and therefore un-problematical.

In fact they are anything but. The idea that actual human biographies sit neatly within a theory of upward mobility (of whatever type) needs very serious testing. Living among children and young people in a residential setting for most of my life, I found that such theoretical frameworks did not do justice to the daily encounters I have had with children and young people in my care. Some seem stuck in a 'stage of development'; some regress; most oscillate. And I never ceased to be surprised by the exceptions to any rule.

And in my reading of human history right up to the present day I find it impossible to trace the universal development of human civilisation of which some speak. It is far more messy and complicated than that. Any who wish to make a special case for 'western civilisation' seem to be suffering from severe

amnesia, and deafness to the critiques of the west from other parts of the world (cf. Mishra, 2012.)

What is more surely the fact is that because both individual human lives, and the life of the planet on which we live, are finite, and will end in death or extinction, there should be at least a cautionary note to any who describe human life or human history simply in terms of ascent or growth. To present a human life or human civilisation as a story of ascent seems either a wilful act of negligence, or a triumph of hope over experience.

## **The Growth of Love**

In short there has to be another way of framing and understanding what is going on in the lives of children, that can draw from the many insights of theorists such as Bowlby, Erikson and Piaget (for example) without being constrained by them at the expense of inaccuracy or superficiality. I am conscious here that one of the many influences on my thinking has been the work of Alistair Macintyre (1981). He argues that it had become difficult in recent decades for reasons he puts forward to have coherent and informed moral conversations. I am arguing that there is a similar lack of coherence when it comes to child care and child development. This is where I believe the neglect or abandonment of the vocabulary of love (not only in human development but also in the emerging language of human rights) meant that it has become increasingly difficult to do justice to the richness and depths of the realities of human experience, longings, fears, dreams whether personal or in relationship.

For this reason I attempted to approach human development in the light of my experience and reading from a different, though time-honoured perspective, which gives a rightful place to love. That this is difficult if not impossible to describe scientifically may be one of its greatest merits. It is manifestly valued throughout human history and across all cultures, and there is a rich store of tradition and writing (wisdom) from which to draw. And ordinary people seem to know what they mean when they use it.

It is vital to repeat that in *The Growth of Love* I draw heavily from the standard child development literature, but the stages of development no longer provide the framework (or 'meta-narrative'). Instead there are agreed aspects or elements of human life and experience that in combination facilitate the growth of love. Far from being a wholly definable or predictable process, it is rather full of surprises, oscillations, creative regressions and upheavals. The five key elements that I identify are Security, Boundaries, Significance, Community and Creativity (White, 2008, Chapters 3-7). The two key points to note here are that they are not stages of growth, and that they only make sense within the wider context of the concept of love.

Since writing the book it has been my privilege to explore its ideas and content in very different cultural contexts across the world, and there have been those sufficiently convinced by it to produce a Study Guide (White, 2014) and to organise courses based on it, such as the Holistic Child Development Masters Programme in Penang, Malaysia. It seems to be the case that there is a growing recognition worldwide of the desirability of seeking to incorporate what love means into our understanding of child development and our practice of child care and education (in the context of writing this paper, I have become aware of the work of Dr Jools Page, of Sheffield University for example).

But the challenges of staying with the word 'love' should not be underestimated. The Growth of Love was launched at the annual forum of the Christian Child Care Forum on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2008. The title of the event was 'Love is a Four Letter Word'. Several individuals and organisations had warned beforehand against such a title. Their argument was that it could easily be linked with paedophiles and paedophilia. This reminds us of another unintended side-effect of avoiding the word love in child care and child development: it can leave a vacuum all too easily filled by those who distort the whole notion of love, and those who abuse the very ones we seek to safeguard, nurture and love. The conference went on with its original title, because the stakes were judged to be too high for there to be a defensible retreat. Someone must use the word love responsibly and healthily in relation to children.

## **Discovering Others on the Same Journey**

For me the journey exploring how love relates to child care and child development has been a rich and rewarding one. I reconnected with the world of literature and discovered and rediscovered beautifully apt insights into how love can appear in the unlikeliest of situations, and its transforming power. It is often poets and novelists who provide some of the best descriptions of the lives, experiences, and growth of children.

And it was a joy to discover that all those child care and educational pioneers on whose shoulders I have been standing never faltered in using the word love when it was appropriate.

