

Our Theory of Change:

A Model for Creating Compassionate Learning Communities

The Origins of the Model:

Where did it all begin? Not surprisingly, it began with compassion, and its intersection with joy. Over our many years as parents, teachers, and school leaders, compassion has formed the core of our curriculum and teacher training; it is also the centerpiece of C's current curricular development efforts. It occupies a pivotal position in an intricate hanging mobile that holds together the many complex and interacting parts of home, school and classroom life. Without it the balance of the mobile would be lost. At the heart of what we strive to do as teachers and school leaders, and as learners with students and colleagues, is to nurture and nudge children, teachers, and families to a place of deepened compassion, empowerment, and love. We include the compassionate voices of five individuals of influence to underscore the importance of why we endeavor to do what we do in our home and classroom lives each and every day.

Compassion is the radicalism of our time. If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.
- Dalai Lama

A single act of compassion throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees.
- Amelia Earhart

Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.
- Aristotle

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.
- Anne Frank

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.
- Maya Angelou

We would like children, parents, and educators, both within and outside the context of their home and school experiences and studies, to practice compassion. This begins with feeling deep empathy for themselves, for others and for the natural world. Again and again, we witness human beings' natural wish to connect empathically with others, and to contribute to the wellbeing of those around them. The stories they tell most excitedly, like those we tell others, resonate with altruistic themes. Thus, we set as a goal for ourselves to inspire others to connect with their true nature and to use their understanding of the power of empathy to consciously act in compassionate ways.

We see "empathic connection" as the ability to recognize the truth in another person's experience, and thus to more deeply understand their feelings and needs in a particular moment. We see "acting compassionately" as the willingness to do what we can to create opportunities for that person to meet those needs in life-serving ways while at the same time meeting our own need to contribute to the wellbeing of those around us.

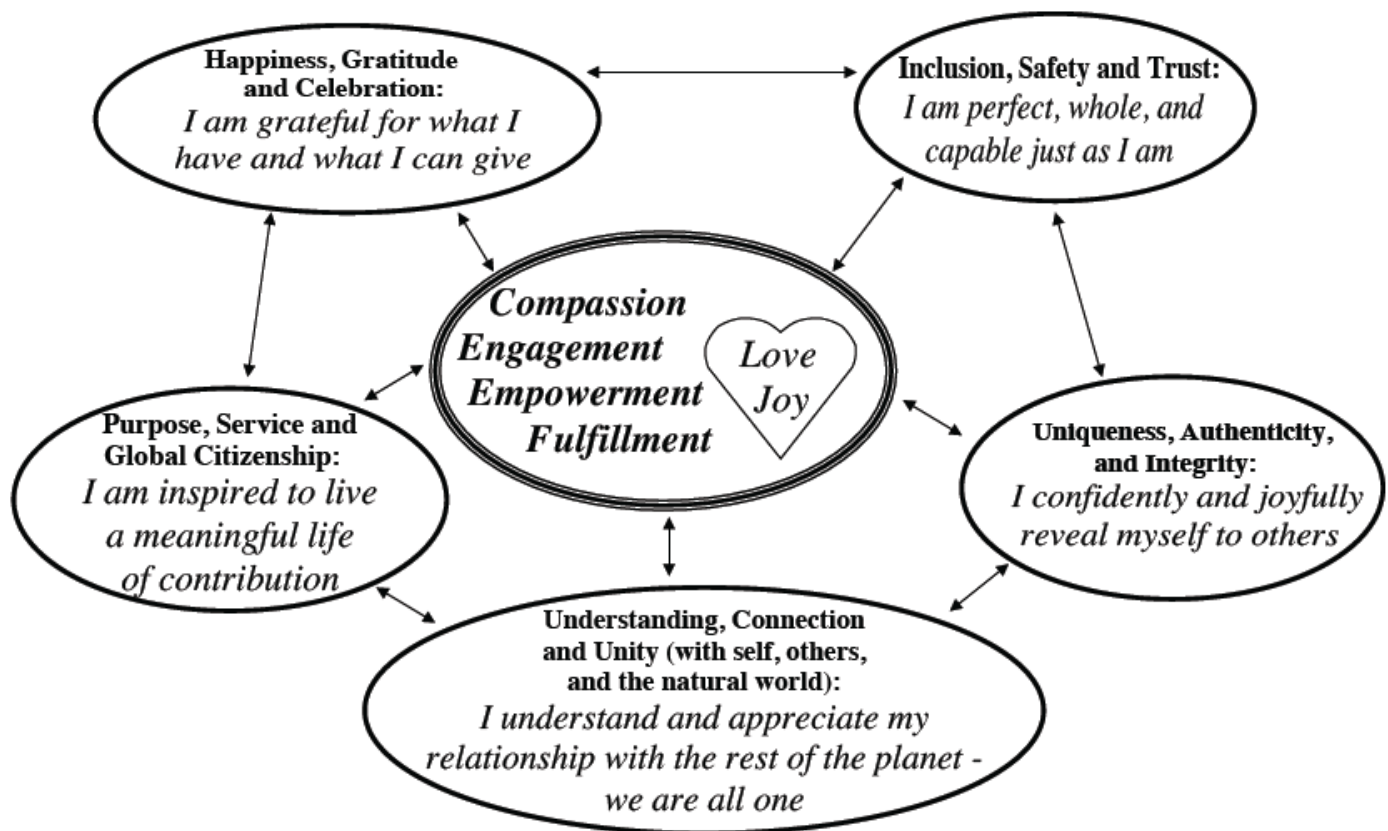
Our ardent belief and observation as active participants in the education of students (and teachers) from Kindergarten through university, is that in their own time, and in their own way, most students in most schools will be provided the academic instruction and services they need to become capable readers, writers, mathematicians and scientists. Most have the support and love of thoughtful and dedicated parents, and the good fortune to be attending schools that value learning. The piece that can be elusive for

