UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology

How Can We Best Promote a Culture of Compassion in Schools?

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In recent decades, there have been increasing calls to cultivate compassionate cultures in school settings. Much of this is driven by the wealth of research linking greater compassion with a range of positive psychological outcomes in both children and adults, including improved wellbeing, mental health, and interpersonal relationships. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how we can best promote a culture of compassion in schools. The aims of the current essay are twofold. First, relevant psychological theory and research in the field of compassion are summarised. Specifically, key theoretical conceptualisations and definitions of compassion, normative developmental trajectories of core compassionate capacities, and individual differences in the development and expression of compassion are explored. Second, insights derived from compassion theory and research are used to present evidence-informed recommendations for how we might best promote a culture of compassion in schools. It is argued that efforts to build compassionate cultures should take a multifaceted, developmentally sensitive, and inclusive and systemic whole-school approach. Such an approach should embed principles and practices to develop both compassion for the self and for others throughout the school community and curriculum. Further research is needed to evaluate such an approach and to additionally clarify, strengthen, and extend the different strands of compassion theory and research which underpin this approach. The essay concludes with implications for educational psychologists.

Scientific and societal interest in compassion has grown rapidly in recent decades. In particular, there has been increasing focus on promoting a culture of compassion in education and a growing number of initiatives to explicitly integrate compassion into school settings (Al-Ghabban, 2018; Welford & Langmead, 2015). Much of this stems from the well-documented links between increased compassion and a range of beneficial psychological outcomes. In children and young people (CYP), greater compassion is connected to increased wellbeing (Neff & McGehee, 2010), resilience (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017), and reduced stress (Galla, 2016) and depressive symptoms (Stolow et al., 2016). CYP displaying more prosocial behaviours have better peer relationships (Layous et al., 2012), self-esteem (Zuffianò et al., 2014), and long-term academic achievement (Caprara et al., 2000). In adults, greater compassion is also associated with improved wellbeing (Zessin et al., 2015), interpersonal relationships (Shonin et al., 2015), and reduced depressive symptoms, negative affect (López et al., 2018), and distress (Shonin et al., 2015). Therefore, cultivating compassion is likely to benefit both children and adults within the school community.

Despite the growing body of evidence linking compassion to positive psychological outcomes and calls to promote a culture of compassion in schools, relatively little attention has been paid to how this might best be achieved (Peterson, 2017). The aims of this essay are twofold. First, relevant psychological theory and research in the scientific field of compassion will be summarised. Specifically, theoretical conceptualisations and definitions of compassion, how compassion develops in CYP, and key factors which influence its development will be considered. Second, recommendations for how we might best promote a culture of compassion in schools will be presented based on the insights derived from compassion theory and research. It will be argued that promotional efforts should take a multifaceted, developmentally sensitive, and systemically

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embedded whole-school approach, and attend to the development of both compassion for the self and others in all members of the school community. Implications for educational psychologists (EPs) will be discussed.

Theoretical Conceptualisations and Definitions

Compassion is generally regarded as an innate capacity that evolved to produce caring and protective behaviours towards offspring, and subsequently broadened to include others within kinship groups and, ultimately, strangers (Goetz et al., 2010; Preston, 2013). The tripartite model of affect regulation (Gilbert, 2009) argues that compassion emerged as part of an affect regulation system designed to regulate negative affect. The model proposes three systems:

1. The 'threat' system, which attends and responds to threats and gives rise to feelings such as anxiety, disgust, and anger.
2. The 'drive' system, which directs us to strive for resources and rewards and gives rise to hedonistic feelings.
3. The 'soothing' system, which is associated with feelings of connectedness, contentment, and safety.

Within this model, compassion is seen as rooted in the soothing system and playing a critical role in regulating the threat and drive systems. Positive mental wellbeing is proposed to result from appropriate balance between the systems, whereas mental health difficulties are associated with overactivity, underactivity, or limited flexibility in the systems.

In psychological literature, compassion has been defined in a number of ways, but is generally viewed as being multifaceted, consisting of cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioural elements. Strauss and colleagues (2016) reviewed the range of compassion definitions in the literature and consolidated these into a five-element definition which involves the following processes:

1. Recognising suffering.
2. Understanding the universality of suffering in human experience.
3. Feeling for the person suffering.
4. Tolerating any uncomfortable feelings that arise (e.g., distress, fear) in order to stay open to and accepting of the person suffering.
5. Being motivated to act or acting to alleviate suffering.

