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Fostering Resiliency and Care: Integrating Self-Compassion Into a Graduate Course

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Self-compassion, which involves mindful awareness of feelings and offering ourselves compassion, has been shown to support balancing emotions, overcoming challenges, and achieving goals. This action research study integrated self-compassion theory and practice in a graduate course in which students wrote their final comprehensive papers in sustainability education. This study found that self-compassion practice resulted in more self-awareness, more acceptance of difficult emotions, and more ability to handle stress. Additionally, students experienced more clarity and calm in the writing process and began to integrate self-compassion into their lives and work. This study points to the promise of self-compassion as a beneficial contemplative practice in academic settings, and also highlights the personal and relational benefits of mindful self-compassion practice.

Recovering at home after a surgery, better but not yet well enough to go back to work, I was feeling sorry for myself. As I suffered with physical pain and, worse, the emotional discomfort of not being able to engage in work that I love, I turned to the book *Self-Compassion* (Neff, 2011) for inspiration. I had been actively learning to practice self-compassion for about a year and a half and was planning to integrate self-compassion reading and practices into my spring graduate course, *Spiritual Leadership for Sustainable Change*. As I read and practiced being with my difficult feelings and offering myself compassion, I became curious about how self-compassion might assist students in another course I would be teaching that Spring, Comps, a writing course in which our graduate students complete their final comprehensive papers in order to graduate.

This four-credit course is the final culminating course for our master's program, in which students write a paper that demonstrates learning in each of the program's key learning areas; synthesizes literature, theory, and community practice to address a problem in the field of sustainability education; and introduces a unique intervention to that problem. The Comps course is taught by different program faculty, depending on the term, and meets six times during the academic term to offer supported guidance and a shared learning community for writing the Comps paper. The course culminates with formal presentations, open to the community, in which students share their Comps papers. Having taught this course over 10 times, I knew it to be particularly stressful for students. As burgeoning sustainability leaders and educators, they feel great pressure to create a paper that is personally meaningful and can also have real impact in a time of increasing ecological and social destruction and urgent need for change. They also face the pressure of synthesizing two to three years of coursework and writing a significant academic paper in a relatively short time frame. At the same time, most students are also engaged in other classes, work, family, and more. As such, the process of writing the Comps paper is often a very emotional experience for students filled with hope, fear, anxiety, and questions of self-worth during an exciting but stressful time in which they are also getting ready to transition out of graduate school. While students get strong support and encouragement from the professor and co-learners in this course, much of the process of writing the Comps paper is solitary.

The Comps paper focuses on an aspect of sustainability education, which in our program refers to a relational process of unlearning and transforming our deeply ingrained values and ways of being, and re-learning how to live in the world in reciprocal and reverent ways. Our graduate sustainability education program is centered in an ecological paradigm, a systemic view of the world as relational and inter-existing in complex patterns and processes (Capra, 2010). This worldview is one of deep interconnectedness, the "story of interbeing" (Eisenstein, 2013), in which everything is connected, and reality is understood as non-linear, emergent, self-renewing, and nonlocal (Wheatley, 2006). This view is spiritual and holistic in that it points out the nature of our belonging in

the world, and our inherent connectedness to the rhythms and cycles of the earth. From this worldview we focus on learning to teach and lead in ways that bring healing and re-connection into our relationships with each other and the earth. Instead of forcing or pushing change, we “invite, we imagine, we re-frame and we re-invent, using our radical imaginations to learn together in new ways” (Burns, Munoz, & Sager, 2016, p. 179). As an extension of this work, I began to wonder if intentionally integrating self-compassion into the Comps course could not only offer tools for students to support themselves through this challenging writing process, but could also offer them and our world, more widely, an energetic experience of connection and healing rather than more fear and stress. I began to craft a small action research study to examine the impacts of integrating self-compassion into the Comps course.

