Not-so Random Acts of Kindness: A Guide to Intentional Kindness in the Classroom

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Much has been written about random acts of kindness – acts performed spontaneously and often to strangers. The topic of kindness and the benefits arising from performing kind acts holds both empirical and applied interest in the fields of education and psychology. Encouraging students to reflect upon and perform intentional acts of kindness develops perspective-taking, increased social membership, and a structured way of encouraging kindness within the school context. This paper provides an overview of kindness research and argues for the need to promote intentional acts of kindness by providing a framework for teachers to support students in the performance of intentional kindness.

Keywords: kindness, kindness definitions, teaching, social and emotional learning, positive education

Introduction

 "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action." (Dewey, 1916, p. 351). Even more than honesty, gratitude, or hope, the trait of kindness is identified as one of the top-ranking character strengths valued in Western society (Karris & Craighead, 2012; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). When parents are asked what they wish for their children, 'being good' or 'being kind' is consistently indicated to be a top trait (Diener & Lucas, 2004; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Wang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2003). Although kindness and other elements of a child's behavior was often seen as something solely within the purview of parents and the moral authority of religion, increasingly, the mandate of schools has broadened beyond a unique focus on the promotion of core academic abilities to

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incorporate students' social and emotional development (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This shift is due to educators recognizing that students are increasingly arriving to school underequipped to meet the social and emotional demands of the classroom (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Spivak & Farran, 2012), and to the robust research in the area of social and emotional learning (SEL) attesting to the benefits arising from interventions designed to boost students' social and emotional well-being (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Zins, Elias, & Greenberg, 2003). The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2015) identifies five core competencies comprising SEL. These include: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Increasingly, social and emotional competencies are recognized as the foundation for strong academic engagement, leading to optimal academic achievement (Caprara, Barbanelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger, 2011; Elias, Zins, Gracyzk and Weissberg, 2003; Suldo, Gormley, DuPaul & Anderson-Butcher, 2014; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg and Wallburg, 2007).

Students higher in SEL tend to fare better in school than their counterparts low in SEL competencies, and are characterized by dispositions and behaviors conducive to learning, including increased classroom participation, positive attitudes and involvement in school, increased acceptance by peers, and a student-teacher relationship in which teachers provide more instruction and offer more positive feedback (Denham, 2015; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). The benefits to students arising from SEL interventions are not limited to improvements in dispositions and behaviours. Meta-analytic findings by Durlak and colleagues (2011) revealed an 11% gain in academic achievement for students who received an SEL intervention when compared to their counterparts who had not participated in SEL programs.

The theme of prosocial behavior, of encouraging students to enact kindness, is a common tenet across SEL programs. Interestingly, despite the school context, and teachers in particular, being well-positioned to foster kindness, the focus to date has largely been on preventing unkind and anti-social acts, such as bullying, rather than promoting prosocial behaviors such as kindness (Pryce & Fredrickson, 2013; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). The idea that performing random acts of kindness is beneficial is quite pervasive in Western culture, but the intent of this paper is to argue for, and illustrate how, Intentional Acts of Kindness (IAK) should be incorporated into classrooms as a means of supporting students' social and emotional well-being. This paper will provide an overview of kindness research and illustrate how educators might consider encouraging and supporting students in performing IAK as a means of increasing individual student well-being, building positive inter-personal (teacher-student and student-student) relations, and positively contributing to class and school climate.

Kindness as a Positive Psychology Intervention

Defining Kindness

As teachers seek resources to support their lessons on kindness, they are likely to begin with a search for definitions of kindness that could be presented to students. Of the definitions emerging from a review of the extant literature, kindness is described predominantly from adult perspectives (see Table I) and teachers

are often left to devise their proper definitions of kindness to guide students. Emerging research exploring young students' (kindergarten through second grade) conceptualizations of kindness in school reveals that students enact kindness in multiple ways. "Kindness, from the perspective of young children, is an act of emotional or physical support that helps build or maintain relationships with others." (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015, pp. 36-37). Young students understand and manifest kindness by offering physical help (e.g. helping up a student who has fallen), providing emotional help (e.g. comforting a lonely student), including others (e.g. inviting a student to join an established team), and sharing.

