

Mind the (Love) Gap: Love and Negativity in Educational Thought

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It will probably surprise no one that many of the theorists writing on the role of love in education today locate the power of love in its “transgressive” or “disruptive” character — that is, in the negative role it may play against or within the bureaucratic, inhuman structures of schools.¹ The rhetorical force generated by arguments based in the negative character of love in education may be related to our inability to positively define what the personal relationships between teachers and students ought to be or to allow, but it would be a mistake to think that theorists of love in education are limited to this sense of indefiniteness. As this essay seeks to set out, love in education is mostly theorized under two categories of negativity that provide a normative conclusion against the limits placed upon both teachers’ and students’ humanity by current policies and practices. In the following pages, I examine these categories, which I refer to as “absence” and “transgressivity,” by focusing on how negativity plays a role in each through their opposition to current norms in schools. Using this analysis as a starting point, I explore the idea that “love in education” might be understood as more than a tool with which we might condemn or attack schools from without. Instead, I question whether the lack or emptiness that theorists find when they look for love in education might be a different sort of negative altogether, namely, the original lack that marks human desire. This constitutive negativity, I argue, stands as distinct from theories based in love’s capacity to transgress or disrupt educational norms, because it serves as the very foundation of educational relationships. By applying Jacques Lacan’s construction of desire, as a slippage between the subject’s primal needs and ability to express them in language, to Jane Roland Martin’s concept of the “love gap in education,” I hope to show that the gap she recognizes as an absence of love in educational practices and theories is one that provides the basis for any educational relationship, and one that may provide us with an explanation of other theorists’ concentration on negativity in speaking of love in education.²

LOVE AS A NEGATIVE FORCE

On the most basic level, many theorists of love in education define love negatively, as they see love as something absent from educational contexts. As such, loving education is described as something that we must “allow,” “invite,” “reassert and re-insert,” and “reuni[te]” from outside educational practice and discourse.³ Calling upon the absence of love in schools follows two normative positions. The first is that of recalling love as it once existed in ancient practices and theories of education. Finding that the humanist tradition includes a discourse of the education of the desires, theorists such as Jim Garrison, Kal Alston, and Kerry Burch have sought to reclaim the love between teachers and students as the misplaced heritage of the West.⁴ The other approach to finding love absent in education involves

employing ideas of love that are found outside schooling but that are otherwise true to our ideals of human existence. If these forms of love are true to our humanity, these authors ask, why should they not be included in schools? While excluding love from parenting, friendship, or relationships of care would be seen as anathema to these very forms of relating, these theorists propose that to speak of love in schools has become taboo. The aim of these authors is to show that schooling is enough like these other relationships to allow for love to be a consideration in its practice, or to show that the loving relationships we prize are taught relationships and therefore must be practiced in schools in order to be realized in the adult world. These two normative standpoints often overlap in the literature, as reviving ancient traditions for contemporary practices is an interpretive move that necessarily also involves introducing something of the “new” in order to make our heritage recognizable to us. Both stances, however, typically involve a radical questioning of our system of schooling that allows something as essential as love to be excluded.

While these discourses of absent love are sometimes confused with particular loves, as in educating our students “to desire the genuinely good,” the place of love in the classroom is more often valued for its negative potential.⁵ Expressed in terms that characterize love at its most “transgressive,” love is described as “critical and disruptive,” as a “critical lens” turned toward the “instrumental logic” of contemporary education, as “emotions to disrupt the imposed norms and practices,” as “the disruptions that need to occur,” as “disruptive energies,” and as “dangerously def[iant].” The “norms and practices” that the negative power of love is understood to disrupt are those of an “instrumental, patriarchal logic of a bureaucratic, linear means-ends rationality, one that demands teachers unquestionably accept preassigned ends” and methods such as “teacher-proof” curricula, “bureaucratic testing,” and “technocratic” controls.⁶

While I agree with some of the negative interpretations that have been articulated in theories of love in education, it may be that each points to a more basic negative relationship, constitutive of teaching and learning, that has somehow been overlooked or forgotten. In order to understand what role, if any, love plays in learning, it may be helpful to think about why our interpretations of it are so manifestly negative. I introduce this question by focusing on Jane Roland Martin’s “The Love Gap in the Educational Text,” an exemplary piece of writing on love in education.

