

Compassion: How do You Teach it?

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that there is a correlation between the violent images and stories we view through media and the effects those stories have on children and young adults, namely the suppression of compassion. With so much emphasis on academic standards, sometimes social emotional skills are grossly neglected. Students are being taught how to read, write, and compute, but often not taught how to be kind to one another. This article provides the reader with available resources related to teaching compassion in schools. The authors also present a theoretical model that will help foster in children, the development of compassion for others. In addition, the reader will find suggestions for teaching compassion at each of the four levels in the theoretical model of influence. The authors assert that purposefully infusing compassion into the curriculum might have the potential power to change the world.

Keywords: Teaching Compassion, Social Emotional Learning, Compassionate Schools

Introduction

In a recent discussion with colleagues, various attributes and their relative value were discussed. Qualities such as diligence, helpfulness, kindness, and civility were all tossed about in heated discussion (M. Cooper & R. Calhoun, personal communication, February 27, 2015). The one characteristic that stood out as both the most essential in humankind as well as that which is most missing in today's world was compassion. Quite simply, compassion is defined as having a concern for others. Images, stories, news, and even reality T.V. depict and glorify, sometimes, the worse human behavior imaginable. Infrequently, the nightly news or other programs will highlight interest stories of individuals engaging and demonstrating great compassion (<http://vtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HumanInterestStory>). Evidence suggests that there is a correlation between the violent images and stories we view through media and the effects those stories have on children and young adults (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003; Bushman & Anderson, 2008), namely the suppression of compassion. The study of compassion and how to infuse it into the curriculum has the potential to make a tremendous difference in the lives of students everywhere. This article provides the reader with available resources related to teaching compassion in schools. The authors also present a theoretical model that will help foster in children, the development of compassion for others. The authors assert that the teaching of compassion might have the power to change the world.

Compassion in the Schools

The word compassion originates from English, Anglo-French or Late Latin, from the word *compati-* to sympathize. Compassion involves both a sympathetic consciousness of another's distress and a desire to alleviate that distress. According to Seppala (2013), compassion is a different concept from empathy, although the two are often confused. Seppala suggests that empathy is the visceral or emotional experience of another's feelings while compassion begins with the emotional response but adds an authentic desire to help, making it much more powerful. Compassion actually combines empathy or an emotional response with altruism or action benefitting another. In a recent study conducted by researchers from the University of Wisconsin, taking a course in compassion can actually prompt higher levels of altruistic behavior (Weng et al., 2013). In other words, compassion can be cultivated. How is compassion manifested in the school environment?

The Compassionate Schools Initiative has identified ten principles of a compassionate school (<http://k12.wa.us/CompassionateSchools>). These include such items as focusing on the culture and climate of the school and community, ensuring discipline practices are compassionate as well as effective, and providing access, voice, and ownership for all staff, students, and community members. This initiative further supports the use of data to identify vulnerable students and to determine outcomes for continuous quality improvement. Although the list could easily be applied to areas other than compassion, such as diversity, culturally responsive teaching, and meeting the needs of students with disabilities, it provides a place from which to begin dialog on teaching compassion in the schools. What other evidence exists to support teaching compassion?

The Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has made available to the

public a comprehensive resource for schools entitled *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success*. This 246 page handbook discusses such topics as trauma, resiliency, responsiveness, compassion fatigue, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, and competencies of personal agency, social and academic skills. As part of the Compassionate Schools Initiative, training, guidance, referral, and technical assistance is available to schools wishing to develop a compassionate schools infrastructure. A primary goal is to keep students engaged and learning through a supported healthy climate and culture within the school.

The Compassionate Action Network International supports compassion initiatives on a global basis (<http://compassionateaction.org>). The organization partners with schools and universities by sharing case studies, curriculum, resources and stories from institutions seeking to embed compassion into every aspect of the learning process. The Children’s Charter for Compassion is an example of one such resource. The purpose of the charter is to provide a means for children and those around them to understand how to treat themselves and others with love, kindness and compassion. Downloadable activity books are suggested that provide children ideas for acting in a compassionate manner.

The Compassion Games (<http://compassiongames.org>) originated in Louisville, KY when the mayor asked citizens to perform acts of service in the community during a one-week period. During that week, more than 90,000 acts of service were recorded. The website provides opportunities to sign up for three different kinds of games: Secret Agents of Compassion, Random Acts of Kindness, and Service Projects. In order to “play” as a secret agent of compassion, young participants receive a daily e-mail during two weeks in September, urging them to commit compassionate acts and “report” these. Acts are recorded for other participants to view. The website also provides shared stories of compassion from around the globe.