Table I. Definitions of kindness

		Definition	Source
1.		"Kindness is a combination of emotional, behavioural, and motivational components."	Kerr, O'Donovan, & Pepping, (2014, p. 20)
		"Kind acts are behaviours that benefit other people, or make others happy."	Kerr, O'Donovan, & Pepping, (2014, p. 23)
2.		". .. kindness is a behavior driven by the feeling of compassion" and that when we "act on this feeling of compassion in a helpful and caring way, this behavior becomes an act of kindness"	Long, (1997, p. 243)
3a.		"This character strength describes the pervasive tendency to be nice to other people – to be compassionate and concerned about their welfare, to do favors for them, to perform good deeds, and to take care of them."	Peterson & Seligman (2004, p. 296)
3b.		"Doing favors and good deed for others."	Peterson & Seligman (2004, p. 296)
4.		". . . voluntary, intentional behaviors that benefit another and are not motivated by external factors such as rewards or punishments."	Eisenberg, (1986, p. 63)
5.		". . . an assertion of self that is positive in feeling and intention."	Cataldo, (1984, p. 17)
6.		"An activity that promotes positive relationships."	Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky (2012, p. 1)
7.		". . . enacting kind behavior toward other people."	Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, (2006, p. 362)
8.		". . . a motivation that is sometimes inferred from the fact that one person benefits another."	Baldwin & Baldwin (1970, p. 30)
9.		"Kindness, from the perspective of young children, is an act of emotional or physical support that helps build or maintain relationships with others."	Binfet & Gaertner, (2015, pp. 36-37).

Research on Kindness Interventions

Encouraging students to perform acts of kindness can be considered a positive psychology intervention (PPI). Positive psychology, a field of psychology that has an increasingly strong foothold in education, shifts the focus in schools from 'what's wrong and needs fixing?' to a focus on the 'strengths and attributes' of students. A derivative field of positive psychology called 'Positive Education' has emerged and has the mandate of teaching students well-being skills – skills that reduce negative affect, increase life satisfaction, and foster learning and creative thinking (Seligman et al., 2009). For additional information on positive education, the reader is directed to the International Positive Education Network (IPEN, 2015). Schools and teachers in particular are well-positioned to implement PPIs and this paper provides a brief overview of kindness intervention research followed by a proposed structure for educators to encourage students to engage in IAK.

PPIs to boost well-being have taken many forms and those proving effective in promoting increases in participants' subjective well-being include having participants count their blessings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), set personal goals (Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006; Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002), express gratitude (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), and, most relevant to the present article, practice kindness (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui & Fredrickson, 2006).

Layous and colleagues (2012) randomly assigned nine to 11 year-olds ($N = 415$) to either a kindness condition in which they performed three acts of kindness or to a control condition in which they mapped places they visited. Findings indicated that participants' in the kindness condition experienced improved well-being and peer popularity (as measured by sociometric peer ratings). In another study examining the effects of kindness on university students' well-being ($N = 119$), Otake and colleagues (2006) asked participants to count or track the number of kind acts they performed over the course of one week. The findings indicated that participants in the kindness counting intervention, in comparison to control participants, experienced increased levels of happiness and gratitude. A third study by Kerr and colleagues (2014) had outpatient adult clients ($N = 48$) waiting for psychological treatment list up to five kind acts they had committed each day over the course of 14 days and to rate their intensity of kindness acts on a 7-point Likert-type scale (i.e., somewhat to extremely). Results indicated that, on average, participants completed 2.5 kind acts daily and rated the intensity of their acts 4.5/7.0. Consistent with findings from other kindness intervention research, participants in the kindness condition reported increased well-being (as reflected by greater life satisfaction, optimism, and connectedness to others). Finally, a study by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005), asked university students to complete five kind acts each week over the course of six weeks. Consistent with other kindness intervention research, their findings indicated students in the kindness intervention group experienced increased levels of well-being. A salient finding arising from this research suggested that the timing of one's kind acts may be key to fostering well-being. Participants in this study who performed their five acts on the same day demonstrated significant gains in well-being over participants who spread their kind acts out over the course of each week.

The Benefits of Kindness

There are a number of reasons teachers should consider implementing kindness curricula into their lessons and classrooms. First, and quite appealing to budget-strained schools, having students complete PPIs such as a kindness assignment is not a cost prohibitive intervention (McCabe, Bray, Kehle, Theodore, & Gelbar, 2011). Students are able to craft acts of kindness involving only their time and effort. Second, having students complete kindness activities is frequently in alignment with both the teacher's and the larger school's mission statement – notably, to consider the feelings of others, to treat others with respect, and to behave in ways that engender cohesion. Third, PPIs may be implemented at the classroom or entire school level and can serve to promote well-being in all students, not only those deemed at-risk (Meyers & Meyers, 2003). PPIs not only encourage students to be kind, but also can help identify students who struggle to be kind. And last, a salient advantage of having students enact kindness and one that is not immediately apparent to students themselves; is that frequently the initiators of kindness reap the most well-being benefits. Post (2005), building upon the work of Sternberg (2001), attests to the "helper's high" and writes: "People engaged in helping behavior do generally report feeling good about themselves, and this has measurable physiological correlates." (p. 70). Post further argues that doing good for others broadens the initiator's thought repertoire and encourages perspective-taking or what he calls "other regarding behaviors." (2005, p. 71). There are numerous reported benefits to being kind and perhaps Kerr, O'Donovan, and Pepping (2014) sum it up best: "Acts of kindness can build trust and acceptance between people, encourage social bonds, provide givers and receivers with the benefits of positive social interaction, and enable helpers to use and develop personal skills and thus themselves." (p. 20)