Martin argues that the practices of teaching and learning in schools suffer from a gap in their understanding of the role of love in educational relations. Noting the many types of love that various cultures and thinkers have theorized to describe forms of human interaction, she seeks “the kind of love whose object is the growth and development of children.”⁷ Using Martin’s own language of “the love gap” and the love she seeks in order to fill this gap in conversation with a Lacanian construction of desire, I would like to question whether the gap she has found is somehow constitutive of the very love she seeks. If this is the case, and a certain negativity lies at the heart of educational forms of love, then the positive value of so

much negative talk about love in education is placed in an entirely new light. Specifically, the love that we seek for educational relationships might not lie outside of schooling as many theorists have speculated, nor might love have the transgressive character that theorists believe it to have or that they suppose the public believes it to have; rather, it might be an integral part of any educational relation.

FALL INTO THE GAP

What Martin has referred to as “the love gap” might find itself filled with the amount of attention given lately to the question of love — or, more broadly, the question of personal relation — in education. This is always the difficulty with a discourse centered on the invisibility or absence of any abstract object, because the more it is theorized, the more it becomes visible. Yet love seems to be a special case of speaking of the absent: when we speak of love — or, more specifically, of desire, passion, eros — we already understand these words to connote a certain fleeting nature or fickleness, given that the fulfillment of love is often its disappearance, and, as we are told, absence makes the heart grow fonder. This seems to beg the question of whether a gap such as Martin’s can ever be “filled,” or if, instead, we will discover it empty again and again and once again attempt to fill it. If love lacks the constancy of other phenomena that might be analyzed in terms of their absence, the problem in tracking it seems to be doubled.

I would not place quite so much attention on “the gap” except that it seems to suit precisely the sort of love that Martin finds missing. How do we *find* something missing? To know that the concept of love appropriate to teaching and learning is missing is to have a sense of what it is.⁸ But how can we know what the something is if it has not made its appearance yet — if it has not arrived to fill the gap? Unless, of course, the type of love that belongs in that space is, very much like desire itself, defined by its lack. That is, if the emptiness that we find in the place of love takes the form of desire, and, therefore, the form of love appropriate to teaching and learning is desire defined by lack. I’m not speaking of a privative emptiness at all, but of a productive emptiness — an emptiness that may be constitutive of the being of teaching and learning. This is not Martin’s solution; instead, she seeks to fill this gap with a form of love that she understands as motherly nurturance, and she spends much of her essay discussing how motherly nurturance has been excluded from our idea of schooling.

While the analysis of the love gap I offer construes it as a productive form of emptiness that is constitutive of the learning relationship, Martin’s proposal for filling this gap in education with nurturance plays a significant role, as nurturance provides not only sustenance, but also the site where desire opens in the individual. While the sort of nurturing love that parents provide their children in the intimate setting of the home is precisely the kind of love whose object is the growth and development of children, any discussion of nurturance, and especially of growth and development, must necessarily bring us beyond the scope of the home and the “feminine” forms of love that Martin finds practiced there, insofar as education cannot help being an education for the world. In the next section, I hope to show that

it is precisely the nurturing relationship between parent and child that establishes the productive gap of desire in the individual, which, in turn, makes necessary an educational relationship based on this gap.

