

CHAPTER 1

Theorising compassion and empathy in educational contexts: What are compassion and empathy and why are they important?

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Abstract

Compassion and empathy are important attributes in supporting social and cultural cohesion yet there is limited research on how we can teach compassion and empathy in schools. Similarly, it is important to show compassion and empathy towards teachers in supporting their everyday work in a complex world. This chapter therefore shares past research that has explored how researchers have analysed various features of learning and teaching compassion and empathy. This includes a number of models of compassion and empathy. It will also outline the contributions to this book.

Introduction

The world is in constant change with growing inequality and access. When you watch the news, you are confronted with national disasters, wars/conflicts, waves of refugees and other crimes against humanity. At a national level, many countries have a changing political landscape that has seen a rise in fundamentalist nationalist parties leading to a discourse of ‘problematic immigrants’. We also witness the decline of democratic ideals and the ethos of supporting people in society as politicians are influenced by capitalist ideals and individual gain. In essence, the world appears to be becoming meaner, with little understanding shown to others. When did values change?

Changes can also be observed at a personal level for many people in their daily encounters with each other and social media. The rise in bullying and negative statements appear the norm in workplaces and social media. For example, there are some Apps that allow anonymous feedback on people that is emailed to them. Likewise, children can access Apps that send hurtful messages to each other without adult detection. We do not know the long-term consequences of such Apps but there have been news stories related to suicide and self-

harm of the recipients of hurtful posts as well as other consequences. What we can learn from this example is that the old saying “treat others how you would like to be treated” is not enacted by all. A question we must ask ourselves is how would we like to be treated or how would we like our children to be treated? If the answer is ‘respectfully’ we must model appropriate behaviour to others.

One could argue that the lack of role models in society also causes the decline in compassion. The behaviour of politicians, celebrities, sports stars and other high profile people suggest a decline in moral and ethical standards. This is worrying considering young children learn from role models. We know from research that when children are exposed to positive role models they learn prosocial behaviour described as “voluntary behaviour intended to benefit another” (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006, p. 646). The need for children to learn prosocial behaviour is perhaps greater than ever before.

At the heart of these changes in society lies the importance of compassion to bring about change, to create a better world for all. As Armstrong suggested in her creation of the Charter for Compassion (2008):

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It calls upon:

all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings – even those regarded as enemies.

The Charter for Compassion is based on the central tenet that compassion is essential for a just and peaceful world. The Charter presents compassion as practical acquired knowledge that can be taught and developed through reflection and practice. This suggests that

compassion is learnt and can be continually developed within educational contexts. As editors, we follow this tenet and argue that compassion and empathy should be embedded within all educational practices and curriculum.

Compassion and empathy are key attributes to living a healthy and happy life (Huppert, 2017) yet surprisingly there is little written about how we can teach these qualities and how teachers can best display these traits in and through their teaching practice. In a similar way, not much is known about how teachers can be supported in their everyday professional lives through compassionate and empathetic understanding. Much research that exists is from a psychological perspective—investigating the personal attributes of compassion and empathy—rather than on the social and cultural influence these dispositions can potentially have on society (Raab, 2014).

This book therefore aims to provide some robust studies and cases in analysing and understanding how compassion and empathy work in educational contexts from across the globe. Education is often seen as an important tool for teaching the future generation skills that are necessary for survival and societal advancement, based within compassionate and empathetic understanding.

It may be argued that schools already engage many children in compassionate understanding in a variety of ways- such as the school ethos and values, relationships shown in school (teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships and parent-teacher relationships), extra-curricular activities as well as actual curriculum content that focuses on compassion. However, we argue that a specific focus on embedding compassion across the curriculum is needed with examples of reflection and practice. Teachers need to be aware of how they can create activities with young people to support the development of compassion and empathy. Through such a focus schools can support the development of moral, ethical, political and social capabilities of students.

Defining compassion and empathy

Compassion and empathy are linked however, they refer to slightly different attributes within the human condition. According to Jiménez (2017) there is a distinct difference between compassion and empathy even though they stem from the same desires—what Jiménez refers to as “to better relate and understand others’ experiences” (p. 1). Compassion has been

defined as “the emotion one experiences when feeling concern for another’s suffering and desiring to enhance that person’s welfare” (Halifax, 2012, p. 1751). Compassion usually creates some distance between people and focuses on how we can help others but also step back from situations and assess how best to deal with challenges (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Empathy on the other hand allows us to feel what others are feeling and be sympathetic towards them or “the ability to walk in another’s shoes” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 98).

Compassion is in many ways better for our own wellbeing and resilience (Jiménez, 2017) whereas empathy has the potential to burn us out if we do not have the skills to recognize when to distance ourselves from emotions such as hurt and pain. It is therefore important that skills such as compassion and empathy are taught in schools but also that teachers and preservice teachers have these attributes in order to teach students more effectively in our complex world (Aronson, Sikes, Blaney, & Snapp, 1978; Aronson, 2002).

