Creating Early Childhood Settings as Beloved Communities in the Covid Era: Closeness Without Touch?

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Abstract

Early childhood settings that center closeness and community are severely challenged by our current reality. How can we teach children to be lovingly connected ---- especially through their bodies --- while also keeping children *away* from one another and naming physical closeness and touch as dangerous? Loving touch was already contentious before the pandemic: concerns about inappropriate touch made educators, administrators and families nervous and vigilant. A growing focus on neo-liberal agendas which privilege academic achievement over relationship building also make it difficult to make love and touch central organizing principles. The Covid pandemic has altered and deepened worries about physical proximity and touch, and has conflated concerns for safety from disease with previous concerns about how touch fits into a classroom. Explanations offered to students about how to maintain social distancing, while necessary, may increase student isolation and justify less embodied, more sterile ways of teaching and learning. Maintaining a commitment to creating a beloved community in which the values of inclusion , justice and anti-bias teaching is difficult when students are or have been instructed on-line and opportunities for connection and community building are sharply diminished. This article explores what educators can do to creatively create and maintain practices that promote embodied learning while also helping students and teachers to be safe. The current moment can either be the "nail in the coffin" for embodied teaching and learning or it can provide critical opportunities to deepen our understanding and commitment to the importance of touch for students and their teachers.

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Contrast this:

> Children are engaged in a game of Hug Tag on the playground. They cling together in hug groups of three or four, while a child with a red cloth ("the Huggit") waits for them to take a breath as a group and hum. When *any one* of them runs out of air, they disband and the Huggit tags a "loose" child who becomes the new Huggit. The other children run around and reconvene in small hug groups so that they are "safe" from the Huggit --- until they run again..

WITH THIS:

> Children are in a classroom together, but they have been separated on carpet squares that are placed 6 feet apart. They are instructed not to move their square, nor to touch anyone else in the classroom. Any infractions result in their removal from the activity and their return to their more isolated cubby or activities where touch is discouraged**.**

The first scenario is a cooperative game which promotes children touching one another and seeing one another as sources of connection and safety. In the game, the way to be "safe" from the Huggit is to be close to other children: "Quick, Nasha, come here!" "Alvaro, take my hand!" In the second scenario, the enforcement of a Covid safety requirement situates safety as coming from being distant and separate from others. Being close to other children is labeled as "dangerous" and to be avoided. Too much closeness is disallowed and punished.

Creating a society that embodies inclusion and social justice requires the development of children as whole human beings who can create a beloved community; part of that loving community involves fostering settings in which children can connect, support, touch and be touched within a loving context (Shapiro, 2002a, 2002b). In previous writing (Sapon-Shevin, 2019) about early childhood education and creating the "beloved community," I asked what early childhood education might look like if building a loving community were the primary focus of our work. I explored how we could operationalize a commitment to social justice in early childhood settings so that students were supported in learning how to interact with one another in loving and caring ways. And, more specifically, I asked what if we recognized and honored that children live *through* their bodies, and believed children's bodies were not merely sites to be regulated, but provided opportunities to envision and enact caring, connection and loving touch?

Since I first posed these questions many things have changed. Most prominently, the pandemic brought on by Covid-19 has radically changed how young children are educated, and, how children (and adults) are allowed to touch one another. Creating early childhood settings that center closeness and community is severely challenged by our current reality. How can we teach children to be lovingly connected--especially through their bodies--while also keeping children *away* from one another and naming physical closeness and touch as dangerous? Swadener, Peters, Bentley, Diaz, & Bloch, M. (2020) describe the challenges of this moment for teachers as well as children as we attempt to enact visions of a future for early childhood that honors "social citizenship"; "during a time of pandemic and social distancing, it is critical to acknowledge the embodied nature of early childhood care and education, and how much of the emotional labor involved depends on being present with children in the classroom or other care setting (Tarrant and Nagasawa, 2020 cited in Swadener et al., 2020, p. 319).

