

CONCEPTUALIZING LOVING PEDAGOGY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Nurul Asikin Zahari¹
Azizah Zain^{2*}

¹Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia (E-mail: nurul57914@gmail.com)

² Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia (E-mail: azizah.zain@fpm.upsi.edu.my)

*Corresponding author: azizah.zain@fpm.upsi.edu.my

Article history

Received date : 24-2-2026

Revised date : 25-2-2026

Accepted date : 6-4-2026

Published date : 7-4-2026

To cite this document:

Zahari, N. A., & Zain, A. (2026). Conceptualizing loving pedagogy in early childhood education: A narrative review. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 11 (81), 493 – 498.

Abstract: *The purpose of this narrative review is to extract and synthesize theoretical and empirical literature informing preschool pedagogy to conceptualize what loving pedagogy means in early childhood education. This review aims to unpack the definition, enactment, and contention surrounding loving pedagogy, and highlight major gaps and frictions in the current literature. Children learning and developing in the context of emotional relationships and caring interactions with teachers is one of the hallmarks of early childhood education. Although care, relational pedagogy and emotional responsiveness are well recognized concepts, the notion of loving pedagogy tends to be conceptually diffuse and vocally inconsistent. However, debates about its professional legitimacy, ethical boundaries, and cultural interpretations remain ongoing, leaving educators, researchers, and policymakers uncertain. An extensive search strategy was utilized to identify relevant studies, but this was then conducted as a narrative review. Methods searched in computerised databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, in addition to screening references lists of selected studies. We included and thematically analyzed peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books published in English and between 2000 and 2024. According to the review, loving pedagogy is typically conceptualized in terms of ethics of care, relational pedagogy, and emotionally responsive teaching. There is evidence of loving pedagogical orientations and positive teacher–child relationships contributing to child well-being; nevertheless, emotional labor challenges, conceptual ambiguity, and professional boundary tensions also are highlighted. It seeks to provide an explication of loving pedagogy, and to urge the development of a more robust theoretical basis for it as well as the production of an empirical evidence base for including it within early childhood practice and policy.*

Keywords: Loving Pedagogy, Early Childhood Education, Teacher–Child Relationships, Ethics of Care, Relational Pedagogy

Introduction

In early childhood education, loving pedagogy has received growing attention reflecting the recognition that the nature of learning of young children is integrated within emotional relationships and caring interactions (White & Gradovski, 2018). This is especially important in preschool settings where children's social, emotional, and moral underpinnings are already being actively established and where teaching approaches that foreground love, care and empathy are critical (Ferreira et al., 2021, Wang et al., 2024)). Previous researches indicate the significance of warm teacher child relationships, emotional responsiveness, and nurturing classroom climates for children's well-being and holistic development (Bailey et al., 2022; Nilfyr et al., 2025). Nevertheless, love in pedagogy whereby pedagogy is concerned with the process of instruction and reflection remains conceptually diffuse and inconsistently defined across studies, despite being often implicitly discussed through such associated ideas as ethical care, relational pedagogy, and emotional labour. Although more recent literature has highlighted social-emotional learning and teacher sensitivity, gaps remain in its theorization, operationalization, and justification as a valid stance of pedagogy, and controversy over professional and cultural boundaries (Daaboul, 2024; Zhao & Li, 2021).

In this narrative review we conceptualize loving pedagogy in ECE by combining theoretical ideas and empirical findings related to preschool teaching. Loving pedagogy is meant here as an intentional, ethically grounded effort to fold in love, care, respect, and emotional sensitivity to teaching (Noddings, 2013). This review aims to explicate central concepts of loving pedagogy, explore manifestations of loving pedagogy as enacted by preschool teachers, and highlight tensions and gaps in the literature. The review includes theoretical foundations, practices of teachers, cultural issues, and professional identity implications. This overview is timely and important given the relative dearth of clear conceptual grounding of loving pedagogy in early childhood education, however relational quality and well-being are appearing as priorities in investing in the ECE field for research, policy, and practice.