The case for embedding compassion in the school curriculum is strong, especially in light of the research indicating that compassion can be cultivated. It stands to reason that our ever growing population and the diverse nature of our schools demands that we seek to understand one another. Surely we can grow students who demonstrate both empathy- experiencing another’s emotion, and altruism-acting upon that feeling in a beneficial way, to make this a more kind and gentle world. In the next section, the authors propose a model based on the work of Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia (1964) that gives educators a framework in which to cultivate and teach children to be compassionate with one another and those whom they encounter throughout their lives.

Model of Influence

The authors have developed a *Model of Influence (MOI)* shown below, which is a theoretical framework that defines four levels to facilitate the development and teaching of value-oriented concepts such as compassion (Kohler-Evans & Barnes, 2015). These four levels ultimately lead to taking action and embracing the influence we have to make a difference in the lives of others through compassionate acts. It is important to note that the MOI is a framework that can be integrated into the curriculum as well as across content areas. While the authors present compassion as the focal point for this article, the MOI can be used as a framework to teach and promote other attributes such as gratitude, taking initiative, honesty, and many others.

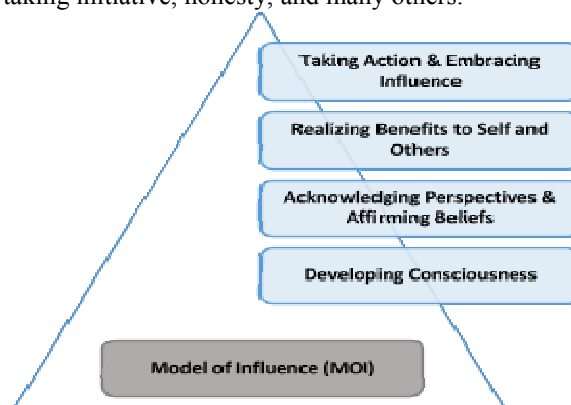


Figure 1-Model of Influence

Level One: Develop Consciousness

The authors propose that the first level to consider in the *Model of Influence* is to **develop consciousness** for compassion in order to promote learning of this attribute. This is the level that builds upon an individual’s curiosity and interest to learn more. It might also be the level at which one begins to grapple with his or her own cognitive dissonance about certain topics, ideas or perspectives regarding compassion. In a K-12 setting, both the teacher and the student need to experience this level so that both find meaning and relevance in the topic. How do teachers foster the development of consciousness in children?

The teacher of young children can easily use connections, such as his or her students' experiences with family members, pets, community, or their places of worship to help students develop a consciousness of the meaning of compassion. Teachers can develop consciousness by engaging students in conversation, or even asking them to draw or act out what compassion looks like. The attentive teacher can connect his or her students with others by utilizing their prior experiences and asking them to reflect on those experiences in preparing for the arrival of a new student from a different school, culture or community. The teacher of older students can use her students' interests to build a curriculum that allows them to become more aware of a global issue, problem or situation, then begin to engage in activities and instruction which affords them an opportunity to learn about the subject at a deeper level.

Level Two: Acknowledge Perspectives and Affirm Beliefs

The second level of the model is to foster acceptance of the new idea, compassion, and awareness that various perspectives exist—**acknowledging perspectives and affirming beliefs**. When building upon the challenges which compromise one's current thinking, one begins to acknowledge other perspectives have relevancy and meaning. This might occur even if those ideals, principles, or beliefs are in opposition to one's own value system. Accepting that differences exist to be further examined can often affirm, extend, challenge, or even, change one's thinking. The authors are proposing to offer students other ideas to consider or engage in perspective taking to deepen their knowledge of how others may interpret, analyze and reflect on various concepts, thoughts, statements, and ideas.

In the classroom, this can take many forms. For the teacher of young students, once an awareness has been created, the teacher can engage in discussion about how others might feel as recipients of compassionate acts. Books about showing compassion can be read and discussed. In addition, the teacher can help students reflect on how a lack of compassion might result in hurt feelings. Further, teachers and children can closely examine the effects of a lack of compassion. Asking students to express their thoughts and beliefs while contemplating various perspectives can shape students' own values and beliefs. With older students, discussions about inclusion, diversity, cultural and ethnic differences through use of current events and issues portrayed in the media can help shape students' perspectives. Gently challenging comments that reflect a lack of compassion, asking students to reflect on scenarios where compassion is demonstrated or lacking, and viewing situations from multiple perspectives can assist in refining and affirming beliefs.