If our vision of socially just early childhood settings values the ways in which children interact with one another, centering their connection, closeness and deep understanding of their differences, and similarities, then our task has become harder, but perhaps even more important. This chapter deepens the exploration of the importance of closeness and loving community in early childhood settings and articulates ways in which we must adhere tightly to our commitment to providing young children with opportunities to love one another in "up close and personal" ways.

Even before the pandemic, aspiring to create early childhood settings that centered on love --and included touch--was fraught with obstacles. I have lamented elsewhere (Sapon-Shevin, 2009) the loss of touch in education and the harmful consequences of

teaching and learning in dis-embodied ways. But now, with the pandemic, some of the restrictions on touch (masking, social distancing and/or temporary moves to virtual-only education) are necessary and life-enhancing. How can we use this present moment to preserve our commitments to touch while still enacting life-saving measures and not allow covid-restrictions to become "normalized" in ways that constitute the "nail in the coffin" of embodied teaching and learning? How can we use this moment to re-think and re-invigorate our commitment to teaching that honors that children (and their teachers) have both minds *and* bodies and that education is best when these are integrated and acknowledged?

Why Touch Matters and Why It Was Challenging Even Before Covid

Even absent the requirements occasioned by the pandemic, discussions of touch have been problematic in education. Because touch and "love" are often connected (and spoken of as a unit), talk about "lovingly touching children" triggers discomfort and distress in many. Some of this stems from peoples' discomfort and fears about *inappropriate* touch and abuse. Another challenge stems from the neo-liberal focus on achieving academic milestones which increasingly relegates social-emotional growth to secondary status, even within early childhood settings.

In an article on "Practitioners' construction of love in early childhood education and care," Cousins (2017) speaks to the importance and challenges of defining "love" in early childhood settings. She says that there is limited (and sometimes contested) discourse about what love is, and "As long as love in ECE remains unspoken, it remains undefined, different in some ways to love in familiar contexts, with some unwelcome connotations, not the same in every situation, natural in some cases more than others, and tough at times" (p. 16).

Campbell-Barr and Varga (2015) ask, "Where has all the love gone?" in developing early childhood professionals; they link the reticence to use the word "love" to the belief that being a "professional" means *not* mothering young children, separating the teacher's role from that of a parent or caregiver. Wariness about the word "love" extends to touching, since many have images of a "loving mother" who holds, kisses, snuggles and hugs her child. Tobin (1997) and Johnson (1997) as well as others have identified the "moral panic" about child abuse and pedophilia that pervades discussions about touch.

Schools are often structured so that bodies are unwelcome, viewed as superfluous at best, and dangerous at worst in the learning process (Piper & Smith, 2003). Even before the pandemic, many schools had eliminated the most embodied parts of the school day, particularly free play, and recess. In my local elementary school, recess was eliminated for the entire year in 4th grade because of the pressure of state-wide assessments. The children were told, "We don't have time to play." Sadly, this ban on "play" has also extended to eliminating other activities during the school day that are seen as unrelated to achievement and high stakes testing success, including music, art, and physical education. Cousins (2017) claims that one of the obstacles to talking about love is the domination of neo-liberal discourses on standards in which professionals are expected to "perform" in particular ways; to be a "professional" is to behave in ways that are predictable and measurable, and which are directly linked to outcomes. The focus on high-stakes academic achievement has trickled down into early childhood settings with a decrease in playtime and an increase in direct instruction and testing/assessments.

And Now Covid. As the pandemic of Covid-19 gripped the world, we were instructed to stay away from other people--at least six feet--not to touch, not to hug, not to be too close. Other peoples' bodies were inscribed as "dangerous" and being too connected puts us at peril. Solidarity was re-framed as caring enough about others not to be near them. In an

article on the challenges of embodied teaching in the time of Covid, Sapon-Shevin and SooHoo (2020) state:

> What we are witnessing is a form of epistemicide, the suppression of a way of knowing. Covid-19, a force of nature, has not only infected our lungs but also the way human beings move and interact across the planet. This moment presents the possible death of ways of knowing, in this case, learning that is kinesthetic and relational. This is as serious as linguicide or the loss of a language. It affects one's world view in many ways (ideology, axiology, ontology, epistemology, subjectivity). What are the implications of no-touch and no bodies for social justice work specifically? What are the consequences of the divestment of physical touch and the body? (p. 677).

