Compassion in Children's Peer Cultures

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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 socio-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, & Hilppö, 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, & Mejía-Arauz, 2012). Likewise, research conducted in early childhood educational contexts has shown that teachers’ warmth (e.g., emotional closeness, fewer 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 et al., (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, Kolak, & Kennedy, 2009). Less empirical work has been done analyzing how compassion manifests in children’s everyday interactions.
In our own work, we have begun to address this research gap by taking an ethnographic research approach to study compassion in Finnish kindergartens (e.g., 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, in 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 impact that peers can 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, & Hilppö, 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 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” and “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 socio-cultural perspective and conceptualize it as a culturally mediated and distributed phenomenon (Lipponen, Rajala, & Hilppö, 2018). In contrast to dominant research approaches that focus on compassion as an individual skill or trait, and hence as 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 in 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 joint activities are accomplished and how duties regarding them are divided and shared between adults and children, what the material and
cultural tools, artifacts and spaces used in these activities are, 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-historical 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 similar 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 come to learn how to show compassion. Building on other socio-cultural 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, & Mejia-Arauz, 2012). Over time, children gradually come to take more central positions in these activities and also learn that showing compassion is an important value for 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 an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting also encompass different ways to show compassion. In ECEC settings, one of the first extra-familial 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 one-way socialization. Rather, in addition to children sustaining the cultural practices of their communities by learning them, 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 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 such, 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-scale child-led compassionate projects can emerge through children’s efforts (Hilppö, 2017). In this sense,
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 this, create new activities with their own goals. In Corsaro’s and Molinari’s (2005) ethnography of an Italian daycare 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 interpretative 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 town center. Three groups of children and their educators participated in the study. In two 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’ 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 at ECEC centers are expected to have at least a vocational 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, for example. 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 hands-on activities. Activities such as eating lunch, dressing for outdoor activities, and taking naps were also considered to be 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, 1995). Two researchers (Rekar Abdulhamed and Annukka Pursi) recorded the events with a handheld video camera, sometimes using an

Additional camera on a camera stand. We 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 with 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 logs—time indexed lists of topics and events—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 2 - 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, which 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” and 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 ensued1.

In the following transcript we have used parentheses to indicate nonverbal action and also describe prosodic aspects of the childrens’ talk. We have also simplified the transcript for better readability.

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Turn | Speaker | Turn-at-talk
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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? (Ilmari looks at Aino. Aino looks at Ilmari, but also elsewhere)
5 | Ilmari | Are you feeling bad?
6 | Aino | Yeah (nods her head)
7 | Ilmari | (turns his head slightly to one side, presses lower lip to upper lip and nods his head. See Image 2)
8 | Aino | You called me badly (looks at Ilmari with a sideways glance)
9 | Ilmari | How did you get boo-boo? (looks down to Aino’s hands where Aino has a band-aid on her finger)
10 | Aino | I scratched it (Raises her hand from lap. Taps on her finger. Looks at Ilmari)
11 | Ilmari | How at home?
12 | Aino | Yeah, during the night you slept
13 | Veikko | Burn night but I burn finger already I got li direction when the finger got
14 | Aino | (Lifts finger in front of Veikko)
15 | Veikko | Mmm aa like this finger better already
16 | Aino | My back burned in the evening it took
17 | Veikko | There was fire from my finger
18 | Aino | And my back burned in the sun
19 | Ilmari | Look I got hurt here too (shows his finger to Aino, grins and laughs. See Image 3)
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 also directed her claim to Ilmari, possibly because he had been involved in a previous name calling incident 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 on Ilmari’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 our 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 had 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 at 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 (Image 2).
Ilmari’s display of concern for Aino’s wellbeing in response to the name calling can be interpreted as an act of compassion. However, Aino did not accept Ilmari’s response as satisfactory and she repeated her accusation (line 9). Ilmari responded to this by changing the topic of the conversation to the band-aid on Aino’s finger (line 10). Ilmari’s action here could arguably be interpreted as a continuation of his previous strategy of creating opportunities for Aino to talk about her feelings and wellbeing. Here, Ilmari offered Aino another opportunity to verbalize her feelings and also showed his concern for her wellbeing. This time, Ilmari succeeded in alleviating the tension as Aino and he engaged in a short discussion about her finger (lines 11-13).