Method

This narrative review aims to collate and interpret current literature on loving pedagogy within early childhood education, with an emphasis on preschool settings. An explicit yet adaptable search strategy was adopted to strive for transparency whilst staying in line with the interpretive character of narrative reviews. Electronic searches using Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar, as these databases cover a wide range of literature in education, psychology, and social science fields. Furthermore, we performed manual searches of the reference lists of key articles to identify relevant studies that did not appear in the database searches.

The search was conducted with combinations of keywords with Boolean operators, these were loving pedagogy, pedagogy of love, care in teaching, teacher-child relationships, relational pedagogy, ethics of care and early childhood education or preschool. Database-specific adaptations of search terms were made, considering indexing conventions. The filters placed were to keep only ones published in English since the year 2000 through 2024: peer-reviewed individual journal articles, and/or scholarly books, to mitigate dated theoretical and empirical advances in the field.

Eligible studies were those that (i) somehow were related to love, care, or relational practices in the field of education; (ii) early childhood or preschool education, or generated theories that pertain to early childhood or preschool education; and (iii) contributed either conceptual,

empirical or reflective works of pedagogy. Studies that were not related to education, research solely focused on parental care without pedagogical relevance, and other publications that lacked sufficient relevance to loving or relational aspects of teaching were excluded.

The literature identified was evaluated thematically, focusing on common ways in which concepts, definitions and issues were reflected. This methodology facilitated critical synthesis, gap identification, and integration of diverse views but without overly prescriptive methodological limitations unsuitable for a narrative review.

Result and Discussion

Synthesis Analysis

Conceptual Definitions of Loving Pedagogy

While in the literature loving pedagogy is not articulated as a singular or cohesive construct represented by an abstract (it cannot), it has developed as a constellation of interrelated concepts rooted in care, relationality, and ethical accountability. Care Ethics Theories: The majority of loving pedagogy theorization describes a care ethics, that teachers and children practice through attentiveness, responsiveness and relational commitment (Noddings, 2013). While some approaches speak of love as the basis for pedagogical practice (McCormack et al., 2022). Others articulate love as a relational pedagogy to describe mutual respect, trust, emotional attunement and connection as the foundation of teaching and learning (Cliffe, 2024; Cliffe & Farenga, 2019; Vialle, 2023) Delineation in these voices is found in the naming of love; harmony exists in the insignificance of love, positionally shoring up its role as integral, rather than incidental, to the pedagogical enterprise. We can find different positions among some authors who argue that avoiding the term on the one hand could diminish its pedagogical implications (Ruiter, 2021), so that the “love” can be “implicit, embedded within professional practices of care in working with children, no less for one another” and others. However, this absence of conceptual clarity signals an enduring gap in the ability to theoretically coherently develop and empirically operationalize the construct.

Pedagogical Practices and Teacher–Child Relationships

Empirically, loving pedagogical orientations are related to the warm responsive, emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions, classroom climates, and sensitive guidance (Zhao et al., 2023) Preschool teachers who practice loving pedagogical practices tend to be sensitive to children's emotional security, voice, and individuality, and meet children's developmental and relational needs in teaching (Siraj et al., 2015). At the same time, such practices is enacted differently, often influenced by certain cultural norms, institutional expectation and teachers' professional identity. Research discourages portraying love in pedagogy as a panacea, citing tensions between proximity and distance. Such debates emphasise the urgent necessity to delineate and clarify how love pedagogy as an ethical posture could be applied appropriately and sustainably in institutional contexts.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Loving Pedagogy

Across the literature, there is a great deal of consensus on the positive impacts of a loving pedagogy with respect to improved child well-being, greater commitment to learning, and more supportive classrooms. Children's social competence and positive attitudes toward learning have been associated with teachers who are caring and emotionally available. Nonetheless, challenges are also evident. Critics caution that love alone, without the structural

support, may put an exceptional emotional burden on teachers, especially in low-resource contexts. In addition, the uncertainties associated with professionalism and accountability are problematic in terms of how loving pedagogy is assessed or sanctioned in policy spaces. These discrepancies speak to a larger question that hasn't been answered: what does it mean to be emotionally authentic while also a part of a larger institution?