This loss of touch as a way of knowing did not begin with the Covid pandemic, but it is worrisome that a trend towards devaluing the role of bodies in education may be cemented by this current crisis. Temporary solutions may become "standard practices," and complicated accommodations to permit closeness and touch may be seen as too cumbersome or costly.

In an article on 'The Trouble with Online Teaching', Cohan (2019) describes the lack of multidimensionality when helping children develop communication skills, character, and leadership. Online teaching fosters limited student engagement, flatline superficial discussion boards, and machine-dependent learning. With the increase in online teaching and the real prospect that our face-to-face classroom interactions may be limited for an extended period, we must explore how to overcome the problems of online teaching in terms of community building, interaction, voices, and representation.

If this moment is challenging and painful for adults, how especially hard is it for children? Children are the *essence* of embodiment. They are *in* their bodies, and they learn through their bodies. But, quite suddenly, many children stopped going to school with peers and having play dates, and for those who DID go to school, their classrooms and interactions were configured very differently. Children were given "private islands" surrounded by plexiglass so that they wouldn't be too close to other children. Teachers constructed elaborate individual stations for children, each child having their own materials, so there didn't have to be any sharing; while learning pods encouraged togetherness, they discouraged touch, hugging. Many congregate activities were eliminated--recess, eating together in the cafeteria, interactive activities in the classroom. School settings—even for young children-- became much more isolating places.

What happens when we try to impose social distancing on young children? How do they understand this concept? Teachers, many of whom were struggling themselves, were tasked with explaining and enforcing these new restrictions and configurations with children. A review of websites related to teaching during the pandemic surfaces many sites addressing how to explain social distancing to children. One website lists seven principles for explaining social distancing to children:

1. Start by explaining what germs are and how we can prevent spreading them.
2. Share a helpful visual with younger children (they suggest having students do a hands-on activity along a rope with knots six feet apart to show kids what this means
3. Use simple, positive language about social distancing (they believe that couching social distancing to keep people healthy and a search for creative ways to interact will make children feel less

scared and helpless and more motivated to maintain a social distance.

4. Explain that social distancing means connecting differently with friends, not losing touch forever (they suggest finding new ways for children to connect with friends)
5. Answer questions honestly and age-appropriately (they warn against avoiding questions or hiding what's going on and encourage "age-appropriate" explanation.
6. Use compassion for others to help older kids socially distance (they recommend appealing to children's altruism about the importance of safeguarding older relatives)
7. Listen and respond to your child's feelings (they urge adults to listen and empathize about children's unhappiness about social distancing and then to suggest ways to alleviate their sadness). **(https://www.waterford.org/resources/talking-about-social-distancing-with-kids/)**

Another website suggests telling young children stories to help them understand social distancing, and shares the work of Kim St. Lawrence who wrote a book about social distancing called "Time to Come in, Bear" which became a 90-second You Tube. It follows a bunny who explains to a bear why they must stay inside (Morin, 2020.) (https://www.munsonhealthcare.org/blog/explaining-social-distancing-to-kids)

Another article suggests that teachers establish a verbal and visual class signal for students to use when others get too close to them. They suggest that the word might be "halt" with a palm outstretched at the person approaching. They say that using a simple word or phrase can let students know that someone has come too close and can ward off what they call "distance shaming." (https://www.understood.org/articles/en/social-distancing-challenges-tips)

An article by Haelle (2020) entitled "Talking to Your Kids about Coronavirus and Social Distancing" includes these suggestions for explaining social distancing: "talk about it honestly and age-appropriately; " "emphasize the positive and what they can do"; "address your own anxiety" and "empathize." Haelle quotes physician Dr. Chaudhary who says "Let your child know that you know how upsetting it must be, and that you wish things could be different. Then reiterate what the rules are, and that the goal is to keep everyone safe. That's the best you can do right now as a parent."

