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ARTICLE



A compassion framework: the role of compassion in schools in promoting well-being and supporting the social and emotional development of children and young people

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ABSTRACT

Our current social and political context is awash with pronouncements about the growing number of children and young people with mental health issues. This paper explores how school culture that is founded upon a *compassion framework* is well placed to support the promotion of pupils' mental health and well-being. Drawing upon experiences of being a senior leader in a specialist social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) educational setting and of supporting a wide range of mainstream schools in the area of SEMH and well-being, this paper outlines some of the conflicting interests and ubiquitous tensions that present challenges in the contemporary UK education system. Conceptualisations of compassion and other relevant theoretical perspectives are referred to in order to illustrate how the, often, at times, competing needs of different constituencies (pupils, teaching and non-teaching staff, management, parents and carers) within school communities are best served when disentangled from each other and addressed with attention and clarity.

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Introduction

It is not controversial to argue that alongside families, schools have some influence over, and responsibility for, children and young people's well-being and mental health. Spratt, Shucksmith, Philip, and Watson (2006, p. 14) maintain that the school environment 'has the potential to either enhance or damage the mental well-being of both staff and pupils, and that school managers carry a significant responsibility to create an environment that promotes good mental health, acts to prevent development of problems in vulnerable groups and supports those experiencing difficulties'. It is much harder, however, to find agreement on what this responsibility entails and to get consensus over how pupils' and even staff's well-being should be ensured. Children and young people's mental health, identified as a priority by the UK government due to high

rates of illness, is now getting considerable attention in the media (BBC, 2017). The Conservative government's mental health campaigner and 'tsar', Natasha Devon, identified the following factors as being central to this crisis: Poverty, academic pressure, lack of family time, social media and reductions in CAMHS – Child & adolescent mental health services (Aitkenhead, 2016). As schools and local authorities struggle to address the issue of children's and young people's mental health, significant reductions in health and education funding (Weale, 2016) and a concomitant raising of the threshold for NHS intervention are compounding the situation (Camden, 2017). Some local education authorities (LEAs) have implemented pilots and initiatives including the sharing of well-being workers across clusters of schools (Tomsett, 2017), whilst many schools are urgently trying to ensure that all staff have received at least basic training in identifying signs of mental illness in pupils; additionally, new initiatives such as school mental health first-aiders have been launched (Bloom, 2017).

Compassion has been discussed extensively in fields such as philosophy, health and social care, parenting and management (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Snow, 1991). This paper, however, draws on literature emanating from psychology, mental health and well-being studies. Using a mixture of experiential vignettes drawn from the author's work as a teacher, senior leader and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) consultant over the past two decades, and prior research, the following sections focus on how a 'compassion framework' can bring cohesion to the disparate approaches, systems and practices that have been designed to promote well-being and improve mental health in schools. Most of the examples provided involve pupils who have been identified as having SEMH needs. In order to prevent identification and to preserve confidentiality in every respect, names have been omitted and personal details have been significantly changed. The pupils referred to have either attended a special provision designed to address their SEMH need or were on special educational needs (SEN) registers in mainstream schools. Although the category of pupils who experience mental health difficulties is much larger than those diagnosed with special educational needs, the vignettes described here and the issues that they raise will be of relevance to all.

Compassion and a compassion framework

The compassion framework proposed here is not something that was carefully theorised, planned and then implemented at the schools to which the vignettes refer. Rather, in what follows, the argument distils an approach that is based on an understanding of some of the failures and successes that contemporary British schools have had in this area. It is a work in progress that requires further development and evaluation by practitioners and researchers across a range of contexts. This approach in schools goes beyond specific initiatives and encompasses all interactions and behaviours

within a school context. It recognises the importance of a cohesive and connected school community for mental wellness (Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012). The framework is based on the following definition of compassion: 'being sensitive to the suffering of self and others, with a deep commitment to try to prevent and relieve it' (Gilbert & Choden, 2013, p. XXV). Each element in this definition can be applied fruitfully in a school setting.

