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What is This?
Do mothers want professional carers to love their babies?

Jools Page
University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract
This article reports an aspect of a life historical study which investigated the part that ‘love’ played in mothers’ decision-making about returning to work and placing their babies in day care. The article begins with a brief discussion of the context, including 21st-century policies in England to encourage mothers to return to the workforce (DfES, 2004; HMT, 2009). This is followed by a critical overview of relevant literature exploring three key themes: an historical view of women in the workforce, Attachment Theory, and theorizing ‘love’ and ‘care’. The life-historical methodology is discussed and justified and seven key themes are briefly identified and explained. The article then focuses specifically on the theme of ‘love’ using life-history interview data and key literature to discuss mothers’ views on the importance of ‘love’, the saliency of ‘love’ in choosing childcare, and the notion of ‘professional love’.

Keywords
attachment, babies, childcare, love, mothers, relationship, work

Introduction
This article focuses on the importance mothers put on ‘love’ when placing their babies into day care. Drawing on specific aspects of a study which investigated mothers’ decision-making about returning to paid employment when their babies were under 12 months of age (Page, 2010), this article explores the question, ‘Do mothers want professional carers to “love” their babies?’

The policy context of the study
Government rhetoric encourages women back into the workforce (DfES, 2004; HMT, 2009; Leach, 2009; Vincent and Ball, 2001, 2006; Vincent et al., 2010), but as Pugh (2010) suggests parents may feel torn by the mixed messages they receive from government. On the one hand, there is a suggestion that good parenting (Langston, 2006) is the most important role, while on the other hand parents are told that the only way out of poverty is through employment (DfES, 2004; HMT, 2009; Teather, 2010) which leads to the need for childcare. Some mothers feel concern and
guilt when trying to balance work and family life (Guendouzi, 2006; Leach, 1997; Shearn and Todd, 2000; Shuster, 1993; Sikes, 1997; Vincent et al., 2008). Pope (2010) claims that the recent economic downturn has added further financial pressure upon mothers to return to work earlier than they may have originally intended. This raises many issues with regard to the dilemmas women experience in making decisions about returning to work while their children are still very young. This article examines the ways in which notions of ‘love’ and ‘care’ are embedded within the decision-making process. It first presents a brief historical overview of women in the workforce. Second, the article explores key issues in the literature on ‘attachment theory’. Finally, a critical reflection on the theorization of the terms ‘love’ and ‘care’ in the context of early childhood education is provided.

**An historical overview of women in the workforce**

Women who decide to return to work following the birth of a child are faced with many decisions about their choice of childcare. A British study of 250 married couples in the mid-1980s (Brannen and Moss, 1991) and two US studies (Hock et al., 1984; Volding and Belsky, 2003) investigated maternal employment decisions, concluding that decisions are rarely confined to one reason. Later studies in the UK (Duncan, 2003, 2005; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Edwards et al., 2002; Quinn, 2004; Vincent and Ball, 2006; Vincent et al., 2008) suggest that social class influences the way in which women combine work and childrearing. According to Barnes et al. (2006) parents’ explanation of their choices of childcare is largely based on hindsight. Several studies have suggested that mothers’ ‘ideal’ childcare choices may change in line with what actually happens (Layard and Dunn, 2009; Leach, 2009; Leach et al., 2006; Pungello and Kurtz-Costes, 1999). Uttal (1996) investigated the views of 31 employed mothers and identified three main interpretations of childcare:

- **Custodial care** – the definition of nine mothers based on their view that although they went to work, they saw themselves as their child’s main carer and it was they who set the boundaries of how their child spent their time with the carer.
- **Surrogate care** – the definition of three mothers who saw themselves as the primary carer but recognized the emotional and physical input from the carer, similar to their role as mother.
- **Co-ordinated care** – the definition of the remaining 19 women who did not consider their role as mother replaced but instead recognized the role of the carer as important and complementary to their mother role.

Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) revealed the most common reasons given for choosing care arrangements were that the ‘care provider was warm and loving, personable and experienced, reliable and trustworthy, and known previously’ (p. 69). Similarly, Atkinson (1994), Cryer and Burchinal (1997) and Leach et al. (2006) found that the mothers in their studies considered interactions between carer and the child to be of most importance alongside that of their own beliefs and values. Such findings are echoed in studies by Kensinger Rose and Elicker (2008), Vincent and Ball (2001, 2006) and Vincent et al. (2010).