We must honor the necessity and the complexity of this endeavor. Wanting children, parents, families and teachers to stay alive has to be our first priority. I worry, nonetheless, what messages are communicated. How can we protect children without making them afraid of being close, or positioning other people as dangerous, the occasion for fear? Vigilance about how close others are to you, using a word to stop them from being too near, and constant reminders about "danger" are hardly conducive to seeing one's classmates as sources of comfort and support. And, although completely reasonable to hope that teachers and caregivers can remain the rational adults who reassure children and have (already) dealt with their own anxieties, this is hardly realistic. Teachers and caregivers have enough significant and unprecedented worry and stress of their own related to the pandemic to expect them to be un-triggered and comfortable with this complex conversation. In an article by Swadener, et al. (2020) they recount teachers' perspectives of the pain they experienced trying to teach in a disembodied way while dealing with their own challenges. Xiomara Diaz, an early childhood teacher explained:

> We just had to try, to keep trying, to make it work however we could. And in the midst of all, there was a constant sense of mourning, of

> missing all that we were, all that we are as a class, as a school, as a community.
>
> We were filled with anxiety for ourselves, for our families, and our children. But once the day began, we closed the door on those anxieties and we smiled for our children. We checked their temperatures when they held our hands. We wiped their noses for them before they could react to the constant drip. And we kept on smiling.(Swadener, et al. , 2020, p. 318).

The Consequences of NOT Touching

The Covid pandemic has challenged multiple kinds of touch; teachers can't be too close to students (sometimes this means teaching on- line) and students cannot be too close to one another. Davis (2020) asks, somewhat depressingly, "Will We Ever Hug Again?"

How can students learn to form relationships and learn ways of connecting, interacting and loving, if they are prohibited from engaging in the most human of activities--touch? Absent a pandemic, the sense of separation and isolation among students is already highly problematic; not only is positive touch tightly controlled, but because bodies become sites of struggle and competition, not sources of support and connection. Before Covid, I wrote about school rules which prohibit hugging and touch. This included stories of a little boy who was reprimanded when he tried to hug his classmate after not having seen him for a long time, and children who were told not to sit "too close" to one another during storytime on the rug.

How hard for teachers, also, to see children suffering and in pain (whether in person or in a Zoom classroom) and be unable to respond in the caring and embodied way they would have previously. Not allowing touch can be seen as a form of dehumanization, since providing loving touch to others is one of the essentials of being human.

Dana Frantz Bentley describes seeing a child on zoom who is upset about a classroom decision and is visibly upset; she wants to intervene, to offer comfort and holding, but is unable to do this . She explains " … even as every fiber in my body moves toward this very common part of the early learning experience, I find I am paralyzed. There is nothing I can do. I ache to put a calming arm around her, to pull her into my lap to help her through this hard moment. I try to think of any way to whisper those soothing words into her ear, to let her know that I hear her." (Swadener, et al, 2020, p. 320).

Previously, I have described teaching settings in which the teacher's behavior was closely observed to make sure that they were complying with no touch policies. Those policies were based largely on fear of "inappropriate touch." Now, the stakes are higher, and the surveillance is more acute. How is it possible to teach from an embodied position if one must control physical contact so carefully? Such policies instill fear, promote lack of authenticity, and feel dehumanizing, driving teachers -- loving, caring, affectionate humans -- away from the classroom. Before the pandemic, Piper and Smith (2003) stated: "The touching of children in professional settings is no longer relaxed, or instinctive, and primarily concerned with responding to the needs of the child. It has become a negative act that requires a mind-body split of children and adults controlled more by fear than by caring (p. 891.) Not being able to *teach* bodies and *have* bodies also limits classroom curricular and pedagogical choices; differentiated instruction using multiple intelligence demands that we be in our bodies.

It is mind boggling to imagine how one could care for young children all day without touching them, but, in many settings, that is the goal and the regulation. Even before the pandemic children in the United States were touched far less than their counterparts

around the world; and, unfortunately, although positive touch is absent in many children's lives, negative or punitive touch is easily available. Many children learn that they only way to be touched is through the use of aggression; although hitting and pushing are not sanctioned, they do result in desperately desired physical contact.

