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A Compassionate Classroom

The instant most children are born they are smothered with love and compassion from everyone around them. The first few years as they continue grow these people continue to show compassion as they cross major milestones by learning to do things like walk, talk, and use the “potty”. Then there comes the time when these children must separate from their parents for the first time to enter school. This is why it is essential for there to be compassion in the classroom so that young students are able to make a subtle change into their new environment. Compassion plays a large part in the students comfort level in the classroom. But what is compassion and how do teachers create a compassionate environment? Compassion can be defined as, “the desire to identify with or sense something of another’s experience; a precursor of caring,” or, “understanding without judgment.” While there are other definitions I feel that these apply to us most as teachers and to our goals of what we want to see in our classroom.

The first way I feel a teacher can create a compassionate classroom is by erasing all judgment in the classroom. This however, is a nearly impossible task because students and are teachers are raised with different biases that affect the way they view and treat people of different socioeconomic statuses, race, gender, that dress differently, talk, or act differently than the people they were raised around and by. This is shown in “The Diversity Debate Convulses Elite High School” by Sharon Otterman. In this article, she discusses how an elite high school in New York has an entrance exam to their high school. However, this exam seems to create discrimination by creating a lack of minorities in this high school. This fact is shown when she states,

“1995, the entering seventh-grade class was 12 percent black and 6 percent Hispanic, according to state data. This past year, it was 3 percent black and 1 percent Hispanic; the balance was 47 percent Asian and 41 percent white, with the other 8 percent of students identifying themselves as multiracial. The public school system as a whole is 70 percent black and Hispanic.”

Even teachers and administrators may unintentionally create classrooms which are not diverse this makes it easy for students to pass judgments on those that are of a different race in their class because there are so few minorities. I feel that if there is a lack of minorities and diversity in the classroom students are less exposed and are, therefore, more inclined to   
judge. I feel that as teachers we can create diverse classrooms and expose students to things that they may not have experienced when they were are at home. If there is a lack of diversity, we should then expose students to other ways and views so that they understand where the other students are coming from. With this understanding I feel that students will be more likely to relate and better get along with each other. This in turn creates compassion in the classroom.

In the fourth grade I experienced this first hand. One day about two weeks into school after we all had started making friends and forming our own little “clicks”, a new child entered the class accompanied by Mrs. Potts, our teacher. We all looked at him skeptically as he entered the room because most of us had never seen anyone like him. Mrs. Potts told us his name was Han Sol Ku and he recently moved here from South Korea. Being a fourth grader, none of us truly knew what it meant other than that he was from Asia.

Han Sol Ku was shy the first week and Mrs. Potts realized that none of us were taking the time to get to know or include him; we were just staying away from him because he was “different”. It was then that she took matters into her own hands and tried to get us to be compassionate toward him. She talked to Han Sol and his parents. His mom agreed to come in. She made us traditional South Korean food and told of us life there, and Han Sol told us of all of the things he did and liked as a kid. In this moment, we as students came to the conclusion that Han Sol was not bad and was the same as all of us he played game boy and listened to hip-hop. By Mrs. Potts having us get to know Han Sol and his culture she diminished any judgments we had of him. Han Sol instantly became part of our group and was included in all activities. Mrs. Potts did what she knew and by destroying our preconceived notions we had created a compassionate classroom where he felt comfortable and at ease learning.

The other definition of compassion I feel is essential for teachers to incorporate into their classroom is, ““the desire to identify with or sense something of another’s experience; a precursor of caring.” As teachers we need to care about our students experiences in the classroom. To create a truly compassionate environment I believe teachers need to be able to collaborate with students instead of standing in the front of the class and just lecturing on the curriculum. This idea can be seen in action by an elementary school New American Academy in Crowne Heights, Brooklyn. Shimon Waronker created this school based on the thought that teachers and students can work together to learn from each other instead of being separated in classrooms. In their classrooms there are around four teachers to sixty students in large open classrooms and students rotate every forty minutes or so to new lessons with new teachers. At first things seemed chaotic, but as the year progressed so did the students. And by the end of the year parents were praising the “inclusiveness” of the class.

I feel that as a teacher we not only have to be understanding to what a student is experiencing inside the classroom, but what is going on outside the classroom. We need to show them that we care about their experiences after the day is over with. Yes, it is important to show them we care about their achievements in the classroom, but students have lives outside of the confines of our room as well. Teachers can show this level of caring by going to students events like sports, concerts, and art shows. Teachers can also show they care by doing simple things and making tiny gestures when they know that students are going through a difficult time such as sending cards and having the class sign it or sending balloons if they are sick for a while. If students feel they are cared about by their teacher and fellow peers a sense of compassion will emulate through the class.

I believe that in a compassionate classroom there has to be no judgment of any of the students and there has to be a sense of care that you show to them. As a teacher if you show these then students are likely to follow in your suit. As they leave their parents and spend so much of every day in your care it is up to you to create a place that is compassionate and where they feel encouraged to keep learning.