Background and Literature

Research on self-compassion has been steadily growing as the positive impacts of self-compassion become better understood, particularly in promoting psychological resiliency. Self-compassion is similar to compassion for others and involves three aspects: an awareness of our own suffering; feelings of kindness, warmth, and caring toward ourselves and our own suffering; and a recognition that suffering is a shared part of the human condition (Neff, 2011). First, self-compassion has a strong element of present moment awareness, or mindfulness, as self-compassion begins with a mindful awareness of feelings and acceptance of feelings as they are. Mindfulness is a special way of paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations just as they are (Desmond, 2016). This involves simply noticing feelings and thoughts, without trying to change the situation or to move into problem solving. Mindfulness includes noticing what stories the mind is spinning and noticing this narrative as “real but not true” (Brach, 2012). Recognizing that thoughts and feelings are just thoughts and feelings helps us “drop the dramatic storylines about our own inadequacies and past failures and gain a more balanced perspective on the self” (Neff & Davidson, 2016, p. 5).

A second aspect of self-compassion involves turning toward suffering and embracing it with kindness and presence. This means develop-

ing self-talk that is loving, supportive, and gentle, and offering ourselves soothing care (Neff & Davidson, 2016). According to Neff and Davidson, “by providing warmth and support in difficult times, self-compassion gives people emotional resources necessary to endure painful or challenging experiences” (p. 5). Practicing self-compassion doesn’t mean replacing negative feelings with positive ones, but rather involves recognizing and holding negative emotions in non-judgmental awareness and acknowledging that these painful emotions can be felt alongside emotions of care and connectedness (Neff, 2011). Self-compassion is about acceptance of ourselves, our painful feelings, and our reactions to those feelings. It’s not self-improvement but rather self-acceptance (Germer, 2009).

A third aspect of self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering is part of the human condition. In acknowledging aspects of our common humanity (for example, that all people fail and make mistakes), we can feel less isolated from others when we experience suffering (Neff, 2011).

It is important to note that self-compassion is different from self-esteem, once the hallmark of psychological health. Although there are many definitions of self-esteem (Borders, 2014), my work follows the view that self-esteem is tied to feeling good about ourselves in comparison with others, and judging ourselves compared to others, better or worse (Desmond, 2016). However, it’s not possible for everyone to be above average compared to others. Desmond notes, “Whereas self-esteem is about evaluating oneself positively, self-compassion is about relating to oneself with a kind and forgiving attitude” (p. 16). Instead of the constant element of judgement that is present in developing self-esteem, self-compassion offers a path to self-acceptance.

Most people are likely all too familiar with self-criticism and judgment as a daily experience. Self-criticism is very common but can also lead to depression, anxiety, and addictions, and is one of the greatest predictors of mental health problems (Germer, 2009). Self-compassion, on the other hand, is linked to greater emotional intelligence, intrinsic motivation, mindfulness, autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Neff, 2003). Because self-compassion weaves kindness towards self and mindfulness together, it serves as an “effective emotional regulation

strategy” neutralizing “negative emotional patterns” and engendering “more positive feelings of kindness and connectedness” (Neff, Hseih, & Dejitthirat, 2005, p. 266). Studies suggest that students with higher levels of self-compassion are more likely to resolve conflicts through compromise, balancing their own and others’ needs in fair ways, feeling a sense of autonomy and connectedness (Yarnell & Neff, 2013, p. 146). Research also shows that those who are self-compassionate are better able to maintain emotional balance when frustrated and tend to experience fewer negative emotions such as fear, irritability, hostility, or distress than those who lack self-compassion. These emotions are still present at times, but aren’t as frequent or persistent (Neff, 2011). A focus on self-compassion also leads to greater motivation to improve in the face of difficulties and can help people to overcome challenges and achieve goals (Desmond, 2016). These are strong positive benefits of self-compassion that could be applied to a variety of academic situations. As of yet, there is still limited research to this end.

Methodology

This study was an action research study of one graduate course, our program’s Comprehensive Exam (Comps) course, that I taught at a large urban university during a recent Spring quarter. Specifically, I was interested in the following research questions: Does integrating self-compassion theory and practice in this course have an emotional and/or psychological impact on students? Does this intervention impact students’ writing process? In what ways, if any, do students perceive this intervention as having an impact on the quality of their Comps paper? This research study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and names of participants have not been used in order to maintain confidentiality.