An article called "The Touch-Deprived New Normal," states that

> Human touch is a need not a choice. We are wired. We are wired to be touched from birth until death and positive touch activates a big bundle of nerves in our body that improves our immune system, regulates digestion, and helps us sleep well. Being touch-starved - also known as skin hunger or touch deprivation - occurs when a person experiences little to no touch from other living things. (…)
>
> The current conditioning for a future with little or no touch will yield bitter fruit; we need to widen our perspective and take many things into account before erecting a 'new normal' where we are deprived of touch and we fear it. (https://movementum.co.uk/journal/touch-deprived).

A study summarized by Jones (2018) that looked at the behavior of preschoolers on playgrounds in Paris and Miami found that the children in Paris were touched more by their parents than those in Miami and those who *had* been touched were less aggressive with peers and engaged in more touching, hugging, and stroking with other children than those who had received less touch. Ironically, although this research pre-dates the Covid pandemic, the research also found that those who had been hugged had a better immune response to the cold virus. So, we are told that not touching will keep us healthier, but the lack of touch could be directly detrimental to our ability to survive the pandemic itself.
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_physical_touch_matters_for_your_well_being

Gould (2020) points to the potential risk factors involved in keeping children in a virtual classroom for extended periods of time. Ameri (cited in Gould) explains that "Much of the time, these virtual classrooms are accessed while cooped up in their rooms. And instead of going outdoors during recess to play games that involve positive touch like tag, red rover, or duck-duck-goose with friends on the playground, they've been limited to online games."

Field's (2014) research shows that while holding hands, hugging, and cuddling are all good, the moderate pressure involved in giving a hug or a back rub result in the most positive results. I witnessesd peer massage in action personally when I visited Latchmere Primary Scbool, on the outskirts of London, known for its creation of a "caring school." The fifth graders all learn peer mediation, and the "Friendship Squad" circulates during recess, alert to anyone who is friendless or alone and seeking connection. Classes begin with circle time, children checking in about their moods and their feelings both in words and through photos.

I followed a group of fourth graders and their teacher up a flight of stairs to the "Blue Room." Leaving our shoes in the corridor outside, we climbed the carpeted steps, past a banner that reads, "You are perfectly fine. Remember that success on the outside begins with success on the inside." I listened as the children explained to me why they meditate, and the teacher led them through a series of breathing and relaxation exercises. There was quiet in the room, and the wiggling stopped. Thirty young people breathed quietly together; the hush was palpable.

After about ten minutes, the teacher asked for a volunteer to show me how they do peer massage. The boy receiving the massage lay down on the carpet and the demonstrator explained how you start with smooth and gentle strokes over the head, removing the negative energy. He demonstrated the cupping technique he uses on the boy's back, showing how you must be careful to avoid hitting the spine or shoulder blades. He checked periodically with the boy he is massaging, "Is this okay? Too hard? Too soft?" After five minutes, he concluded the massage by gently sweeping away anything negative left in the body.

Then--all of the children found their partners (which sometimes crossed gender lines) and arranged themselves around the room. Several sat on the bank of sofas as their partners sat in front of them. Some were lying completely flat on the carpeted floor. They checked in with one another: "Do you want this massage? Do you have any sore or tender areas?"

The room was filled with the gentle energy of twenty pairs giving one another massages. I was struck by the quiet and respectful ways they talked to and touched each other. Half-way through, they switched so that both people get a massage. After they are finished, the peacefulness in the room was over- whelming. I have never seen thirty nine-year-old's this quiet or relaxed. There was no hitting, no pushing, no name-calling, no exclusion, no meanness. (Sapon-Shevin, 2009).

