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Compassionate Complexity: Narrative practice and school culture in middle childhood

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Abstract

Compassionate Complexity: Narrative practice and school culture in middle childhood

by

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Recent movements, such as the whole child initiative and the collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning (CASEL), have pushed schools and educators to take social and emotional learning into consideration as a critical component of healthy development. Compassion- the genuine desire to alleviate another's suffering- is a critical component of social and emotional education (Seppala, 2013). The aim of the current study was to gain a better understanding of how children understand, express, and experience compassion in their own words through story sharing. A story sharing intervention, known as KidsTalk, was implemented in an elementary charter school in large metropolitan area in the southern United States. Seventeen third through fifth grade students participated in the program once per week for five weeks. This exploratory and descriptive study revealed that although the children never used the word compassion in their stories, they have a very sophisticated understanding of the role compassion plays in their daily lives. The children asserted the complexity of implementing compassionate behavior and challenged the notion of compassion as a stagnant construct. KidsTalk provided the children with the time and space to reflect and engage in the formation of a compassionate community, which has serious implications for future efforts in educational settings and for further research in this area.

Compassionate Complexity: Narrative practice and school culture in middle childhood

Schools are a critical site of learning and teach children many things, both explicitly and implicitly. They are sites of academic learning, but beyond that they also reinforce various societal norms (Anyon, 1980; Dreeben 1967; Feinberg & Soltis; Kumashiro, 2009). These implicit and explicit norms that are taught reinforce a culture of power that exists in American society and is learned in our schools (Delpit, 1993). This culture of power favors what bell hooks calls white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy (hooks, 1994). The students who do not fit this mold (white, able bodied, middle class, cisgendered) must learn the implicit skills necessary for navigating the culture of power both in school and after graduation. The educational system experienced by children of color and children from working class backgrounds is very different from the education of their privileged counterparts. Oftentimes the educational system experienced by these students takes a deficit approach and does not take into consideration the strengths and values of the surrounding communities (Moll et. al., 1992, Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). These strengths and values are essential to the development of a compassionate community.

Social and emotional abilities are important implicit skills, which are often not made explicit in schools. Since schools have traditionally focused explicitly on academic learning they have often failed to explicitly address the equally important realms of social and emotional learning essential for navigating various social locations both within and

after leaving school (CASEL).¹ Recent movements, such as the whole child initiative and the collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning (CASEL), have pushed schools and educators to take social and emotional learning into consideration as a critical component of healthy development. Emphasis on social and emotional learning encourages schools to take the child's larger context and environment into consideration as an equally important contributing factor to classroom success and healthy child development (ASCD Whole Child Initiative). For working class children and students of color, taking the environment and strengths of the community into consideration is essential for explicitly teaching students to navigate the culture of power. However, oftentimes the schools do not take the assets of the community into consideration as essential strengths (Delpit, 1993). Altering this perspective requires compassion and has implications, not only for individual children, but for schools and communities as well.

A critical component of social and emotional education is learning to become a compassionate member of a community. Positive psychologists, such as Martin Seligman (2011), have studied compassion and positive emotion as key factors in a strengths-based approach to development. Emma Seppala (2013) described compassion as the genuine desire to alleviate another's suffering. Compassion evolved as an "instinct" to ensure our survival, but is also conducive to psychological and physical wellbeing (Seppala, 2013). It requires perspective taking, empathy, and often facilitates kindness (Pommier, 2011; Davis, 1980).

In order to experience compassion a person must be able to identify another person's perspective(s) and empathize with his or her suffering. However, compassion

¹ CASEL created social and emotional learning standards, which have been adopted by the state of Illinois.

goes beyond these two steps and requires a person to have the desire to alleviate the suffering that another person is experiencing. Compassion necessitates these skills that are also critical for children's social and emotional development, and it can be developed through a variety of meaning making and contemplative practices (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Hesch, 1992; The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society). Contemplative practices cover a wide array of activities such as mindfulness, meditation, and narrative sharing, which can be used to facilitate the development of compassion (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society). This study specifically focuses on the study of compassion through narrative sharing practices. Next I discuss a selection of the current research on children and compassion. I then explore the critical role of stories and story sharing in middle childhood.

Literature Review

Compassion

There is a growing body of research that suggests compassion is beneficial for both physical and mental wellbeing (Lo, 2014; Lord, 2014; Klimecki, Leiberg, Ricard, & Singer, 2014). However the majority of recent research on compassion has primarily focused on adults (Klimecki et al., 2014; Lo, 2014; Lord, 2014; Liben, 2011; Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010; West, 2015) and less frequently focused on exploring compassion and children (cf. Landsman & Clawson, 1983; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2011; Makariev, 2012; Hesch, 1992). One of the difficulties when studying compassion is the disjointed nature of the literature. Compassion is oftentimes only studied in relation to other topics. Though these studies provide important insights into potential applications of compassion, they do not provide unique information about how children

understand compassion nor about the process by which compassionate responding develops (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2011).

This leads to another common occurrence in compassion research; namely, compassion is often lumped together with related constructs such as altruism, empathy, kindness, or positive emotions. For example, Makariev (2012) attempted to explore children's understandings of justice and compassion in intergroup relations. She studied both race and gender ingroups and outgroups. She found that children were more likely to behave in a prosocial² manner toward people of their same gender or race. However, she failed to distinguish compassion in a meaningful way from prosocial behavior. This is problematic because empathy, a prosocial construct and contributing component of compassion, has been shown to be critical for successful social interactions. However, excessive empathic sharing of negative emotions may lead to burnout and negative impacts on personal outcomes, whereas the same situations addressed with compassion is shown to have positive impacts (Klimecki et al., 2014). Compassion invokes empathy, or a reaction to another's observed experiences, and kindness, but uniquely requires the desire to alleviate another's suffering (Davis, 1983).