Sensitivity to the suffering of 'others'

Being sensitive to suffering 'of others' is a basic tenet of many approaches to mental health implemented in schools such as being aware of the signs that a pupil might display to suggest they are not well or have a mental health issue (Whittaker, 2017). The phrase 'suffering of others' should not be limited to staff sensitivity to pupils' needs; indeed, staff well-being is an increasing cause for concern across the UK education system (Banning-Lover, 2016). There are studies that point to the impact that this, in turn, has on pupil well-being (Roffey, 2012). Many staff experienced in working with young people are aware that pupils' awareness of the mental health needs of fellow pupils is also an area that requires attention (Newton, 2016).

Sensitivity to the suffering of 'self'

Being 'sensitive to the suffering of self' is a complex and often overlooked area. Some school mental health initiatives are, in part, about developing self-awareness so that pupils can begin to understand why they feel how they do, how such feelings can lead to specific behaviours, and which strategies might improve their self-worth and well-being (Hart & Heaver, 2015). The definition of compassion referred to earlier involves these elements: Having compassion for others, receiving compassion from others and having compassion for self. These areas have a symbiotic relationship in which each impacts on the other. Therefore, in order to build our capacity for compassion, it is important to be aware of, and to cultivate, all of these areas of compassion. Being sensitive to suffering in self and wanting to alleviate and prevent such suffering does not mean withdrawing from difficult situations or into self-pity; it involves having compassion for self or 'self-compassion'. Neff defines self-compassion as 'being touched and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering...' (Neff, 2003, p. 87). This is an important practice in any family, group, community or school because it enhances empathetic behaviour. The extent to which we are self-compassionate can impact on our capacity to have compassion for others as Gilbert & Choden explain:

It's simply not possible to develop deeper levels of compassion if you're not open to compassion coming towards you and you are resistant to developing self-compassion. For example, if there are things in you that you block or detest, then you're going to struggle to empathise with similar things in other people. (2013, p. XXX)

In a school context, influenced by the need for budgetary efficiencies, and by the top-down imperative to raise attainment amongst pupils, some school leaders no doubt assume that to prioritise self-compassion is an unnecessary extravagance or distraction. However, in order to address urgent mental health needs by maximising our capacity for compassion in organisational settings, we need to ensure that we address all elements of organisational life and not just the ones that 'appear' to be most relevant to educational achievement. As the following vignette illustrates, electing to neglect some aspects of communal life in schools is a false economy:

Vignette 1

A school offered 'reflective sessions' for staff to attend on a voluntary basis. The rationale behind these sessions was to give staff a space to reflect on how they felt about pupils and difficult situations. This space was not for talking about achievement strategies or school systems. In one particular example of disclosure and discovery during a session, a teacher was recounting how they felt about a pupil who was causing them considerable distress. They found it difficult to relate to and deal with this pupil, who displayed extremely challenging behaviours. The teacher described a series of occasions when the pupil had been overly physical and, on occasion, had pushed or punched them when thwarted. There were aspects of the pupil's behaviour that the teacher really didn't like: namely, a tendency to be emotional, melodramatic and camp. This behaviour made them feel uncomfortable and unsettled. In reflecting on this affective discomfort, the teacher realised that this feeling probably had more to do with their own sense of self, the way they were raised, and their social values, than with the pupil. After reaching this understanding, the teacher was able to have considerably less ill-feeling towards the pupil and to focus on the aspects of their behaviour that were objectively problematic. It also brought some clarity and calm to the teacher's mind.

Having time for reflection within these sessions gave staff the opportunity to be sensitive to their own 'suffering', to ask questions about their own responses and to unpack their feelings. This, in turn, helped to develop more compassionate relationships with pupils. In that they helped staff to disentangle their own feelings from pupils' needs, these sessions helped to build the organisation's overall capacity for compassion. Staff could thus focus with greater clarity and attentiveness on how best to meet pupils' needs.