**Attachment Theory**

theory and argued that when high quality childcare is provided, a child is unlikely to suffer. Criticism of Bowlby’s theories stemmed from the circumstances of his subjects. Moss and Melhuish (1991) argued that ‘When other methods (of study) are used, it turns out that the differences (in relation to separation anxiety) are not as marked’ (p. 58, italics added). Henessey et al. (1992) also argued that secure attachments are not always necessary for healthy development and may depend on cultural child rearing practices. However, Lamb (2007) contends that ‘a child with secure attachment is able to rely on the parent or parents as a source of comfort and safety in times of upset and stress’ (p. 2) which accords with the views of Belsky (2007). Other evidence (Gopnik et al., 1999; Degotardi and Pearson, 2010; Trevarthen, 2002) suggests that infants are able to form multiple attachments from birth. Brooks-Gunn et al. (2010) claim there is little evidence to suggest mothers’ returning to work in the first 12 months of their baby’s life are damaging children’s ability to form secure attachments. Gerhardt (2004) claims that what babies really need is love, arguing that affection helps babies’ brain development.

Elfer et al. (2003) and Goldschmied and Jackson (2004) have argued the case in early childhood settings for the knowledgeable, understanding consistent and constant adult – the ‘key person’ (KP) – who is not intended to ‘replace’ the parent or mother but instead to understand and sustain the child’s learning and value and respect the relationships that the child makes, with adults and with children (Selleck and Griffin, 1996). Langston and Abbott (2005) argue that caring for and educating young children is a complex task; one, I suggest, should include the need to love young children.

Loving young children in professional contexts is not often discussed; instead terms such as which do not necessarily mean the same thing as love are used, such as respect, dignity, containment and attachment or ‘emotional well-being’ (Laevers, 1997). Love is not easily defined or discussed, but not talking about love implies that the topic is somehow taboo. It is therefore important to theorize the terms ‘love’ and ‘care’.

Theorizing ‘care’ and ‘love’ in early childhood education

Deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships between adults and children are vital for children’s holistic development (David et al., 2003). In working with and for children and families I have never sought to hide my ‘love’ of children or to undermine the love between the parent and the child. When parents, usually mothers, have been able to recognize that my love for their children (what I am calling, in this context, ‘professional love’) does not seek to compete with the love between them and their children but instead seeks to complement it, is the point, where mothers have been able to give me ‘permission’ to love their children. As a mother I always wanted the practitioners to love my children and was not jealous or upset when they did; I did not believe my children could give ‘my’ love away to someone else. This is a view shared by Goldschmied and Jackson (2004) who suggest that ‘sharing love and affection with another caregiver is not like sharing a cake where the more people there are, the less there is for each. Love is learned by loving . . . children’s love for their mothers is no way diminished by this’ (p. 44).

Goldstein (1998) claims the unsophisticated view that caring in education is simply gentle smiles and warm hugs ‘obscures the complexity and the intellectual challenge of work with young children’ and is ‘detrimental to the field’ (p. 244, italics added). Noddings (1984, 2003) suggests the ethics of caring relates to an approach whereby the experience of having been cared for leaves a memory which can later be used by that person in order to give care themselves; a theme concurrent with the views of Belsky (2007) and Lamb (2007) on secure attachments. The role of the individual can, Noddings suggests, be linked to ‘motivational displacement’ and can happen on differing levels; ‘caring involves stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference and into the other’s’ (Noddings, 2003: 24).
It is in relation to both *reciprocity* and *motivational displacement* that I locate my own theoretical framework. Noddings (2003) defines motivational displacement as being concerned with another and becoming as absorbed in what is important to them as much as one might be with one’s own project a moment earlier. Noddings’s theory resonates entirely with my thinking and fits with Gerhardt’s contention that ‘Babies need a caregiver who identifies with them so strongly that the baby’s needs feels like hers [sic]’ (p. 23). Faver (2004) argues something similar for those working in social work and calls it ‘relational spirituality’. Noddings (2001) claims ‘most human beings . . . want care from people who love them, not from paid strangers’ (p. 32). Drawing on the *intellectual* aspect of caring (Gilligan, 1993; Goldstein, 1998; Noddings, 1984, 2003) I suggest that for early childhood professionals it is not only the ethics of care and education but in fact the ethics of ‘*love*’, care and education that are bound up in this complex theory. Thus, when mothers recognize reciprocity as an intellectual experience they are able to identify the carer–child *attachment* as a relationship that is fundamentally in tune with their own wants and needs for their child, rather than a feeling that is threatening to their mother–child relationship. Piper and Smith (2003) discuss the ‘moral panic’ around child protection faced by professionals who work with children in relation to holding, touching, and kissing. Powell (2010) concurs with this view claiming that practitioners are fearful and anxious of child protection reprisals. Yet Gerhardt (2004) argues that touch is crucial to learning claiming that ‘being lovingly held is the greatest spur to development…’(p.40).