Story Sharing

Stories are deeply ingrained in the lives of children long before they learn to speak. Sharing stories allows children to situate themselves in their social world (Bruner, 1990) and helps them shape their own identity (Engel, 1995). Stories are also tools that transfer culture from generation to generation (Engel 1995). Storytelling, or the

² Makariev (2012) compared prosocial behavior to prohibitive behavior in hypothetical scenarios. The prosocial scenario depicted a situation in which a character had the opportunity to sacrifice a personal goal to help a child in need. In this study prosocial behavior required taking an additive, rather than a prohibitive or punitive approach.

interpersonal process of sharing stories, creates a common experience between people and provides space for collaborative meaning making (Banks-Wallace, 2002). African American culture has a rich history of storytelling traditions, which are rooted in the values of both African and American cultures (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Goss & Barnes, 1989). African American oral traditions are rooted in the historical context of the slave trade and allowed the enslaved storytellers to preserve the memories of their homeland. Storytelling in African American communities has evolved in response changing contexts, but continues to reflect the consistent cultural values and serve as a frequent social practice (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Goss & Barnes, 1989; Champion, 2014). Children are taught about the values and histories of their communities through this storytelling tradition.

As children develop they transition from the role of audience to the role of storyteller. As the storyteller, the child is the protagonist of his or her own story (Engel, 1995), learns to position him or herself morally in the story (Bruner, 1990), and constructs a self-identity (Engel, 1995). Story sharing also plays an important in the development of emotional awareness and emotional understanding (Walton & Harris, 2008). When a child tells a story they are engaging in an act of meaning making by assigning significance to various roles and events in the story. They are also participating in the larger context of cultural story sharing traditions. Story sharing also serves as a social activity within families and between peers. During middle childhood peer relationships become an integral part of children's social and cognitive development (Piaget, 1965). As a result of the importance of peer relationships, storytelling is a critical skill that helps children navigate a complex world of peer interactions and conflict.

Current Study

To date, research has not sufficiently explored compassion in children's stories. In response, I designed this study with the goal of better understanding how children understand, express, and experience compassion in their own words through story sharing. Here I pay close attention to how African American children at an elementary school in a metropolitan area in the southern United States talk about compassion and the ways in which it is mobilized in narrative form. Studying children's understanding and negotiation of compassion in their own words through story sharing provides a unique opportunity to shed light on how compassion currently expresses itself in the lives of children. In my study I hope to contribute to a fuller understanding of how children experience, negotiate, and understand compassion in their own cultures and peer communities.

Methods

Participants

The participants for this study are 17 children recruited from Bluff City Elementary School³ (BCE), a charter school in a southern United States city. The school population is comprised of 98% African American students and 87.8 % of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch (Elementary Schools). Bluff City Elementary has grown rapidly since its founding in 2010, beginning with a group of kindergarteners and expanding one grade each year. BCE will graduate its first group of fifth graders this

³ Bluff City Elementary School a pseudonym is also referred to as BCE in the remainder of the study.

spring. The charter school emphasizes closing the achievement gap⁴ and is focused on college graduation for each student.

This study is specifically interested in how children make sense of compassion in their social world and peer communities during middle childhood. Administrators collaborated with teachers to select male and female third through fifth grade students for participation in this study. While I was not a part of the selection process, I was informed by teachers and administrators that school set behavior patterns and parent interest were important factors when selecting children to participate. Groups of two to seven children from each grade were recruited to participate in KidsTalk during lunchtime once per week for five weeks.

Table 1		
<i>Participants</i>		
<u>Grade</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>	<u>Number of Sessions</u>
Third	2-5	5
Fourth	3-5	5
Fifth	5-7	5

All of the sessions for each grade contained both male and female children. The variation of student participation was a result of data collection in a school environment (e.g. illness, absences, etc.) and obtaining parent permission forms (e.g. loss of forms, delayed return of permission forms).

Data Collection Procedures

KidsTalk

⁴ According to Ladson-Billings (2006) the achievement gap, which is the disparity in test scores between students of color and their white counterparts, is better characterized as an educational debt. Educational debt reflects underlying problems of racialized inequity that students of color face and the accumulated educational debt that must be addressed.

KidsTalk is a program designed to encourage children to share stories. The Child Narrative Research Team⁵ (Walton & Brewer, 2001; Harris & Walton, 2009; Davidson, Walton, & Cohen, 2013; Walton, Wuerfel, Kansal, & Cohen, 2013; Walton, Davidson, & Harris, 2015) has implemented the KidsTalk program in a variety of different settings including camps (Hendrix et al. 2015) and after school programs (Walton, Davidson, & Harris, 2015), as well as with children of different races and socioeconomic statuses (Walton, Davidson, & Harris, 2015; Walton, Wuerfel, Kansal, & Cohen, 2013). I implemented KidsTalk for five weeks at BCE. I obtained parents' permission for their child to participate in KidsTalk and for each session to be audio recorded (see Appendix A for the parental permission form). After parental permission was obtained, a typical session included five to seven children from each grade and myself as the facilitator. KidsTalk is a version of a contemplative practice called a council circle that has been adapted by the Child Narrative Research Team for children six to twelve years old (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society).

The first session began with a discussion of the concept of research and the purpose of the KidsTalk program (see Appendix B for KidsTalk protocol). Next, I presented a story prompt, such as "Tell a story about a time a friend didn't act like a friend" (see Appendix C for KidsTalk Prompts Fall 2015), and then each child had the opportunity to share a story in response to the prompt or to pass. Additionally, no child was required to share a story, even if parental permission was given. After the child shared his or her story other children were given the opportunity to ask a question or comment on the story. The sharing of stories orally is relevant oral traditions as social

⁵ The Child Narrative Research Team at Rhodes College has been collecting and studying children's narratives and experiences for the past 15 years.

practices in African American communities (Goss & Barnes, 1989; Champion, 2014). In order to study both compassion and story sharing at BCE, I have aimed to provide a robust exploration of children and compassion through the practice of oral traditions (Goss & Barnes, 1989).