Early Childhood Education as a Beloved Community -- Even During a Pandemic

I have written previously about what early childhood education infused with love could look like (Sapon-Shevin, 2019) . I used the expression "Beloved Community" which was popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the description of a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one's fellow human beings (Ritterman, 2014.) Using some of the 25 traits articulated by Dr. Arthuree Wright (2017) in describing the Beloved Community, I envisioned what it might look like if we conceptualized early childhood settings as places and opportunities to envision and enact the Beloved Community and if we designed and implemented educational policies and practices to operationalize these goals.

Much of that imagining was based on seeing early childhood settings as sites for *anti-bias education*, one of the most operationalized enactments of social justice (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Farago & Swadener, 2016; Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Anti-bias education is rooted in the belief that for anyone to challenge or resist oppression, three components are necessary: Individuals must recognize that something unfair, discriminatory, or oppressive is taking place; must be able to name that injustice in some way; and must have active strategies for addressing that injustice.

Anti-bias education represents a committed ideology accompanied by specific pedagogical strategies and curricular choices designed to confront and counter oppressive beliefs and behaviors. I am particularly interested in how the attention to injustice can be fostered within a loving community with particular attention to love, touch, and connection.

My own vision of social justice is one that extends beyond particular aspects of character and a focus on injustices and inequalities. My vision is an *embodied* one that asks how social justice is enacted in and through children's bodies. My vision privileges how bodies move through space and interact with one another and interrogates how love and loving touch are manifested in early childhood settings. I ask: How are children's bodies respected and treated as part of a loving community? How is love evidenced through children and adults' physical interactions? What are children taught about how they can use their words and their bodies to support justice, inclusion and equity?

Now, in this moment, these questions have shifted a bit to include these: How can we maximize the ways in which children interact with one another with love and tenderness when they may not be together? How can children who cannot be physically close learn to offer support and comfort? Are there ways to center touching and the importance of feelings even when actual physical touch is limited? Can we still create beloved community even with the challenges of the current moment and the unknowns of the future? I believe that it *is* possible, but that it will require even more intentionality and a commitment to examining every aspect of curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom culture to make sure that lack of touch does not become "the new normal," accepted as the status quo. We will need to implement thoughtful and creative strategies to ensure that loving connection remains at the center of all we do.

Earlier, I generated a chart that described what an operationalized version of various principles of Beloved Community might look like, with a strong focus on children and teachers as active social justice agents, recognizing and addressing injustice and inequality. I have added here a third column which speaks to how we might enact this Beloved Community even during a pandemic. Or, perhaps, *especially* during a pandemic when many of the inequities in our society have been laid bare and when our commitment to equity and social justice must be powerfully implemented.

Trait of the Beloved Community	What this might mean in Early Childhood Education	And even /especially during a pandemic ….
Offers radical hospitality to everyone; an inclusive family rather than exclusive club;	Fully inclusive classrooms; all children are welcomed and belong. Hospitality would mean that inclusion goes beyond mere physical presence and includes the creation of a welcoming community.	Devise rituals for welcoming others that might not include physical proximity in a shared space. Have children contribute to shared projects even if they must do that work individually or asynchronously. Think and talk about how the pandemic has not been experienced equally by everyone? Contradict the platitude that "We Are All in The Same Boat" with more nuanced understandings that we are in the same storm, but some people have cruise ships, and some are adrift in life boats. Work to actively teach young children empathy for others; "What can we do so that Natalia feels welcomed in our group even though she is at home?"
Gathers together regularly for table fellowship, and meets the needs of everyone in the community;	There are frequent and on-going efforts made to build community. These may include morning meetings, community building activities and extended times for students to talk and interact with one another. Social	Consider all the ways that we can still build community even with proscriptions on closeness and touch. Design community building activities that can work at a distance. Develop ways to sing and dance together even without physical proximity.

