

How to Develop Compassion in School: An Emotional Component of Ethical Perception

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Abstract. This article discusses the training and development of compassion among students. This emotion can be awakened through the act of giving, which in modern society is expressed via community contribution. Schools today make the subject of giving to one's community - an active act of helping weaker populations - a part of their curriculum. This article refers to the method of learning about compassion - an emotional channel that comprises part of a mature moral outlook. It is important to emphasize that teaching via modeling is also suitable to the teaching of ethics. The article refers to learning from role models that contribute to their communities and saved others from the cycle of poverty and neglect. These activities can also sharpen a student's sense of justice and morality, and advance his ethical outlook. As such, the article suggests ways to train students to be compassionate through discussion of current events, relation to conflicts and situations that require the addressing of emotion, not just through cognitive explanation. All this can sharpen the ability of the individual to attain compassion.

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One of the most useful learning methods is modeling, (Mischel & Bandura, 1965) which can also be applied to the teaching of ethics and morals.(Wolf ,2002 ,2004 ,2008) Therefore, this essay will emphasize instances of modeling and the way in which they can be used to teach the young generation of students.

It is important to say that compassion can also help the school community realm by creating a more harmonious and ethical environment. The concept of compassion is mainly expressed through activities for the sake of the community, promoting empathy not only as an emotional reaction towards another person but as something to be transformed into action. These activities can also sharpen a student's sense of justice and morality, and advance his ethical outlook.

1. An Example of Compassionate Acts by Intellectual Giants

Sometimes we encounter "Enlightened People," individuals that successfully achieve great accomplishments through public aid and social services. Such an example is Muhammad Yunus, a doctor of economics from Bangladesh, who received the 2006 Nobel Prize along with the Grameen Bank that he, himself, founded. Mudammad Yunus and his students villages in Bangladesh and saw that a little sum of money could really aid the villagers in building small business enterprises without borrowing money and going into debt from interest. Instead of allowing them to become

financially independent, these interest fees keep them in a state of eternal poverty. For this reason, Yunus decided to lend them micro-sums of money to encourage them to be financially sufficient.

Muhammad Yunus's method of lending "micro-money" to "micro businesses" was economically groundbreaking, its accomplishments boundless. He succeeded to relinquish thousands of people from the harshest strains of poverty through the small sums of money he lent them. In the first stages, he lent them money approximately 117 dollars from his own pocket and later on he lent them money via the Grameen Bank that he founded. It is important to say that the majority of the people paid back their debts to the bank with an additional donation in order that the bank would be able to help others as it helped them. Many branches of the Grameen Bank function today in many countries – India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and more, and continue the blessed work of Muhammad Yunus.

Another figure whose actions were extremely influential in the educational and child welfare realms was Jose Antonio Abreu, manager of a youth orchestra in Venezuela. Jose Antonio Abreu, doctor of law, economics, and also a politician, attempted to find the solution to violence, drugs, loitering, and the poverty in the neighborhoods of Caracas, the capital city of Venezuela. This was done in an effort to keep children off of the streets and veer them away from crime. He initiated the foundation of the youth orchestra. The chain of orchestras that he founded receives Venezuelan government funding until this day.

Abreu focused on those children who lived in poverty stricken neighborhoods to train in music and musical rendition. This musical educational operation which Abreu initiated for the children caused them to be exposed to many advantages: the enjoyment of playing an instrument, the experience of success, the social cooperation, the corrective experience that proves to themselves their ability and more. This successful operation in Venezuela led to the founding of hundreds of other orchestras whose members Abreu trained. Those who were trained by Abreu now play an active role in training the next generation of youth, adding to this continuous chain of giving.

Abreu's efforts, starting in 1964, to give leverage to musical education in his country exceeded all expectations. Over the period of eleven years, about two hundred orchestras and choirs had been founded with an attendance of around a million students. These youth at risk became interested in music and reverted all of their energies to their musical talents and the understanding of the deeper significance of music. These children were able to find an escape with their interest in playing music and transformed a life of emptiness with a life of enjoyment. This revolution sparked by Abreu saved hundreds of thousands of children from a fate of neglect, violence, poverty, and vagrancy. As a matter of fact he bestowed upon them a fishing rod rather than the fish itself.

In the words of Abreu, the project's founder: *"Poverty leads to anonymity and loneliness and the music redeems them. It awakens the feeling of triumph and hope for the future, provides happiness and meaning to life, teaches the children how to live in society and become better people"*(Haaretz'24/1/10)

2. The Meaning of giving- Compassion

It is clear that Abreu's program, in which a person learns how to appreciate music, also contributes to the welfare of the individual in the realm of a possible future career choice or profession. The motivation of this endeavor is giving, and it is for good reason that it says in Exodus, "Speak to the children of Israel, and have them take for Me an offering; from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity, you shall take My offering" (Exodus 25:2). Rashi notes specifically that the language used in the Bible is "take" and not "give." Indeed it seems that someone who gives a donation or an offering in this case, also receives something in return. Especially today, the field of 'Positive Psychology' (science of happiness) has really taken off and is attempting to pass onto society empirical information to maximize happiness and research shows that giving that involves satisfaction can be fulfilling for the person and grant him much happiness

(Seligman, 1998 ,2000, 2002, 2008 ,Taylor et. al. ,2000). It is important to note that at the basis of giving there is the education of giving.

