

Peterson, A. (2017). Compassion and education: Cultivating compassionate children, schools and communities. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan. 180 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-54837-5

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Compassion and Education: Cultivating Compassionate Children, Schools and Communities, written by Andrew Peterson, Adjunct Professor of Education at the University of South Australia, outlines the important role of education in cultivating compassion. Peterson defines compassion as a moral which refers to the ability to “recognize and care about the suffering of others and to take some form of appropriate action in response” (p. 2). He argues compassion is a necessary individual and collective approach to education. Peterson emphasizes, such an approach to education is necessary as a result of the highest level of suffering we have encountered since World War II due to the incidence of natural disasters, disease, and conflict, impacting nearly 60 million people, with half of them being children (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). Peterson’s central concerns, which he seeks to address, include defining the concept of compassion and its key characteristics, how to enact compassion toward others, and how compassion relates to our self-concept.

This book can be appropriate for anyone concerned with supporting the marginalized and alleviating suffering in the field of education. In particular, the book is suitable for academics, principals, teachers, teacher candidates, and school psychologists whose work involves supporting students who are coming from post conflict backgrounds or who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACE) (Felitti, 2009) or trauma.

In the field of civic and moral education, the topic of compassion addresses the growing emphasis of schools on “character education, positive psychology, wellbeing, mindfulness, global citizenship, religious education and values education” (p. 10). Peterson’s previous work focused on global citizenship which, in this book, he links to cultivating compassion. Such a link is claimed since “compassion is based on a recognition and appreciation of common humanity, including humanity’s fragility ... and relates to notions of ... human flourishing” (p. 1). Peterson believes compassion can be cultivated as part of school culture, relationships, extra-curricular programs, as well as pedagogy, all within the framework of character education and with an underlying focus on well-being. Character education:

permeates all subjects, wider school activities, and a general school ethos; it cultivates the virtues of character associated with common morality ... Schools should enable students to become good persons and citizens, able to lead good lives, as well as become “successful” persons. (Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues, 2017, p. 1)

The book is divided into seven chapters, and starts with conceptualizing compassion in its enactment outwardly as well as inwardly, concluding with its application in schools and communities. Chapter one is the introduction, and it outlines Peterson’s definition as well as others’ definitions of compassion. It cites calls to compassion in different contexts including political and healthcare fields. For example, the Department of Health (2012) in the UK released the “Compassion in Practice” strategy which defined compassion as “how care is given through relationships based on empathy, respect and dignity – it can also be described as intelligent kindness, and is central to how people perceive their care” (Department of Health, 2012, p. 13). Peterson also cites the global Charter for Compassion announced in 2008 by Karen Armstrong, a British author in the field of comparative religions, which views compassion as a “practically

acquired knowledge ... which can be developed and learnt through practice and reflection” (p. 2). Chapter two outlines the core elements of compassion viewed as a moral comprising of emotional, cognitive, and active responses, which recognize our common humanity. In other words, after experiencing the emotion of empathy, for example, when witnessing others suffering, we cognitively start to develop reasons for taking action to help them. When it comes to how compassion enables us to recognize our common humanity, Peterson explains: “To be compassionate, we must be able to conceive what it means to suffer and accept that the suffering is something which, given human fragility, we will have experienced or will experience” (p. 21). Chapter three explores further the emotional aspects of compassion by focusing on pity, sympathy, and empathy, which Peterson claims are the three emotions consistently appearing in the literature related to compassion. Peterson describes these three emotions and the similarities between them as “fundamental to understanding compassion” (p. 38), and as “prerequisites to compassion” (p. 38).

Chapter four examines key features of compassionate action, which are mediated through the principle of care, practical wisdom, and contextually specific characteristics in any particular situation. The principle of care is defined by a theory of moral development as “an internalized moral value that one should help those in need ... [and] evokes helping behaviour” (Bekkers & Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2016, p. 240). Practical wisdom is defined as “deliberating about and discerning the right action, [which is] viewed as central to conceiving compassion as a virtue” (Bekkers & Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2016, p. 65). As for contextually specific characteristics in any particular situation, Peterson explains that alleviating suffering may not always be possible. Thus, he explains “supporting those suffering to endure their pain while maintaining their dignity becomes the aim” (p. 64).

Chapter five explores the idea of self-regard by emphasizing that “a positive regard for the self is a necessary part of compassion” (p. 92). This argument is made since “compassion can be understood as involving an enlightened and healthy approach to self which can be differentiated from more self-centered and egoistic forms” (p. 92). Armstrong (2011) supports these claims by stating: “Before you can embrace the world, you must focus on yourself ... notice how much peace, happiness and benevolence you possess already” (pp. 76-77). Chapter six explores how compassion can be directly taught as part of the subjects Civics and Citizenship or as one of the characteristics in a school character education program. For example, in Australia, *the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* cited care and compassion as one of nine values which students needed to learn (Australian Government, 2005). Also, in England, compassion is mentioned in various curricular documents and guides published by the Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues and the University of Birmingham. However, Peterson argues students (or adults) are not expected to reach an end result of becoming *entirely* compassionate. Rather, he refers to theories of moral learning and development to explain that cultivating compassion, among other morals, is a learning process. Finally, Chapter seven examines how schools can become compassionate institutions by examining “general ethos, structures and practices” (p. 135). This includes how schools interact with families and the greater community. He defines a compassionate institution as “an institution which values compassion, uses a vocabulary of compassion, and which seeks to develop and promote relationships based on care, empathy, altruism and a positive form of self-love” (p. 138).

