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Hilppö, Jaakko Antero

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Compassion in Children's Peer Cultures

Hilppš, J., Rajala, A., & Lipponen, L.
University of Helsinki, Department of Educational Sciences

Abstract

Peers have a significant impact on children's learning and development (e.g., Rubin, Bukowski & Bowker, 2015; Sawyer, 2015; Corsaro & Eder, 1990). Interactions with other same age children not only influence children's social, cognitive and emotional competencies, but importantly constitute the very grounds for their development. Previous research has shown that peers have a critical role in children's language learning, cognitive skills, physical wellbeing as well as in cognitive areas of development, like collaboration, cooperation and prosociality. While this body of work has significantly advanced our understanding of the nature of peer interactions, there is still a dearth of knowledge on how children orient to and address the worries, concerns or suffering of their peers in everyday settings, namely to act with compassion. To this end, in this chapter we will present our cultures of compassion approach (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppš, 2018) to studying compassion in children's peer interactions in a Finnish kindergarten and share an example of our video ethnographic work and interaction analysis on compassion. We will conclude our chapter by discussing how it is possible to foster compassionate peer cultures in early child education and care settings.

Introduction

Research on compassion has shown that children, even as young as toddlers, are capable of displaying concern for the wellbeing of others and acting with compassion (Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2017). Research has pointed to a range of biological and social influences on children's capability for compassion. Firstly, children's competence for compassion increases with age (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015) with older children being better at discerning the concerns of others as well as finding appropriate responses to others' plight. Secondly, it has been argued that parenting practices such as modelling or perspective-taking emphasizing induction as well as children's participation in adult practices such as helping with family chores have an impact on how and to whom children learn to show compassion (Kirby, 2017; Eisenberg, et al., 2015; Lopez, Najafi, Rogoff, & Meja-Arauz, 2012). Likewise, research conducted in early childhood educational contexts has shown that teachers' warmth (e.g., emotional closeness, conflicts between teacher and student) can be conducive to children's compassion (Luckner & Pianta, 2011). Regarding peer interaction, Eisenberg et al. (2015) note that existing research offers suggestive evidence of the possible impact of peer interactions on children's compassion, or more broadly prosociality, and propose that peer interactions possibly offer unique opportunities for compassion.

Despite this growing body of research on compassion, Eisenberg (2015) note that the literature is currently thin on situational analysis on compassion in action, especially regarding research on children's peer interaction. In other words, while much is known about compassion in children, to a large extent, our knowledge of it relies on experimental investigations and parental (or teacher) reports and interviews (e.g., Volling, Kohn, & Kennedy, 2009). Less empirical work has been done analyzing how compassion manifests in children's everyday interactions.

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In our own work, we have begun to address this research gap by taking an ethnographic research approach to study compassion in Finnish kindergartens (Lipponen, 2018; Rajala & Lipponen, 2018). Our studies have revealed that compassion can be embedded as part of the culture and social relations of a kindergarten. For example, Lipponen (2018) discovered that the local early education and care curriculum of a kindergarten encompassed many rules related to compassion, that everyone should be included. In practice, the rule was not explicitly referenced in interaction, but it contributed to the creation of inclusive practices through which everybody could feel welcomed and recognized. Rajala et al. (submitted) analyzed a kindergarten's interactional practices in relation to compassion. The findings pointed to an implicit division of labor between the adults and children. Adults were mainly expected to show compassion. While children were also present in situations in which their peers displayed distress, most of their observations the adults were the only ones showing compassion and the children acted as the audience. In some cases, children could even be forbidden from showing compassion. For example, when a child was hurt and a peer would approach him with the intent of helping, an adult would tell the peer to turn away and take sole responsibility of consoling the crying child. Furthermore, when the children did show compassion, such as by helping their peers or consoling a crying friend, they were not always able to act in a way that would alleviate the concerns or plight of their peers, unless helped by an adult.

However, the existing research on compassion has not shed light on how children orient to and address the worries, concerns or suffering of their peers between themselves, namely how compassion is enacted in children's peer interaction. Considering the impacts that compassion have on children's learning and development (e.g., Rubin, Bukowski & Bowker, 2015) analyzing the interactional nuances and dynamics of children's compassionate peer interactions is an important step if we want to understand how children learn to show compassion and what their ways of acting compassionately towards their peers are. To this end, in this chapter we will present our cultures of compassion approach (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppš, 2018) to studying compassion in children's peer interaction in a Finnish kindergarten and share an example of our video ethnographic work and interaction analysis on compassion. We will conclude our chapter by discussing possibilities to foster compassionate peer cultures in early childhood education and care settings.