3. How Compassion is expressed in Schools

It is important to say that contribution is a central foundation of many religions and faiths, and is expressed in the modern world also through schools activities for the sake of the human community and for the sake of the environment itself. The idea of helping the community is based on the understanding that the “poor of your city” take precedence over other poor people, and that a healthy community is not self-enclosed, but rather extends an open hand to others for whom fate has not been as kind.

It is worth engaging in activities that contribute to the community from an early age. For example, a project exists in many Israeli cities in which schoolchildren teach and train adults in computer use, a project that clearly benefits both sides. The students gain self-confidence and pride while the adults provide the youth with advice from life experience and a sympathetic ear on various issues. In other words, this activity for the sake of the community has the added value of creating a sense of giving and doing among community members.

Compassion is expressed through schools activities for the community. These activities highlight the fact that a school is not meant to deal solely with its own world, but rather it is preferable and befitting for it to reach out to the community as well. Many schools make financial, social and organizational contributions for the advancement of weaker populations and for the weaker elements in society that need the help. For example, additional involvement is seen through student volunteering in community institutions like – visiting the elderly and lonely, assisting the handicapped, volunteering in preschools, and the like. Their contributions are not expressed through money, but also through guidance, teaching, or investment of time for the sake of others’ well being.

This nature of this contribution is mainly utilizes in teaching and guiding others in order to help them achieve physical and emotional well-being. As Abraham Lincoln said: “*I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.*” (Abraham Lincoln, Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, p. 265)

Wolf has already mentioned that both the community and the organization (school) profit from this activity, and that by making a contribution one also receives something himself. (Wolf, 2008). Today, schools that are interested in increasing student’s motivation by meeting not only their material needs, but their spiritual needs as well, organize internal organizational activities and collective volunteer programs. These have the potential to strengthen student’s’ sense of belonging and raise their level of responsibility

4. What is Compassion?

Seeing as we explained how it is possible to train for compassion, it is important to also explain what the term 'compassion' means. The concept of compassion is related to emotions that are shared by all human beings, such as being aware of the suffering of others whose situation is currently not as good. This sharing – the ability to understand another person by being aware of his or her suffering – can increase empathy, based on the sense that people are equal in their emotions as human beings.

The Merriam-Webster English Online Dictionary defines compassion as the “*Sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it*”. The study of the definition of compassion in dictionaries of different languages shows the use of a similar example in defining the concept. From the Spanish dictionary: “*Feelings of sympathy for the suffering of others; the desire to treat, alleviate or prevent this type of suffering*” (translation from the Spanish – Ruiz & Vallejos, 1999, p.7). It is evident from this that the concept of compassion is based on the fact that a

person is capable of understanding suffering, but it also obligates him to act in order to prevent or alleviate that suffering.

Wolf (2004, 2008) refers to the definition of compassion in the Hebrew dictionary as: “*Mercy, a feeling of sympathy and the desire to help another person in his distress*” (translated from the Hebrew, Even Shushan, 1956, p. 419). In order to explain the essence of the word, the Hebrew dictionary adds to its definition a verse from the Bible:

“*With His love and with His pity He redeemed them*” (Isaiah - Chapter 63, 9). According to Wolf, compassion emphasizes the emotional principles of mercy and sympathy, and the desire to act – the desire to help.

These definitions of compassion include reference to understanding (cognition), emotion and behavior. In other words, the understanding of another’s suffering is not the only thing necessary, nor is the emotion that one feels when seeing another person suffer. Rather, an action – a behavior – is required. Compassion is expressed in these three areas of a person’s life.

In fact, the principal of empathy is based on cognitive ability, which has already been noted by both Selman and Selman & Byrne (Selman, 1976, 1980; Selman & Byrne, 1974) – the ability to adopt the social perspective of another person. Selman outlined several concepts included in the theoretical basis of ‘Social Consciousness’, such as taking another’s perspective, empathy, logic, interpersonal problem solving, and self-awareness. These concepts represent the ability to see and understand another person’s point of view, including his motivations, emotions, thoughts and positions.

5. Compassion as part of ethical behavior

Different theorists, philosophers and psychologists regard compassion as one of the important foundations of morality, including: Berkowitz (1996); Boutmama (1988); Damon and Colby (1996); Ruiz and Vallejos (1999); Sagi (2002); Wolf, (2002, 2004a, 2004b). They emphasized the ethical aspect based upon solidarity, altruism, concern, and understanding and consideration of others.

The approach that calls for the development of compassion emphasizes the need to recognize emotions and to develop personal awareness. The way in which one deal with appropriate relationships and morality within sometimes lacks an emotional channel. This emotional channel aims to strengthen the individual’s ethical understanding and to emphasize compassion as part of ethical behavior (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Wolf, 2004, 2008 ;Hoffman ,1991).