all of us at times is the ability and willingness to reach out and be truly human in our interactions with ourselves, others, and with the natural world.

The model we articulate here grew out of nearly 60 years of combined service in different classrooms, schools, and countries of the world. We looked at our practice as educators and as school leaders after being encouraged to do so by families, students and teachers who shared their appreciation with us. And then we attempted to describe in replicable ways what we do, and how and why we do it. Our theory of change model for creating compassionate learning communities is the result of that reflective effort.

An Overview of the Model:

Creating Compassionate Learning Communities: A Theory of Change – The Contributors



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We believe, and we have predictably and repeatedly witnessed, that children and adults who feel physically and emotionally safe, and who receive messages regularly that the important adults and peers in their lives appreciate, value and have confidence in them, are most likely to reveal themselves and their humanity in authentic ways. In fact, we have seen that the children who come to see their own perfection, humanity, and capability are also the children who feel secure enough to practice revealing both of these on a daily basis. And most impressive to us, we see that they grow into adults who are able, willing, and indeed compelled to do the same, at the same time that they grow into capable scientists, mathematicians,

writers, readers, and artists who can confidently access the resources they need to help them answer life's questions and respond to life's challenges. In each case, the first fuels the second.

We believe, and have predictably and repeatedly witnessed, that children who feel emotionally safe, who see themselves as “worth-more” rather than “worth-less,” that is, who feel good about who they are, and what they have to contribute, quite naturally look outside themselves, both for intellectual sustenance, and for meaningful human connection. They do this because once their need for belonging and their need for love and understanding have been met, then their natural curiosity and their investment in growing in as many ways as possible are freed to express themselves more fully. Our goal then is to help feed children's curiosities and spirits, and to inspire them as they discover the myriad ways in which they can guide themselves and the world to a better place. The ways in which they interact with the Earth's environments, and the plants and animals within them, in addition to the ways in which they interact with the Earth's people are basic, not only to their future, but to their children's future and beyond.

At the heart of their feeling good about themselves as young people is how they are viewed and treated by others. Their relationships with other children and adults help to determine the ways in which they will embrace the world. Our goal is that they be embraced in loving ways, free from the influence of adult judgments that often serve to define them narrowly and thus limit possibilities. When this is accomplished their embraces are much more likely to be loving and free from judgment as well.

When we say “loving” and “free from judgment” we are suggesting that students be provided challenging and meaningful learning opportunities in which there is a range of freedom and a high value placed on collaboration that permits, and indeed, encourages and fuels both their need for autonomy and their sense of community simultaneously. It is then that they can uncover and share in the most comprehensive way, who they truly are as learners and people. We are suggesting creating a classroom environment in which we live the mantra: “love is all there is—we are all one—do no harm”—where there is no language of shame, guilt, blame or fear because each of these discourages children from taking the kinds of risks that are a necessary part of deep and sustained learning.

In the following paragraph we describe our theory of change—a model of a process we have employed over the many years we have been teaching and leading in schools. As is true of the way in which we develop curriculum, lead teachers, or support parents, we designed this model by working backwards from the “compassionate outcomes” we were seeking and from the results we have predictably seen in our students, their families, and the teachers with whom we've worked and learned.

Consistently, at the conclusion of each school year, all stakeholders have expressed their excitement about all that they had accomplished. And parents' and teachers' attention, at the same time that it celebrated the profound advances their children and students had made within the academic realm, was on all that they had done with regard to “matters of the heart,” that is, on their growth as social emotional learners. They celebrated their heightened capacity for compassion, and the many actions they had taken throughout the year that had directly and compassionately impacted the world outside themselves, both at home, on the playground, in their neighborhoods, and beyond.