	interaction is privileged in and of itself, not simply as a vehicle to improve academic achievement.	Engage children in zoom singing and fingerplays even though they are in separate spaces. "Let's have a dance party and take turns copying each person's move. First I'm going to spotlight Carlos and we will do what he does; then it will be Kim Lee's turn."
Recognition and affirmation, not eradication, of differences; Builds increasing levels of trust and works to avoid fear of difference and others	This speaks directly to an anti-bias approach to early childhood education which eschews colorblindness in favor of helping students recognize, name, and understand many kinds of differences. The desire is not to create homogeneity but to honor and build on heterogeneity. Children are helped to learn language related to differences in race, class, gender, ethnicity, language, religion, family make-up, etc.	Be vigilant about not letting students learn to fear others; "germs are a problem, our classmates aren't the problem." Do not let differences become a site for enacting separation and distancing. Talk to children about some of the inequities that have become even more pronounced during the pandemic and encourage them to see and talk about differences, even when those discussions are uncomfortable. Being able to see one another's houses and work spaces on zoom has made some inequalities stark; be alert to shaming or exclusion based on those differences and challenge them directly and through activities. "People's houses are really different, aren't they? Some of you have your own private space to "do school" and others of you work at the kitchen table with your baby brother and Mom nearby. Let's all say hello to Devon's little brother!"
Listens emotionally (i.e., with the heart) – fosters empathy and compassion for others Speaks truth in love, always considering ways to be compassionate with one another; Acknowledges conflict or pain in order to work on difficult issues	Social skills including empathy and compassion are named and taught. Students are encouraged to develop listening and support skills and to employ these when classmates are distressed. There is explicit recognition that life	Be deeply empathic about the challenges of a no-touch or low-touch environment. Be honest with children about how painful the limitations on touch are --- for students --- and for teachers. Let children talk about what they miss and how their lives have changed. Do not "gas light" children in an attempt to comfort or reassure them. They know

	can be hard, painful and unjust.	things are different. Listen and affirm. "Tell me what you miss about being able to hug your friends"; "Can we give each other hugs on zoom? Let's practice hugging ourselves and saying "Shu Kai, this hug is for you!"
Focuses energy on removing evil forces (unjust systems), not destroying persons; Unyielding persistence and unwavering commitment to justice; Promotes human rights and works to create a non-racist society	A commitment to understanding, naming and discussing injustice pervades the classroom. Children are given skills in noticing and responding to inequities regarding student participation, respect, and acknowledgment and develop skills in personal and social justice advocacy.	Encourage students to brainstorm strategies and specific actions that help redress inequities in how children are being educated; encourage students to send each other letters, call one another, and in other ways do what they can to address inequities. "Can we think together about what we can do to cheer up Daniel? He's feeling lonely now and misses his friends."

Moving Forward with Integrity and Touch

Beyond the above general principles. there is more we must do. As humans and as educators, we are tasked with figuring out how can we hold onto our connections, our closeness and our support when we can't touch or are discouraged from touch. How can we experience and teach about the collective power and healing of our bodies without touch or with limited touch? How can we meet our own needs for closeness and connections as adults so that we can be more grounded and empathic in our work with children? From a more hopeful stance, we can see this current crisis as creating a kind of a "speed hump" (Sapon-Shevin & SooHoo, 2020) that allows us the space and opportunity (if not the necessity) to examine all aspects of our curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom practices in terms of our vision of creating a beloved community infused by closeness and affirming touch.

The following suggestions are very partial, and they emerge, at least partly, from my own deep grief and sadness about the loss of a powerful way of connecting, learning and transformation. I assert no pretense that I am not deeply troubled by the state of the world nor that I have fully figured out how to do this vital work. I share these thoughts with deep humility and the recognition that as the current crisis evolves, these proposals may be surpassed by more nuanced possibilities.

1. We must honestly and openly acknowledge that the loss of human touch and connection is lamentable and painful. We cannot address what we will not name; pretending that we have simply replaced human touch and connection with technology is to deny the deep pain and disorientation that we experienced and, in many cases, are still experiencing. Failure to name this reality is a form of gas lighting -- I don't see why you're upset --you can talk to your friends on Zoom --- it will be just the same". Talking on the phone while "walking with a friend" is not the same as holding

hands; writing a note of support to someone who has experienced a painful circumstance is not the same as wrapping them in your arms for a hug as they cry. Tell the truth. It's not the same. It's really hard and it is painful. "Touch starvation" is real and devastating (Jones, 2018). We must allow ourselves and our students to name and grieve what they are missing. Teachers should be able to (with thoughtfulness) share how their lives are different and what they are missing as well: "I haven't been able to see my grandson in almost two years and I really miss holding him on my lap to read to him; I read to him on Zoom, but I really miss feeling him in my lap."