Conceptualizing compassion in children's peer interactions

The Oxford English Dictionary defines compassion as 'suffering together with another, participation in suffering; fellow feeling, sympathy'. The feeling or emotion when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it (OED, 1989). In this chapter, we approach compassion from a sociocultural perspective and conceptualize it as a culturally mediated and distributed phenomenon (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppš, 2018). In contrast to dominant research approaches that focus on compassion as an individual skill or trait, or as an internal property of an individual child (e.g., Goetz, Keltner, & Simon Thomas, 2010), we understand compassion as an aspect of the children's engagement in joint activities, as something that children do and show in different situations and varied ways. Furthermore, we emphasize that compassion is substantially constituted by the cultural tools employed in these acts as well as the social organization of the joint activity. That is, in order to understand compassion in any of its forms, we argue that it is important to understand the cultural means of achieving compassion and the social organization of the joint activity that constitute the local cultures of compassion. In the case of our investigation, this means looking at how the activities are accomplished and how duties regarding them are divided and shared between adults and children, what the material and

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cultural tools, artifacts and spaces used in these activities as well as how the local rules and values come to play in the way compassion is enacted in Finnish kindergartens.

Our approach to compassion builds on sociocultural and cultural-historical theories of human functioning. Accordingly, the core argument of this chapter is that human cognitive capabilities, emotions and actions are mediated by cultural tools and activities and their cultural development (e.g., Vygotsky, 1987). Importantly, mediation not only accounts for the structure and content of our actions and experiences but also for their emergence in the first place. Moreover, human actions are always encompassed within larger activity systems that also take part in establishing the actions, for example, through how the work is distributed between other people (e.g., Engeström, 1987). In this sense, the cultural means and the people using them form a distributed cognitive and affective system that together constitute and shape whatever actions are taken (Valsiner, 2001). For example, when a child falls down and hurts him or herself, the words, expressions, tones of voice, objects, and embodied actions others use to comfort him or her and the way they distribute this work are culturally mediated through and through. In different cultural settings, what is seen as an appropriate response to a situation might be different and elicit a different set of cultural tools and practices that are used to comfort the child, if it is responded to at all (e.g., Rogoff, 2003).

Important to our perspective is also the process through which children learn how to show compassion. Building on other sociocultural perspectives (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) we argue that central to this process is children's participation in cultural practices. By seeing how adults help others, by being recipients of adults' care themselves or taking care of younger siblings and by doing charity or communal work with their family, children learn how to console, help and alleviate the plight of others (e.g., Lopez, Najafi, Rogoff, & Mejuz, 2012). Overtime, children gradually come to take more central positions in these activities and also learn that showing compassion is an important value in their community. Moreover, learning compassion is also an aspect of formal educational settings. In the same way as in children's families, the social practices of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting also encompass different ways to show compassion. In ECEC settings, one of the first educational communities that children spend a significant part of their everyday life, young children can encounter and interact with people (children and adults) who might significantly differ from the children's families and other communities in terms of ethnicity, social status and cultural background. If we think of education not merely as transmission of qualifications but as also involving processes of enculturation and subjectification (Biesta 2010), the question of how compassion is enacted within such diversity is crucial.

However, this learning process is not solely ~~only~~ socialization. Rather, in addition to children sustaining the cultural practices of their communities by learning them, ~~children~~ ^{children} also contribute to the change of these practices. From our perspective, people do not just passively occupy their cultural settings and their practices of compassion are not given, static or eternal. Instead, people actively create and maintain the ~~cults~~ ^{cultures} they live in and their practices (e.g., Varenne & McDermott, 1999). In this sense, what is seen as suffering and the ways to alleviate it exist only through the active upkeep of the people living within that culture. As ~~these~~ ^{these} practices are open to change through collective effort (Engeström, 1987) and children can be part of this process. For example, children can extend the range of people who a family helps or and even ~~large~~ ^{large} child led compassionate projects can emerge through children's efforts (Hilppš, 2017). In this sense,

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children are not just passive recipients of adult culture and its ways of showing compassion, but active agents who have an impact on how compassion is shown, when and to who.

Moreover, children, through their agency, can also contribute to the development of new cultural practices. Importantly, children's creative uptake of the activities, values, norms, routines and materials around them can create distinct peer cultures between children within their everyday lives (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Corsaro & Johannesen, 2007). For example, children interpretively reproduce shared routines through play and through these new activities with their own goals. In Corsaro's and Molinari's (2005) ethnography of an Italian day care center, they observed the recreation of the familiar disappearance-reappearance play routine in the form of a hide-and-seek play in which children hid from their peers behind the curtains of the center. This interpretive reproduction not only concerns activities that children come up with, but also the way in which they relate to their own community and the broader culture around them. In relation to compassion, this raises the question of what practices of compassion children's peer cultures encompass.