Analysis Method

Case Study Analysis

I have conducted an intrinsic case study in order to explore how children make sense of and talk about compassion in their own words through their own experiences (Stake, 1995). Using a selective sample, I investigated these questions through audio recordings of the KidsTalk sessions, extensive field notes, and close and careful qualitative analyses (Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b). The goals of this study were primarily descriptive and exploratory in nature, aligning well with an intrinsic case study methodology (Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b; Stake, 1995). The selected cases explore understanding(s) and expressions of compassion in a charter school setting with African American students. I analyzed the data I collected primarily through strategies such as pattern matching and explanation building (Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b). Pattern matching involves comparing two patterns to determine whether they match and is useful for matching an observed pattern with an expected pattern, whereas explanation building necessitates the development of explanations across patterns (Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b).

Exploratory Descriptive Analysis

After the stories and field notes were collected I used an open-coding approach, in which I made an initial pass through the sessions identifying any common themes or ideas (Willig, 2008). Then I used a constant comparative method to continue to identify

and compare the themes that arose within the data. I made note of instances of differences across sessions that informed me about changes over time and variations in themes.

Finally I used my descriptions to build toward pattern matching and explanation building with the goal of expanding and complicating these explanations (Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b).

Researcher Positionality

This work required that I also investigate my own positionality. As a result of this my own biases, positions, privileges, and experiences have greatly influenced my interpretation of this data. As a middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied white woman my own life experiences and perceptions are likely to be very different in potentially problematic ways from the children participating in this study, and perhaps teachers and administrators at BCE. As a result of this I only have access to the ways that I made sense of the story sharing sessions as well as the participant's reflections on KidsTalk. I work to be transparent about the lens I bring to this data and engaged this explicitly with my participants. Throughout this study and my participation in KidsTalk I too became a participant in this case. From this position I was able to perform closer analysis of the data and triangulate converging lines of evidence in order to interpret my findings more robustly (Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b; Stake, 1995).

Analysis

The remainder of this paper focuses on the various themes I identified that were shared across the fifteen sessions and the three different groups of students. These themes include family, citational voice, commodities and individualism, and school critiques. I have elected to present each theme through the factors that inhibited and promoted

compassion in order to demonstrate the complexity of the participant's compassion narratives. Each of these themes is briefly explicated in the subsections that follow and frame the idea of the multifaceted nature of compassion.

Family

Family members were among the most pervasive characters and topics in the children's stories. In fact, the majority of the stories the children told describing compassion included family members. Stories referencing compassion frequently mentioned adults and oftentimes these adults were family members. Specifically, mothers often played the role of helper ("My mom always helps me") or conflict resolver in the stories. In fact, female family figures are referenced almost exclusively in relation to compassion. The overwhelming majority of the teachers at BCE are women, however, only two stories referenced a teacher as a compassionate figure. When the children told stories about compassion, the stories contained female characters, but rarely included female teachers. This indicates that compassionate responses are expected from female characters outside of school, but within the school these same patterns often do not occur.

Family Value Systems. The children set up a clear value system, which places family directly after the self. According to fifth grader Mariah⁶, "I just said me myself and I and my momma and my daddy is the only people I need." The value system that emerges is the self, family, commodities,⁷ and then others. The fifth graders demonstrate this hierarchy most explicitly in response to the story prompt, "Tell a story about a time

⁶ Mariah and all other names are pseudonyms.

⁷ Commodities are further defined and discussed in the *Commodities and Capitalism* section.

you needed a friend.” During this session I gave the students an opportunity to reflect on and discuss the prompt. James, a fifth grade boy, said,

“I remember I met my friend that was me, and I then I met another friend his name was myself, and then I met another friend named I, and we were all friends.”⁸

This, however, is counter-intuitive because one of his best friends was also a member of the KidsTalk group. He uses the phrase “me, myself, and I” to be funny, but also as a way of presenting himself as strong and independent. Mariah used his phrase “me, myself, and I,” but also included her family. The students used a prompt about “needing a friend” as an opportunity to share the ways in which their identity is deeply connected with family. James and Mariah also intentionally do not mention any friends, despite having friendly relationships with many of the other students in the story-sharing circle. Many of the children describe rich relationships between multiple familial generations and peer exposure through close-knit extended family relationships. For example, Aniyah told this story of intergenerational family compassion.

“One day my I went to my grandma house and...she’s old so we go over to my grandma but she’s old and she has like these pumpkin trees in a vase...and what happened was she had told me to go water her plants and I watered all her plants. And then so she had told me to go mix up the corn bread and I forgot how to do it and then my my auntie came in a she helped me. And then my grandma said, “Are you ok?” And I said, “Yes.” And then she told me mix it up again and then I knew how to do it because my auntie had helped me the first time.”

In addition to intergenerational adult relationships, stories of both compassion and conflict in peer contexts are often described between cousins. Shanae told a story about peer conflict including family and non-family members in a non-school setting.

⁸ My representation of the African American Vernacular English used in this story and others attempts to convey, with as much clarity as possible, the students’ own word choices and phrasings.

“It was like last year when I was at my cousin house and some of their friends came out and I let my cousin see my stuff in front of them that was my friend’s. So I said, “Nah ya’ll cant play with it” cause it gonna get broke. They got mad and they said, ‘I’m not your friend no more.’”

In this story Shanae describes a friend-like relationship with her cousin, but makes a distinction between her cousins and her cousin’s friends. Shanae trusts her cousin with one of her “friend’s stuff,” but further describes a hierarchy of trust which places family above friends. Evidence from the children’s stories, compassion occurs most within families, in settings outside of school. This information provides valuable insights into the situations and people that the students determine necessitate or call for compassionate responses.