Kindness Considerations

Emerging research indicates that the structure and dosage of PPIs are important (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Findings indicate that interventions in which participants engaged in structured versus self-initiated activities over the course of one week experienced increased well-being (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Additionally, the more effort participants put into their kind acts, the greater the well-being benefits they receive (Nelson et al., 2012). Finally, having participants engage in both planning their PPI activities and in enacting a variety of activities (versus repeating the same kind act) have been shown to increase participants' well-being (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2012; Sheldon, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). The optimal 'dosage of kindness' (how many acts students perform) is difficult to discern (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Since several studies have participants count up to or perform five acts of kindness over the course of one week (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013), this is presented here as a starting point for teachers wishing to have students participate in IAK.

A Framework for Intentional Acts of Kindness

Step one – Creating a recipient bank. One way to increase engagement in students, especially students for whom enacting kindness is unfamiliar or who may be initially reluctant to perform IAK, is to

have them generate a bank of recipients (see Appendix). The bank of recipients is a list of all the familiar and unfamiliar individuals or agencies (e.g. local animal shelter) in need of receiving kindness or who would appreciate having something kind done for them. Once generated, the list may be categorized from 'most familiar' to 'least familiar' to further aid the student in planning his or her acts of kindness. Having a bank from which to draw helps reduce barriers or obstacles for students by initiating and contextualizing their kind act. Generating the bank of recipients requires perspective-taking (i.e. Who might need kindness? Why might this person appreciate a kind act?)

Steps two and three – Planning acts. The second step requires students to reflect upon each aspect of their act of kindness, including their intended recipient (i.e., familiar or unfamiliar), the nature of the kind act they would like to execute (i.e. does it involve the offering of a material good, time, and/or energy?), whether the kindness will be done anonymously or with the initiator's identity being known, figuring out the details of the act (i.e. what are the steps involved to realize the kind act?), the timing of the act (i.e. when is an appropriate time to execute the kind act?), execution of the act, and reflecting upon the process and recipient's reaction, if known.

Step four – Verification of acts. Once students have planned each of their IAK, it is important that the teacher verify that the acts do not put students themselves or the recipients in danger (e.g. requiring unsupervised travel across the city to enact, that the student does not enter the private residence of a recipient unsupervised, etc.) and that the proposed acts are in alignment with expectations (e.g. that acts are of sufficient complexity and effort for the student's grade level, that the proposed acts do not require unrealistic materials to execute). For acts to be conducted away from the immediate school site, planning sheets may be sent home for parental approval. Some acts may involve the assistance of parents (e.g. for transportation).

Steps five and six – Establishing a timeline and enacting kindness. Once each of the proposed acts has been verified, students may draft a timeline for the execution of each of their acts. As is typical with school assignments, teachers may impose a deadline for the completion of the proposed acts.

Step seven – Reflecting upon kindness. Once all kind acts have been completed, students are then encouraged to reflect upon what they did by responding to a series of guided prompts. These prompts are designed to encourage both perspective-taking and introspection. That is, what can be learned about others and what can be learned about oneself?

Conclusion

Guiding students through the planning and execution of IAK holds potential benefits for not just students and the recipients of their kindness, but also for teachers, for the class, and for the school community. When developmentally adapted, the use of IAK is suitable for students of all ages; however IAK might be especially well-suited to incorporating into middle and high school curricula. There is a dearth of SEL programs targeted to adolescents (Williamson, Modecki, & Guerra, 2015) as the bulk of SEL programs are geared for younger students. As Saunders (2015), in his review of mindfulness interventions for adolescents, notes: "There are windows of opportunity in the lifespan when specific brain regions and networks are particularly modifiable, and the introduction of certain forms of enrichment (i.e., mindfulness) could produce

salutary effects." (p. 438). Adolescence is a time of biological, cognitive, and physiological change and well-developed social and emotional competencies can help adolescents navigate these changes (e.g. expressing frustration, asking for help, providing and receiving support).