Level Three: Realize the Benefit to Oneself and Others

The third level is **realizing the benefit to oneself and to others**. As with the last level the idea is to build upon the knowledge gained and insight discovered and shared. It is often times far easier for individuals to identify how something will benefit themselves. What has sometimes become difficult is for students to recognize the relevance of their lives to others. In other words, how is each life connected to others' lives, and how can lives be used to be productive, compassionate, and caring members of mankind?

Once students have developed an awareness or consciousness regarding compassion and have begun to affirm their beliefs, they can begin to more fully understand the benefits of their acts of compassion on their lives and the lives of others. One way to help young students appreciate the benefits of compassion is to create a compassion jar. Each time a student observes someone showing compassion the student will place a "compassion chip" in the jar. At the end of the week, or daily, the teacher can count the chips or ask students to recount why they placed the chip in the jar. This could be done at home or in the classroom. Daily reflection on the benefits of compassionate acts can be woven regularly into the conversation. For the older student, posing the question: how can talents, knowledge, skills support and serve others, can generate a multitude of creative ideas. Using a journal to record personal responses to compassionate acts is one way to help students appreciate the positive benefits of such acts. When teachers take the time to assist students in examining the perspectives of others, witness their struggles and successes, it can empower them to see beyond themselves and find ways to advocate and help others. The idea of this third level is to engage in discourse, discussion, reflection, and yes, explicitly, authentically teach compassion. It also affords opportunities to enter the last level—**taking action and embracing influence** we have to make a difference.

Level Four: Take Action and Embrace Influence

Taking action and embracing influence represents the highest level of the framework because it requires one to take some courageous steps to initiate necessary change—steps that might seem daunting, challenging, foolish, or daring. Each previous level requires one to "do something" such as study more, ask more questions, engage in more discussion, do more research. This level of **action and embracing influence** encourages students to develop and seek a sustainable response to an issue, problem or concern. It might be difficult for some students who may not necessarily see themselves as difference makers, nor might they recognize the gifts and talents they have to offer.

As students begin to see the benefit that their acts of compassion have on themselves and others, this final level focuses on empowerment. There are countless examples of children all over the world who have defied the odds by reaching across their neighborhoods or even the globe to make a difference in the lives of others. Collecting food for the homeless, blankets for dogs in a local shelter, or even stuffing backpacks for families in poverty are all ways to embrace the influence that one life can have. Reflecting on the lives of compassionate men and women such as Ghandi, Mother Teresa and others can be a powerful reminder that one life can change another's. Recognizing and helping students see that they can make a difference in the lives of others is perhaps the teacher's greatest challenge and responsibility. By consciously creating an awareness, helping students acknowledge their own and others' perspectives, working with them to realize the benefits of compassionate acts, this final level of empowerment is the most powerful of all. Whether acts impact one other child, a group of children, or even children in a village a world away, the benefits are potentially powerful enough to change the world.

Future Research and Final Thoughts

In an effort to delve more deeply into the teaching of compassion in the schools, the authors are in the process of developing specific lessons that address each of the four levels. These lessons will be piloted in schools in Arkansas, and teachers of students who are taught the lessons will be completing pre and post questionnaires regarding the degree to which the lessons might result in changes in student behaviors.

As we step more fully into the twenty-first century, we must help instill in our students this call to consciousness and the stirrings of a powerful desire to reach out. The bombardment of images, stories and news demonstrating how insensitive people are to one another can be a hindrance, but careful attention to the messages we bring into our classrooms through our teaching, to demonstrate the value of caring for and about other people, can make a powerful difference. Perhaps now, more than any other time in history, compassion is critically needed. Our world cries out for those who would reach out to another with the willingness to share experiences and empathize with another's distress. Daily, we are presented with images of horrific acts and occurrences throughout the world. The onslaught of inhumanity and unkindness, carelessness and intentional acts of cruelty pervade our culture.

A simple saying comes to mind, life is the act of planting seeds. The image of the seed, growing in the dark, wet ground while reaching upward and forward into the light, a seed that, given nurturing nutrients, sunlight, warmth, and care, lives to bear fruit and nourish the world. Compassion, when given to another, is as the sower scattering the seeds. Only by promoting acts of compassion can we turn the tide of history.

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Web Resources

- Compassionate Action Network (<http://compassionateaction.org/>)
- Compassion Games (<http://compassiongames.org/>)
- Compassionate Schools Initiative (<http://k12.wa.us/CompassionateSchools/>)
- Human Interest Story (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HumanInterestStory/>)

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