Citational Voice

Across the grades and sessions the children invoked the voices of others. According to Rogoff (2003), story sharing invokes a cacophony of voices that build and surround us as we create our own identity. Most frequently the children invoke parental and school discourses as *evidence* for claims made in their stories. These are often shared phrases encouraged by the school, or parental statements that make their way into the child’s descriptions or explanations.

Additionally, children often use cultural references such as church and pop culture references for a variety of purposes ranging from humor to establishing authority. For example, fifth grader Ashante invokes parental discourses in response to a prompt asking what I needed to know about being a kid their age.

“Kids like...they get spoiled like, where basically, where everybody else is and then its like, if you like try to be. Kids try to be grown when they young and then like parents tell you the child don’t grow up too fast. Because like, if you grow

up too fast you could like pay bills and do everything, have to take care of people.”

Here Ashante makes a clear distinction between getting “spoiled” during childhood and paying bills in adulthood. She uses her own experiences to describe childhood and cites “parents” as the authority on adulthood. This provides just one example of the ways the children cite external voices in their stories. The frequency and purpose of the invocation of these adult, school, and cultural discourses vary by session, and even by specific children. However, all of the sessions include some use of the voices of others in the children’s story sharing, reinforcing Rogoff’s idea that stories are the method used to form identity by building on the voices around us.

Parent/Adult Voice. The children demonstrate their story sharing style and bolster points made through their stories by citing adult and parental discourses. The children often do this by using parental and adult discourses, which suggests sophisticated things about the children’s stories. First the children will quote a parent or an adult figure directly. A child quoting their parents or other adult figures in stories is reflective of storytelling style. The child is emphasizing various perspectives within the story that may or may not correspond with the perspective of their own culturally contextual practice.

Another form of invoking parent/adult discourses happens when the children incorporate adult discourses into their own speech in a story. The child is using terminology or words that have been accumulated from an adult source and incorporated into the story by the child. For example, according to third grader Danielle, “Sometimes kids don’t know everything so they can ask someone for help.” She uses the expression “kids don’t know everything” to express a common experience and cites an adult source

in order to give this claim authority. This can be used to invoke authority, explain unfamiliar occurrences, and to emphasize commonality across perspectives. In some instances by incorporating parents' or other adult family member's voices into their stories the children are emphasizing the importance of family by choosing to include family members in their stories.

Cultural Voice. Children also cite non-parental characters or sources of authority in their stories. Many of these other sources are related to religious and pop cultural vocabularies. The children select what form of authority to cite in response to various situational factors. They use examples from popular culture and religious spheres to further emphasize or clarify points made in their story.

Religious discourses were primarily used in the context of supporting the ideas of others or showing agreement with other group members. The fourth and fifth graders frequently used "Hallelujahs" and "Amens" to show support for the ideas of others within the circle. However, the religious discourses were also referenced in individual stories. In this example, fifth grader Chris told a story about family compassion and alleviation of suffering through religious discourse.

"This is my story ok so when my great uncle died... I was very sad I was crying, and but my mom like helped boost me back up cause she like talked to me tellin' me that he up in heaven and that he with God and that he with the angels so that made me feel better."

Chris explained the powerful role of faith in alleviating suffering for some individuals. His story also gave evidence for the central theme of spirituality in African American discourses (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

Pop culture references were used less frequently, but often permeated particular sessions. When asked what I needed to know about being a kid his age, one fourth grader, Caleb, responded that kids were important because “When JayZ and Beyoncé get old you’re gonna need a new JayZ and Beyoncé.” According to Caleb, African American celebrities like JayZ and Beyoncé occupy an important role that will need to be filled by future generations. The students used popular culture as a frame of reference for their own social location and indicated which figures applied to their lives.

School Voice. A part of BCE’s culture was the repetition of specific phrases and even methods of talking about certain issues. The invocation of school terms or voice occurred the least of the three forms of citational voice. Through my presence during KidsTalk data collection I observed the very rigid nature of the school. The school enforced strict rules around dress, behavior, and even syntax. All of these severe conditions formed a school culture where the children were not provided with the space to interact, and when they did so they were encouraged to utilize school mantras and ideas. For example, the teachers and administrators referred to all students as “friends.” Although this practice is intended to promote inclusive language, it also results in the overuse of the term “friends” as a synonym for “classmate” rather than referencing a peer with whom a meaningful relationship is shared. Through the school’s attempt to promote prosocial behavior, this language simultaneously undermines student relationships.

The occasions where the children did reference school terminology and ideas during KidsTalk are worth noting because of the infrequency of compassion stories within the school context. Below I discuss three examples in an attempt to accurately depict the interaction between school discourses and compassion. For example, during a

fifth grade session the students were responding to a vignette prompt. This vignette described a situation in which the child's friend had been left out and asked the child to pretend the situation really happened to them and how s/he might respond⁹. Fifth grader Kevin explained,

"I would feel like it was unfair cause it's not fair for people that cause everybody is friends, but like it's like if I'm friends with this person and everybody's his friend, but that one person don't get it's not fair cause everybody's friends, but that's not fair. And it's a little like it's a little bullying like, but not bullying like...cause you let this person come on and then the other person feel bad. I'm finished."

In this response Kevin invokes the school voice when he says, "everyone is friends" and even refers to leaving someone out as "bullying." I was not anticipating Kevin's connection to leaving someone out and bullying. His reaction to this vignette is laden with school discourses. Chris followed up this point from Kevin saying,

"It actually is bullying because like you don't, like we all should be friends, should never leave anybody out, you should never hurt anybody's feelings. Like you know like our rules like keep your hands, feet, and other objects, unkind words and you should be nice to everybody."

Chris is directly relating a prompt about leaving someone out to school rules and discourses. The school has given the students language to talk about the issues of bullying and friendship and both Chris and Kevin provide the answers they feel are expected of them within the school context. However, when pushed further about this specific situation Kevin reveals the complexity of situations requiring compassion.

