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‘An old intelligence of the heart’: Towards the compassionate school

What is compassion’s relevance to mindfulness, to Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education and to spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development? This article attempts, in brief, to answer these fundamental questions and draws upon a recent book, *Towards the Compassionate School: from Golden Rule to Golden Thread* (Coles, 2015). The book was the result of three years research undertaken by the [CoED Foundation](#), a charity dedicated to bringing compassion into education and learning, in which its various authors use their specialist knowledge to unpick compassion’s role in the development of their specialism. Most recently, the book has been included in the DfE funded [PSHE character education toolkit](#).

David Hare (2016), the radical political playwright and commentator, perhaps articulated much of what many people, in the caring professions, genuinely feel when he argued that the neoliberal ideology, promulgated so ferociously by Thatcher and Reagan and their heirs, simply does not and cannot deliver.

It is not only that untrammelled market forces and small government do not work, but they actually make people worse off in so many areas of life.

One would expect that from Hare but remarkably, even the IMF (2016), has joined in the criticism; albeit of course in more measured language when they ask if neoliberalism has been oversold and argue that ‘instead of delivering growth, some neoliberal policies have increased inequality, in turn jeopardizing durable expansion...’. And yet we have a government sold on pursuing the privatisation agenda in public life. If we dare to object, as so many of us increasingly do, then we are wrong and are

roundly rebuked for our inability to understand the ‘right’ of course of action.

What are the necessary virtues for survival?

Are they exclusively neoliberal or is there an alternative model to that which has in the recent past been the accepted norm? Cue compassion. More and more people in all walks of life are rejecting the neoliberal paradigm that is essentially based on competition and consumerism in favour of one that is based upon collaboration and service; to one, in short, that has compassion at its very heart. That is not to say that the education reforms have not delivered in terms of academic attainment. In many ways and for an increasing number they have, but as Harry R Lewis, former Dean of Harvard, put it: we have produced ‘excellence without a soul’ (2006). For Lewis, this excellence is ‘hollow’, because higher education (and, by implication, those lower down the educational chain) has forgotten its essential purpose of creating better, well-rounded, moral individuals.

Although Lewis refers to Harvard and the USA, his analysis is equally relevant to England because our systems and worldviews are so similar. Lewis, like the Archbishop of Canterbury and Professor Ken Robinson amongst others, is clear about the solution. Harvard’s leaders have to embody self-understanding, strength of character, ‘compassion and empathy for others, as well as scholarly excellence.’ For them compassion and compassionate education can provide a new story from which can evolve new paradigms. Or more precisely, a paradigm based upon older spiritual and ethical truths, eloquently expressed by the American poet Wendell Berry:

*It is not "human genius"
that makes us human, but an old love,
an old intelligence of the heart
we gather to us from the world...*

It is this 'old love,' this intelligence of the heart, this compassion that we argue must be central to education systems, here and across the world, but compassion requires definition and its rationale has to be clarified. There are other equally pertinent questions that require addressing. What, for example, are the essential characteristics of a compassionate person and how would these play out in an education system groaning under the weight of unresearched reforms?

The nature of compassion

The word compassion itself however can be misunderstood. Hitherto seen by many as rather soft and woolly, it is now increasingly accepted that there are four components to compassion -

- the recognition of a person's or group's suffering
- an empathetic response to that suffering
- an active determination to alleviate that suffering and where possible its causes
- and the wisdom and knowledge to act wisely

You can recognise suffering which might be

sympathy. You can do your best to 'walk in' the sufferers' shoes, which might be empathy but it is only if you act upon these (hopefully wisely) that compassion occurs. The book's authors at CoED Foundation therefore describe compassion simply as love in action and after much discussion encapsulated their vision in a simple mnemonic, *Acts for Love* which detailed the values of a compassionate person. These values apply equally to young people, to teaching and support staff, to managers and governors, to care workers and psychologists. They form the bedrock of any compassionate education or care system.

The characteristics of a compassionate person

Table 1 below shows words linked to the mnemonic, *Acts for Love*. No doubt, most teachers if asked to conduct a brainstorming exercise on compassionate characteristics would produce a very similar list. Many of these are self-explanatory. Several, however, require further clarification. Some might list 'visionary' but few 'ordinary.' Most of the compassionate acts we and our pupils perform will be unremarkable everyday acts of goodness and kindness, but they are as important as great acts. This was perhaps best summed up by Mother Teresa who eloquently said, 'Not all of us can do great things.'