Consistent with Gilbert's (2009) model of affect regulation, this definition highlights the capacity to regulate negative emotions as a core feature of compassion.

Importantly, in Strauss et al.'s (2016) definition, the five elements can be applied to both compassion directed to the self and to other people. This is in line with Eastern philosophical accounts of compassion which emphasise the integration of the 'self' and 'other' and assert that self-compassion is a necessary foundation for the development and expression of 'true' other-compassion (Gilbert & Choden, 2013; Quaglia et al., 2021). This is also consistent with Gilbert's (2009) evolutionary model, which describes compassion as emerging from the soothing system for self-regulation. Empirical support for the importance of first building self-compassion comes from the literature on burnout and 'compassion fatigue', which consistently links self-compassion to reduced burnout and compassion fatigue, and greater confidence in providing compassionate care (Beaumont et al., 2016; Kemper et al., 2019). Self-compassion has also been found to mitigate the impact of increased burnout on barriers to other-compassion (Dev et al., 2018).

Development of Compassion

Understanding the development of compassion has the potential to further our knowledge of how compassion might present at different ages, the factors that influence its emergence, and how we might best intervene to promote its development. Given the multidimensional nature of compassion, various trajectories need to be considered when mapping its development. Research examining the developmental trajectories of compassionate capacities in CYP has predominantly focused on the affective and behavioural components, namely, other-oriented empathic connection and prosocial

behaviour.

Studies have generally shown that empathic connection and prosocial behaviour emerge early in life and increase throughout childhood. Roth-Hanania and colleagues (2011), using an accelerated longitudinal design with three cohorts of infants aged between eight and 16 months, showed that before the second year of life, infants showed modest degrees of empathic concern towards others in distress but rarely displayed prosocial behaviours. From 10 months of age, infants showed continuous increases in empathic concern and by 16 months, there were frequent displays of prosocial behaviour. They also found that empathic concern at 10 months predicted subsequent prosocial behaviour, two and four months later. These findings have been supported by other studies showing that infants display concern for others in their first year of life and exhibit helping behaviour in their second (Davidov et al., 2013; Svetlova et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies also typically show that concern for others and prosocial behaviours gradually increase from early to late childhood (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1998; Malti et al., 2013). Such findings suggest that the development of empathic concern may be a precursor to the development of prosocial behaviour. Increases in prosocial behaviour also result from the development of increasingly sophisticated skills in recognising, understanding, and regulating emotions, perspective taking, and moral reasoning (Denham et al., 2003; Eggum et al., 2011; Neldner et al., 2018).

Although existing research has advanced our understanding of the development of compassionate capacities, there are several key gaps for future research to address. Research examining the developmental trajectory of other aspects of compassion (e.g., cognitive process of perspective taking) is scarce compared to the wealth of findings on the development of empathic connection and prosocial behaviour. Developmental research has also focused on other-oriented capacities and much less is known about the developmental trajectories of self-compassionate processes and how they relate to other-compassion processes. Furthermore, in addition to understanding how the core elements of compassion develop in CYP, an important question is when and how elements become integrated during development. For example, to gain insight into the development of an integrated experience of compassion, rather than simply correlating facets (e.g., empathic connection and prosocial behaviour) across time, it would be helpful to examine whether one facet (e.g., prosocial behaviour) is contingent on others (e.g., empathic connection) across different ages.

In addition to research evidencing developmental growth in core compassionate capacities across childhood, the literature on psychological programmes developed to enhance compassion support the potential for self-compassion and other-compassion to be cultivated through intervention, for both adults (Kirby et al., 2017) and CYP (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017; Karakasidou et al., 2021). This highlights the potential for compassion to be learnt and continually developed within educational contexts.

Beyond research on the normative development of compassionate capacities in CYP, there has been considerable interest in individual differences in how these capacities develop. In the following subsection, the influence of CYP's attachment security will be summarised, as an example of a factor which impacts the development of compassion and informs our understanding of how we might best promote a culture of compassion in schools.