"Sometimes when...like you have a party and then like you sometimes this be happening. Like I'll try to share some with this person and then, like they'll ask me something, and then I say no, and then they'll start talking and getting mad and they'll start talking about me. But then when I try to get 'em something then they wanna be grateful and like then I say nah you just got that attitude."

⁹ See appendix C for full vignette.

He put himself in the position of the person hosting the party and used perspective taking to acknowledge the difficulty of pleasing everyone. Although in his original response to the vignette, Kevin stated that leaving someone out was “bullying,” after he applied perspective taking he was able to empathize with the situation of the party host and acknowledged the complexity of situations requiring compassion. Though invoking the language used by the school provided Kevin with terms to initially label a hypothetical situation, the language did not necessarily cause him to respond more compassionately to the person who was left out. School discourses were a helpful starting point for students to engage difficult topics with common terminology; however, this did not necessarily impact the outcome of complex situations.

Individualism and Commodities

Throughout the stories and sessions children frequently referenced material objects. Surprisingly this pattern permeated stories about compassion as well; in fact, the students often spoke of compassion in terms of material objects. This orientation toward material objects manifested itself in ways that both inhibited and facilitated compassion. On one hand, some stories children told regarding material objects were filled with selfish individualism and grudges. On the other hand, compassion stories regarding material objects revealed sophistication and complexity.

Individualism and Grudges. Over the course of the five-week KidsTalk program, the students in each grade developed a group identity. The fifth grade group specifically warrants examination in this regard. In response to the vignette prompt¹⁰ about a time a

¹⁰ The vignette described a situation in which the child’s friend had been left out and asked the child to pretend the situation really happened to them and how s/he might respond. See appendix C.

friend was left out, the fifth graders proposed a social system based on reciprocity, which took priority over compassionate responses. Shanae provided an example very similar to the vignette, but injected her concerns about reciprocal relationships.

“Last year I left one of my friends out. They were not from school and I left them out from my party. Because we’ll...do something and I give it to you and you don’t give it to me. I remember it so I can remember to do the same thing back to you, because I’m gonna let you come to my party and you act mean to me then the next day you gonna do the same thing.”

In many ways this story explains a moral and social code that has the potential to impede compassionate responses. Shanae promises to “remember” if someone else “act[s] mean” so she can “do the same thing back.” This logic does not emphasize perspective taking, empathy, or kindness. In the minds of some of the fifth graders a lack of reciprocity creates an unfair situation that takes priority over compassion and forgiveness. Shanae proposes that justice takes priority over kindness, which could reduce compassionate responses in the name of fairness. This indicates a very sophisticated philosophical and moral dilemma and further complicates compassion as a universally shared moral imperative.

Compassionate Commodities. Despite Shanae’s complication of the morality of compassion, the students provided strong evidence that commodities could be used for compassionate purposes as well. For example, if two people value commodities or a person is experiencing physical suffering, commodities are a useful way to alleviate that pain or empathetically take the perspective of another. A fifth grader, De’Andre, gave one particularly explicit example in his story about a time he helped someone.

“I said this little boy was like mad upset, because like, he don’t have that much, and he’s needy, and he was upset because he didn’t get some shoes and a video

game he wanted for Christmas. So I actually got the shoes that he wanted and just gave the shoes to him and let him have them.”

In this situation, De’Andre recognized the other person’s desire for the shoes, and despite his own desire for the objects, made the decision to give them to someone else and alleviate his struggle. However, this leads into a more nuanced concern about commodities used for compassion. De’Andre positions himself as the protagonist in his story (Engel, 1995). Despite De’Andre’s desire to help someone else, he also presents himself as someone with the means and material power to help. He has the shoes and the agency to decide to give the shoes to his friend. Underlying his story of commodity compassion is a larger theme of a desire to have agency, specifically material agency.

Despite attending a school in a working class neighborhood, the students make a point to materially distinguish themselves from those less fortunate. Shanae told a story about a “homeless man on the street” she saw and “gave [him] some money.” She distanced herself from the homeless man, but also asserted her own material agency by giving the man some money. In her story fifth grader, Chloe, goes beyond the distinction between herself and someone less fortunate.

“Like when I would grow up I wanna be a pediatrician that’s a baby doctor. And I want to do that because like me and my grandma and my family we love kids. And we don’t like every time we somebody on the street like a kid and we know that we get a lot of stuff and they don’t get a lot of stuff. And like we the school we in now, BCE, they care for us they give us they like let us go on field trips and the kids that’s on the street and people that’s on the street that like they don’t get all them things that we get. So like when we ride past them me and my grandma we like donate clothes to them. And then cause my grandma she’s got a lot of brand new clothes and stuff she gonna donate some and then its really fun... We try to prevent [provide] a better world for these kids, teachers, and people that don’t know anything that live on the street. We try to provide them to be good like us.”

Chloe made note of the ways in which herself, her family, and the kids at BCE are different from the “kids” and “people that’s on the street” who “don’t know anything.” She engaged a paternalistic perspective on alleviating the suffering experienced by the “people [that’s] on the street” by proposing “we try to provide them *to be good like us.*” This is a powerful statement from a fourth grader attending a school where 87.8% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch programs. She invoked of her own material agency by giving clothes to people on the street, but also culturally distinguished herself and her classmates from these people. She described a paternalistic compassionate response to the “people [that’s] on the streets,” further contributing to the complexity of compassion and its implementation.

