What's Love got to do with it?

Laura Steckley

Last month, I had the fantastic experience of hearing Jenny Molloy give an inspiring presentation.o Jenny is the author of *Hackney Child* (see details below) and she gave an astounding talk in June at the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care's annual conference. Unfortunately I missed it and I was so pleased to be able to hear her and meet her after all. What an amazing person.

Jenny spent a portion of her childhood in residential care, and she has some really important things to say about her experiences there. I was most profoundly affected by her discussion of love. Not only did Jenny say she felt loved by social workers and residential child care practitioners, but some of them also told her that they loved her. Jenny clearly conveyed the importance of love as part of her care experience.

Love – the word and concept – has become the subject of explicit concern in our sector. For some time it has been a taboo, but this is now being challenged. CYC-Net has had a very lively and long-running discussion thread about whether or not we should tell kids that we love them (see the archives). In a recent inquiry into the decision making about whether to take a child into care, our own Scottish Government acknowledged, as part of a consultation exercise, the importance of loving relationships (and the related complexities) for children in care as part of a consultation event (Scottish Parliament, 2013, p3). Here on CYC Online, several contributors have offered thoughts on the subject. Smith (2004) discusses "the metaphysical connection with another human being" of individual love and Skott-Myhre (2005) invokes a political interpretation that is part of a wider effort to "restructure the material conditions within which we all live…[guided by] principles of loving desire for absolute human connection." Krueger (2004) voices greater uncertainty about the place and meaning of love in a practice context. He offers thoughts about the difference between loving a person for what they do and loving them for who they are, and about allowing young people to witness the place in ourselves that is capable of loving and being loved. I like the candour of this piece and Mark's willingness to ex-

plore and expose his uncertainty to us. Integrating her own related practice experience, Ranahan (2007a, 2007b)begins to chart what love might mean in CYC practice:

> Loving is reaching a new plateau in practice and is about how I bring my Self into the relationships I am involved in. If I choose to express the loving part of my Self, I need to reach beyond my fears and definitions of love. I need to be committed to the present, and show unconditional acceptance and empathy when the child's Self comes forward. Love is a process, a way of being, an expression that moves and shifts as I develop my style of practice. It challenges me and demands I consistently show a clean slate presence, without conditions, without grudges, and with an attempt to understand each individual's subjective experience as they tell me their story. The expression of loving from the Self removes the barriers that may be present in respect to allotted time for service, or the actions of the child.

All of these authors acknowledge the inherent risks and complexities related to the place of love in child and youth care practice, and none of them offer simple or absolute answers.

In one of the most recent accounts of what CYC is, Garfat and Fulcher specifically identify love as one of the 25 characteristics of contemporary CYC practice (2011). This is a more definite statement and I like its courage. While I too am uncertain about many of love's related complexities, what I do know for definite is that our kids need to feel loved and that in some cases the only place they may experience this love is in our care.

Garfat and Fulcher's article is included as part of our introduction to Child and Youth Care during the first module (class) of the MSc in Advanced Residential Child Care. This year I asked the students (all of whom are working full time in residential child care or a closely related area) which of the characteristics most resonated with their own experiences of practice and which, for whatever reasons, did not. The first student to speak identified the characteristic of love, and we went on to have a rich debate for most of the rest of the session. In almost all of my teaching on residential child care, this issue of love comes up at one point or another with every cohort (postgraduate and undergraduate). It clearly is seen to be important, and there are strong and varying views on the subject. Many of the

reasons offered as to why we should or should not consider what we do as love, and whether or not we should use this word 'love', mirror much what is written in the articles I've cited. One that comes up every time and which I'm still trying to get my head around goes something like this: because of the temporary nature of our relationships with the children and young people in our care, love is not appropriate and may even create false or damaging expectations.

Ranahan (2007a, 2007b) offers some insights about love in our time-limited relationships, and in my own efforts to make sense of students' arguments, I can see the prudence in reserving the commitment of love for our more enduring relationships – at least in our personal lives. Yet I cannot see that it would be better for a child not to feel loved at all than to feel loved only for limited amount of time. Moreover, the notion that relationships categorically should not endure past the placement lacks validity and cannot stand up to our developing understanding of attachment and resilience. Progress is being made on this front as well, though I think we have a long way to go. I can't help but wonder if sometimes we get frightened that we simply are not up to the significant demands that love might require. Even just the experience of a loving relationship that young people carry away may still be active in what Gharabaghi and Stuart (2013) would refer to as the mental or virtual dimension of their subsequent life-spaces. In other words, the relationship might indeed endure even if there is no continuing interaction between the practitioner and the young person who felt loved.

I suspect that the perception that love is risky has been complicated and exaggerated by our efforts to professionalise the sector. Don't get me wrong. I do believe that good practice requires high standards of training, education, ongoing development, some sort of coherent professional identity, and even a level of regulation. How we define what it means to be a child and youth care professional, and how this translates into training, education, ongoing development and professional identity, needs to be informed by those who understand what good practice actually means.

This, then, brings me back to Jenny Molloy. All of our struggles to gain some

clarity about this and many other vitally important areas of practice need to be informed by the views and experiences of the recipients of our care, particularly care-leavers who have had a chance to make some sense of their experiences of the care system. These views will, of course, also be varied, but when I sat listening to Jenny last month I felt sure I was listening to someone who deeply understood what good child and youth care practice actually means.

Here are the details of Jenny's book: **Hackney Child: The true story of a neglected but resourceful child surviving poverty and the care system** by Hope Daniels (Jenny's pen name) and Morag Livingstone. Published in 2011by Livingstone's Photos.

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