Goldstein (1994) calls it ‘*love*’ (p. 1) when she draws on the similarities of the role of teachers and mothers and the feminist perspective of connection which Elfer (2006, 2010) argues is essential for a child to feel emotionally secure. Hult (1979) rejects close personal relationships and what he terms ‘*pedagogical caring*’ (the teacher as one who not only educates but cares about those s/he educates) claiming it is inappropriate and impractical for teachers, but Noddings (2003) argues that it is exactly what teachers should do. Dalli (2006) proposes a ‘re-visioned notion of love and care as a pedagogical tool is one in which the unacknowledged part of teachers lives are recognized’ (p. 8). I suggest that the intellectual experience of *pedagogical loving* requires motivational displacement and involves developing deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships and I suggest the term ‘*professional love*’ needs to be explored and discussed openly and honestly within the early years qualifications framework and in the context of other early years policies, alongside and with as much importance as ‘leadership and management’, ‘cognitive development’ and ‘phonics’ (Page, 2008: 187). Noddings’s argues that caring is not about feelings but, as Goldstein puts it, it is ‘not something you are, but rather something you engage in, something you do’ (1998: 246). There is a need for discussion between parents, carers and policy-makers about the need for babies’ and young children’s learning to include the need for love: practitioners who know, understand and are secure in their reciprocal relationships with young children for whom they are responsible, do so with the rights of the child wholly embedded at the centre of every aspect of their practice. Lynch (2007) maintains that ‘*love labouring*’ (p. 559) is heavy work that is not just about physical labour but also:

At 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 or him emotionally at times of distress. (p. 560)

Notions of love within the context of early childhood care and education are poorly understood, yet it is imperative that we understand how mothers internalize such issues and the influence this has on the process of decision-making to return to work.

The next section reports the methodology and findings from a recent life historical study of the perceptions of six mothers who had one or more children and who made decisions about returning to work when their babies were under 12 months of age.
Life historical methodology

A life historical approach to the study provided the means to ‘get inside’ what the participant mothers thought about the adults who cared for their children. Open-ended interviews with the six mothers covered a range of experiences, such as: age differential, profession, choice of childcare, geographical location and ethnicity (see Table 1).

Five of the six interviews were conducted over a period of two to three hours and one participant was interviewed twice over a longer period of time and all participants completed timelines (Sikes, 2006) which detailed further biographical information. Locating the stories of the six participants in the historical and political context of what Pugh (2010) alluded to as a contradictory agenda was an important facet of this study.

Analysis and key themes

I developed a four-staged meaning-making process to interpret the data from the life historical interviews:

Stage 1: Transcription was the first stage to produce the ‘original transcript’.
Stage 2: To remove the hesitative utterances and my responses so as to bring coherence to the transcripts and as Riessman (1993) suggests to ‘refashion’ them – the result being the ‘refashioned transcript’.
Stage 3: Involved editing the refashioned transcripts into a 3000 word interpreted narrative, which became the ‘interpreted narrative’.
Stage 4: Discussed in more detail below, involved applying a thematic approach to bring further interpretive meaning to the original transcripts (produced in stage 1).
At stage 4, I returned to the original transcripts and identified emerging themes individual to each participant that were also evident and embedded across all of the six life stories. I coded the original transcripts and tabulated each of the themes into a separate document. I was then able to examine the process I had constructed in depth and ensure I had applied the same technique and rationale to my interpretation of each of the interviews. This process revealed seven main themes: Childhood, Decision-making about returning to work, Influences and dilemmas, Expressions of emotion, Indicators for change, Identity and ‘Love’. In addition, I grouped other individualized themes specific to each person’s own life story: Domestic violence, Death/illness, Religion, Kissing under the heading of Idiosyncratic. In the next section I will briefly discuss each of the seven themes. Participants are identified with pseudonyms.