School Critique

Many of the children’s stories referenced the school itself and the ways in which the school promoted and inhibited compassion. They also provided a picture of the transient nature of public education in this southern city. Although two of the students had attended BCE since kindergarten, the majority of the students had attended three or more other elementary schools. The children took their education very seriously and had insightful discussions about why education was important and where the best education could be found. According to Shanae, at charter schools “you get more time” “to learn in school” and “there are uniforms” and “their rules is so strict,” however, Kevin clarified “but them the best schools.” The children were repeatedly silenced by the rigidity of BCE, but they acknowledged an understanding that schools like BCE provide “the best” education available to them. Kevin expressed “after we leave [KidsTalk] its like prison after this, its like work time, like *it’s going to the yard picking cotton.*” These students

must sacrifice large amounts of freedom, in Kevin's words comparable to "going to the yard picking cotton," and autonomy in the name of education. Kevin's explicit critiques of his own experience with hidden curriculum- things that are taught (intentionally, unintentionally, and by omission) in schools but are not an 'official' part of the formal curriculum- demonstrated the pervasiveness and negative implications of hidden curriculum on the student's educational experience (Apple, 2000; Anyon, 1980).

The rigid culture of the school restricted student opportunities for interaction. Even within the spaces where the children interacted with each other this communication was limited. These characteristics inhibited the use of compassion between peers during day-to-day interactions. The messages sent by the structure of the school undermined compassion and socioemotional development. According to Mariah, her mother said, "she think the rules are getting messed up and she think that the school is starting to go badder...because new rules started coming up that's not good for the children." She even went so far as to say "they slaving us." Four out of five fourth graders and two out of seven fifth graders mentioned leaving BCE during the spring semester of 2016. Not only is the school squelching compassion, but it is also contributing to instability among students. This transience is a result of the inequitable educational system that working class students and students of color experience, but are not necessarily able to transcend the restrictions (hooks, 199; 2003), nor transform the school conditions that limit their expression of compassion. This is a poignant argument for the necessity of teaching students to navigate implicit and explicit power structures (Delpit, 1993).

Compassion

Each KidsTalk prompt was designed to elicit stories about necessitating compassion or examples of compassionate behavior. Despite this intentional planning the students *never* used the word compassion in their stories. However, this is not to say that the students did not express complex and meaningful notions of compassion. There were many descriptions of kind behavior, empathy, and perspective taking. The types of suffering indicated in the story influenced the compassionate responses described. For example, one of the most frequent instances of suffering cited by the children was physical injury. According to numerous stories, physical injury necessitated compassion by a family member or friend.

For instance, when asked to describe a time she would need a friend, fourth grader Chloe told a story explicitly about physical injury, but also expressed emotional pain, which was alleviated by a friend:

“Then he pushed me on concrete. I busted my knee open a little bit, it really hurt, and then I had to go to the front office and Aniyah she said, “Chloe can you? Do you want me to help you?” I said, “Yes.” She took me to the little thing that was under the playground, the little chairs and stuff, she had took me in there and then she said, “Chloe I’m a go tell the teacher for you because that, cause I’m your friend” and then I didn’t want to hurt your feelings, just go and let the teachers know about it and tell them that she’s still my friend.”

In this story Chloe physically hurt her knee, then her friend Aniyah entered the story and offered to help Chloe get adult assistance. However, beyond helping Chloe connect with an adult for assistance, Chloe said that Aniyah also helped her emotionally because Aniyah “didn’t want to hurt” her “feelings.” As discussed previously, parents and adults were common stewards of compassion, and other children or those less fortunate were on the receiving end of compassion.

At first glance this story appears to be about Chloe's injury, but Chloe made note that her emotional care is also important. Across the stories the children referenced needing a friend as a result of physical injury, or for entertainment. Beyond these simple physical situations, the students provided deep analysis of compassion as a complex construct. They presented a clearer image of the things that get in the way of compassion and the things that promote compassion, but also challenge the underlying morality assumptions regarding the promotion of compassion.

Conclusions

KidsTalk

In the final KidsTalk session with each grade I asked the students to reflect on their experience. I asked them what they thought of telling stories, of KidsTalk as a program, and what they thought about me as a facilitator and researcher in their school environment. The responses varied by session and by grade, but three common themes emerged. First, they thought KidsTalk was fun; this was mentioned by each grade and almost every child. At first glance this may seem too simple or obvious to be meaningful, however, in reality the children were tapping into something very important. Throughout all of the sessions there were moments of seriousness, but many more moments of laughter and humor. Humor played an important role in facilitating a compassionate and welcoming group dynamic. It also served as a fun outlet and a break from the rigidity and structure of the rest of the school day.

The idea of KidsTalk as an outlet was another consistent theme. Many of the students expressed that KidsTalk was the only time during the day that they got to laugh and talk besides recess. They said that even during lunch they were not allowed to talk

and that sometimes they did not have recess. Providing the time during lunch (each KidsTalk session took place at lunch time) gave them a space to explore meaning making experiences with their peers and became a reward because of the space agency. By limiting peer interaction, the school is squelching opportunities for peer development and compassion. Many of the stories about compassion were told about adults helping children, however, by providing spaces that allow for the negotiation of values and complex ideas this would give the children more opportunities to practice compassion with their peers. Despite regularly evoking the language and discourse(s) provided by the school, only two compassion stories referenced a teacher. These opportunities to practice and further develop compassion, when intentionally created by the school, provide an incredible opportunity for children to explore the complexities of compassion with their peers. Too often, however, and in the name of “high standards” and “high expectations,” such opportunities are not made available.

Exploring the complexities of compassion is one potential use of a KidsTalk or a similar story-sharing program; however, there are numerous other benefits. Another consistent response to KidsTalk was that the children were able to express themselves and talk about things they would otherwise forget about or may not have been comfortable discussing in a different environment. Story sharing served as an opportunity for identity building and socioemotional learning. The children were able to present their own value systems, beliefs, and priorities to their peers in a respectful environment. Kayla said she “was able to express” herself during KidsTalk, and those around her agreed. The students described the identity the group had formed as well. They

acknowledged that even though they may not have been friends with everyone in the group they knew a lot more about each other.