DEFINED BY MY GAP

While the understanding of desire as a lack, a hunger, an emptiness is nothing new in the history of thinking on human experience or education, Jacques Lacan's construction of desire as both basic to our identity and established in relation to others provides us with a sort of contemporary myth of origin that allows us to place desire in dialogue with our educative relationships. The myth goes something like this: as human beings, we are born premature to the world but, nonetheless, late to its creation. We depend upon the relation of love to provide for the satisfaction of our primal needs. Insofar as we are premature, parental nurturance provides for the fulfillment of these needs; our demand for love from our provider — at first voiced in the form of a cry and later in increasing levels of sophistication — supersedes and all but replaces the original need that drives the relationship.⁹ As we are late to the world, our demand to have our needs met is not simply understood through our presence: our expression must take the *form* of a demand that we must *make* on the other. In order to make this demand, we must engage in language that extends beyond us, in systems of meaning that are present before we arrive upon the scene. According to Lacan, the self is through and through defined by the original lack experienced as primal need and superseded by the demand for loving relationship, but, as he argues, the constitutive nothingness at the origin of the self is not somehow “solved” or “filled” by its externalization in language. Since the language in which we express ourselves is prior to any individual, the demands we make on others are always inadequate to the need that drives such expression. The alienation of our primal needs when expressed in language is Lacan's understanding of desire: the imperfect realization of self in language — or, we might say, the gap between the two — allows for the human relation of the self to the world as one of growth and self-overcoming.¹⁰ That the self is to be superseded according to the norms it internalizes in acquiring the language of its given situation is the most basic assumption in education. The paradox that goes along with this supersession is that the more the subject grows through its interaction with the world in order to better articulate its demand on the other, the more the world speaks through the subject and serves to define its needs and purposes.

Returning to Martin's theory regarding the nurturing love of parents and the love gap in schools, we might re-imagine the relationship between these elements as follows: the nurturing love of parents is as essential to the cultivation of desire in children — to their humanity — as it is necessary for their physiological existence in the world. The nurturing relationship must point beyond itself, however, if it is to realize its purpose as a kind of love whose object is the growth and development of children, as the language in which the nurturing relationship takes place is prior to either parent or child.¹¹ For a relationship to be educative, the milieu into which the student is initiated must extend beyond both teacher and student: if the teacher were to be the author, the relationship would be not educative but merely technical. If

formal education is to play the double role of helping us to improve our mastery of the language in which we express our demand *and* to grow into ourselves as subjects constituted by the alienation of desire in language, then the gap that Martin finds in the schools might be appropriate to formal learning in the same sense that parental nurturance is the love by which that gap is established.

RECONCEIVING THE GAP

If Lacan's construction of desire can be meaningfully applied to education as the kind of love whose object is the growth and development of children, then the negativity implicit in this theorization of love maintains the positive force that others have attributed to it. Understanding education in terms of the productive emptiness of desire requires a relocation of love in the educational setting as well as a reassignment of its purposes for theorists and practitioners alike.

If the love gap diagnosed by Martin is constitutive of the subject in such a way that the educational relationship is inconceivable without it, then to speak of love as absent from the scene of education — whether lost in history or outside the walls of the school — no longer makes sense. While certain manifestations of love, such as the parental nurturance that Martin calls for, may not be present in the same form that we find them realized in the private sphere, we might be able to question why parental nurturance as such belongs in schools, or if it could possibly be a part of formal education. If, following Lacan, we locate the origin of the problem of desire in the voicing of the demand to which our caregivers respond, it does not seem to follow that we would wish to envision schools as an extension of the home and the values expressed there. While a further exploration of this particular form of love in schools is beyond the scope of this essay, I suggest that the presence of love in educational relationships can be given voice in the form of desire, which, distinct from nurturance in its internalization on the part of the subject, allows us to see an alternative to Martin's understanding of the educational love gap.