Janusz Korczak (1878-1942), for example, spoke of it always in the farewell speech he gave to orphans leaving his orphanage: 'I can give you but one thing only- a longing for a better life, a life of truth and justice...perhaps this longing will lead you to God, Homeland and Love. Goodbye. Do not forget' (Josephs, 1999, p.144). It is difficult to conceive of his own final act of sacrifice as he gave his own life in order to be alongside the orphans on their way to the gas chambers as anything other than an act of love. It remains a formidable test for all of us who say we are committed to the care of children to ask what we would have done in the circumstances.

Over recent years it has been my privilege to discover many others who have been actively thinking along similar lines, not least in what is known as Social Pedagogy. Slowly it is becoming apparent that the word 'love' is beginning to make a come-back in professional child care and child development. It should not be surprising that any attempt to be 'holistic' when coming alongside and relating to children (for example in foster care, residential care or adoption) will eventually find the question emerging (even if unspoken) 'Do you love me?' The Fostering Network's programme, Head, Heart, Hands is a good example Fostering Network, [www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/head-heart-hands](http://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/head-heart-hands)) Once the word 'heart' is in the frame then surely love cannot be far away.

## **Re-Connecting Education and Care**

As the journey of discovery continued one of the most important connections that was re-forged was that between child care and education. How could they ever have come apart so clinically given that Paulo Freire wrote, 'It is impossible to teach without the courage to love' (2005, p.5).

Two of my main mentors in this field and on this journey have been Friedrich Froebel and Paulo Freire. What follows is a summary of some of their philosophy that relates specifically to this connection. As we listen to what they are saying it becomes apparent that we have boxed in 'education' in a way that prevents us seeing the rich interplay between head, heart and hands in every aspect and every part of a child's life and learning and love. It is still possible to conceive of education as something that happens away from home and everyday life in purpose-built places labelled schools! When we all know that learning knows no bounds. How is it that the philosophies and theories of these great pioneers have not influenced child care and child development? Surely one reason, at least in part, is that we had forgotten the vocabulary of love that can form a bridge.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852): Froebel first came into teaching through a school run along Pestalozzian lines. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was a pioneer of educational philosophy in Trogen, Switzerland. His motto was 'Learning by head, hand and heart'. Although Froebel eventually parted company from Pestalozzi over some differences of emphasis, he, like Pestalozzi believed that humans are essentially productive and creative, and that fulfilment comes through developing these in harmony with God and the world. His vision was to stimulate an appreciation and love for children, to provide a new but small world where children could play with their age group and experience their first gentle taste of independence. His kindergarten system consisted of games and songs, construction, and gifts and occupations. The play materials were what he called gifts and the activities were occupations. His system allowed children to compare, test, and explore. His philosophy also consisted of four basic

components which were: free self-activity; creativity; social participation; and motor expression.

Froebel's songs, plays, games, Gifts (his word for materials), Occupations (his word for activities or experiments) and educational theories were invented, tried and tried again. Froebel was destined to teach the child. Love was the keystone, and joy, unselfishness and unswerving faith in the natural impulses of humanity underlined his philosophy. Significantly his kindergartens were closed in some parts of the world for being too free and therefore subversive. But his philosophy of education continues to inspire people and institutions worldwide. Among his many legacies are these two works:

*The Mother Love and Nursery Songs.* These remind us of the place of love in education: Froebel believed that in general it is mothers who should teach during the first seven years of a child's life because they know, understand and love the child (something that Froebel never experienced because his own mother died when he was very young, and his step-mother did not show love to him). It was from his love of nature, particularly trees that Froebel came to recognise the uniquely loving mother-child bond and relationship.

*The Education of Man.* Here are just two quotations from this major work by Froebel. He writes that a primary purpose of education is: 'to call forth the love within [the child]' (p.8). And also that: 'Every human being must be recognised and fostered in accordance with his eternal, immortal nature as the divine shown in human form, as a pledge of the love, the nearness, the favour of God, as a gift of God' ( p.10).

Paulo Freire (1921-1997): was one of the great philosophers of education. The foundation of his theory was a belief in the fundamental importance, the primacy of love in every area of life. He talked of love in relation to everything including his marriage, family, childhood; neighbourhood, language, soccer, wine... (for further reading developing on Freire's work see Darder, 1998 and 2002; Allman, 1998).

In the light of this it is as instructive as it is encouraging that there is a doctoral thesis by Edward Schoder (2010), on the theme of love in Freire's pedagogy. In this thesis Schoder identifies three main elements (virtues) of love: fairness, respect and gratitude (p.7). To these he adds caring and faithfulness (p.8). Love will include love of peers, love of nation, love of humanity... (p.9). He argues that love is both a means and an end in Freire's educational philosophy and project (p. 15).

I have traced many, but not all of Freire's references to and development of this theme. Here are some indicative examples.