Attachment and Compassion

Attachment theory proposes that humans have an innate attachment behavioural system that, from birth, motivates them to seek close relationships with protective attachment figures (e.g., parents) in times of need (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment figures who are consistently sensitive and responsive foster a sense of attachment security (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This results in the creation of positive internal working models (IWM), or mental representations of the self and other people (e.g., as trustworthy, worthy of love and care; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017), which guide children's behaviours and support their expressions of compassion (Gross et al., 2017). The development of the attachment system is theorised to co-occur with the development and

activation of the soothing affect regulation system (Depue & Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005), out of which compassion emerges (Gilbert, 2009). The caring behaviours of attachment figures stimulates the soothing system, calming feelings associated with overarousal and threat in infants (Gilbert, 2009). When our early needs are not responded to in a sensitive, supportive, and consistent way, insecure attachments are instead formed, which result in negative IWMs (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969) and undermine compassionate responses (Gross et al., 2017).

In support of the theorised links between attachment and compassion, research has shown that early caregiving experiences and attachment security affect the development and expression of self-compassion and other-compassion. Attachment security correlates strongly and positively with self-compassion in adults, with self-compassion significantly mediating the relationship between attachment security and compassion for others (Sarling, 2020). Adults' recollections of positive parental support are associated with greater self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping et al., 2015). Additionally, in their review of the empirical literature on attachment and prosocial behaviour, Gross and colleagues (2017) found that secure attachment or positive IWMs are generally positively associated with prosocial behaviour across different developmental stages, from infancy to adolescence.

Although attachment security is typically conceptualised as being stable and global, emerging research indicates that it can change over time and in response to life events (e.g., divorce, loss of a parent) (Fraley, 2019). Attachment theorists and researchers have also argued that in addition to global attachment representations, people can have IWMs specific to particular relational categories (e.g., peers, teachers) and particular people within those categories (Overall et al., 2003). Even if they differ from a person's general attachment style, when activated, these specific representations can impact their behaviour and experiences (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). The variable nature of attachment presents promising opportunities to strengthen attachment security and create more positive IWMs through intervention. Experimental studies have found that repetitive priming of attachment security can have lasting and positive effects on people's self-views, expectations of relationships (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007), compassion, and prosocial behaviour (Mikulincer et al., 2005).

Taken together, current findings on the relationship between attachment and compassion have important implications for how we might best support the development and expression of compassion in CYP. They indicate that compassion can be facilitated by strengthening CYP's general attachment security and/or supporting their development of positive specific attachment representations.

Application to Promoting a Culture of Compassion in Schools

The previous sections present an overview of relevant psychological theory and research in the science of compassion. Although further research is needed to clarify, strengthen, and extend the different strands of existing research on compassion, current theoretical and empirical insights present a useful evidence-informed starting point from which we can begin to build a culture of compassion in schools. Such efforts should account for the following key findings:

1. Compassion is a multidimensional prosocial construct, comprising cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioural elements. Efforts to cultivate compassion should take a multifaceted approach.
2. Elements of compassion have distinct normative developmental trajectories and can grow in response to intervention. The development of compassion can also be affected by environmental and relational conditions (e.g., attachment security). A developmentally sensitive approach is therefore needed.
3. Self-compassion is an important foundation for the development of other-compassion. To effectively create a culture of compassion, we must attend to the self-compassion and wellbeing of all members of the school community in an inclusive and systemic way.

Each point will be considered in terms of its

application to schools.

A Multifaceted Approach

Compassion is widely regarded as being multifaceted and involves recognising suffering, situating it as part of the shared human experience, emotionally connecting with the person suffering, tolerating uncomfortable feelings, and helping, or being motivated to help (Strauss et al., 2016). Approaches to promoting a culture of compassion in schools should therefore be multifaceted and aim to develop the core capacities that comprise compassion.

Nguyen and colleagues (2021) recently reviewed the literature on compassion in educational settings and proposed a multifaceted instructional model to cultivate the five elements of compassion (Strauss et al., 2016). They recommend that educators use an instructional sequence of teaching, consistently modelling, and practising when supporting the development of compassion. Examples of classroom strategies to support the development of the five elements include using questions and dialogue to explore examples of suffering (e.g., "who is upset?"; "how do we know they are upset?") (recognising suffering); using shared reading and roleplay to increase understanding of suffering as part of the human experience (universality of suffering); journaling as a way of exploring feelings towards the self and others during challenging times (emotional resonance); using compassion visualisations to practise emotion regulation skills (tolerating distress); and practising acts of caring and forgiveness towards peers (helping).