Our discussion thus far has focused upon the benefits to individual students and it is important to recognize that teachers who guide students through IAK stand to benefit as well. Given the documented benefits to students themselves from performing acts of kindness, a teacher who supports and encourages students to enact kindness stands to teach transformed students – students who have participated in activities that encouraged both perspective-taking and introspection. Previous research that saw students perform acts of kindness saw boosts to students' well-being and this research follows protocols used by evidence-based interventions. With students' well-being bolstered, there is potential for increased student engagement in lessons, for an increased quality of peer and student-teacher interactions, and for the possibility of continued kind acts taking place within the learning context. As Dewey's (1916) opening quotation suggests, the actions taken by students stand to form and inform their sense of self. Teachers who encourage and support students to act kindly provide opportunities to encourage the 'continuous formation' of students, moving them forward to become prosocial agents within their school and larger communities.

Last, as many of the students' kind acts are likely to take place within the immediate school community, the school as a whole stands to profit with a notable increase in both positive school affect and climate. Fowler and Christakis (2010) have written of the 'ripple effect' arising when prosocial activities are encouraged. Acts of kindness have a way of encouraging more of the same. As teachers seek ways to encourage prosocial behavior in students, the use of IAK helps teachers educate the 'whole child' – moving beyond just curricular content mastery to education of skills that will safeguard students social and emotional well-being and yet still have the corollary effects of benefiting curricular engagement, student development, and class and school community enrichment.

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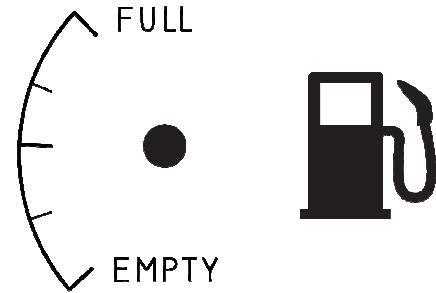
Name: _____

Date: _____

Intentional Kindness Planning Sheet

How kind are you currently?
Indicate on the gas tank your
current level of kindness.

Is there room for improvement?

Brainstorm a list of all the <u>people</u> or <u>places</u> in your school or community you
think could use some kindness.

	STEPS	WHAT TO CONSIDER:	
RECIPIENT	**STEP 1:** Identify your Recipient	Someone you know/ Familiar location **- OR -** A stranger/Unfamiliar location	
MECHANISM	**STEP 2:** Decide on the kind of kindness you will do	Materials (e.g., giving an object, making something) **- OR -** Time or Energy (e.g., helping someone)	
FORMAT	**STEP 3:** Decide if you want to be known or anonymous	Known **- OR -** Anonymously (the recipient won't know it was you!)	
PREPARATION	**STEP 4:** Figure out the details	What's involved? What do you need? Prepare your materials & gather supplies	
SCHEDULE	**STEP 5:** When is a good time?	When? When would be the best time to do your kind act?	
EXECUTION	**STEP 6:** Do your act of kindness	Execute	
EVALUATION	**STEP 7:** Assessment	How did it go? Did your act go as you planned? How do you think your recipient felt? How did you feel?	

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<u>Directions</u>: Plan 5 Kindness activities (<u>three that occur within school and two outside of school</u>). Use the following grid to help you plan each of your activities. Do your best to plan DIFFERENT activities (don't repeat). Be creative!

		Kind Act #1	Kind Act #2
RECIPIENT	**STEP 1:** Identify your Recipient		
MECHANISM	**STEP 2:** Decide on the kind of kindness you will do		
FORMAT	**STEP 3:** Decide if you want to be known or anonymous		
PREPARATION	**STEP 4:** Figure out the details		
SCHEDULE	**STEP 5:** When is a good time?		
EXECUTION	**STEP 6:** Do your act of kindness		
EVALUATION	**STEP 7:** Assessment		

Name: _____

Date: _____

POST-KINDNESS REFLECTION

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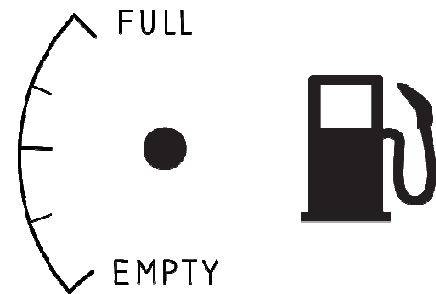
Directions: By now you have completed your Intentional Acts of Kindness. It's time to reflect on what and how you did and on any impacts doing kindness had on you.

1. **Revisiting the Kindness Self-Assessment**
   How kind are you currently?
   Indicate on the gas tank your
   current level of kindness. Is there
   room for improvement?

2. Thinking back to the RECIPIENTS of your kindness (the people who received kindness from you), WHO do you think was most appreciative or grateful? Why?

3. There are differences in the QUALITY of the kind acts we do. That is, some acts are done more thoroughly and thoughtfully than others. When you think of the kind acts you did, which one had the highest quality? Why?

4. How did completing the acts of kindness impact you?