

More Than Just Academics: Teaching Kindness

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter addresses how the authors, two former elementary school teachers, discovered that their students needed lessons in how to treat fellow students with respect and kindness. Now working in teacher preparation, the authors reflect on the importance of actively teaching kindness. They argue that teaching children to be thoughtful, kind, and considerate is every bit as vital as teaching them the three Rs—Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic. From experience, they know that helping children develop an ethic of caring for others is not learned from lecture or posted rules. Rather, it is learned from observation and with encounters of what kindness looks and feels like. In their college classrooms, they share these stories as a way to help young teachers understand that once they are in a classroom of their own, they will be education the whole child.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching children to be thoughtful, kind, and considerate is every bit as vital as teaching them the three Rs—Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic. How teachers choose to help their students understand the importance of developing an ethic of caring for others is not learned from lecture or posted rules. Rather, it is learned from observation and with encounters of what kindness looks and feels like. Below the two authors share their respective experiences with how they perceived a need and approached a curriculum of compassion in the classroom.

The first story describes the author-teacher's decision to confront her middle school students when she discovers their mean-spirited gossip notebook, the "Slam Book." Conversations with the perpetrators point to a gap in students' social development; subsequent teacher-structured lessons that involve writing compliments result in unexpected, positive outcomes. The author-teacher of the second story portrays the familiar reality of a new student joining an established class at some point after school is in session. Teachers know that excluding others is uncharitable, unkind, and unacceptable, yet these behaviors occur all too frequently. Using children's literature to develop empathy was part of full-throttle approach to address students' behavior. Bridging the fictionalized account of how children treat other children and contextualizing the lessons of kindness to students' present circumstances required deliberate scaffolding, resulting in a changed classroom dynamic.

In both classroom scenarios, teachers saw a need and took action to effect change. By addressing the issues directly and respectfully, all class members benefitted and learned valuable life lessons about what it means to care for others. The authors now share those experiences with their pre-service teachers (PSTs); thus, the kindness curriculum is introduced to a new generation of teachers.

FROM "SLAMMING" TO CELEBRATING

On a typical day in my classroom, I heard a variety of insults tossed carelessly across desks. Some were intended to hurt; others were simply thoughtless remarks. I usually addressed them with a reminder to be kind to each other and moved on. Despite my own experience being bullied as a student in school, I thought my reminders were enough. I didn't notice the impact these comments were having on the environment of my classroom (and, indeed, on my school) until I found something ugly that forced me to evaluate how ineffective my efforts to encourage kindness had been.

Two girls in my classroom were sitting in the back of the room, giggling during independent work time and passing a notebook to another girl at the next table. This girl took the notebook and began flipping through the pages. With a broad smile, she turned to an empty page and began to write. Whatever she was writing had her full attention, so she did not notice when I approached her. As I glanced over her shoulder, what I read activated a mix of emotions: anger, frustration, and despair. Nonetheless, remaining calm, I asked her to stop writing and hand me the notebook. Reluctantly, she did so. With wide eyes, the girls who had passed her the notebook watched me return to my desk. I put the notebook in a drawer and resumed teaching.

Later that day, during my planning period, I opened that drawer and pulled out the notebook. On the front cover was the name of one of my students. Notably, it was not the name of any of the girls involved in the passing of the notebook earlier that day. Each page of the notebook was filled with insults about the student named on the cover. Some were well-written while others showed little thought. None were signed by the writer. All were hurtful. The more I read, the more furious and disappointed I became. The girls involved in the malicious act were leaders in my class. Their peers listened to them and respected their ideas. Those cruel words, written by them and many of their friends, now had me questioning my own actions. Had I created an environment where this sort of cruelty was acceptable? Was it too late to fix this problem? Had the student named on the cover been a frequent victim of bullying that I had failed to notice?

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