Table 1. Words linked to the mnemonic, *Acts of Love*.

| | | | | | |
|----------|---|----------|--|----------|--|
| <i>A</i> | SPIRATIONAL LTRUISTIC CTION ORIENTATED PPRECIATIVE | <i>F</i> | AIR ORGIVING UN | <i>L</i> | OVING EARNING |
| <i>C</i> | REATIVE AMPAIGNING OLLEGIAL HARITABLE OURAGEOUS | <i>O</i> | PEN PTIMISTIC | <i>O</i> | RDINARY |
| <i>T</i> | RUSTWORTHY RUTHFUL | <i>R</i> | ESPECTFUL ESPONSIBLE ESILIENT EFLECTIVE EFLEXIVE | <i>V</i> | ISIONARY |
| <i>S</i> | PIRITUAL ACRED ELF AWARE USTAINING YMPATHETIC | | | <i>E</i> | QUITABLE MPATHETIC THICAL MOTIONALLY LITERATE |

But we can do small things with great love.' Similarly, we all understand the importance of reflection and self-reflection but 'reflexive' may not have the same currency; yet it is a crucial skill that young people require in such a complex age as ours. Reflexivity is an approach through which we increasingly understand how we ourselves impact upon any given situation. Thus, for example, how we speak, how we dress, our skin colour may influence how other people see and respond to us. We are not neutral observers of the world for our very interaction elicits a range of responses which if we have understood can help in the development of empathy.

Why compassion and compassionate education? Why now?

Many of these characteristics, like empathy, altruism and kindness, can be seen as overarching principle systems which are accessible to everybody and have spawned their own educational movements. There are other big ideas that have similar aims to compassionate education but are expressed in different ways. Character education, for example is one that has great contemporary and government supported traction. The CoED Foundation argues that there are ten major drivers for compassionate change which it justifies in depth and which it calls the 'ten self-evident truths;' self-evident because nine of them are empirically based. The tenth is aspirational. We have already highlighted the dangers of a neoliberal economic approach which have produced disparities of wealth not seen since Edwardian times. In addition, issues of terror and counter terror, how we deal with mass migrations, deteriorating physical and mental health, and the perils of climate change all require a compassionate response, not one based on individualism and greed. These are some of the push factors, the negative drivers which demand change. In addition, there are six positive pull factors:

1. The first is time-honoured, encapsulated in the Golden Rule: treat everyone as you would wish to be treated. Major religious and ethical groups have come together to argue that in the [Charter of Compassion](#), the golden rule should be at the heart of all we do. Cities across the world are seeking to become compassionate, demonstrating that

the golden rule permeates every service they offer.

2. The second is startling in its originality. Neuroscience allows us to demonstrate empirically that humans are wired for compassion (Beckes et al., 2013) and that the more compassionate we are the more compassionate we become. This virtuous circle allows the brain to become wired to be compassionate. The obverse is equally true. The brain is deeply social and we know that how, and to whom we communicate alters its circuitry and our actions. The key is the experiences we have and the motivations that follow. As Dan Siegel writes in the foreword to the eminently readable *Buddha's Brain* (2009), 'the simple truth is that how we focus our attention, how we intentionally direct the flow of energy and information through our neural circuits, can directly alter the brain's activity and its structure'. As Hanson puts it, 'What flows through your mind sculpts your brain. Thus you can use your mind to change your brain for the better - which will benefit your whole being, and every other person whose life you touch.'
3. The third follows: Compassion can be taught, caught and cultivated.
4. The fourth, also empirically founded, is that successful organisations are built upon compassionate values.
5. The fifth relates to the power of technology, to the positive use of social media to build a more compassionate world.
6. The final factor should be seen as positive: our cities are increasingly places of great diversity where people from all countries, all faiths and all cultures reside. Compassionate education, with its emphasis on cultural development, can help significantly in building cohesive communities.

What is compassionate education?

We have the definitions, the logic and rationale for change. This is the new context in which are young people will grow. Neuroscience suggests that we are wired for compassion; and now we need a new story, a new paradigm upon which to

operate, one in which collaboration and service replace competition and consumerism. Education is at the foothills of these changes. *Towards the Compassionate School* offers a detailed breakdown of how this might develop. In summary, however, compassionate education is the conscious implementation of love in action, of the values and virtues outlined in the mnemonic 'acts for love'. It involves making compassion the organizing principle of everything we do. It embraces the spiritual, moral, social, cultural and intellectual development of students and of society, as well as their physical and mental health. It includes faith and interfaith approaches as well as secular movements devoted to values and character education, to educating the heart, to emotional literacy and to the building of empathy and resilience. Compassion in education is both product-based: curriculum; organization; systems; and process-driven: meditation; mindfulness; dialogic reasoning; empathetic listening; the power of the narrative and co-creation.

What is compassion's relevance to Mindfulness, PSHE and SMSC?

The following extracts, from *Towards the Compassionate School*, provide a content overview in the areas of mindfulness, PSHE and SMSC.