Action research is a methodology used by those inside a community for the purpose of better understanding an issue and involves systematic inquiry, analysis, and reflection (Hinchey, 2008). Typically, action research includes the elements of action, research, and participation and is a cyclical process of understanding a practice in order to create new actions and improve practice within the same community (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Educators have a long history of engaging in action re-

search in which teachers as researchers have sought to improve their own practice and solve problems within their own educational settings (Herr & Anderson, 2005). This research project may also be considered emancipatory action research, which seeks to “free people from unquestioned cultural assumptions, and from limitations they’ve unconsciously accepted” (Hinchey, 2008). With roots in critical theory, emancipatory action research asserts that those who are in a situation must be the ones to analyze the situation and notice the possibilities for change. In this case, within an academic environment that typically does not question the cultural assumptions of success, pressure, performance, and stress, students were asked to examine their own feelings and self-talk, and to notice if there were possibilities for change.

There were 12 graduate student participants in this study and students met four times for two and a half hours as a class, together in small groups outside of class each week, and two times for several hours each for final presentations of the papers. Each class session was organized into the following activities: opening circle (check-in and meditative breathing), a participatory self-compassion activity and discussion, and discussion about the writing process and writing techniques. Each class session ended with a request for students to write a note that began with “Dear *Heather*,” an invitation to share their feelings or concerns about the class or their lives. Students also had weekly homework assignments including short readings about self-compassion, self-compassion practices (found at self-compassion.org), as well as reading assignments and writing assignments/deadlines for the Comps paper itself. The in-class self-compassion activities were guided activities including: 1) recognizing emotions as feelings in the body, allowing them to be there, and then sending kindness and love to those emotions; 2) practicing self-compassion in which one calls up a difficult situation and uses the following mantra: *This is a moment of suffering, all humans suffer, may I be kind to myself in this moment of suffering*; 3) observing thoughts and feelings, labeling them as thoughts and feelings, and observing them as coming and going in the mind; 4) checking in with feelings in body, mind, and heart; placing hands on a part of the body that needs extra support; and sending words of self-compassion to self. I guided each of the partici-

patory self-compassion practices in class, and asked students to share their experiences in discussion afterwards. Most of the students in this class knew each other as they were from the same graduate cohort, and others knew each other from having had classes or other activities together. As such, they were likely more willing to be vulnerable and open in discussing the self-compassion activities and their feelings about the Comps process. These students were also open to participating in short meditation activities in class, as this is a norm in all of my classes and these students had all taken classes with me previously.

Data was collected from a variety of sources and included lesson plans, teaching notes taken during and after each class, three student reflective writing exercises, and a recorded and transcribed focus group discussion. The reflective writing exercises were completed in class during the first class session, in the third class session, and at the final class meeting. The first reflective writing focused on students' initial feelings and concerns about writing the comps paper, how they usually handle stress and challenges, and their initial understanding of what self-compassion means. The second reflective writing focused on how the writing process had gone up to that point and what self-compassion had meant to them during the process. The third reflective writing asked students how they understood self-compassion, what impact it may have had on them personally or during the comps writing process, and what they perceived to be the impact of self-compassion practice on the final finished paper. The focus group interview took place on the last day of class and focused on questions related to the practice of self-compassion and its impact. This research applied grounded theory to the data analysis process, and data were collected and coded on an ongoing basis, using open coding and the constant comparative method of analysis. Data were reviewed multiple times and researcher memos were useful in making sense of the data (Maxwell, 2013).

Results

The following research results are organized around the three major research questions. The first question was: Does integrating self-compassion theory and practice in this course have an emotional and/or psychological impact on students?

Students began the Comps course with a mix of emotions but almost all reported feeling confident. Additionally, all expressed some kind of fear about the writing process or time constraints. Students' self-reported understanding of self-compassion at the end of the term didn't change drastically from their understanding of this concept at the beginning of the term and included definitions such as kindness, love, respect, patience toward self, treating self like others, and an awareness and acceptance of self. However, in the final reflection there was more emphasis from more students on *holding space for all emotions* including self-criticism and difficult emotions, and an awareness that all feelings can be accepted. There was more allowance for the difficult and negative emotions and a recognition that instead of being pushed away, these can be allowed and responded to with awareness and care. This increased acceptance of all emotions was cultivated through increased self-awareness. This self-awareness was expressed as an increase in awareness of the critical self and self-judgments, and an ability to notice these thoughts and feelings and pause before engaging in further self-criticism. This self-awareness also included an increased awareness of self as a human who is part of the human condition. One student wrote, "self-compassion has really impacted the way I live on a day-to-day basis. I find myself recognizing when my mind and body feel burdened and to pause and send myself some love before I head down a path of negative talk." Another wrote that self-compassion has become "more like a sort of habit of self-awareness, rather than an activity." Yet another student said that self-compassion practices helped her "know that thoughts and feelings are a part of being alive and that there is wisdom and beauty that can be found in those feelings."