Other concepts related to compassion and empathy are morals and ethics. According to Cam (2012) moral experiences grow out of children’s own explorations and therefore begins at home. Once in care prior to school, children have direct interaction with an extended peer group and other adults. Cam (2012) suggests that:

“Mixing with other children throughout the day, in both structured activities and free play, provides constant opportunities for moral development in an environment that is likely to have a greater focus on social learning than will be the case at school.” (p. 17)

The development of compassion and empathy however, lasts throughout one’s lifetime (Wei, Liao, Ku & Shaffer, 2011). Much research has explored these attributes from a psychological perspective whereby “distinct appraisal processes attuned to undeserved suffering, distinct signaling behavior related to caregiving patterns of touch, posture, and vocalization, and a phenomenological experience and physiological response that orients the individual to social approach” (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010, p. 351) can be carried out. Goetz et al. (2010) share a comprehensive review of literature that analyses compassion as an affective experience and oriented state. This perspective relates to a number of theorised models offered in the literature.

Models of compassion and empathy

Not surprisingly, a number of scholarly researchers have explored the notions of compassion and/or empathy in different environments. Halifax's (2012) model of enactive compassion for example, acknowledges that "compassion is an enactive, emergent process of factors in the attentional and affective domains, the intentional and insight domains, and the embodied and engaged domains of subjective experience" (p. 2). These are known as A, I and E axis.

According to Halifax (2012) this psychological model involves the notion of people's attention or mental processing resources to everyday objects. Attention for example, can be focused or dispersed and Halifax (2012) notes that this idea determines people's ability to acknowledge and respond to others suffering. For Halifax (2012) attention should be "nonjudgmental, nonreactive, not contracting in relation to adversity, and nongrasping in terms of the desire for a particular outcome" (p. 2). In this sense, people are capable of listening attentively to others' concerns without having to always offer solutions to problems.

The other element to an enactive model of compassion is affect. Halifax (2012) explains that the affective domain involves two emotional states: kindness and equanimity. These are defined as:

"Kindness and equanimity are essential affective processes associated with compassion. Kindness is characterized by a dispositional tenderness toward others as well as genuine concern. Equanimity is a process of stability or mental balance that is characterized by mental composure and an acceptance of the present moment" (p. 3)

Halifax (2012) believes that in order to cultivate the affective process, including balance, both kindness and equanimity are required. Another feature of this model is the I axis which involves intention and insight. This involves the ability to intentionally guide the mind and have insight about people's suffering. Intention and insights operates in alignment with affect and attention. They assist with compassionate balance when interacting with others. Halifax believes that "the intention to transform suffering is one of the features that distinguish compassion from empathy" (p. 5). The insight domain involves the capacity to develop metacognitive perspectives. This includes self-awareness and access to memory.

The final axis to this model includes embodiment and engagement. Halifax states that the E axis is based on an enactive process. This is when the mind, body, and the environment come together to enhance compassion. Embodiment is the felt sense of someone else's suffering. Engagement is when the embodied mind is in a state of readiness to support this suffering.

Halifax’s enactive model of compassion provides an excellent resource for those working with others, particularly those who need support. In educational contexts, it is important for educators to consider ways in which to work with others by being mindful of each of the elements outlined here: attention, affect, intention, insight, embodiment and engagement.

Another model offered in the literature is that of Gerdes and Segal (2009). They presented a social work model of empathy that reflected a sense of social justice. They explained that the model involved three components. These were: 1. the affective response to another’s emotions and actions; 2) the cognitive processing of one’s affective response and the other person’s perspective; and 3) the conscious decision-making to take empathic action. They argued that the affective component of empathy required healthy neural pathways and that the cognitive processing includes perspective-taking, self-awareness and emotion regulation. Without an effective understanding of these processes—both affective and cognitive—as well as action that moves beyond them, then empathetic responses are possibly limited.

Kristeller and Johnson’s (2005) study explored how mediation can support compassionate and empathetic thinking and doing. They proposed a two-staged model that explains the effect of mediation practice on developing these skills. The model highlights how meditative practice not only supports individual’s self-awareness but also their wellbeing and self-regulation. This includes a decrease in self-attachment which leads to more empathy for others. Kristeller and Johnson’s (2005) model has significance for educational contexts where the focus on learning and teaching is on thinking about others before oneself (ACARA, n.d.). Indeed a number of studies have explored how mindfulness and meditation can enhance these practices in the classroom (Fuertes & Wyland, 2015; Hartel, Nguyen, & Guzik, 2017).

Similarly, Singer and Klimecki (2014) note that we use a range of communication modes to express emotion and social abilities such as empathy. They argue that compassion and empathic distress stem from empathy itself and present a schematic model that differentiates between two empathic reactions to the suffering of others.