**Childhood**

The nature of the life historical approach meant that the mothers revealed aspects of their own childhoods. Martha commented on how she drew strength from her secure attachment experiences with members of her family which concur with Rutter’s (1972) notion of strong multiple attachments and Noddings (1994, 2003) claim that recalling a memory of being cared for can be used later.

**Decision-making about returning to work**

Five of the six participants returned to work and made childcare choices and one participant, Esmé decided to be a stay-at-home mother. All of the mothers (not their partners) had made the final childcare choice and decisions about when to return to work which bears out the findings of Brannen and Moss (1991). The decision-making was not straightforward for any of the women in my study and they were influenced by a range of other factors which are discussed below.

**Influences and dilemmas**

The mothers faced dilemmas and at times were influenced by certain factors which contributed to their decision-making. For example, Amy’s father had been a tenant farmer and she described how her family were bound by the constraints of what she referred to as almost being ‘owned by the landed gentry’. She wanted her son to be well-cared for preferably in a family context, hence Amy was faced with the dilemma of becoming an employer whilst being heavily influenced by her values and belief that she did not want her son’s nanny to feel like a servant or as Gregson and Lowe (1994) contend to ‘service the middle classes’.

**Expressions of emotion**

The ways in which the women told me their life stories were as much a part of the research as the content itself (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Labaree, 2006; Muchmore, 2001; Plummer, 2001). I included my interpretation of their expressions of emotion in the study in line with Atkinson’s (1998) perspective of the sacred nature of the personality of the life told. All of the women used expressions of emotion which I interpreted as their way of conveying a particular emphasis about an aspect of their life story or decision-making. My interpretation was to draw out their emotionalism which Gubrium and Holstein (1997) suggest is to literally *feel* the experience of the participants.
Indicators for change

The mothers all had to make compromises between their ideal choice of childcare and their eventual choices which support the findings of Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) and Vincent and Ball (2006). However, if there was a point whereby they believed that their child’s well-being and development were being compromised it signalled an indicator to the mothers that something needed to change. For example, Ayesha’s frustration about the childdminder’s lack of toys resulted in Ayesha providing a range of natural materials to provide what she considered to be an enhancement to her son’s educational experience. This fits with the findings of Guendouzi (2006) and Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (2000) who view the way in which some mothers try to balance work and parenting.

Identity

After becoming a mother Martha could no longer accept her professional role working in a social services day nursery particularly where child protection issues pervaded her day-to-day work. Additionally, Amy described how she had worked hard to ‘escape’ her working-class roots to become a middle-class woman which did not fit with her view of being a mother, this is in accordance with the literature (Duncan, 2003, 2005; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Edwards et al., 2002; Quinn, 2004; Vincent and Ball, 2006; Vincent et al., 2008) which suggests that social class determines the way in which women combine work and identity.

‘Love’

The relationship between the childcarer and the child was highlighted as being of vital importance, for all the women in this study in relation to choosing childcare; a finding that is well supported by previous research (Atkinson, 1994; Barnes et al., 2006; Cryer and Burchinal, 1997; Leach et al., 2006; Vincent and Ball, 2001, 2006; Vincent et al., 2008). Nevertheless, their concept of love remained emotional and even nebulous something which Gregson and Lowe (1994) argue are the ‘contradictions and tensions’ involved in ‘paying for love’ (p. 191); a notion which Lynch (2007) claims is non-commodifiable.

Having briefly discussed the seven key themes drawing on examples of the mothers’ perspectives in relation to the relevant literature, in the next section I move on to discuss the mothers’ views on ‘love’ in professional day care.