It is expected that the development of this emotional channel will be useful in developing the personal skills that focus a person’s understanding of the bigger picture, a broader perspective, which is an important stage in the development of ethical behavior.

6. Training and Education for the Development of Emotional Awareness

Schools today are aware of the need to invest in students as a human resource. This investment is carried out by training students to be aware of their own and others’ emotions. The essence of empathy is the awareness of one’s own emotions together with the emotions of the other person. The ability to put oneself in another person’s place, and to examine another’s motivations, thoughts and reactions, can empower students in schools in the society to develop open communication, and increase social fitness and reciprocal activities (Avruch & Black, 1991; Barret-Lennard, 1993; Blackard, 2001; Stien & Book ,2011).

Processes related to emotional awareness, such as compassion, advance the “social intelligence” of an individual and of an organization, and are no less important than other achievements. Indeed, in recent decades, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and educators have called for the development of emotional intelligence as a tool for developing integration and harmony (Stein &

Book 2011, O'boyle jr. et al. 2011). Today's insight into the work system is that one should not try to escape conflict and uncomfortable situations, which always exist, but rather should aspire to cope with them candidly and openly.

There is no doubt that the development of an emotional channel in understanding others – the development of compassion – can change interpersonal, reciprocal relationships and help in developing their personality.

Compassion is developed by, among other things, investing in developing patience and tolerance in the students, respect for others no matter who they are. It may be that he excels in his learning, but stirs up ardent disputes around him. Therefore, investment in the interpersonal relationships within a school, including the emotional atmosphere, actually ends up being a worthwhile investment.

7. Can Compassion Really Be Developed Among Students?

Compassion, as an individual quality, indicates an additional ethical feature of one's personality. Beyond the demand for justice that Kohlberg (1969) and others (Bull 1969; Rest, 1983, 1984; Nisan 1992, 1996; Oser 1996). Often spoke of, compassion turns a person's attention towards helping others who are weaker than him. This ability can be developed if a person is able to behave with empathy towards another, and if he is really able to put himself in another person's place and understand his feelings and situation.

In order to strengthen compassion and morality among students and teachers it is best to hold discussions about conflicts and crises in real life event. In other words, in order to draw someone close to the ethical emotional channel, different researchers recommend that discussions on the topic of ethics focus less on ideal situations and more on real situations in which a person can find himself (Habermas, 1988; Ruitz & Vallejos, 1999; Wolf, 2008). It is appropriate for these discussions to deal with real-life situations, such as those related to environmental relations and reciprocal relationships in the society.

Habermas (1988) describes an ideal discussion as a situation that ends with a proposed, mutually supported, in which each person tries to imagine himself in the other person's place. According to him, ethical obligation is not a matter of personal ethical responsibility, but rather it is based on the idea of solidarity.

One of the criticisms that Gilligan (1982) directed at Kohlberg, who recommended utilizing discussions and debates in order to advance an ethical outlook, was that the ethical discussions he recommended mainly dealt with hypothetical topics. According to her, in this situation the person debating has no part in the experience being discussed. He is talking about an experience from afar, exposing a certain event and then judging it. This is an exercise only. Gilligan recommended discussing real-life situations. She claimed that by using this approach, one can achieve a more mature ethical understanding.

My recommendation to educators is to use the conflicts that are frequently displayed by the local and global media to organize discussions and philosophical debates in schools that go beyond religious, national and societal perceptions. The need to protect the earth and fight corruption is likely to serve as a primary stage in the development of compassion.

In the course of these discussions, it is worthwhile to focus on more suitable behavioral alternatives to situations. At the basis of this suggestion is the idea that insight coupled with compassion will be more successfully implemented in a situation in which one is able to consider the other person who is suffering from injustice and provide a solution. This is the way to develop compassion. Development of compassion is expressed through two main approaches – by strengthening one's awareness of another's viewpoint and by encouraging ethical, social consideration – and there is no doubt that this type of consideration has to be trained. Today it is

understood that emotional intelligence can really help build a strong healthy self (Goleman, 1995; Rietti, 2008; Zeidner et al., 2004; Furnham, 2009).

Schools that take this emotional viewpoint concerning students and teacher are able to fight corruption and build a good community. As it was previously stated, promoting empathy not only as an emotional reaction towards another person but as something to be transformed into action, can improve the situation. The development of compassion does not only lead to recognition of the justice due to others, but also leads one to take responsibility for situations that demand action, such as protesting on behalf of others.

Playing a role in enforcing the law by making sure that justice is carried out, and by changing the situation of those in a weaker position, is part of the development of compassion. The definition of compassion even includes the concept of repair – improving one's current situation. It is possible to train students to be compassionate. Learning this concept is accomplished by presenting a successful model that has saved people from the cycles of poverty. Exposing students to such figures can change the welfare and affect the lives of others so deliberately, therefore it is imperative. Learning sharpens the care and empathy for others.

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