Mid-way through the term, students reflected on the following question in writing and through discussion: *What has self-compassion meant to you during this Comps process?* For a number of students, self-compassion had resulted in an increased mindfulness and acceptance of feelings and reduced negative self-talk. Some students saw self-compassion as something that had increased their confidence and motivation and saw it as a helpful tool, a guide or a refuge to go to when they experienced doubt. One student said, "if I hadn't had self-compassion I would have

walked away.” By the end of the course, students reported that forming this habit of self-awareness led to more ability to notice, allow, and accept feelings; handling stress better; being more calm; getting better sleep; feeling or expressing emotions more fully; and more self-acceptance. One student wrote, “self-compassion practice allows me to feel my emotions more fully, allows emotions to surface and gives me time to breathe and feel.” Another wrote, “I can sleep better at night. When I become restless, I am able to calm myself and peacefully fall asleep which was not a skill I had before.” Recognizing and accepting all emotions, becoming more self-aware, and more able to deal with difficult emotions and stress was a large part of the emotional/psychological impact of these students’ self-compassion practice.

As students practiced self-compassion during the term, another key impact arose. A student told the class that she had been finding a lot of joy and support in her self-compassion practice and because of this had shared her experience in another class she was taking, thinking the practice might be useful for others. Students in that class had questioned her assumptions and had critically suggested that it was only because she was in such a privileged position in life that she could have the time and space to practice self-compassion. The student was clearly conflicted as she brought this experience to the Comps group. She had been experiencing many benefits from self-compassion and wanted to share this with others, but she did not want to participate in systems of oppression or flaunt her own privilege. She had stopped her practice, wondering if she was worthy of self-compassion as a privileged person. A lively conversation ensued. One student agreed that he similarly didn’t feel he could share this practice with the disadvantaged youth he worked for. He felt they would scoff at such a practice when they were struggling to have food to eat and a roof over their heads. But other students in the class shared how they were integrating self-compassion ideas and practice into their own work, and how others were benefiting from it—one shared experiences with kids at a public middle school, and another with people struggling with illness. The conversation turned to how self-compassion could be a simple tool for anyone, since it is mostly about mindful perception and self-talk, and how it could be a healing tool for some

of the most vulnerable people in our society. We also discussed the importance of self-healing in any social justice or social change work, and the value of loving and accepting ourselves for who we are as humans, recognizing privilege but also mindfully acting in line with our values.

As a result of this discussion, it became clear that students were not just learning and practicing self-compassion, but that they were more deeply integrating this practice into their identities, and into their relationships with others, testing out and sharing what they were learning. In addition to becoming more self-aware, and more able to accept and deal with difficult emotions and stress, students who were experiencing positive emotional and psychological benefits from self-compassion were naturally integrating this into who they were as leaders and educators, thereby increasing the benefits of self-compassion by teaching it to others.

It is important to note here that not all participants in this study actively practiced self-compassion to the same degree. While all students agreed to participate in this study, self-compassion was not the focus of the course, nor did students know about this added emphasis prior to the beginning of this term. While we all did self-compassion activities in class, not all students were present at every class session, and several students told me privately or told the group that doing the self-compassion homework exercises were difficult either due to space or time constraints, or due to limited emotional energy. About a fourth of the students noted that they felt that the self-compassion homework practices created pressure, were a struggle, or were just one more thing they needed to check off their list. As with most practices, those who were most actively engaged in practicing self-compassion seemed to experience the most personal benefit.

The second research question was: Does this intervention impact students' writing process? About a fourth of the class reported that self-compassion practice either had no impact, that they were postponing the completion of their Comps paper, or were unsure about the effects on their writing process. These responses mostly came from roughly one-quarter of the participants who were not as actively engaging in self-compassion practices. Other responses showed that self-compassion had a positive impact in dealing with difficult emotions while writing

Comps and that self-compassion offered positive motivation, including increased confidence, sense of purpose, care for self, and clarity in the writing process.