Mothers’ views on ‘love’ in professional day care

In this section, I draw extensively on the ‘voices’ of the mothers to illustrate their views about their notions of love.

Esmé: I think . . . I would want to get to know the person first so I might, within my close friends . . . I would be quite happy, um, to like ummm leave Polly with certain people but I know that person and to me that feels very different than just dropping her off somewhere.

Esmé saw leaving her children in the care of close friends as something quite different from leaving them with strangers. Perhaps Esmé would agree with Noddings’s (2001) and Vincent and Ball’s (2006) notions of wanting her children to have love, not paid ‘care’ provided by ‘strangers’.
Ayesha: I don’t make any qualms about saying ‘intimate’, I wanted that intimate family setup . . . I have no qualms, because I actually do want somebody to love my child . . . I know that every parent feels that their child is lovable um and the best [thing] since sliced bread, but I wanted someone to love him . . . I see her [Lillian, childminder] as part of my extended family. But I wanted it to be a professional relationship. Not just having a member of my real family. For example, I didn’t want my mum to look after Freddie because um, I wanted it to be professional. So it is a professional relationship. I know that I am her employer but I do see her as part of my family.

It’s that extended professional relationship and it’s very much a sort of an intimate close family, and that’s what I wanted, and I’m happy about it. I think it’s coming from a large West Indian family when knowing that everybody’s your Auntie even though they’re no blood relation and knowing that you have that level of respect . . . from having that close family relationship within a community. We come from a Christian ethos as well, and knowing that there are . . . different levels of love. So you’ve got a ‘Agapé’ love meaning friendship love, and there’s the ‘Eros’ love, the sexual love and knowing . . . when you say the word intimacy, people are a bit confused . . . I think if you have my background, in a large West Indian family, . . . the different levels of love it is very clear that if I have an intimate relationship with you built on friendship built on that level of um . . . respect, and it’s not tainted . . . with anything else. So . . . you show love . . . I’ve used the term intimacy, and I think I quite like that phrase, I understand about the term ‘professional love’ but I think for me, by putting the word ‘professional’ there um, it brings a divide. For me, when I feel the love that Lillian [childminder] has for Freddie I know it is professional but I don’t want her to feel, you love him professionally because you’re actually bringing a wedge. I actually want her to f-e-e-l that level of intimacy and that’s I think for me that family orientated role, I can’t really express it really but I think mmmmmm I can’t really sum it up. I think the terms that I would use would be that family, intimacy ummmmmmm I think I just have that expectation. When you . . . use the word professional, you kind of feel that people need to be trained to do it and I feel that mmmmm it should become part and parcel of knowing the child and it’s something that you do naturally. I think when you put the term professionally, it’s something like you need to be trained, and there are different skills in that professional love. I understand that certain people might find it difficult . . .

Ayesha’s Christian view about the different types of love in relation to her faith accords with the family like structures of loving relationships which can be found in Christian schools (Baker and Freeman, 2005) which suggests a sense of shared understanding of definitions of love. Ayesha was secure about her role as Freddie’s mother and was confident about her understanding of the role of the childminder in a close loving and intimate relationship with her son in line with Elfer et al.’s (2003) contention of the role of the key person. Ayesha’s notion of Lillian as being part of her extended family fits with the literature by Gregson and Lowe (1994) in which they report how their respondents employed a nanny and viewed her [sic] as being ‘part of the family’ (p. 183). They argue that it is the very nature of ‘social relations of nanny employment [which] are constructed by and shaped through wage and false kinship relations’ (pp. 183–184) which they suggest are exploitative. However, the mothers in the study reported in this article mostly viewed close relationships with their children’s carers as positive.

Martha: Yes I did, [want someone to love Holly] because when I couldn’t be there I wanted to think that somebody was looking out for her, that she wasn’t just a number and she wasn’t just left to you know wander aimlessly around. That somebody there was actually . . . thinking I actually care about that child. To me that was really important, because I’d have hated to have . . . a sea of faces and that she just didn’t mean anything to anyone. I don’t see that there is any difference [between love and care] I think that . . . mmmmm depending on how secure you are as a person actually would impact on how you can actually love other people. I think I am a very secure person . . . Like with Holly . . . I hope that . . . people love her. It
doesn’t mean that it would take any of her love away from me. As a person, I just hope that you know she is able to sort of make them attachments to other people – I think that’s really important, really important.