Importantly, Aino’s story about her finger evoked a compassionate response from Veikko, who up to this point had stayed silent and not shown any concern for Aino’s accusations. In his turn, Veikko shared a story about how he had burned his finger (line 14) and how it had healed (line 16). Through the topical connection (hurt fingers), Veikko showed that he understood Aino’s position and also attempted to console her by telling that her finger will heal, like his did. Veikko’s story prompts Aino to explain how her back had been sunburnt (line 17). After Veikko’s attempt to continue talking about his finger, Aino reiterated her concern (line 19).

At this moment in the interaction, Ilmari responded to Aino’s concern in a new way. In his next three turns (20, 22 and 24) Ilmari makes a series of attempts to elicit a playful response to him from Aino and change the mood of the discussion. Ilmari first pretends that his finger is also hurt, grins to Aino in a friendly manner (image 2) and laughs (line 20). Then his rising intonation (line 22) and acting out the sun beam hurting his finger (line 25) can be read as invitations to engage in play. However, Aino turns down Ilmari’s invitations and indicates that she is more serious about the matter. She does this by emphasizing with her intonation the fact that her back got hurt (line 21) and that the sun can be dangerous at times (in her words: “strong”, lines 23 and 26). However, Ilmari, Veikko and Armas don’t engage in the discussion with her and Aino then changes the topic of the discussion (end of turn 26).
Fostering compassionate peer cultures

In this chapter, we have presented an episode that illuminates children’s own ways of addressing each other’s worries and showing compassion. Situations like the one in the episode are common place in Finnish kindergartens, and presumably in other early childhood education and care settings as well. Children hurt themselves while playing, pine after their parents or get into arguments with each other almost on a daily basis and adults, despite their best efforts, cannot always be around to provide them with care, help or consolation. In those moments, children have the opportunity to act with compassion towards their peers, and like Aino, Ilmari and Veikko showed that they have the skills and the will to do so.

With the analysis of this episode, we have illuminated our cultures of compassion perspective. We showed how in the situation, children took up and reproduced the compassionate practices that are endemic to that particular community and participate in maintaining that culture. Specifically, we could observe Ilmari and Veikko help Aino to verbalize and elaborate her negative feelings using strategies similar to those used by the adults in this kindergarten community. Paraphrasing Vygotsky (1987), in these situations, children could be seen as doing independently today what they did co-operatively and with guidance yesterday. In addition, we have also argued the interaction visible in the episode could be understood as indicating children’s unique ways of showing compassion. That is, the playful orientation at the end of the episode can arguably be seen as a way to alleviate or deal with Aino’s concern that is inherent to children’s peer cultures. Furthermore, given the different creative ways in which children can create their own peer cultures (according to Corsaro and Johannesen (2007)), our observation here is most likely not the only unique way in which children show compassion to each other. If so, our observation points toward an interesting and possibly fruitful avenue of further research. In addition to uncovering other possible means by which children show compassion, these studies could explore what local children’s cultures of compassion are constituted by such means, if any at all. Such research could illuminate, in interactions such as the ones between Aino, Ilmari and Veikko above, how children establish the norms of their peer culture in relation to others’ concerns, distress or suffering and practices to alleviate it. Understanding these moments in depth would not only advance our knowledge of how children act compassionately, but also of how children through their agency can take part in building compassionate communities.

This emphasis on children’s agency in relation to the compassionate practices of their kindergartens’ culture or their home cultures possibly highlights an important avenue in relation to how early childhood education and care professionals can foster compassion in kindergartens or other early childhood settings. It is important to create space for children to appropriate the values promoting compassion in their own ways. It has been argued that suppressing children’s agency and imposing mechanical rules for their conduct lead children to only pay lip service to the rules and hide their creative ways of resisting the adults’ imposition (Matusov & Marjanovich-Shane, 2018; Rajala & Sannino, 2015). If the children also reproduce compassionate practices creatively, these renewed practices can offer insights to how children see compassion, who they offer it to, in what ways and what kind of situations. That is, children’s peer cultures can bring to fore their interactional strategies for showing compassion, and when recognized, these methods can be taken as grounds for developing the culture of compassion of that particular early childhood education and care setting. In this sense, moments of peer compassion can encompass one potential future, a concrete utopia (Bloch, 1986) for cultures of compassion in early childhood education.
However, the way in which these grassroots-level 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, can 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, & Hilppö, 2018), employing methods like formative interventions (Engeström, 2011), and social design experiments (Gutiérrez & 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 materials 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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