'Commitment to alleviate' and 'commitment to prevent'

Understood and applied properly, compassion is not an easy option. Let me explain. A common element in working with pupils with SEMH needs involves de-escalation during periods of anxiety, stress, anger and emotional intensity. However, once calm has been restored and immediate 'suffering' has been 'alleviated', the job is far from done. In order to prevent future episodes (of suffering), pupils often need to be encouraged to reflect, increase self-awareness and develop strategies. This process may trigger even more difficult emotions, as pupils re-visit painful or unsettling emotional states. Nonetheless, it is an essential stage for them to go through. The point that I make here is precisely that compassion is often misunderstood as being 'nice' and about avoiding distress. However, if the intention is for practitioners to help to prevent future suffering, pupils need to be supported to develop traits and skills to be resilient and flourish. In summary, a 'commitment to prevent suffering' may involve experiencing 'suffering' in order to reach this goal.

Key competencies of compassion

Given the degree of challenge and complexity that practitioners working with pupils with SEMH needs face, the capacity to be reflective, to 'think on one's feet' and to make 'judgement calls' is essential. In order to be able to do this it is important for schools to cultivate in staff what Gilbert refers to as the 'key competencies' (Gilbert, 2017, p. 52) necessary to engage with suffering and alleviate and prevent suffering. Gilbert discusses 12 such competencies, but in what follows only a selection will be explored.

'Empathy' and 'compassionate non-judgement'

Bullying causes considerable distress and can have a very damaging effect on mental health (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001). It is essential that schools have effective systems to combat bullying in all its forms and that victims' well-being is at the centre of all interventions and actions. Sanctions against bullies are not necessarily, however, the most effective solution: in fact, sanctions can create the 'illusion of action' (O'Brien, 2016). Pupils with SEMH needs, who display patterns of bullying behaviour over time and who do not respond to warnings and reprimands, need alternatives to sanction-based approaches. A compassion framework has much to offer in this respect.

When outlining the processes that give rise to compassion, Gilbert and Choden explain the importance of empathetic processes. They add that these are not always straightforward, since '[e]mpathy can require a decision to move into places that are difficult' (Gilbert & Choden, 2013, p. 159). If our ultimate goal is to alleviate and prevent suffering, then empathetic skills and

practices should not be viewed as weak or soft but as, potentially, the only effective course of action, as the following vignette illustrates.

Vignette 2

An older pupil was bullying a younger pupil, threatening them and invading their personal space. The younger pupil was clearly intimidated. Several staff issued warnings to the perpetrator but were ignored. Staff present felt that they had to intervene and some stepped between the two pupils to stop the intimidation. Despite repeated requests, the perpetrator refused to leave the scene. So, it was decided to escort the victim out of the area. Subsequently, the perpetrator showed no remorse and refused to back down. I recall my own feelings at the time as being ones of anger at what was happening and a desire for the perpetrator to be punished severely. I also recall a feeling of dislike for the perpetrator at the time of the incident. My colleague, however, seemed less incensed. This colleague had taken every reasonable step in trying to stop the situation from developing. They were simply not as outraged as I was. Later in the day, we discussed the event. I disclosed my feeling that we had to deal harshly with pupils who bully others. I confessed that had I been in the victim's position I would have felt terrified. My colleague told me that they identified with the perpetrator, as they had bullied others when they were younger. This shocked me. They weren't defending the older pupil's actions or their own past actions; yet, they could understand how certain experiences and thought-processes could lead someone to behave in a bullying manner. This challenged my thinking and went against my previous instincts for retribution. My colleague's perspective helped us all to gain a better understanding of the underlying causes of the perpetrator's bullying behaviour and, ultimately, over time, we were able to intervene effectively.