Although this model considers the multidimensional nature of compassion, the specific examples included relate primarily to the cultivation of other-compassion and are based on developing compassion in early childhood education. It would be helpful for educational models to extend this work to consider what self-oriented and other-oriented compassion-based practices might look like for older children, adolescents, and adults within the school community. In their review of the development of compassion, Roeser and colleagues (2018) outline key psychological skills that can be targeted in association with the five elements of compassion that can be applied across the life span, including focusing attention, social awareness, emotional awareness, perspective taking, emotion regulation, and strategies for prosocial action. Models for cultivating elements of compassion for all people in the school community could include strategies which target these psychological skills. Whilst some of these skills are addressed in existing social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes in schools (Gedikoglu, 2021; Malti et al., 2016), it has been argued that skills specific to the development of both self-compassion and other-compassion are absent from these programmes (Jazaieri, 2018). Addressing this omission may be particularly important given evidence showing that SEL programmes that target more compassion-related constructs (e.g., emotional awareness and connection, caring) are associated with larger effects on social-emotional competencies and academic functioning (Malti et al., 2016). The effectiveness of such programmes may therefore be optimised by increasing the degree to which they develop the multifaceted skills specific to compassion.

A Developmentally Sensitive Approach

Given that the core dimensions of compassion develop across infancy and childhood and have distinct developmental trajectories, specific approaches to enhancing compassion in CYP should be developmentally tailored. Malti and colleagues (2016) argue that comprehensive tailoring, that accounts for developmental differences in compassionate profiles, involves the need to differentiate compassion-enhancing strategies both between and within age groups. This would ensure that CYP of varying developmental age and stage receive strategies that appropriately build upon their existing skills and capacities.

It is important to note that although efforts to cultivate compassion should build upon CYP's existing capacities, which may involve focusing on developing skills related to particular elements, theoretically, compassion involves the interplay and overlap of all five elements (Strauss et al., 2016). Whilst more research is needed to explore when and how distinct developmental trajectories converge into an

integrated experience of compassion, it is important that strategies to enhance compassion in CYP explicitly build connections between the different dimensions to facilitate a fuller understanding of the construct. For example, when focusing on encouraging prosocial behaviour, attention should also be given to motivations for such behaviour, including recognition of suffering, feelings of connection, emotion regulation, and the desire to alleviate suffering.

Related to the need to match approaches for cultivating compassion to CYP's developmental stage, which accounts for individual differences in compassionate capacities, there is the need to acknowledge environmental and relational conditions that influence the development of compassion, such as CYP's attachment security. Research shows that through intervention, attachment security can be strengthened, and this has beneficial effects on compassion and prosocial behaviour (Mikulincer et al., 2005). People can also have attachment representations that are specific to particular people, and this can influence their global attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). These findings have important implications for building compassionate school cultures; they highlight the potential added benefits of including strategies to develop and strengthen positive attachment relationships within the school community.

Research on attachment relationships in schools emphasise the important role that teachers can play as attachment figures (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012) and the benefits of secure teacher-student attachment relationships on a range of social, emotional, and academic outcomes for CYP (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). The importance of additionally promoting positive peer relationships in schools, for CYP's development of compassionate capacities, has also been supported (Portt et al., 2020). This is especially important as children get older; peer relationships become increasingly important as children develop, with a greater number of attachment-related functions shifting from key adults to peers (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

Bergin and Bergin (2009) recommend a range of practices for promoting attachment-like relationships in schools, both at the individual level and in terms of school policy. Suggestions include equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to relate sensitively, warmly, and constructively with children, particularly those who have insecure primary attachments; helping CYP develop positive peer relationships; and implementing inclusive and positive school-wide policies. Although more research is needed in this area, to determine the impact of such practices (e.g., on CYP's specific school-based attachment relationships, global attachment security, and compassion) and the exact nature of this impact (e.g., whether secure school-based attachments are more beneficial for certain CYP, such as those with insecure primary attachments; the relative importance of peer and teacher attachments), the evidence points to the need to attend to differences between children in attachment security and the power of building positive relationships in schools.

Self-Compassion as a Foundation

Compassion theory and research have highlighted the interconnectedness between self-compassion and other-compassion and the foundational role of self-compassion (Gilbert & Choden, 2013; Quaglia et al., 2021). Such insights have important implications for the promotion of compassionate cultures in school. They emphasise the importance of building self-compassion prior to, or alongside, other-compassion in CYP. They also point to the necessity of developing self-compassion and other-compassion in members of the school community beyond CYP. Not only is this important because developing compassion in CYP requires the consistent modelling of compassionate qualities (Nguyen et al., 2021), but a compassionate approach to education involves recognising the fundamental shared human experience of suffering, irrespective of differences between individuals, and necessarily includes all members of the school community.