Revisiting Researcher Positionality

In addition to evaluating KidsTalk, I asked the students to evaluate me as well. I verbally named my position as a young, white, female researcher to each group. Every grade had an explosive response to me naming my race. All of the children laughed, and the fourth graders even tried to comfort me and assure me that my being white was not a bad thing. This was one of two times that race was ever brought up explicitly during KidsTalk. The first occurred in a political discussion in which one third grader, Chloe, grader stated that she didn't like the "white man," Donald Trump, who was running for president. I then told Chloe that Barak Obama was our first African American president, and she responded, "I am literally crying right now." During her lifetime she has only known Barak Obama as president, but she still identified negative changes that the "white man" Donald Trump would make and how they would affect her community. This conversation is very relevant to understanding the scope of the third grader's construction of race and compassion. In these two race-related conversations, both the children and myself acknowledged that they were members of a community that I was not a part of. They did not want me to feel bad about not belonging to that community because I am white, however, a common trope among the students is to use "white" as an insult. This was another situation in which the children responded in a kind way to a complex situation. In their minds calling someone "white" is something that generally did not occur in front of a white person and had negative connotations. Fourth grader Chloe ("but you're not like..") and fifth grader Mariah ("you called yourself white we didn't even say

that”) reacted compassionately toward me by making explicit attempts to comfort me and by making it clear that I did not possess the negative qualities that were inferred when they used “white” as an insult.

After the initial reaction when I asked each child to share what they thought about me there were a variety of responses. Many of the children said I was nice and fun. Fourth grader, Shae told me she liked me because I was like her teachers. In many ways I am very demographically similar to the teachers in the school; most are young, white, women. The fifth graders said they liked me because I *wasn't* like their teachers. I was simultaneously similar and dissimilar to the teachers in the school. I was not confined by the same rules and structures of the school, which allowed more space for the students to share their voice, but I still possessed many demographic characteristics similar to the student’s teachers. This both-and positionality offered a unique insight into these students’ conceptions of compassion; a standpoint that for many felt similar enough to their teachers to be trusted and respected, but different enough from their teachers by “allowing” for more student agency and expression.

Compassionate Complexity/Complex Compassion

Over the course of fifteen sessions with seventeen children, compassion was described in rich and nuanced detail, but the word compassion was never used. In response to prompts specifically targeting compassion, the children discussed the complexity of prosocial attitudes and behavior. They proposed ways that compassion aligns with and disrupts social norms and values. Specifically, the fifth graders problematized the ways in which compassion can conflict with justice and indicated the ambiguous moral lines between the two. The school explicitly endorsed compassion and

prosocial behavior, but through its structure reinforced justice as the prevailing value. The extent of the compassionate response also varied by the context and characters in each story. These findings do not provide clear-cut prescriptions or recipes for the development of compassion.

However, this study does help us to problematize the underlying truths and assumptions that presume the superior morality of compassion. Beyond the specific instances of compassion and participating actors, there were many other factors that simultaneously influenced compassion in the children's stories and compassionate responding by the children within each session. Simultaneously enabling and inhibiting factors included family, citational voice, individualism and commodities, and school structures. In this specific instance story sharing during KidsTalk sessions provided the time and space for students to negotiate the complexities of the application of compassion to daily life.

Implications and Recommendations

In this study I explored the ways in which third, fourth, and fifth grade students at a charter school in Memphis, TN made sense of compassion in their own words through story sharing. Through exploratory descriptive analysis, I made meaning of the KidsTalk sessions in terms of inhibiting and promoting factors that influenced compassion. The students described compassion as a complex construct, which necessitated time and space in the form of story sharing as a contemplative practice. This time and space, however, is regularly denied to them in school. Story sharing can be a useful tool for creating necessary space for reflection, as well as social and emotional growth.

First, the children's overwhelming emphasis on family in relation to compassion indicates families as powerful partners in promoting compassion, but also socioemotional development. Families are also an incredible asset for promoting compassionate responses between peers. Frequently in this study children cited family as why they should behave in certain ways toward their peers. Future research should explore the links between familial values and peer social structures in order to promote the development of compassion in schools. Also, encouraging the exchange of family and school norms and values in the school context can help the school to better reinforce and build on shared values and goals (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002).

This study has perhaps the greatest implications for the so called "no excuses" charter schools. Although BCE provided the students with the language to talk about issues such as friendship and bullying, this did little to impact the children's sense that the rigidity of the school stood in stark contrast to the compassion they have experienced outside of school. Since the school leaves negligible space for expressions of compassion to be implemented during the school day, these efforts have a limited and constrained impact. The extreme rigidity of the school model is a factor that got in the way of peer compassion, which is likely an unintended consequence, but is critical to understanding the ways these students understand compassion.

BCE, and other similar charter organizations, propose a worthy goal of college graduation for every student. Yet we must reconsider the socioemotional skills that are essential for healthy social development and long-term wellness, which are continually denied through the limiting of student agency at BCE. This limit on agency severely cripples potential compassion and compassionate responses from occurring within the

school building. Regardless of this factor the students present a robust understanding and experience of compassion in their own families and communities. If we desire compassionate students and compassionate communities, we must consider how our schools are both encouraging and limiting the scope and scale of compassion. This requires *hearing* and *listening* to students' stories and scaffolding compassion toward our larger aims of an equitable education for every child.

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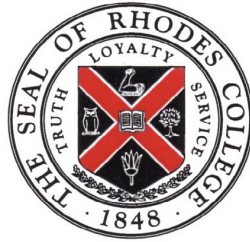
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Appendix A

Parent Permission Form



Dear Memphis College Prep Elementary Parents,

Memphis College Prep and Rhodes College have partnered to implement a program called KidsTalk that encourages communication through story sharing. The program was designed at Rhodes College and has been implemented in several schools and after school programs locally over the past 15 years.