We articulate our model here in an effort to show how we create compassionate learning communities. We hope our explanation, brief as it is, will be complete enough to successfully illuminate what we believe is a dynamic, yet at times linear process, one that begins with creating an environment of inclusion, safety and trust. As noted previously, we believe that we, as human beings, most easily express our authenticity and uniqueness, and do so with integrity—being truly seen for who we are in the process—when we feel

safe, and when our need for respect and our need for trust and belonging have been met. To this end, we do all we can to build learning environments filled with as much acceptance, appreciation and celebration—and free from as much judgment—as possible. We observe and respond to children and their movement toward understanding and autonomy with as much unconditional love as we are capable of. We build learning environments and school cultures in which all children are provided evidence of the power that comes from trying to understand and value every voice. We engage in conversations that matter, conversations that draw out children's own stories and vulnerabilities. And, we frequently begin these conversations by sharing our own stories and vulnerabilities. We have found that children will happily follow a kind, sincere, and courageous adult lead. It has been a moving experience to be invited into our students' and their families' lives, to share their celebrations and passions, and to hear their deepest thoughts, joys, sorrows, and feelings. This opportunity comes when children feel truly safe, and when they trust that our agenda as teachers and/or significant adults is finding ways to enrich both their lives and our own.

We believe, and we have predictably and repeatedly witnessed, that once our human need for safety and for trust have been met we are more willing to, and indeed excited about, not only sharing who we truly are, but looking outside ourselves to see and to understand others more clearly as well. The more we look outside ourselves the more we discover evidence that we, our feelings and aspirations can be found within people from every corner of our classroom and from every corner of the Earth. When we see ourselves in the rest of humanity, we then more easily embrace the connections and the unity we share with all things. And this connection of which we speak forms the heart of our academic curriculum, since, within our definition of curriculum, we include discovering, understanding, and celebrating our relationships with each part of our universe, from self to other, from the small to the large, from the concrete to the abstract, from the simple to the complex, from the natural to the human-made, from the ancient to the contemporary, and on and on.

Once we truly reach a place where we acknowledge and embrace our connection with all things, we see how integral each piece is to the whole. And, in those moments, we are quite naturally inspired to live our lives with consciousness, meaning, and purpose. With this purposeful and meaningful consciousness, we are inspired to recognize our individual and collective responsibility to find ways to be of service, and to contribute in some way as global citizens to the greater good. After all, it is in these moments of connection and service that our spirits soar the highest. It is at these moments when we feel the greatest joy in life and in learning, the moments when we lose ourselves in the work at hand. That passion, that happiness—what positive psychologists define as the intersection of what we are good at, what we could lose ourselves in for hours on end, even forgetting to eat, and of what we are passionate about—is a powerful force in realizing the goal of ultimate health and wellness.

We believe that our grandest and most natural purpose, as human beings, is to be of service and to enrich life wherever and whenever we can. The students, families, and teachers with whom we have worked and learned over the past 32 years have let us know that this is true—for, their recounts of what they found greatest value in during our journeys together, and their stories of connection are the stories that we hear again and again, years after our time together in the classroom and/or staff meeting has come to an end.

Being actively taught to recognize and to mindfully see the beauty of this connection that we are blessed to have with one another and with the planet, and the magic that is our existence, we are moved to thankfulness. When we are fully conscious of ourselves and of the gifts that are ours in every moment, we cannot help but live in and express ourselves from a place of gratitude and, indeed, celebration. The

humility that comes as a result of realizing we are “a part of it all” fuels our gratitude, and it also fuels the celebration that quite naturally accompanies the joy of being alive.

Implications for Instruction:

Needless to say, the process we articulate here takes time—any theory of change, particularly in an enormous and complex institution like education—requires time, patience, careful thought and planning, mindful teacher and student training, and hours of practice. It is not accomplished as a one-time unit of study with students nor as a one-time Professional Development with teachers or webinar with district heads. Nor is it accomplished within one particular school year. As is true for reading and mathematics, writing and science, the understanding of which, and facility with which grow from carefully planned and articulated instruction, repeated experiences, and practice over time, “compassion” must be intentionally and skillfully woven into students’ (and adults’) daily school curricula and lives.

As noted above, an important precursor to children treating each other in open-minded and loving ways is for them to come to know themselves and each other in very real and human ways. It has been our repeated experience that once human connections are made, connections founded on respect and appreciation of similarities and differences and grounded in active perspective-taking, connections formed by sharing personal and important stories, that students are more likely to see each others’ hearts and spirits, and to treat them with tenderness and understanding.