A micro-ethnographic approach to researching peer compassion

As part of our ongoing research project to study compassion in early childhood education, we engaged in a micro-ethnography (e.g., Erickson, 1992) that focused on how compassion was enacted as part of the flow of everyday life in kindergarten. Our study took place in a public kindergarten located in Helsinki, Finland. The kindergarten is situated near the center. Three groups of children and their educators participated in the study. In all of the groups, the ages of the children varied between one and three years, and in the third group, the ages were between two and four years. All groups had adults working as kindergarten teachers or nurses. Some of the adults had several years of work experience, while others were in their first position since graduation. This type of multi-professional work community, with a varying combination of professional qualifications and job descriptions, is characteristic of Finnish ECEC. The minimum requirement for a kindergarten teacher is a bachelor's degree in education or in social science. Other staff in ECEC centers are expected to have at least a vocational or upper secondary qualification in the fields of social welfare or health care.

The curricula of the kindergarten highlight that children would be learning to express and verbalize emotions in the kindergarten. The kindergarten also aimed to create an inclusive and just environment for the children, and they took active measures to prevent bullying and discrimination. According to our observations, the daily activities of the kindergarten exemplified the culture of Finnish early childhood education, which can be characterized in terms of a holistic approach that encourages play, relationship, and curiosity. The daily practices also included adult-initiated activities, such as reading to children and presenting hand stories. Activities such as eating lunch, dressing for outdoor activities, and taking naps were also considered educationally valuable and educators played an important role in these activities by guiding and helping the children.

To understand in detail how compassion was embedded in the kindergarten's practices, we video recorded the everyday activities of the three groups intermittently over the course of three weeks. We collected 51 hours of video over nine separate days. Our video-based research was informed by the interaction analysis tradition (Jordan & Henderson, 1996). Researchers (Rekar Abdulhamed and Annukka Pursi) recorded the events with a handheld video camera, sometimes using an

additional camera on a camera stand and recorded the audio either with the camera microphone or a wireless microphone worn either by a child or an adult. We used the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 1990) across different situations (varying persons, locations, and types of activity) when selecting which events to record. The guardians of all the participating children and the kindergarten staff, gave informed consent to conduct the research. We also paid careful attention to how the children reacted to the presence of the camera and the intention of stopping the recording if we noticed that they were hesitant about the camera. However, this did not happen.

We started our analysis by taking a rough overview of all the videos and made content tags indexed lists of topics and even of each video (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). We then watched the videos several times and identified episodes in which someone expressed distress or physical or emotional pain (Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011). In addition, we identified episodes in which suffering was not expressed but implicit or explicit references were made to someone's distress or pain. We identified 15 episodes from the video corpus.

“You called me stupid”: an example of compassion in children’s peer interaction

The following episode is an illuminating example of our cultures of compassion perspective and how children can show compassion towards each other when together. The episode took place during lunch time between Aino, Ilmari and Veikko (age 3 years) while they waited to get lunch (image 1). Armas, a fourth child also sat at the table, but engaged only minimally in the interaction. What is important to know is that just a moment before the interaction in the example took place, Veikko had called Aino stupid. The adult, Kirsi, who had been present had asked Veikko to apologize to Aino by saying he was sorry and hugging Aino. Such was a common apology practice in the kindergarten. Kirsi had also had a short one-to-one discussion with Veikko during which she had told him that calling other children names will make others feel bad and you too that they don't call anyone stupid in the kindergarten. After they had sat down and Kirsi had left to get their lunch, the following interaction ensued.

1!"#\$%&'()*+,-./0-+1\$%*#&#.2/4.-&%"\$%&/#\$(#+4+0.\$%&'("2&-5#)40#\$(#4&-0-+5-/(4+0#./1&0\$/#('\$%�%)+4-#)/6#\$%&#.2&#./)(#/+1)+4&#%&#-."0-+1\$%('5&\$\$&-#&.4.5+)+\$8#