First, most participants reported that practicing self-compassion had a positive impact on dealing with difficult emotions such as stress while writing Comps. At the beginning of the course students reported that they handled stress in a variety of ways. Some were healthy (taking a break, looking to others for support, and positive self-regard), but most fell into the unhealthy category (procrastination, avoidance, numbing with food, alcohol, or TV, and emotional outbursts). Learning self-compassion gave students new tools for handling stress and overwhelm, particularly through the power of mindful awareness and pausing to notice what was happening emotionally. One student said that every time she felt overwhelmed when writing she would pause and practice self-compassion. "This," she said, "not only calmed my feelings of being overwhelmed but added calm and motivation to my writing process." Another student reflected that self-compassion practice helped her develop a habit of stopping or pausing before becoming overwhelmed by stress, or before it became anxiety. In addition to increased mindfulness, other students reported a sense of the bigger picture. One student said that self-compassion practice helped her more clearly recognize the transience of difficult situations and she worked with the mantra, "this too shall pass." Another said that she came to a new understanding of knowing that challenging situations would be okay, and that when addressed with love, "whatever happens there will be love at the end as well." Another student similarly commented that self-compassion practice made her feel calm and that she didn't need to have all the answers as she was writing.

In addition to handling stress differently, the practice of self-compassion helped students to avoid the frustrations of perfectionism and guilt. One student noted, "Self compassion helped me to understand that my paper won't be perfect. This has helped me not to fall into despair and frustration." Another said self-compassion "helped assuage feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and frustration." Letting go of guilt about how much she was doing, how good it was, or how much she was distracted allowed her to feel more clear in the writing process. Similarly, another student

also said that self-compassion practice helped her feel more clear-headed in the writing process. Another noted that in addition to reducing negative emotions, self-compassion practice also increased positive emotions. This student said, “the days I pause and practice self-compassion have not only calmed my feelings of being overwhelmed but have also added clarity and motivation to my writing process.” Another student said, “I’ve been able to care for myself more, recognize my anxiety more easily, and have more confidence when I sit down to write.” Yet another student said, “I gave myself the space and time for breathing and meditation and to get kind of grounded or feel the things I was feeling... and so then when I would approach it I just felt like I was coming from a more of a clear-headed space and it was uncomplicated.” It seems that overall, the stress-reduction, calm, and confidence gained by practicing self-compassion had a positive impact on students’ writing process for at least three-quarters of the group.

The third research question was: In what ways, if any, do students perceive this intervention as having an impact on the quality of their Comps paper? About half the students perceived that practicing self-compassion had an impact on the quality of their Comps paper, but most of these were tentative in their responses. The way that they spoke about the impact of their self-compassion practice on their comps paper was personal—they realized that they had been impacted personally and thus the quality of their paper had also been impacted. It was difficult, at the end of the term, still very much in the throes of finishing the paper and getting ready to present their papers, for them to separate themselves from the papers. This may also be a testament to the nature of the papers, in which they chose a personally meaningful topic and created a unique intervention related to the topic. Thus, the papers were a personal, creative, and academic expression of who they were as people and scholars, a part of their identity. As such, those who said that they thought that self-compassion had an impact on the quality of their Comps paper spoke mostly of the impact of the self-compassion practice on the process of writing, repeating the same themes as were discussed in the previous research question.

At the end of the term students did not have the distance or perspective to be able to evaluate the quality of their papers and did not yet have the perspectives of faculty reviewers. When asked if self-compassion had impacted the quality of the Comps paper, one student commented, "I'm not sure. I am seeing self-compassion in pretty much every aspect of my life so I don't see how it could not affect my writing, but I can't tell you how right now." Although beyond the scope of this study, this research question is perhaps best suited to a longer study, in which students could look back on their experience and their work with some perspective in order to answer this question.