2. Continue to talk about and teach about physical touch and connection, even when that teaching cannot include the actual closeness and touch. Ask questions: "What is it like for you now that people are not touching you or hugging you?" "What is a memory you have of the ways in which touch has been important in your life "Talk about a time when someone supported you -- what did that feel like in your body?"; "What is your fantasy of touch and connection in the future--what are you hoping for?"; "Draw me a picture of what touch means to you"; "What have you found that offers you some comfort and physical connection now? When a teacher shared that they sleep with a stuffed animal, many children then shared their animals as well. De-stigmatize ways that people can self-soothe and connect even when physical proximity is challenged; "Sometimes I line up all my stuffies and tell them each that I love them. And I imagine what they would say to me."
3. Within these discussions of touch, acknowledge that experiences with touch have not been the same for everyone. Recognize people who have been touched without consent, people for whom physical touch has always been problematic or painful, and the ways in which those with marginalized identities have been subjected to touch in inappropriate ways. Explore and recognize how power, privilege and oppression have been evident in how people touch and are touched by others. Envision how it might be, should be; what would touch look like in a socially just society? How would our bodies connect within a framework of consent and recognition of boundaries? What can solidarity of bodies look like even when there is no touch? Now is a perfect time to extend discussions of touch to broader issues of consent; "You get to decide who hugs you and who touches you. It's okay to tell someone, "I don't want you to hug me now."
4. More specifically, we must acknowledge that issues of touch and social distancing all occur within a broader context of race and racism in which certain bodies are marginalized, excluded, and oppressed (sometimes to the point of death). The last few years have occasioned many moments of racial reckoning during which the pervasive and systemic racism of our society and a culture of White supremacy have impacted Black, Indigeneous People of Color in horrifying ways. And now this pandemic moment has occasioned the re-imaging of many aspects of our society. There is no possibility of returning to 'the way things used to be'—and there is increasing recognition that many of the ways it were vastly unjust and inequitable. So, we may use this opportunity to also re-imagine touch. How would we make all bodies visible, valued, and safe? How would we explicitly name and negotiate issues of boundaries and consent? How do embodied ways of

knowing address racism? The work of Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (2017), recognizes the necessity of addressing bodies in racial healing.

5. Explore what is possible. In my Music for People workshops https://www.musicforpeople.org/wp/ we have learned ways to dance together, make music together and create physical intimacy without being in the same space. In a workshop on improvisation that I led, we imitated one another's motions and got to (even on screen) experience what it's like to momentarily *be* someone else. Learning how to give Zoom Hugs, sharing (on screen) physical objects that we treasure, sharing stories of how people are giving and getting support and closeness during this time -- all of these can help us to create new possibilities. But we must also be thoughtful about recommendations for ways to have children connect and play while socially distant. For example, a website called "Hi Mama" (https://www.himama.com) lists over 200 activities for childcare centers and includes activities specifically designed to maintain social distancing. But some of these activities are competitive (with children working against one another) and others are not culturally or religiously inclusive; simply because an activity can be accomplished with social distancing doesn't mean that we should suspend other criteria of inclusiveness and appropriateness.

If we are to create a society in which people see themselves as interconnected and mutually responsible, this vision must include experiences that allow the intimacy and trust-building of touching and connection. If people remain disembodied and disconnected from themselves and others, we cannot produce citizens who are fully present to their own lives and the lives of others. Empathy for others and commitments to equity and inclusion require that we acknowledge others' lives and their bodies. We must relearn how to touch and be touched. The pandemic provides an amazing opportunity to process collective emotions and "re-imagine" what is possible in education. We need not compromise our commitments to closeness and engagement; we *do* need to be more exploratory and creative in our imagining.

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