

## Love, Care and Solidarity in the Changing Context of Irish Education<sup>\*</sup>

Bernie Anne Grummell

Maynooth University

### Abstract

Love, care and solidarity are at the heart of humanity. They are evident in and through the bonds of interdependency that are key in human development, learning relationships and education encounters. This paper explores the care implications of the changing political, economic and cultural context of Irish higher education in recent decades. Lynch et al (2007) and Lynch et al. (2015) argue that a longstanding culture of carelessness in education, grounded in Cartesian rationalism and Western scientific knowledge, has been exacerbated by the rise of neoliberalism in an increasingly volatile context of global capitalism. This paper explores the implications for learners and educators in terms of the politics of the caring roles we occupy, our relationships with colleagues and learners, how we are positioned in the organisational structures of higher education and the broader implications for how we know and care about our world.

**Keywords:** Love, care, solidarity, organizational structures of higher education

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## Introduction

Love, care and solidarity are at the heart of humanity, constituting essential elements in human development, our learning relationships and educational encounters. I am starkly aware of this as my family has cared for and begin to mourn my beloved mother during recent weeks. I learnt much of what I know about education from my parents, from their open and non-judgemental acceptance of people, their caring support and encouragement of their children, their emphasis on learning and being in the world with others. As their children, we are the first in our family to attend higher education, to blend the values of our rural farming background with a world of formal learning unfamiliar to us. Their encouragement and support for learning, their care and curiosity about the world has sustained me. This journey has made me aware of the deeply political nature of education and its transformative potential. I am very conscious of the disjunctions, exclusions and injustices experienced by many in and through education. As Freire highlights, education has to exist in the context of

a profound love for the world and its people.... Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence (1990: 77-78).

This paper explores the care implications for education and educators as we operate in the changing political, economic and cultural context in Irish education in recent decades. Lynch (2007) and Lynch et al. (2015) argue that a longstanding culture of carelessness in education, grounded in Cartesian rationalism and Western scientific knowledge, has been exacerbated by the rise of neoliberalism in an increasingly volatile context of global capitalism. Neoliberal discourses encourage us to presume we are independent agents, choosing to learn as an individual autonomous achievement in a marketplace of educational choice. This assumes that education's primary function in our lives is productive in the narrow sense of employment and career opportunities. This ignores the broader function of education as critical consciousness, building our capacities to be productive in all aspects of life – socially, emotionally, aesthetically, politically, culturally and economically productive. The discourses of Western rationality and science dislocate education and learning from the interdependent and relational context of our lives, disregarding its vitality for learning. This ignores the political and ideological context of education, failing to problematize the interdependent, emotional and relational qualities that are inherent in learning.

This paper draws on an affective equality framework to explore the implications for educators in terms of the politics of the caring roles we occupy, our relationships with colleagues and students, how we are positioned in the organisational structures of higher education and broader implications for how we know and care in our world.

### **1.1 Affective Equality – inequalities of love, care and solidarity in education**

The affective equality framework (Lynch et al. 2009) emphasises love, care and solidarity as a core part of social justice. Cantillon and Lynch (2017:2) describe how the bonds of love, care and solidarity are relational, interdependent, inalienable, non-commodified and unbounded temporally. These qualities are also essential to the learning relationships and engagements that form the heart of education. Whilst the structures, processes and outputs of education may be increasingly subject to measures of performativity and commodification, learning as a process remains inherently a relational, emotional and interdependent process. The quality of the learning experience is contingent on how educators and learners engage and relate with each other throughout the processes of learning.

The formal structures of education often do not acknowledge or encourage these elements of love, care and solidarity that are fundamental to education. This ignores or disguises the operation of ideology and power in education systems, smoothing over the politicalised construction of curriculum and knowledge to create a sense of unchanging and unchangeable block of knowledge. This disembodies learners and educators from their relational and emotional beings. We live and experience education through our own biographies. Inequalities of affective equality, often relating to inequalities of gender, class, sexuality, ability, and ethnicity, echo throughout our education as in our lives.

Lynch et al. (2007) describe how care commanders, usually those supported in their love labour, are exempt from care responsibilities to concentrate on activities in the public sphere (usually economic, political or cultural roles). Meanwhile, care's footsoldiers, love labourers, are the primary carers supporting others. The former are very visible in the public sphere, acknowledged for their productive role, especially in a culture of hegemonic masculinity. Those engaged in love and care work are often invisible, hidden in the backdrop of the private sphere, but vital in supporting those operating in the public world. This is evident within education where the care work at the heart of education is often not recognised and unpaid or low paid, whilst knowledge work, especially in higher education, is highly paid, rewarded and respected. These patterns are often gendered in terms of the hegemonic masculine assumptions of a moral imperative for females to care and nurture in our societies (O'Brien

2008), whilst men are care commanders, driven by autonomy, rationality and independence (Lynch et al. 2007). Those doing care work in our society are ascribed a lower status, lower pay with more precarious working conditions. This is increasingly evident in a casualised labour market where conditions of employment for educators and graduates are becoming increasingly precarious (Standing 2011, O'Keefe and Courtois 2015).