Discussion

This study, while small in scope, adds to the literature on the benefits of self-compassion and begins to point to the benefits of practicing self-compassion specifically within academic settings, especially those which typically involve pressure or stress. While the results did not provide clarity as to the effects of self-compassion on the quality of the final papers, there is significant evidence that self-compassion provided positive benefits to students emotionally and psychologically as they engaged in their academic work, and that it positively impacted the process of writing. In particular, the recognition and acceptance of negative self-talk and perception, along with the addition of compassionate and loving self-talk, created many positive benefits conducive to strong academic work, including confidence, calm, and persistence. This study coincides with previous research that shows self-compassion to be an effective strategy for emotional regulation and balance, decreasing negative emotions (Neff, 2011). Indeed, a primary benefit for the students in this study who practiced self-compassion was fewer or less persistent negative emotions such as fear or distress.

Yarnell and Neff (2013) point out that self-compassion is a skill to emotionally support both oneself (being nurturing and understanding toward oneself, not judgmental) and others (recognizing that all people make mistakes and feel inadequate in some way) when confronted with human imperfection or conflict. The mostly fast-paced, competitive, and pressured environment of academic courses provides students with

opportunities to recognize the humanness of their imperfections, their limitations, and their own internal conflicts. Being able to recognize and acknowledge these feelings and associated self-talk, and then to be able to practice self-compassion in order to offer oneself support, is a skill that benefited the participants in this study and could more broadly benefit anyone in academia. Further, as pointed out by this study, the self-compassion practice did not stay confined to academic work, but seeped into relationships, work, and other areas of life, providing increased emotional resiliency and integration of mindfulness and compassion into the identities of the participants. Thus, the practice of self-compassion, while it had an academic benefit for most participants, also had a more holistic benefit in the lives of participants. Further, the practice of self-compassion had more far-ranging impacts than anticipated as participants discussed, shared, and taught these practices with others within their circles of relationship and influence. Within a worldview in which everything is interconnected and relational, the compassion that these participants practiced towards themselves had more far-reaching energetic impacts, sending more compassion and care into the world.

As action research, this study has informed my own teaching practice and I found the benefits compelling enough to continue integrating self-compassion into other courses. From these results, I see that mindfulness, especially noticing the transience of emotions and patterns of self-talk, is particularly important to highlight for my students. Facilitating and sharing resources for specific self-compassion tools and practices were key for students, but it was important to have a variety of options as not all the practices worked well for everyone. On a larger scale, self-compassion deserves further exploration and integration within academic settings as a potential way to address the rising anxiety and distress we increasingly see in students of higher education, a reflection of our modern society as a whole. Self-compassion could be successfully woven into many academic courses or student development activities in simple ways that don't take a lot of time. It may be important to frame this practice in such a way that acknowledges its academic and personal benefits, such as decreased stress and increased confidence and clarity, so that students will be willing to try it. A professor or instructor can

model and/or facilitate simple self-compassion practices such as using the first five or ten minutes of class as a way to settle anxious energy and prepare students for better learning. Or self-compassion exercises could be folded into homework assignments and then could be focal points for short small group check-ins or discussion. [Self-compassion.org](https://www.self-compassion.org) and the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion are accessible online resources with activities related to self-compassion, including exercises, guided meditations, videos, and other resources.

Like any personal practice, self-compassion is a practice that normalizes, expands, and becomes more natural over time. Thus, repeated patterns of teaching and learning in which self-compassion is a part can help to reinforce the internal practice and extend its benefits. During the spring of 2020, I found myself once again teaching our program's Comps course, this time remotely and in the midst of a pandemic. I again included a self-compassion focus through weekly assignments and class activities, and students discussed the benefits they receive from this practice, how it calms, soothes, and centers them. And because they experienced these benefits, they once again shared these practices with friends, family, and colleagues. As I see this pattern repeat, I am reminded that in this time of increasing tension, anxiety, and even pandemic, self-compassion offers simple tools for self-calming, for clarity and persistence in our work, and can help us remember our sense of belonging, connectedness, and our capacity for love—even for ourselves. While this particular action research study was small and the results limited, my own practice of self-compassion and respect for what this practice can offer students has continued to grow. Since mindful self-compassion provides a state of warmhearted, connected presence during difficult times (Neff & Germer, 2018), this practice is worthy of continued exploration, especially now. In learning to lean into this beautiful, vulnerable practice with students, I have noticed that not only does mindful self-compassion support our teaching and learning work, but that it easily, readily, and continually seeps beyond our classroom spaces, amplifying loving-kindness, compassion, and support to a world in need.

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