Education is an act of love (1965, p.38);

'From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love' (1970, p.24). Education takes place 'when (the teacher) stopes making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love' (1970, p.35). 'Dialogue cannot exist however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and men. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself...it cannot exist in a relation of domination. Domination reveals the pathology of love...Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to other men (sic)....If I do not love the world - if I do not love life - if I do not love men - I cannot enter into dialogue' (1970, pp.77-78).

And from the book, *Teachers as Cultural workers* (2005), he makes a specific case for love in a context and climate that sees the word as too imprecise to be of descriptive value. 'It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up ...We must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific' (p.5).

## **Research into Cognitive Development**

Meanwhile research into neural networks and the functioning of the brain also saw a place for love in child development. An example of this is the book by Sue Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters* (2004). She argues that science was finding consistent and cogent evidence that affection (that was the word she used inside the book much of the time when referring to the word, love that was on the cover) could alter both the biochemistry and the structures of the brains of young children. This should not be too much of a surprise to those familiar with the work of the Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) who argued that 'All knowledge is personal' (1958).

Now I do not believe that aspects and dimensions of our lives such as love, empathy, compassion, the sublime, loyalty, devotion, need to wait for science to give them its imprimatur, but in the case of child development we do need to begin to re-align our perspective and models so that they resonate better with human affection, feelings, longings and desires. The development of children's rights and the understanding of children as social actors or agents can be seen in this light, but there are dangers that such discourses see children in the image of adults. They have merit, but are not appropriate as meta-narratives within which to understand and relate fully to children.



## **Children in Hospital**

One of my long-standing friends and colleagues is a chaplain in a children's hospital. Perhaps it is unsurprising that when faced with inexplicable suffering and often the inevitability of death, the children, parents and chaplains find that love is a word that recurs in many contexts (Nash, Darby & Nash, 2015). Significantly of course the role of many types of stages of development is often completely irrelevant in such a setting. Life and death have interrupted any such notions. What matters is not reaching further standards of achievement, but identifying and valuing what really matters. It is hard to see how anything ultimately can be a substitute for love.

## **Love in Religious Traditions**

Of course in religions in general and in Judaeo-Christian writings in particular love has the central place that reflects the belief that God is love, and that humans are to respond to that love by loving God with heart soul mind and strength, and their neighbours as themselves. And it does not require much imagination to see that the decline in the use of the word love in child care has taken place over a period with features consistent with some form of secularisation (certainly in the sense of belonging to communities of faith). That these traditions have helped in the formation and transmission of understandings of love does not mean that others cannot adopt and develop them. Indeed love has been much in evidence outside traditional Christianity over the centuries.

## **Conclusion**

Most of my life has been lived within a residential community caring for children. In relating to many children from very different backgrounds and cultures I have sought to develop my understanding of them in any and every way possible. I am grateful, as I hope is now apparent, for the pioneering work of the likes of Dr John Bowlby and many others. But in the end as my search for insight and understanding continued, (always challenged and critiqued by the real life stories of the children and young people), and the puzzling historical context in which we found ourselves, it became apparent that there had to be something more. In this paper I have described the importance of love. It is such a many-faceted word that its meanings are inexhaustible. But without it, as Brahms was determined to underline in his very last work (and effectively, testament): the fourth of the songs in his final work, *Vier Ernste Gesänge*, is a setting of these words of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 13., all our activity however well-intentioned is sadly inadequate: 'If I could speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love I would be like sounding brass or a tinkling symbol'

Swafford, 1999, p.610-611.) As a musician Brahms was a perfectionist and he chose the final subject with typically meticulous care. Perhaps it could be said that child care and child development without recourse to the language and practice of love are not very different: the notes, the themes, the harmonies, the rhythms may be there, but the heart is missing.

## About the author

Keith J. White, M.A. (Oxon.), M.Phil., PhD is the leader of Mill Grove, a Christian residential community that has been caring for children and young people in the East End of London UK since 1899. He is married to Ruth and they have four children and six grandchildren. He is the founder and Chair of the Child Theology Movement, a trustee of the UK Christian Child Care Forum; Frontier Youth Trust; former Chair of Children England, and member of the UK government's Care Standards Tribunal.

Among the books he has written or edited are *A Place for Us; In His Image; Caring for Deprived Children; Why Care?; Re-Framing Children's Services; Children and Social Exclusion; The Changing Face of Child Care; The Art of Faith; The Growth of Love, Reflections of Living with Children (Vols. I and II); In the Meantime; Now and Next; Entry Point*. He has contributed monthly columns in *www.childrenwebmag.com* (now *The Care Journal*), since 2000.

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