These injustices and stratifications are also echoed in other aspects of education systems, such as the selection and ordering of students and their learning in hierarchical terms (in terms of enrolment in different types of schools or college, differences in subject choices and levels of education). Previous research demonstrates that such hierarchies are ordered by and through power structures, reflecting societal injustices in terms of differences of class, ethnicity and abilities (Bartolomé 2008, Murray et al. 2014, Fleming et al. 2017). Injustices are apparent in the content and knowledge produced in education, where the rational critical knowledge of Western academic and scientific knowledge is privileged globally, leaving little room for emotion or other forms of knowledge, especially when enacted in the hierarchal structures and patriarchal culture of Western higher education (Lynch et al. 2015). Other ways of knowing the world and other knowledges are denigrated, marginalised and ignored on a global scale (Freire 1990, de Sousa Santos, 2014).

### **Love, Care and Solidarity in Education**

Whilst love, care and solidarity can be conceptualised as discrete entities, they intertwine in people's lives in complex and imperceptible ways. This is evident in education where intimate sphere of love, secondary care work and the solidarity of the collective all overlap in complex ways. The intersection of love, care and solidarity in education is worth further consideration as it is here where the political nature of education is evident (Freire 1990, hooks 2000).

We often place education in the realm of carework; emotional work conducted within professional employment conditions and secondary care relations. However, it is embedded in complex relations of love, care and solidarity. Cantillon and Lynch "distinguishes love relations from other care relations [as] their principal goal is the enhancement of the love relationship itself". (2017:175). They describe love as a discrete inalienable set of non-commodifiable and non-substitutable social practices that operate within wider affective system of caring, loving and solidarity (2017:170). They describe its vitality for humanity as we "are carers and care recipients both in the public and the private domain of life, and that, as humans [we] live in profound states of dependency and interdependency". (Cantillon and Lynch 2016: 2)

Love is emotional work which cannot be assigned to another in a commercial or voluntary capacity without undermining the premise of mutuality that is at its heart (Cantillon and Lynch 2017). This is important to consider for the caring work of education, as relationships in education cannot be solely defined within a singular category. Every learner and educator bring their own biographies of love, care and solidarity to bear on the learning relationship. Experiential learning means we bring a complex history and presence of love, care and solidarity into education. Love, care and solidarity take material form in educational engagements, visible through the bounds of affection, commitment, attentiveness and people's investment of time, energy and resources in each other and their relationships. At heart love, care and solidarity in education are nurturing; a deep respect for one another, based in trust, mutuality, and attentiveness. As Cantillon and Lynch highlight

love labor ... produces the nurturing capital that enables people to flourish; it produces externalities, enabling and providing resources to people, and giving meaning, warmth, and joy to life outside of the love relationship itself. (2017: 178).

Caring is a human capability, meeting fundamental human needs (Nussbaum 1995; hooks 2000). The care work involved in education operates in the secondary space of affective relations or care (like nursing or social care work) governed by professional structures and practices. Drawing from Cantillon and Lynch's work on love labor, care work also

involves presence, time and physical and mental work as well as emotional work. It is in everyday undertakings that it is created, doing practical physical tasks [*of supporting learning*]... the listening [*work that is at heart of pedagogy*]... and engaging [*in learning relations and activities*] ... At the mental level, it involves holding the persons and their interests in mind, keeping them "present" in mental planning, and anticipating and prioritizing their needs and interests. Emotionally, it involves listening, affirming, supporting and challenging, as well as identifying with someone and supporting her/him/hir emotionally (2016: 9). [*author's additions to original text in italics*]

The importance of social power in affective relations is evident in terms of solidarity. Solidarity is the collective nature of conscientisation and transformation where, as bell hooks describes "love has the power to transform us, giving us the strength to oppose domination" (2000: 104). It is evident in the solidarity and collective action that is at the heart of conscientisation in education (Freire 1990). Solidarity is a form of collective caring and politicized loving of others

that is vital in the global struggle for social justice and emancipation (de Sousa Santos 2014).

Love, care and solidarity are deeply political and unequally distributed (along gender, ethnic, global and class divides) in education as in all areas of society (Lynch et al. 2009, Bartolomé 2008, Cantillon and Lynch 2016). The implications of care and love's neglect are felt most deeply by those disadvantaged and marginalised in our societies. These implications can be exacerbated and reproduced within educational systems as Bourdieu and Reay's work on cultural capital highlight (Bourdieu 1986, Reay 2004) or education can be a force for politicization, conscientisation and transformation (hooks 2000; Freire 1990). This is explored further below in terms of the implications of neoliberalism for education.

### **The rise of global neo-liberalism and new managerialism in Irish Education**

Neoliberalism inherently re-echoes and deepens the human capital and rational choice discourses which have dominated Irish political and educational strategy since the 1960s (Clancy 1998, Grummell and Lynch 2016). These discourses idealise qualities of autonomy, choice and self-interest as the dominant focus of social relations amongst individuals. They have undermined the discourses of public service and public good that are at the heart of democratic and human development values of education.