Table 1.1: Compassion and empathic distress (Singer & Klimecki, 2014)

Compassion	Empathic distress
Other-related emotion	Self-related emotion
Positive feelings: e.g. love	Negative feelings: e.g. stress
Good health	Poor health, burnout

They argue that “an empathic response to suffering can result in two kinds of reactions: empathic distress, which is also referred to as personal distress; and compassion, which is also referred to as empathic concern or sympathy” (p. 875). This means that empathy relates to human capacity to resonate with others’ emotions and distress means we can or do not. Compassion, they state, on the other hand is a feeling of concern for others. It is important to consider the difference between compassion and empathy from a cognitive perspective but also in relation to people’s dispositions and whether or not they can be learnt and developed skills (Windham, 2016). The next section therefore outlines a number of studies exploring compassion and empathy in context.

Studies about compassion and empathy

Compassion and empathy, as both philosophical and theoretical notions, have infiltrated the literature. Unsurprisingly, these concepts have featured in discourse related to different disciplines including business, education, law, medicine and other health areas such as nursing and psychiatry. Birnie, Speca and Carlson’s (2010) study for example, explored how a mindfulness-based stress reduction program impacted on people’s self-compassion and empathy. Their study involved participants who suffered from chronic medical conditions. They found that both self-compassion and empathy increased after participation in the program and that “self-compassion and aspects of empathy revealed strong associations with psychological functioning” (p. 1). This finding has implications for those working in educational contexts as increasingly students and/or adult learners attend to education with a range of personal or physical concerns. Mindfulness has proliferated the research literature in the past decade and many studies are developing strong evidence-bases related to its significance in building compassion and empathy (O’Brien, Wade Leeuwen, Hadley, Kelly, Kickbusch, Talbot, & Andrews, 2016).

Another study by Stojiljković, Djigić and Zlatković (2012) asked whether empathy is connected with teachers’ self-assessment of success in and through their work. Their work explored personality traits and dispositions of successful teachers. This included effective pedagogical leadership and management in the classroom. Stojiljković, Djigić and Zlatković (2012) argued that teachers’ work is very complex and involves a number of roles. One of

these roles is supporting the personal growth of students. For Stojiljković, Djigić and Zlatković (2012) this included the development of compassion and empathy as personal attributes. Another role mentioned was connected with the acquisition of knowledge. They argued that “contemporary school is treated as the institution that should support the overall cognitive and personal development of each student and society contribute to social development of the society in whole” (p. 961). This means that skills such as compassion are critical in contributing to cultural and social growth.

Stojiljković, Djigić and Zlatković (2012) continued to explain that empathy is an important feature of successful teachers. As such, empathy enables effective communication between teachers and students. Empathy is a skill that helps teachers deal with the multiple roles that they face including interacting with parents in the community. Their study argued that a clear definition of empathy is lacking. Some information provided defined empathy as ranging from caring for other people and having a desire to help them, as well as experiencing the same emotions that others do. Findings from this study (Stojiljković, Djigić & Zlatković, 2012) showed that empathy is an important personal capacity for an effective teacher. In order to carry out their roles successfully they had to understand the way that students thought as well as how they interacted with others. This included students’ learning styles and strategies. Their study highlighted that a “teachers’ life and professional experience, as well as appropriate professional education, contribute to the intention and competences for performing different professional roles, primarily those related to social relationships and affective communication in the classroom” (p. 965)

In the field of service-learning, Everhart (2016) shows how students can build their skills through experiences in diverse workplaces. Twelve higher education students completed self-assessments and reflective entries related to critical incidents. Environments that students completed their work experience included schools, medical clinics, service agencies such as for domestic and substance abuse. Themes related to empathy development such as change and student metacognition were explored through the data. The author showed that observation of emotional experiences of others and increased responsibility in communities have the potential of changing empathy levels for service-learning students.

A further two phase study carried out with adults who worked in a range of contexts and recruited through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (Study 1, n = 124 and Study 2, n = 121), found that respondents who reported higher levels of self-compassion showed a greater willingness to help hypothetical people but with reduced empathy. In addition, self-

compassion related only to “feeling less personal distress in response to someone else’s emergency” (p. 54). Overall, both studies found that both self-compassion and empathy were distinctly aligned with the participants’ willingness to help people in need.

Another interesting exploration of compassion and empathy in the literature is how they relate to mindfulness and wellbeing. Raab (2014) for example, investigates the literature in relation to perceived connections between mindfulness and self-compassion in the health sector. Raab (2014) highlights how such ideals have the potential to reduce stress for health workers as well as enhance compassion in regard to the care of patients. The review reveals how health care professionals are particularly prone to stress overload, impacting on compassionate thinking and behaviour. The examination shows that both mindfulness and self-compassion can promote improved “curiosity and nonjudgment towards one’s experiences” (p. 95). Further, it was found that mindfulness learning has the potential to increase self-compassion, decrease stress levels of health care workers and hence care of clients.

Structure of the book

Add summaries of each chapter here

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