Another level at which we may rethink the negativity of love in schools is in the transgressive or disruptive force that love is thought to have in these contexts. Following from the constitutive presence of desire in educational relationships — specifically from the idea that education might serve the double purpose of developing the languages in which we voice our demand, while at the same time helping us to manage the desires that serve to shape us — we might say that desire is one of the forces that aids in the continuity of educational relationships, even those we would categorize as “technocratic” or “instrumentalist.” The question is not whether or not human desire is employed in educational contexts, but instead to what purposes desire is employed, how it is shaped, and how its shaping affects the lives of individuals. When we speak of instrumentalist forms of education, the negative judgment we place upon it is related to the lack of openness or human freedom inherent in the ends that are provided; we fear that students who are subject to such forms of education might not experience the fullness of their own humanity.

The freedom that many theorists of love in education associate with the practice of love has to do with the incompleteness or unfinished character of humanism and

the higher purposes of the human spirit. These purposes are where we want the gaze of our students directed. These are the directions in which we want their love disciplined. The danger that we see for our children is that the love inherent in any learner's relationship to the world might be used toward the wrong things: the blindness of racism or the mundane evil of acquisitiveness, the misery of power, or the grip of fear that sets desire against itself. Considering these concerns, the significance of understanding the role of love in education, so that we may approach teaching with a proper sense of what we are doing, becomes present to us. A number of educational theorists have already made advances in this understanding by recognizing forms of negativity associated with love in educational relationships. I hope to have added something to this understanding by suggesting that love, in the form of desire, might play a constitutive role in educational relationships. By employing Lacan's construction of desire in discussing the negativity of love in schools, I hope to have shown that desire, as the gap or slippage between our primal needs and the language in which we make demands of others, contains within itself the seed of negativity that has been employed in discussing its power in educational contexts.

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1. I am including here all of the various synonyms and analogues of love (relation, care, eros, desire, and passion) that have been written of in Kerry Burch, *Eros as the Educative Principle of Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); Kerry Burch, "Eros as the Educative Principle of Democracy," *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 18 (1999): 123–142; Kerry Burch, "The Love Problem in Liberal Pedagogy," *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 21 (2002): 497–503; Daniel Cho, "Lessons of Love: Psychoanalysis and Teacher-Student Love," *Educational Theory* 55, no. 1 (2005): 79–96; Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Daniel Liston and Jim Garrison, eds., *Teaching, Learning, and Loving: Reclaiming Passion in Educational Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Alexander Sidorkin, *Learning Relations* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); and Sharon Todd, "A Fine Risk to Run?" *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 22 (2003): 31–44.

2. Jane Roland Martin, "The Love Gap in the Educational Text," in *Teaching, Learning, and Loving*, ed. Liston and Garrison, 21–34.

3. Daniel Liston and Jim Garrison, "Introduction," in *Teaching, Learning, and Loving*, ed. Liston and Garrison, 1–20.

4. Kal Alston, "Teaching, Philosophy and *Eros*: Love as a Relation to Truth," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 3 (1991): 385–395; Burch "Eros as the Educative Principle of Democracy"; and Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*.

5. Liston and Garrison, "Introduction," 11.

6. *Ibid.*, 2, 3, 15, 35.

7. Martin, "The Love Gap in the Educational Text," 21.

8. This problem sounds very much like the paradox explored in the *Meno* (80d–e). Here it is stated that in order to seek something, we must already know that which we seek, and that therefore knowledge must already be had in some way in order for it to be gained. Martin certainly knows what sort of love she wishes to introduce into the classroom, but provides no reason why motherly nurturance has the structure of a gap, or privation, within education. If male-dominated schools have systematically excluded love from schools, why have they left a gap?

9. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 1977), 286.

10. *Ibid.*

11. On this level, Martin's complaint that schools place priority on a male-oriented public perspective rather than focusing on private, feminine virtues seems a bit misplaced. While it may be the case that the public sphere is dominated by what Martin calls male values, the position she takes seems to beg the question of the relationship between the world and the school. John Dewey, for instance, argues that formal education comes about when the technique of language and memory allows significant cultural knowledge to grow to a point at which it is no longer coextensive with the everyday life of the culture represented by the activities of the home. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 7–8.