The security of her own attachments outside of the family shaped Martha’s longing for her baby to be loved by and to make connections with others. For example, she knew that strong attachments can help to build resilience and security which can be recalled during times of insecurity (Elfer, 2006, 2010; Elfer et al., 2003; Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004; Lamb, 2007; Noddings, 2003).

Amy: I just do not think um, that kind of institutionalized um setting . . . is the right place for very small babies. I think they need um . . . lots of close interaction, not necessarily one to one but lots of close interaction, and I think they need to be cuddled, have lots of attention and to have freedom . . . lots of love . . . It made me think you know what an important job [childcare] . . . is and what a huge responsibility you have! Um and how a lot of it is instinctive and is about common sense, and is about your capacity to love and show compassion and to care for and about those children and their wellbeing. Um, and then they can have a . . . good quality experience of having a really nice time with somebody who cares about them. Um, and so, yes it was kind of, I felt really um, uneasy about the decisions I make about Sebastian, and what to do with him, I wanted somebody to – not love him in the same ways that I do but I wanted . . . someone . . . to care for him in such a way you know, that, all the time . . . that she was responsible for my son’s well-being, that he is the most important thing in her world, at that moment. For me I think that is one aspect of love it’s kind of um, it’s . . . about responsibility, and it’s about caring, and it’s about nurturing and I suppose those aspects can be debated with love but I don’t – you know [have] a sense of love in that um . . . in that overwhelmingly emotional take the whole body and soul over necessarily, no! no! That’s not what I would be expecting …

Amy considered nurseries to be institutionalized settings that had very little to offer children in the way of individualized care and attention which fits with the findings reported by Vincent and Ball (2006) and Vincent et al. (2008). However, Amy’s view accords with Gerhardt’s (2004) notion that love matters in relation to a child’s healthy development. Amy knew it was good for Sebastian to form strong loving attachments with the nanny and persevered in her efforts to overcome the threat she sometimes felt it had to her own relationship with him. Amy thought of her own way of loving her son as taking over the whole of her emotions but she did not expect or want the nanny to love Sebastian in the same way.

Lucy: Obviously I think it is impossible not to love Daisy, because she is such an endearing little child, but . . . you have to get to know her to love her. You know, deeply. Love is about not just being on the surface it’s about knowing a child. So for me it’s about . . . meeting Daisy’s needs, it’s all of them really not just the love thing. It’s about the care side as well . . . love is there, I know that sounds daft to say that wouldn’t be my sole priority because to me it’s about the care and I know love comes with care but it’s fitting the two . . . it’s just that the caring and understanding and the needs of Daisy are far more important.

Lucy at times had a strained relationship with Daisy’s childminder which fits with the views of the participants in the Vincent and Ball (2006) study. Lucy was unable to really distinguish what she saw as the difference between love and care although she thought care was more important. Lynch (2007) claims that love labour is non-commodifable and Hult (1979) argues that ‘pedagogical caring’, is not a practical approach for teachers to develop on the grounds of professionalism and time constraints. This seemed to be a quality that Lucy valued in those who looked after her daughter.
Becky: I know that they’re not allowed to, but where I’m friends with them [nursery practitioners] I know that they do give a cuddle here and there, and Jordan will say ‘Oh my favourite at Nursery is Leah’ (one of the girls who works there) and so on, Um, so yeah he has got that emotional attachment to them, especially as he’s been going since he was so young. For the last two and a half years he’s been with a lot of those girls there. He’s been going up each class but the difference is that he’s in a group of say thirteen children some days. Other days, sort of six children or whatever and the children and the staff, there, the nursery practitioners, have an equal relationship with each of those children. I’m sure they’ve got their favourites, but I’m sure . . . they treat each child the same. So it’s not that Jordan and Leah are special that I could be replaced you know, it’s not like a Jordan and mummy relationship. I think with a childminder that can develop. I don’t know, this is just my opinion. I’m not saying that I’ve read anything that says that happens; it’s just what I think. A childminder who’s relaxed in their own home with a baby, that the baby might be with them right up until a certain age that’s going to develop a bond like a mummy, or like a second mummy as such . . . I think at a nursery, it’s more of a friend thing. Jordan’s got bonds with my friends who are like Aunties and they love him and he loves them you know . . . But I think for those women that are working at the nursery that’s their work, they’re going in to work with lots of children, and they’ve all got relationships with them children which is different to a relationship with a mother and a child. Do you see what I mean? That’s what I think that a childminder could have that relationship like a child and a mummy and I didn’t want to be replaced.