In an effort to help children connect with their own tenderness we create opportunities for them to exchange stories and wonderings, vulnerabilities and questions, on a regular basis. And, we begin this practice from the outset, starting with our youngest learners. On some occasions we invite them to share their stories broadly, with no guidance or focusing from us. Often their stories arise out of a moment of deep connection—a conversation that leads to self-disclosure. On other occasions we invite them to share stories that are narrowed in some way and often connected to a piece of literature we are exploring, and that pertain to specific scientific or social inquiries we are pursuing—a time they were worried, scared or sad, one of the best things that has ever happened to them, the perfect afternoon.

On each of these occasions we do not rush or judge the stories. We create a space for conversation, and we place questions into the silence, questions that can be pondered, and out of which answers and more questions can grow. Valuing the process most of all, we do not designate an ending time when we begin. The conversations may be prompted by the stories we read. They may arise from interactions between students on the playground or in the hallways, or from the students’ home lives. They may come quite spontaneously out of questions children raise in the course of experiences and discussions we have. The students’ questions inspire more questions and discussions—all opportunities to explore real human issues in meaning-filled contexts. We listen closely to what the children are saying (and, in many cases, not saying), and then shape our responses in an effort to encourage greater vulnerability and connection within the group, and, ultimately, the sharing of more questions. Emotional vulnerability is perhaps the greatest gift we can give one another. We have seen no more attentive listening in the classroom or the staff meeting than that which occurs when we, and the children and teachers with whom we live and learn, are sharing from our hearts.

Once or twice each month—and weekly if needed— we may meet as a community to share (always with the option to pass if students wish to) “Things that are going well,” “Things we would like to change or would like to be different (with a request that individual’s names not be used in the stories, so that people feel safe sharing without embarrassment),” “Things that we appreciate (followed by compliments and gratitudes—this we do regularly during the week-ending Magic Basket),” “Things that we regret or mourn

(that is, things we would like to have done differently if we had the opportunity to do them again),” “Things we are looking forward to,” and/or “Questions we have for one or more of our community members.” Our goal in having these community meetings is to empower children to test out their voices in a more public way, and to share the kinds of feelings that, once expressed, bring us closer.

In addition to exploring human issues directly and as they come up through conversations, we look for and create many opportunities for students to be of service and to make a difference. Making a difference is powerful in nurturing our good feelings about ourselves, as well as in the development of empathy—looking beyond ourselves so that we can feel the feelings of, and put ourselves into the experiences of others. An ongoing garden project (carried out over consecutive years with the larger school and neighborhood communities—including retirement communities—and sometimes with children from other schools); “Heart Talk” (a form of Compassionate Communication that we teach and practice in an ongoing way throughout the year); “Circle of Friends” (a week-ending celebration of learning and friendship during which each student is recognized and honored by their peers for ways they have contributed to one or more classmates’ well-being); a UNICEF press conference (addressing the state of the world’s children and spreading the importance of service that benefits children in need); Ripples Network News (an electronic news magazine written, recorded, edited and published by children and for children that focuses on what is going well in the world); and the work of Peace Productions Unlimited (a student-operated arts production and performance company that uses a peace-focused event to feature all of the arts and raise awareness, and money for “Kids Helping Kids”) are important avenues through which children have been able to contribute, and, through which children have experienced themselves as capable and powerful during the school year.

Through these projects, and so many more, coupled with thoughtfully articulated lessons promoting the development of social emotional skills and attitudes, our students from Kindergarten to 8th grade predictably become more connected to the larger world community, and they predictably become more socially conscious and active, so much so that by year’s end a great many have initiated their own service projects—from creating new playground games in which everyone can participate, sending rice to Washington to inspire the president to exercise caution and assume a peace-keeping stance in U.S. interventions overseas, to bringing to school every coin they had been saving, hoping to inspire classmates and teachers to unite in helping the earthquake victims in Chengdu and surrounding areas, to initiating their own and varied global calls to action on behalf of endangered animals and endangered environments. And the list goes on.

Each of these ventures requires the children to look outside themselves and to work toward a meaningful goal. In order to work together effectively as they pursue grand and meaningful causes, children learn more about respecting and valuing one another. Uniting to achieve big things requires a heightened intimacy and connection, because the work is difficult. The road they travel together is often quite long and the hours spent together in focused work is often many. When each school year begins, we share with our students—and with our staff—our view of the work that lies before us. And, we share our intention—that everything we do and everything we ask of them be “useful, caring, hard work, that feels good.” The results, both the products of the students’ learning, their efforts and the impact each project has had on their lives personally, as well as on the world more generally, have confirmed for us how essential it is to purposefully do what we can to help foster the kind of loving consciousness that results from the creation of a compassionate learning community.

When we wed our theory of change model with the guiding principles that drive the creation of a compassionate school's culture, curriculum and ongoing decision-making, it can and has looked like this:

Our Theory of Change for Schools – 5 Guiding Principles for Academic and Personal Excellence