Having the ability to understand pupils who consistently bully others – and in so doing to examine areas of the self that one might wish to disavow, or past behaviours one has tried to forget – is important if it enables us to understand what led to the moment(s) of bullying, and what needs to happen for that person to not engage in such behaviour in the future. Gilbert and Choden discuss the importance that the role of 'compassionate non-judgement' can play in dealing with situations that don't have quick and easy solutions:

...we might never like the psychopath who was beaten up and is cruel to animals. But through empathy we can try to understand what their mind is like... On the basis of this understanding... we can open up to the possibility of being non-judgemental towards this person, but again this does not mean that we have to allow them to be harmful; and if we didn't, say, put them in a prison we might be failing in our efforts to prevent harm to others – an important moral issue. Compassion is aimed at the wish for the processes that create cruelty within the psychopath to stop ... (2013, p. 161–2)

If we apply this perspective to the situation described earlier, it shows that we were correct to act decisively and to not 'allow them to be harmful'; yet crucially, we can often get distracted when dealing with issues such as bullying. We may get angry and even dislike the perpetrator. We may feel that it is only just that the he or she is punished. But ultimately, when we block out these judgements (which can be unhelpful distractions), our focus should be on ending the processes that created bullying in the first instance (in other words, in preventing future suffering). 'Compassionate non-judgment' is an important element of compassion in schools, as it enables us to focus on what we are trying to achieve for pupils instead of being distracted by our own complex emotions and responses to distress and trauma.

Wise actions: 'helpful attention' & 'compassionate behaviours'

For Gilbert (2017), empathy and compassionate non-judgement are competencies that relate to what he calls one of the two 'psychologies of compassion', namely, first 'sensitivity to, appraisal of, and engagement with suffering' (51–2). When describing the second psychology of compassion centring on 'action to (try to) alleviate and prevent it' (52) he explains that this involves a 'commitment' to 'develop wisdom/skills' in order to take 'wise action' (58). The time taken to establish some of the details of the perpetrator's life in the previous vignette and to formulate an effective intervention based on this enabled the school to take 'wise action' which led to a modification in the pupil's behaviour. Though it may have felt appropriate to simply punish and sanction, the perpetrator, in this case, that would not have constituted wise action. The concept of wise action should not be equated with common sense actions that arise from a wish to be kind or to do the right thing but are not based on the required wisdom, skills and insights. Without insight and wisdom action taken in schools may not have the desired impacts. One may have the good intention of building a house for the homeless in an area but if one does not marry that good intention with 'wise action', by developing and drawing upon requisite skills, training and experience in architecture and construction, one's good intentions will not lead to the alleviation of suffering for those that are homeless but rather to further problems – in fact, the consequences could be disastrous. The following vignette illustrates the importance of wise action in reaching compassionate outcomes.

Vignette 3

According to the records of a pupil newly admitted to a school, they had a severely troubled past, with evidence of abuse, neglect and considerable turbulence and change. The school was aware of the need to make this new pupil feel a part of the school community and for them to develop positive relationships. The final activity of the school week was a whole-school

assembly. The rationale behind this event was to focus on all of the positive developments throughout the week (both academic and social/emotional) and to congratulate pupils for making progress. The new pupil was awarded certificates and received much praise during these assemblies. Initially, they appeared not to respond at all. After several weeks, they started to tear up their certificates and then ultimately to throw chairs around the room. The experience of receiving praise and feeling part of a caring community on a Friday afternoon, which might have been enjoyed by a less troubled individual, clearly caused them discomfort. After one such incident, a member of staff suggested that they should be punished for their behaviour; they were exasperated because, in their view, all the right things were being done by offering public praise and yet the pupil was rejecting this and in an increasingly violent way.