Becky had struggled with the idea of her son being cared for individually by one person and moved Jordan from the childminder to a nursery when he was one. Becky’s experience with the childminder seemed to be in line with Uttal’s (1996) interpretation of surrogate care, which Becky did not want for Jordan. Her preference echoed Uttal’s (1996) notion of co-ordinated care and Nelson’s (1990) that working mothers may reject the notion of close child-carer relationships. Becky felt more secure in the knowledge that the practitioners in the nursery were less likely to form a mother–child relationship with Jordan that would threaten her own relationship with him. She considered the nursery to be a work environment where the practitioners – some of whom she had made friends with – would need to treat the children equally and not to get too close to some or have what she called ‘favourites’. Becky worried that she would somehow lose her role as the most significant adult in Jordan’s life (a view that concurs with Vincent and Ball’s 2006 study but contrasts with the views of Gillespie Edwards, 2002, and Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004). Rutter’s (1972) notion of strong multiple attachments seemed to resonate with Becky’s complex view.

Although it seemed difficult for the women to articulate their perspectives on love in relation to their babies’ relationships with people outside of their immediate family, the mothers all had strong views about how they wanted those around them to be with their babies. It could be argued that if as Lynch (2007) suggests ‘love labour’ is non-commodifiable, the mothers in this study were somehow obscuring the boundaries in their search for their ideal choice of childcare. However, I suggest this study demonstrates that many of the mothers’ thoughts and expressed principles concur – to different degrees – with Noddings’s (1984) theory of the ethics of care and education and with my interpretation of professional love. The mothers in the study reported in this article who were secure in their own attachments with their babies were better equipped to recognize the reciprocal love offered by the practitioners to their children and in turn were able to grant the professionals who cared for their children; permission to love them, but not too much.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed the views of six mothers on whether they wanted professional carers to love their babies and the importance of love when choosing childcare. All six mothers held strong views about how they wanted the professional adults to be with their children even if they did not
call it love. This is in line with the literature which suggests that decision-making about childcare for very young children is challenging and anxiety laden but that the relationship between the caregiver and the child is of critical importance (Barnes et al., 2006; Cryer and Burchinal, 1997; Kensinger Rose and Elicker, 2008; Layard and Dunn, 2009; Leach, 2009; Leach et al., 2006; Pungello and Kurtz-Costes, 1999, 2000; Vincent and Ball, 2001, 2006; Vincent et al., 2008; Volling and Belsky, 1993).

The mothers’ views also accord with Noddings’s (1984, 2003) theory of the intellectual aspect of caring and are in tune with my interpretation of the term professional love. The mothers in this study appeared to want the adults who cared for their children to love them, though they did not always call it love. My interpretation of the mothers’ views is that they valued the importance of having a shared understanding with the children’s carers about what they thought love looked like and though there were times when the mothers talked about trivializing or denying the existence of such love, they seemed to place more emphasis on the importance of loving relationships.

Having explored the concept of ‘love’ in the context of six mothers’ choices, beliefs and dilemmas around choosing childcare, I contend that for these mothers, the concept of ‘love’ was a crucial phenomenon within the decision-making process about whether to leave their child(ren) and resume paid employment. This is new territory for research in the field of early childhood and further research is needed. First, these results offer suggestions to policy-makers and practitioners regarding the need for practitioners to consider the need for loving relationships with children in childcare settings, that is, ‘professional love’.

Second, the term ‘love’ is not easily defined and can be difficult to discuss within the context of early childhood care and education. Yet notions of love, and loving children, were essential factors for six mothers in this study. The concept of ‘professional love’, provides a foundation to support dialogue between carers and parents; by talking about the importance of loving babies and young children we can better understand the dilemmas faced by parents, especially mothers, when they decide to place their babies in day care to return to work.

References