Compassionate Minds (and Brains) in Education

Tatton and Ramos, in their *Compassionate Minds (and Brains) in Education* chapter, examine in depth the emerging neuroscience data related to the developing brain and "brain informed" ways of working in the classroom. The field of contemplative neuroscience is fast expanding and bringing into the mainstream neuroanatomical terminology and findings from neuroimaging studies to help us understand what happens in the brain when we learn to pay attention, moment by moment, without judgement, and the benefits this brings to the educational setting. These studies are challenging the assumption that the brain follows a pre-determined developmental trajectory. Rather, we are learning that the brain is highly plastic and much more malleable than previously thought. Although the majority of these studies have been conducted with adults, many of the findings have direct implications for how we work with our young people in the classroom to help them

build healthier neural networks that will equip them with the skills they need to function as emotionally resilient and resourceful adults. They consider the training requirements for teachers to deliver mindfulness in the classroom and also describe the changes observed in the brain following these distinct but related trainings. These data from the clinical, educational and imaging data indicate that mindfulness of the body is the key to engaging with our own emotional experiences in a more skilful and compassionate way and that this, in turn, is a vital building block in developing the ability to be more compassionate towards others. The chapter concludes with a helpful 'ten things I can do right now' which have immediate impact.

Compassion through the Development of Physical and Mental Health and Well-Being

John Lloyd employs his many years of experience in *Compassion through the Development of Physical and Mental Health and Well-Being* where he argues that compassionate education and compassionate schools are central to achieving good physical, mental and emotional health and well-being. For him, a compassionate school is a healthy school in as much as it promotes and develops health literacy in the young where they are able to assess and evaluate information, managing risk and making lifestyle choices that develop and maintain healthy lifestyles and, ultimately, good health. A compassionate school also promotes the health and well-being of its entire staff, recognising that a healthy workforce is more likely to be effective in the delivery of high-class teaching and the management of behaviour as well as the relationships necessary to be effective at every level. John references the 10 principles of PSHE education and OfSTED best practice and offers a range of practical compassionate signposts that will help schools in an environment driven by examination results.

Compassion through Spiritual Development

In his chapter in *Compassion through Spiritual Development*, Coles argues that it might be true to say that, without compassion, there is no spirituality. One could equally argue, however, that without spirituality, compassion would not exist for compassion forms the quintessential bedrock of spiritual practice. Compassion and spirituality are interwoven. Indeed, the

compassionate school will, almost by definition, be a school promoting spiritual development. Words, however, require careful definition. The chapter unpacks the terms 'spirit', 'spirituality', 'spiritual' and 'spiritual development' and explores their relationship to compassion. It defines spiritual development as perspective, process and content; and provides a detailed taxonomy employing the mnemonic *Be Oracles Power*, which aims to encapsulate spiritual development's essential characteristics as well as offering schools a simple aide-memoire. Coles provides a range of 'spiritual signposts' which educators can take into their own settings. His overall aim is to help to begin to ground the practice of spirituality into teaching and learning experiences that are readily understood by all; can be translated into the language of the classroom and which makes spiritual experiences for young people an everyday lived reality.

Compassion though Social and Moral Development

David Woods in his chapter on *Compassion though Social and Moral Development* investigates their contribution to the overall ethos and culture of the compassionate school. Moral development is defined as the ability of pupils to make judgements about how to behave and their reasons for such behaviour reflecting upon rights, responsibilities and relationships. Woods offers a range of suggested activities and examines character development, emotional intelligence, the rights respecting school, behaviour policies and programmes and restorative justice. Social development is defined as the development of social skills in different contexts, willingness to participate in a number of social settings and an understanding of the way societies function. Woods explores specific aspects of social development as the citizenship curriculum and student voice.

Compassion though Cultural Development

Brown and Coles in their chapter on *Compassion though Cultural Development* maintain that all education systems transmit their own view of culture and cultural development, whether they are part of their stated aims or not. Definitions of culture are not and have never been neutral but reflect society's contemporary dominant values. They unpick the creative and

anthropological perspectives on culture and relate them to their transmission and development within schools. They explore the dynamic and interactive relationship between culture and identity, and argue that, especially when viewed through the prism of compassion, cultural development is a key vehicle for helping young people become skilled compassionate cultural navigators in an age of multiple identities.

A Curriculum for Compassion

Mick Waters brings it all together when he considers what a *Curriculum for Compassion* might look like. He examines the way that the school curriculum has developed over time and how it has been influenced by the sway of politics on a global scale. He considers where compassion would fit in the curriculum offer; whether it would replace elements that currently exist and act as alternative or complement and integrate with the work that schools already do to subtly change the way that pupils are prepared to make a difference to the world and supported for their own futures whilst enjoying the present that is their childhood.

Conclusion

Schopenhauer called it right: 'compassion is the only morality.' If we can actively and consciously teach, model and cultivate it throughout our total education service young people will be kinder to each other and indeed to themselves. I hope this article goes some way to explaining how and why this might be achieved.

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