Lynch et al. (2012, 2015) describe how neoliberal policies and new managerialist practices have radically altered the nature of education in Irish society. Increasingly education, especially higher education, is framed as a tradable service on a private marketplace rather than public service. Its global scope is increasingly evident in international agreements such as GATS, Lisbon, Bologna Agreements (Lynch et al. 2015, Murray 2014). These discourses shift education from public service ethos to knowledge economy market logic. In the Irish context, this change occurred in a context of recession and austerity from 2008 onwards where public services were seen as a luxury, not a public right. Public welfare reforms were organised and justified within a managerial focus on outputs, with education and other public services assessed according to measurable qualities of efficiency, audit cultures and performativity. Individuals were dislocated from their interdependent webs to be positioned as autonomous, employable, competitive and self-interested entities. Work and public culture was indifferent to the bonds of solidarity, care and love labour.

Lynch et al. (2015) and Grummell et al. (2009) contend that new managerialism has contextualised education in a 'care-less' frame. The individual educator is framed as an autonomous entity which assumes a single-minded and unbounded dedication to the organisation in a 24-7 work hours culture. Learners are located as 'consumer citizens' driven

by market-led competitive self-interest. The unbounded temporal and relational nature of this creates a skewed recognition of emotions – to serve the emotional needs of educational organisation (in terms of human resources, student supports and learning outcomes). Educators and learners are positioned as rational economic actors working in the context of a neoliberal market economy (Lynch et al. 2007).

Public services including education are subjected to the logic and regulations of the private marketplace, commodified through intellectual property rights, rankings and learning outputs (Lynch 2014). The state shifts from delivering education services to responding to market-led pressures. The workforce of educators and the future labour force of learners are increasingly working in casualised, precarious and de-regulated conditions (O’Keefe and Courtois 2015, Grummell and Lynch 2016). The subject matter or knowledge valued in education is dominated by rational and cognitive logics that can be expressed and recorded in written and oral forms. Emotional and relational knowledge and learning processes remains invisible and difficult to quantify in these measurable outputs.

There is little recognition of the personal emotions and care aspects of educators or learners as they engage in education (in terms of work-life balance, professional values or the status of ‘heart and head’ work in education). This work still occurs, but is often stratified in terms of gender, class ethnicity and ability.

Moreover, and for a variety of different and unrelated reasons, more and more women undertake both paid work and unpaid caring. When they are middle class and career-trained, women must follow the male trajectory of long hours and assume a career-led life (Hochschild 1997). They must maintain the image, and often the forced practice, of a relatively care-free life, even though they remain care’s foot soldiers while men are care commanders. (Cantillon and Lynch, 2016: 15)

### **Counter-hegemonic discourses - a caring profession**

While we can identify this drive towards carelessness in education, its pathway is not entirely clear. Counter-hegemonic discourses have always been evident in education. A caring ethos often based in theology was promoted and protected by religious bodies, teacher unions and different education groups in Ireland over the years. Social conditions in Irish society and education have ensured that this caring ethos has been maintained in the practices of schools and educators. The classical and humanist orientation of Irish education, embedded in what O’Sullivan (2006) terms a ‘theocratic’ approach, is still evident. However, the liberal ‘emphasis on education as a means of personal development was challenged if not replaced by a new

emphasis on shaping the educational system to meet the...demands of the labour market' (Clancy, cited in Farrell, 1998: x).

Religious bodies still control the management of many primary and second level schools nationally, promoting a person-centred moral vision of education as a public good. The local context of Irish schools ensures that schools are deeply integrated and responsive to local communities. Their small size and local context ensures a relationality and closeness that larger institutions cannot facilitate. Staff and students are members of local communities and relate to each in many different spheres of life. Teachers in Ireland are highly unionised and their unions hold a powerful position in the negotiation of educational policies and conditions, especially in terms of resistance to performance measurement (especially league tables, curriculum reforms and rankings) (Lynch et al 2012). Different educational groups, especially at community levels, have been central in resisting, protesting and protecting those most vulnerable to the effects of public cutbacks (Murray et al, 2014). These processes are nuanced and experienced differently across education sectors, revealing the complexity of how new managerialism and neoliberalism are experienced in specific contexts (Grummell and Lynch 2016)

### **Conclusion: people at the heart of education**

Writing this article was very different to what I expected and to the original address at the ICEP conference in December 2016. It has shifted from a discussion of the role of care in the work of educators to a personal manifesto and mantra about the role of love, care and solidarity in education. This is framed within the context of my life over the past months where the illness and death of my mother has transformed life for me and my family. The rawness of grief means that the importance of love, care and solidarity are starkly evident to me. What remains constant for me throughout this time is the centrality of love, care and solidarity in life and learning.

*Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Breda Grummell.*

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