The events described in this vignette suggest that problems can arise if we equate 'common-sense' acts of 'kindness' with 'wise actions' as mentioned earlier. It is essential to have a detailed understanding of the psychological dispositions pupils with SEMH needs and the things they have experienced or do experience, to inform interventions and planning and ultimately lead to wise actions. Despite the 'good intentions' of the school, the feelings of connectedness, love and community created by the assemblies were clearly deeply stressful for this pupil. Perhaps their unhappiness was triggered because they experienced emotions of closeness and love that they needed but did not receive when they were younger. That is not to suggest that the school was wrong to hold such celebratory events, but to note that this particular pupil could have been better supported through that process: in other words, the school's 'good intentions' were not adequate. The competency that was lacking was what Gilbert refers to as 'helpful attention' – 'bringing to our mind what knowledge or wisdom of what is likely to be helpful' (Gilbert, 2017, p. 58). In this case, such 'attention' would have benefited the pupil. Perhaps, a therapist's insights could have informed how the pupil could have been supported better. Further, the tendency to react with exasperation or punitive measures when problematic behaviours re-occur after such acts of 'kindness' is counter-productive and, ultimately, a distraction.

A further competency that Gilbert identifies as being helpful in securing wise action is centred around 'compassionate behaviours'. One such behaviour he refers to as 'soothing distress'. This involves the following: 'being present, listening, validating and empathising, maybe stroking, hugging or hand holding... voice tones, body postures and facial expressions can play a key role here' (Ibid: 59). Reading this description of 'soothing distress', one might assume that this soothing is what might be required for someone who is, perhaps, overcome with sadness and misery. However, the following vignette shows how this action can be applied to pupils in other circumstances:

Vignette 4

One pupil's behaviour was becoming increasingly erratic. They struggled to cooperate with staff and there was an increase in frequency of violent outbursts. On one occasion, they were trying to gain entry into a classroom to confront another member of the school community. It was clear to staff that were the confrontation to occur, it would lead to increased conflict. The angry pupil started to kick the door. It became apparent that if they persisted, they would break the lock and gain entry. At this point, a member of staff who the pupil knew well, and who was skilled in de-escalation, intervened, encouraging the pupil to move away. The pupil refused and continued to try to break the door down. The member of staff put themselves in front of the pupil to prevent this. The pupil tried to move the member staff away, occasionally throwing punches, grabbing and pulling. This physical altercation involved the member of staff having to 'hold' the pupil briefly at various points but constantly releasing him to give him the option to leave. Throughout this experience, the member of staff verbally reminded the pupil how well they were doing. They validated the pupil's feelings by telling them that they were aware that the pupil was angry and frustrated, whilst at the same time trying to prevent them from gaining access to the classroom. Had someone from outside the school community appeared on the scene there is no doubt that would have been bemused by the fact that this overtly aggressive pupil was being praised during such an explosive outburst. The member of staff's tone of voice was consistently gentle and supportive; their physical touch was minimal and, where unavoidable, careful and affectionate. No one else was involved. Ultimately, having expended so much energy, the angry pupil became tired and then lay on the floor in a foetal position, before getting up and leaving the scene of his own volition.

The approach adopted by the member of staff is one of the most moving displays of compassion I have witnessed in a school context. The offering of constant empathy and validation via all elements of one's being – tone of voice, body language, touch, breath – despite being on the receiving end of violent and aggressive behaviour, was an inspiring sight. It is also evidence of how compassion, when applied appropriately and intelligently, in this case via 'soothing distress', can be effective in a school setting. The member of staff's behaviour was not based on a conscious theoretical framework but rather an 'intelligence' based on life experience and married to a close understanding of an individual pupil's needs. The importance of developing and using a theoretical compassion framework is that those members of staff who do not necessarily have such experiential 'intelligence' can draw upon such a framework or approach during critical moments when there isn't time to plan every move. Practitioners have different life experiences and skills, making some forms of action non-viable. Therefore, it is important to know which

competencies and skills it would be useful to acquire, both at an individual and at an organisational level, in order to develop an overall capacity for compassion.

Culture and leadership

There is growing evidence of the impact that compassionate cultures can have, not just on well-being but also on creativity, productivity and effectiveness across a range of organisations and contexts (Seppala & Cameron, 2015). Whilst this is true for groups and organisations where compassion is not essential (such as companies), it is even more relevant for organisations where compassion is identified as being a key value, as is the case in many schools and healthcare settings.

