Chapter 8
Cultivating Compassion in an Upper Elementary School Classroom Community

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explored the notion that compassionate behaviors can be learned or cultivated among elementary school students through mindfulness practice in the classroom. Integral theory served as the conceptual framework for the research questions, the methodology, and the analysis. The investigation thus unfolded as a narrative inquiry using a mixed methods approach and informed by integral methodological pluralism to relate the story of one classroom. Increased self-awareness, happiness, and calm were observed in the students and teacher alike as a result of mindfulness practice. The integral analysis determined that these positive effects were persistent for all involved and pointed to the potential benefits of adopting mindfulness practice at the system level.

INTRODUCTION
The development of compassion and the attitudes and behaviours associated with it is a multi-faceted and complex process. For this reason, research into the concept requires a model that takes into account multiple perspectives in a systematic fashion. Integral theory provides a framework for just this sort of model in regard to the elaboration of research questions and data collection methods and the interpretation of the collected data. This study has accordingly employed integral theory as a means to arrive at a well-rounded understanding of compassion as it was fostered through mindfulness practice in a classroom combining students from grades four and five.

Mindfulness strategies are becoming increasingly common in classrooms as a means to enhance the well-being of both teachers and students (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012). Their popularity runs counter to the tendency in Western societies to view individuals’ inner worlds as inconsequential and to leave interior, subjective ideations to clinical settings, such as the interactions between a student and a school counsellor. The focus in classrooms has rather been on the exteriorization of students’ feelings.

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as behaviours through citizenship education (Marrero, 2007). The present study was designed to explore the effectiveness of mindfulness practices in promoting the development of wisdom, compassionate attitudes, and an ethic of care in a classroom community.

Context

This study took place in a vibrant northern community that, having experienced significant growth over the past decade, can been described as a boom town. The school division consists of 15 schools, and the study took place in one for kindergarten to grade 6 students. The school itself has experienced a fair amount of change over the last few years. Its student population was at one point one of the largest in the division, but the opening of a new school in the fall term during which this study took place reduced enrolment by about half, resulting in many staff changes and a shift in the school’s programming and overall culture.

Purpose

This study was designed to explore the concept of compassion by introducing mindfulness practice in a classroom and investigating its effects on the attitudes and behaviours of the members of the classroom community and through them on the broader community. A further goal was to explore the social environment of the school and its position within the educational system in terms of the creation of compassionate learning environments.

These concepts and contexts were also examined through the inclusive lens of integral theory, which “is a way of knowing that helps one strive for the most comprehensive understanding of any phenomenon” (Marquis, 2007). This systematic framework facilitated examination of the interconnections among various perspectives that were identified in the course of the study.

Significance

This study is of particular note owing the use of integral theory throughout the research process. In the analysis of the data, this approach allowed for the analysis of individual perspectives, both in isolation and also in relation to other perspectives, through the integral model known as “all quadrants all lines” (AQAL, explained below). The benefits of this theory for a study like this one were well described by its originator, Wilber.

What is the point of using an Integral map or model? First, whether you are working in business, medicine, psychotherapy, law, ecology or simply everyday living and learning, the Integral Map helps make sure that you are “touching all the bases.” If you are trying to fly over the Rocky Mountains, the more accurate map you have, the less likely you will crash. An Integral Approach ensures that you are utilizing the full range of resources for any situation, with a greater likelihood of success. (Wilber, 2005)

Not only does the analysis presented in this study “touch all the bases,” but it also facilitated a comprehensive examination of the connections among the various aspects of the issues under discussion so that a holistic picture could emerge. This approach to the organization and analysis, then, provided the basis for an investigation of the phenomenon of compassion and its promotion through mindful practice from a variety of perspectives and methodologies.