A key part of promoting compassion in schools, and one that is often stressed both in the scientific literature and public discourse, is supporting the self-compassion and wellbeing of teachers. Much of this emphasis comes from findings that schools are becoming increasingly stressful environments for teachers, with 33% of UK teachers leaving the profession within the

first five years (Long & Danechi, 2021), 70% reporting adverse effects of work on their mental health within the previous year, and 57% reporting adverse physical health effects within the previous year (NASUWT, 2019). In addition to the negative effects on teachers' individual health and wellbeing, these issues are problematic in terms of cultivating a culture of compassion, given the association between burnout due to work stress and barriers to compassion (Dev et al., 2018) and links between teacher and student wellbeing (Roffey, 2012). Supporting self-compassion in teachers is key, with research showing that self-compassion protects against burnout and mitigates its adverse effects on other-compassion (Dev et al., 2018). In teachers, self-compassion is linked to greater resilience to stress (Chen, 2022) and increased observer-rated emotional support in the classroom (positive climate, teacher warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness) (Jennings, 2014).

An emerging evidence base supports the potential to improve teachers' compassion and wellbeing-related outcomes through psychological interventions based on compassion. Recently, Matos and colleagues' (2022) randomised controlled trial of an eight-week compassion-based intervention in teachers across different pre-school, primary, and secondary schools found that compared to those in the waitlist control group, teachers who received the intervention showed significant and medium-large improvements in self-compassion, other-compassion, positive affect, anxiety, and depression. Although further robust research is needed to replicate and extend such findings (e.g., measuring a wider range of wellbeing-related outcomes; exploring long-term effects), these findings suggest that compassion-based interventions can be effective at raising staff compassion and wellbeing-related outcomes.

Despite the potential to increase teachers' compassion and wellbeing through intervention, there is growing consensus that issues with retention and work stress within the profession are systemic and therefore necessitate systemic solutions (McLaughlin, 2015). The main sources of work stress for teachers include high workload, long working hours, lack of resources, feeling undervalued, and the pressures of setting targets and achieving results (Ofsted, 2019). Research on the barriers to compassion in other caring professions have highlighted poor leadership, work overload, poor working conditions, role conflicts, and role confusion as inhibitors of compassion (West & Chowla, 2017).

Therefore, within schools, promoting a culture of compassion goes beyond specific or one-off initiatives implemented in isolation, such as requiring teachers to teach, model, and practise compassionate strategies with CYP or delivering short-term compassion interventions. It requires the embedding of compassionate principles and practices systemically and inclusively, throughout the school curriculum and community. Such an approach to promoting compassion in schools is likely to involve integrating the implementation of compassion-based programmes for staff, delivery of programmes and strategies for CYP, and review of school policies and practices that might inhibit compassion.

Conclusions and Implications for EP Practice

To conclude, compassion theory and research shows that a culture of compassion can best be promoted in schools by taking a multifaceted, developmentally sensitive, and whole-school approach, where principles of, and practices to build, both self-compassion and other-compassion are integrated and embedded throughout the school community and curriculum. This recommended approach represents an evidence-informed starting point and may evolve as the field develops, particularly in the directions highlighted throughout the essay.

EPs are well-placed to support schools to promote a culture of compassion in terms of their knowledge of, and easy access to, relevant psychological theory and research, skills, and position within schools (e.g., to work in a consultative capacity, closely and in collaboration with CYP and staff). They can therefore support compassionate cultures within schools by keeping abreast of the literature on compassion, critically evaluating emerging evidence, communicating research findings, and

facilitating the extension of findings into real-world school settings and implementation of evidence-informed practice (Campbell & Green, 2022). An important part of the implementation process involves working collaboratively with schools to develop their capacity to support compassion. Specific collaborative practices could involve: facilitating consultations with leadership teams to reflect on current school systems and policies and how these might strengthen or inhibit compassion; supporting schools to gather views from CYP and staff about their perceptions of the school climate, systemic issues, and what could be done to promote compassion; supporting schools in delivering compassion-based programmes for staff and CYP; and delivering whole-school training on compassion and empowering staff to implement practices to promote a culture of compassion. Finally, EPs can support the monitoring and evaluation of an embedded, multifaceted, developmentally sensitive, and whole-school approach to compassion. This has the potential to generate valuable practice-based evidence to further inform the promotion of compassionate cultures in education.

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