Implications and Research Gaps

In sum, the literature indicates an increased attention to loving pedagogy but enshrined in enduring conceptual and methodological voids. However, there is little empirical research that examines by name or measure loving pedagogy, and even less in diverse cultural contexts. Implications for future research should target the development of a more direct conceptual framework, investigate teachers; experiential realities when teaching with love and finally investigate how teachers may be prepared to love through teacher education and policy. Given the growing global attention to concepts of well-being and quality of relationships in the early years, recognizing loving pedagogy as a valid and moral aspect of early childhood education is vital for practice and policy.

Limitations

However, several limitations of this narrative review are acknowledged that should contribute to a more balanced interpretation of the findings. The first is a general limitation of narrative reviews that applies to this study. The review is not as exhaustive nor fully reproducible as a systematic review as it did not follow a comprehensive and transparent search strategy based on formal protocol (albeit, the search strategy was structured and transparent and covered several other databases and reference list screening). Thus, relevant studies, especially those originating from non-indexed journals or in a language other than English, may not have been retrieved. This may have led to a limited view of world views around loving pedagogy in ECE.

Secondly, there are significant limitations in the available evidence base. Accordingly, only a handful of empirical studies sought many particular outcomes guided specifically by the construct of loving pedagogy, with the majority of literature being either theoretical, conceptual, or reflective in nature. When empirical work is present, it tends to be in the form of small-scale qualitative designs or choose related (though not synonymous) constructs (e.g., care, emotional labor, relational pedagogy), making direct comparison and synthesis difficult. All that may well be comparable while being intellectually rewarding to some extent, it makes it unimaginable to draw conclusions about the results, the effectiveness or the causes of the success or the failures.

Third, struggled to synthesize due to lack of consensus defining loving pedagogy. Due to the heterogeneity of wording and cultural context, data could not be synthesised between studies. Although thematic synthesis allowed to identify similarities but also contradictions, interpretive bias cannot be ruled out entirely. The authors own positionality and scholarly perspectives may also have influenced decisions on identifying, prioritizing, and interpreting themes. Lastly, despite its own merits to highlight transparency whilst documenting the selection of relevant documents, the PRISMA-based flow diagram is less useful within the context of a narrative review than for systematic reviews. In order to overcome these limitations, future studies may focus on establishing more explicit conceptual frameworks, collecting empirical evidence across cultures and utilizing a mixed or systematic–narrative hybrid methodology. Doing so would scaffold the evidence base and deepen the theoretical and applied knowledge base of loving pedagogy in early childhood education.

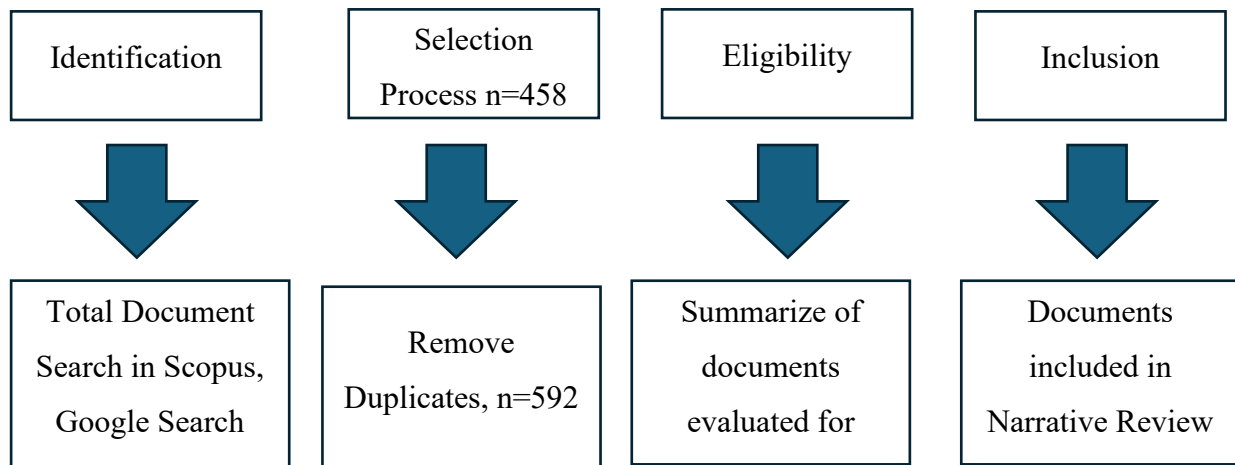


Figure 1. PRISMA-based Flow Diagram of Document Selection Process for Narrative Review