Through examining particular areas of interest in the book, in Chapter four, Peterson successfully argues the importance of taking compassionate acts beyond immediate relief efforts, to address the structural reasons of suffering. For example, he quotes Martin Luther King Jr. who said: “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar” (Peterson, 2017, p. 68). Peterson’s view aligns with King’s quote in that it is important to address large scale and systemic structures which lead to the suffering of particular individuals or groups in a quest for justice. Therefore, it is important to first, start cultivating and infusing the principle of care more strongly into faculties of education, schools, districts, and ministries of education. This poses questions about how we can intentionally and consistently foster this principle of care, starting with how we prepare pre-service teachers to teach for and about compassion. It also raises questions about how our current teachers cultivate compassion in the classroom. The principle of care also invites us to explore how school and system leaders shape compassionate school cultures and districts by integrating compassion into policy and practice.

In Chapter six, Peterson explores how teachers can teach compassion in schools in practical ways. He quotes Nussbaum (2014) who advocates that “education in common human weaknesses and vulnerability should be a very profound part of the education of all children” (p. 104). However, Peterson’s agreement with Nussbaum’s statement needs to be qualified by the types of assistance schools need to provide for

students when they observe suffering. This type of support may come in the form of providing teachers with training on cultivating compassion, so they are aware of the processes needed to develop this moral in a sustainable way with students. For example, part of the processes include understanding that students can be taught compassion “through our engagements – deliberate and unexpected – in practical and habitual situations and the subsequent critical reflection on such engagements which are guided by more experienced guides (such as parents and teachers)” (p. 115). It may also involve providing students with additional social emotional learning (Katz & Porath, 2011) which focuses on self-awareness and managing emotions. This type of learning can assist students with exploring and managing challenging emotions including helplessness or overwhelm when they engage with the suffering of others.

Moreover, it is important to note that a profound part of education needs to *also* be about human strength, willpower, agency, and the factors that can cultivate those states, so we can empower students to take compassionate actions and promote positivity and resilience. Research refers to this approach as a “strengths perspective”, as opposed to a “deficit perspective”, where educators focus on the “psychological resources students have to build upon for future success” (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016, p. 63).

In the final chapter, Peterson discusses how compassion is shaped and informed by institutional processes. He emphasizes that it is important for teachers to understand their role as moral educators and refers to a Framework for Character Education published by the University of Birmingham (Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues, 2017). The framework cites that “schools should consider questions about the kinds of persons their students will become, how the development of good character contributes to a flourishing life, and how to balance various virtues and values in this process” (Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues, 2017, p. 1). Some questions arising from this statement include, are teachers and school leaders sufficiently prepared to successfully carry out such a task? Are there national, provincial or district policies in place to support such endeavors? Is there funding in place to provide educator training and curriculum supports? Or are some schools pressured to ensure students perform well on standardized tests, which form the basis of school rankings, at the expense of prioritizing character education?

Furthermore, Peterson’s emphasis on cultivating compassion raises important research questions. For example, how can cultivating compassion in schools, families, and communities impact students’ achievement and well-being, particularly those coming from post-conflict contexts or who have experienced adverse childhood experiences and trauma? Would cultivating compassion contribute to increased resilience and enable such students to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically? Would cultivating compassion in schools contribute to increased equity and inclusion? Could cultivating compassion positively influence achievement and well-being?

Additionally, this book connects to Katz and Porath’s (2011) article about creating compassionate learning communities. In this article, the authors explored the impact of a social and emotional (SEL) intervention called the *Respecting Diversity (RD)* program on students’ ability to develop the following social and emotional skills: “self-awareness, self-respect and respect diverse others” (Katz & Porath, 2011, p. 29). Researchers found that using this intervention with classrooms, versus control classrooms with no intervention, yielded a significant impact on students’ development of the social and emotional skills previously cited. In turn, this contributed to an increasingly positive classroom climate. As for the control classrooms, it was found that students actually decreased in the identified social and emotional skills. These findings support Peterson’s ideas that creating compassionate schools and communities necessitates an intentional approach where positive morals or virtues such as compassion are cultivated as part of school ethos. Creating compassionate schools also includes making pedagogical connections to compassion in the classroom, and organizing extracurricular activities within a school framework that integrates and emphasizes character education.

Furthermore, Peterson claims empirical research on cultivating compassionate schools is still in its early stages; thus, while this book provides a meaningful contribution to the field of civic and moral education, there needs to be more research conducted on how to prepare and support public school teachers and school leaders to cultivate compassion. Such support may begin with incorporating moral development in teacher and principal preparation programs as well as professional development programs for educators. Moral development is linked to schools’ emphasis on character education which includes compassion (Peterson, 2017). Additionally, the notions of responsibility and accountability need to be considered when public school staff are expected to cultivate compassion and focus on character development. Accountability may be supported by mandating policy on character education frameworks, making

resources increasingly available to transform policy into practice, and conducting ongoing evaluation leading to recommendations for improvement. In addition to understanding the philosophical and research underpinnings of educating for compassion, there also needs to be more practical recommendations for public school educators. These practical recommendations can be different strategies educators can readily use to cultivate compassion in schools, given time constraints and work pressures.

Overall, Peterson's book is well written. He successfully argues his points by thoroughly referencing other scholars' work in the field of civic and moral education by dedicating the majority of his book to an examination of the theoretical, philosophical, and research underpinnings of educating for compassion. He provides an important foundation for further investigation of how to create compassionate schools using evidence-based strategies and interventions, which may enable students to increasingly thrive and succeed in school, and beyond.

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