Image 1 Aino, Ilmari, Veikko and Armas sitting at the table

Turn	Speaker	Turn -at-talk
1	Aino	You both called me stupid a moment ago was here (looks at Veikko)
2	Ilmari	(unclear)
3	Aino	Yes you called me stupid (looks at both Ilmari and Veikko)
4	Ilmari	Are you so like feeling bad?
5		(Ilmari looks at Aino. Aino looks at Ilmari, but also elsewhere)
6	Ilmari	Are you feeling bad?
7	Aino	Yeah (nods her head)
8	Ilmari	(turns his head slightly to one side, presses lower lip to upper lip and nods his head. See Image 2)
9	Aino	You called me badly (looks at Ilmari with a sideways glance)
10	Ilmari	How did you get boo?(looks down to Aino's hands where Aino has a bandaid on her finger)
11	Aino	I scratched it. (raises her hand from lap to her other finger. Looks at Ilmari)
12	Ilmari	Ho- at home?
13	Aino	Yeah, during the night you slept
14	Veikko	Burn night but I burn finger already I got li direction when the finger got
15	Aino	(Lifts finger in front of Veikko)
16	Veikko	Mmm aa like this finger like already
17	Aino	My back burned in the evening it took
18	Veikko	There was fire from my finger
19	Aino	And my back burned in the sun
20	Ilmari	Look I got hurt here too (shows his finger. Aino, grins and laughs. See Image 3)

21	Aino	My back burned (emphasis on last two words)
22	Ilmari	Boo-boo (said with rising intonation)
23	Aino	The sun can be really strong
24	Armas	From there
25	Ilmari	Boo-boo (said with rising intonation) moves finger from right to left to show how the sun hurt his finger, looks at Aino)
26	Aino	Ee th the sun is really strong that it can burn back yes yeah and then it is very strong it can and the strong sun. I'm three years old (shows three fingers)

Interpreting "You called me stupid"

What took place in the episode was a discussion in which Ilmari and Veikko showed compassion to Aino by addressing Aino's concerns and her wellbeing. The conversation started with Aino returning to Veikko's recent name calling. Apparently, the apology that Veikko had given her did not suffice and she wanted to continue addressing the issue. Aino directed her claim to Ilmari possibly because he had been involved in a previous name calling earlier the same day and had then not apologized in the same way as Veikko had. After talking about the name calling, the conversation gradually evolved to other issues related to Aino's wellbeing, from a cut Aino's finger to her sunburnt back. The episode ended when Aino changed the topic to her age at the end of her last turn.

In the following, we will unpack our analysis of how compassion manifests itself in children's peer interaction. We show how Ilmari and Veikko address Aino's concerns with compassion. Based on our analysis, we argue that the episode represents an example of the array of interactional strategies children have to show compassion towards their peers. In this analysis, we will draw attention to three significant aspects of the interaction: 1) how Ilmari and Veikko verbalized Aino's experiences and expressed their intersubjective understanding of them (lines 4, 8 and 14), 2) how Ilmari invited Aino to talk about her concerns (lines 4 and 10), both of which reflect strategies also used by adults when responding to peer concerns compassionately (e.g., Pudlinski, 2005; Kuroshima & Iwata, 2016). In our video data, we could observe that this strategy was also used by the adults of this kindergarten. Thirdly, we will draw attention to an aspect which most shows children's peer culture in action and their own endogenous strategies for showing compassion, namely how Ilmari oriented playfully to Aino's concerns (lines 20 and 22).

The episode started with Aino topicalizing her first concern, that she was called stupid (line 1). By this she treated Veikko's apology and Ilmari's previous actions as insufficient and something that still needed to be addressed. After Aino repeated her claim (line 3), Ilmari responded by asking if she was feeling bad (line 4). Ilmari's response here verbalized Aino's possible emotional state, sought confirmation of it and created an opportunity for Aino to further elaborate on this. Ilmari's response also showed that he was aware of Aino's possible emotional reaction to the name calling. Aino did not answer Ilmari's question first, but after Ilmari had asked again she confirmed how she felt. Ilmari then responded (line 8) by further expressing his awareness of Aino's feelings and his alignment with her through his facial expression (line 2).

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However, the way in which these grassroots acts of compassion could be encouraged in children's peer culture or fostered as more widely adopted and sustained practices in the kindergarten might not be a straightforward process. Efforts to spread practices, whether ones relating to compassion or ways of acting, often face obstacles and even resistance in workplaces, and early childhood settings are not immune to this. Instead, as we have previously suggested (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppš, 2018), employing methods like formative interventions (Engeström, 2011), and social design experiments (Gómez & Jurow, 2016) might offer a more fruitful guidance for this. As part of such efforts, observations and documents about how and when children act compassionately amongst themselves would act as material for reflection between early childhood education and care professionals, the children and the researchers facilitating the change process. Importantly, this way the practices would then also be under critical collective scrutiny which would open up the possibility for seeing what the politics of compassion (Ure & Frost, 2014) of the community are. That is, joint reflection, if carefully done, could reveal where and to whom acts of compassion are directed to and if all persons of the community are included.

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