Conclusion

The goals of this narrative review were to conduct an integrative synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature relevant to preschool contexts in order to conceptualize what loving pedagogy might look like in early childhood education. The review shows that loving pedagogy is generally accepted as a key component of high-quality early childhood education, but is conceptually fragmented and inconsistently positioned. Somewhere in the literature, love is usually framed as care ethics, relational pedagogy, and emotion responsive teaching, containing consensus for the values of warm teacher-child relationships, emotional attunement, and children individuality respect. Simultaneously, this synthesis reveals tensions surrounding professional distance, emotional work, and cultural meanings of love in teaching that remain largely unresolved, thus responding back to the conceptual and practical chasms outlined at the beginning of the article. Most significantly, the conclusions are that the findings show loving pedagogy to be implicitly linked with positive child well-being and engagement, but its claim to legitimacy within policy and professional discourse is lacking as the empirical operationalization of it has remained poor. Developing upon these insights, we encourage researchers to offer clearer and more nuanced definitions, culturally responsive definitions, and empirical studies that investigate loving pedagogy in practice. Research on longitudinal and mixed-methods capturing teachers lived experiences, institutional constraints, and child outcomes would be particularly useful. In order to move loving pedagogy from an idea to a practice that is positioned in early childhood education as both credible and necessary, we suggest that teacher education and policy frameworks are critically strengthened to ethically enable loving pedagogical practice.

Acknowledgements

Contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed here to acknowledge their efforts and support, and consent must be taken from these people for their name to appear (technical assistants, writing assistants or head of department who provided only general support). Financial support should be disclosed and acknowledged.

References

- Bailey, C. S., Ondrusek, A. R., Curby, T. W., & Denham, S. A. (2022). Teachers' consistency of emotional support moderates the association between young children's regulation capacities and their preschool adjustment. *Psychology in the Schools, 59*(6), 1051–1074.
- Cliffe, J. (2024). (Re)imagining the social pedagogy within early childhood education and care: A (re)exploration of the power and importance of relationships and connections. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy, 13*(1), 1–14.
- Daaboul, D. D. (2024). Love pedagogy: Teachers reflect on love as an educational approach. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 30*(10).
- de Ruiter, J. A., Poorthuis, A. M., & Koomen, H. M. (2021). Teachers' emotional labor in response to daily events with individual students: The role of teacher–student relationship quality. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 107*, 103467.
- Ferreira, M., Reis-Jorge, J., & Batalha, S. (2021). Social and emotional learning in preschool education: A qualitative study with preschool teachers. *International Journal of Emotional Education, 13*(1), 51–66.
- Holmes, W., & Tuomi, I. (2022). State of the art and practice in AI in education. *European Journal of Education, 57*(4), 542–570. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12533>
- Nilfyr, K., & Ewe, L. P. (2025). Thriving children's emotional self-regulation in preschool: A systematic review discussed from an interactionist perspective. *Education Sciences, 15*(2), 137.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Siraj, I., Kingston, D., & Melhuish, E. C. (2015). *Assessing quality in early childhood education and care: Sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being (SSTEWS) scale for 2–5-year-olds provision*. Trentham Books.
- Wang, Y., Derakhshan, A., & Pan, Z. (2022). Positioning an agenda on a loving pedagogy in second language acquisition: Conceptualization, practice, and research. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 894190.
- Wang, Y., Pan, B., Yu, Z., & Song, Z. (2024). The relationship between preschool teacher trait mindfulness and teacher–child relationship quality: The chain mediating role of emotional intelligence and empathy. *Current Psychology, 43*(3), 2667–2678.
- Zhao, J., Zhang, L., & Yao, X. (2023). Developing and validating a scale for university teacher's caring behavior in online teaching. *Education Sciences, 13*(3), 300.
- Zhao, S., & Li, M. (2021). Reflection on loving pedagogy and students' engagement in EFL/ESL classrooms. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 757697.