Threat-based approaches to leadership or 'social dominance'-oriented organisations can have a detrimental impact on the well-being and productivity of the people who work there (Martin & Heineberg, 2017). Such approaches contradict the work of a compassion framework as the project of 'alleviating and preventing suffering' obviously does not sit well with an approach that uses sanctions, threats and fear as its key motivational tools. The limitations of such approaches to leadership are even more stark when working with pupils with SEMH needs. This is a context in which, by its very nature, there are already additional risks for the people who work in them: namely, there are higher levels of pupil vulnerability and additional risks for staff who work with unpredictable and abusive pupils. Combining these exigencies with a management style predicated on intimidation creates an unhelpful cocktail of concerns and anxieties for staff. Ultimately, this makes the project of cultivating compassion an all but impossible task.

Even outside of a threat-based system or style of management, there are other factors or conditions that mean that an individual's capacity for compassion as well as an organisation's capacity is restricted. This is true for other contexts such as in healthcare where 'poor working conditions, poor leadership, role confusion, role conflicts, and work overload' can all be 'compassion inhibitors' (West & Chowla, 2017, p. 239). The following vignette describes a difficult situation in which one school found itself, and the impact that this had on levels of stress and anxiety of staff and pupils.

Vignette 5

Due to funding cuts, a secondary school in a deprived socio-economic context underwent a restructure which saw a 20% reduction in staff. The restructure led to new roles and to staff being asked to re-apply for their jobs. The morale of staff was very low. Most staff perceived that there was a decline in pupil behaviour. Relationships between staff and pupils were increasingly frayed. A

spike in pupil exclusions followed. There was a recognition by management that the re-structure was de-stabilising; however, rather than showing compassion for overwhelmed staff and patient attention to student well-being, the response was to be 'tougher' on pupils. When reflecting on this period, a senior manager candidly admitted that the decision to exclude so many pupils was a 'false form of support' as this did not address the underlying causes of staff distress; namely, job insecurity, the departure of so many colleagues and the fragility of behaviour systems and community cohesion revealed by the whole.

In this scenario, the anxiety and uncertainty caused by the staff re-structure were compounded by the school leadership's decision to exclude large numbers of pupils in order to improve behaviour. This decision, they admitted, was partly 'symbolic', though ultimately a misplaced, form of 'support'. Instead of stabilising and restoring a community in which many staff had lost their jobs, there was increased hostility and mistrust between members of the school community, brought about by the exclusion drive. This climate impacted negatively on the emotional well-being of staff and pupils. Ultimately, the school's capacity for compassion towards pupils became restricted due to the management team's decision to take a form of action that, although was based upon a 'recognition' of staff 'suffering', and 'motivation' to 'alleviate' it, did not constitute a 'wise action'. The context of funding cuts and a staff re-structure, combined with actions that fell short of their aims, meant that the organisation's capacity for compassion was compromised.

Conclusion

For a compassion framework to succeed or a compassionate culture to be impactful, it cannot be restricted to certain areas of school life or limited to specific sets of relationships (i.e. teachers towards pupils). Compassion flows in different directions via all members of the school community and should underpin all interactions. There are, no doubt, other important aims of a school's mission, not least, academic development. However, these goals need not be counter-posed to those of a compassion framework. Further consideration should be given to the role that government policy can play in reducing the factors that inhibit compassionate practices in schools. Even within the current context of education in the UK, schools would do well to reflect on and decide what role all people, including school leaders, can play in creating and developing compassionate cultures and communities; namely, what systems and structures can schools develop in order to facilitate compassionate practices and how can they cultivate key competences in staff that support this process. While this paper has evaluated some of these, given the current context of deteriorating mental health in schools across the UK, further research is required to determine precisely what impact a compassion

framework can have on pulling together and breathing new life into the disparate and diverse interventions around mental health and, ultimately, on the well-being and mental health of all members of school communities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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