KidsTalk provides children with a space to share stories while developing a sense of self, conflict resolution skills, literacy skills, and success in peer relations. Story sharing is practiced frequently in everyday life, and KidsTalk helps to provide children with the time to share stories with their peers during school.

Previous Memphis College Prep Intern and Rhodes College Honors Student, Brittany Alexander, will facilitate KidsTalk during lunchtime over the next five weeks. The information she learns during KidsTalk will contribute to her understanding of healthy peer relations and compassion. Brittany will use this information in her education honors research project under the supervision of Dr. Casey and Dr. Walton.

We are seeking your permission to let your child participate in KidsTalk during their lunchtime.

During KidsTalk children will sit in a circle in small groups and Brittany Alexander will lead the story sharing by asking a daily prompt. These prompts are designed to encourage the child to share experiences they will find interesting. Here are some examples:

1. Tell a story about a time you helped someone.
2. Tell a story about a time you had a conflict with a friend.
3. Tell a story about a time something happened to a friend that was not fair.
4. Tell a story about a time you did something brave.

Each child will have an opportunity to share if they wish to. No child will be forced to share a story, and the children will be encouraged to listen respectfully to one another's stories.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the KidsTalk program children may be asked to fill out a questionnaire at the end of the program.

At the completion of this project Brittany Alexander will make a version of her honors thesis available to any interested participating families and students.

Confidentiality and Privacy

We will be very careful will your child’s personal information. Names and other identifying information will not be shared with anyone expect the researchers involved with this project. We will also follow the guidelines Memphis College Prep has in place to protect and support students.

Questions?

If you have questions about KidsTalk or if you are interested in getting more information about our research, you may contact Dr. Marsha Walton (901-843-3987), Dr. Zachary Casey (901-843-3742) or Brittany Alexander (615-613-3995). If you have concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may call Dr. Nick McKinney, Chair of the Rhodes Human Subjects Review Board (843-3985). We look forward to working with your children as a part of the KidsTalk Project!

Sincere Thanks,

Marsha Walton, Professor of Psychology, Rhodes College
 (901) 843-3987
WALTON@rhodes.edu

Zachary Casey, Professor of Education, Rhodes College
 (901) 843-3742
caseyz@rhodes.edu

Brittany Alexander, Honors Student, Rhodes College
 (615) 613-3995
alebl-16@rhodes.edu

I understand that my child may participate in story sharing and other activities in the KidsTalk Program described above. My signature below authorizes that my child may participate in KidsTalk and that my child’s stories can be recorded for research purposes to only be shared with Dr. Casey and the Rhodes College Narrative Development research team. If I choose not to give permission, or change my mind at anytime, my child will not participate in KidsTalk.

I, _____ (Guardian’s name), give permission for
 _____ (Child’s name) to participate in the KidsTalk
 Research Project described above.

 Guardian’s signature

 Date

Appendix B

Protocol for KidsTalk at Memphis College Prep

INTRODUCTION

KidsTalk is a program designed to promote children's natural tendencies to talk about their experiences. Story sharing is important to moral development, to emotion regulation, to the developing sense of self, and to the establishment and maintenance of relationships. The ability to share personal stories is a precursor to literacy skills and has been shown to be critical to our ability to cope with adversity. We are seeking to encourage the story sharing practices and to create an atmosphere in which children know that their own stories are valued by others. All we really do when we facilitate KidsTalk sessions is listen to kids talk about their lives, responding naturally, and giving minimal instruction.

GUIDELINES

Open session(s) with an explanation of what KidsTalk is to the children, and the idea behind why we share stories (example: "We learn from things that have happened to us before, so story sharing helps us learn from other peoples' experiences).

Next, after explaining why stories are important, introduce yourself (the facilitator) in a greater depth, transitioning into the research aspect of KidsTalk—i.e. mention the fact that you are both a college student and a researcher. Explain why you are interested in listening to the stories of children—e.g. you are interested in understanding how being a kid is different now, compared to when you were a kid.

Once you have explained both the ideas of KidsTalk and why you are conducting this research, begin the session! Here are some tips to keep the session as fluid and fun as possible:

- Review each child's name and welcome the group before starting KidsTalk
- Remind the children about being good listeners and not interrupting the speaker when he or she is talking
- Remind children that only the child with the talking stick/staff can talk
- Always be attentive and actively listening to the child's story
- Introduce the topic for the day, and follow up with an example story of your own to make the children more comfortable
 - You don't want to intimidate the children by telling a story that is nothing like a story they might be able to share
- You *MAY* ask questions if the story is not clear or not elaborated at all. This may especially be needed in the first couple of sessions
- Model good listening behavior: this will make it more likely that the children will listen to each other. Show normal (not exaggerated) emotional responses—surprise, concern, laughter, sadness, relief
- All children are allowed to share at least one story, but if there is extra time—and if the children desire—you may extend the session and have children share more stories
- Once session is complete, thank the children for sharing

Appendix C

KidsTalk Prompts Fall 2015

- 5) Tell a story about a time a friend didn't act like a friend.
- 7) Tell a story about a time something happened that was not fair.
- 18) Tell a story about a time you felt left out.
- 23) Tell a story about a time you helped someone
- 25) Tell a story about a time someone helped you.
- 26) Tell a story about a time you were kind to someone else.
- 27) Tell a story about a time someone else was kind to you.
- 30) Tell a story about a time when you needed a friend.
- 31) Tell a story about a time when a friend needed you.
- 75) Tell a story about something that happened on the playground.
- 79) Tell a story about something that happened on the 4th of July.
- 94) One of your friends is having a birthday party and s/he invites you and all of your friends except one to the party. The friend who wasn't invited found out that s/he was not invited to the birthday party. His/her feelings were really hurt because s/he was not invited. How would this make you feel? What would this make you think about?/act?