

Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal

E-ISSN: 2634-9876

Vol. 10, 2023, pp. 204-220

Journal homepage: <https://cerj.educ.cam.ac.uk/submissions/>



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To cite this article:

Fraser-Andrews, C., & Yeomans, J. (2023). Imagining School Inclusion Through Systemic Compassion: The Case for Compassion. *Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal*, 10, 204-220.



Link to the article online: <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.104596>



Published online: 14 December 2023



Imagining School Inclusion through Systemic Compassion: The Case for Compassion

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Abstract

School inclusion is a key United Nations priority (UNESCO, 2017). Their goal for education by 2030, is that everyone, without exception, will access their entitlement to an “inclusive and equitable quality education” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 2). There is rising support for the role that compassion might play in achieving this goal (UNESCO MGIEP, 2021). This paper explores compassion as a mechanism for promoting equitable and inclusive education in schools in England. The research aimed to stimulate the participants’ imaginations and emotions, to envision how a compassion-informed school might be realised. The paper presents the results of two comparative focus groups of education professionals with a shared interest in compassion and inclusion: one comprising classroom teachers, and one comprising school leaders. The focus groups discussed the potential scope of compassion in facilitating and furthering inclusive practice, and imagined how this might be accomplished in a school setting. Thematic analysis was applied to the data, and the interpretation of the findings drew on systemic approaches and social network theory. The findings suggest compassionate approaches modelled by leadership as the most important priority, and external pressures on schools as the most significant barrier, in the development of a whole school approach to compassion. The paper argues the case for the role of compassion in facilitating inclusion, finding that this is most effective when compassion informs and infuses all aspects of school life.

Keywords: inclusive education, compassion, systemic approaches, social network theory

Introduction

Compassion is not a new idea, rather it is an evolutionary imperative (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010) found at the core of many world religions and myriad ethical, political, philosophical, and spiritual traditions (Armstrong, 2010; Stanford University, 2018). In recent years there has been a significant rise in the publication of literature and research in the field of compassion (Sinclair, et al., 2016). Accordingly, there has been an upturn in professional interest in compassion as a therapeutic intervention, and as an educational tool (Coles, 2015; Welford & Langmead, 2015). For example, over the last decade compassion focused therapy, developed by British psychologist Paul Gilbert, is increasingly used in clinical settings and has been found to be effective in reducing depression, anxiety, stress, and rumination, as well as addressing eating disorders (Welford & Langmead, 2015). Furthermore, NHS England (2023) now recommends compassionate conversations as an approach to fostering supportive relationships between staff across their workforce. Compassion is differentiated here from similar concepts such as kindness or empathy, as compassion requires action and engagement rather than just feeling (Strauss, et al., 2016). If empathy is a personal quality, then compassion is the cognitive process which facilitates reflection and action towards the individual who is the object of that empathy (Barton & Garvis, 2019). Neuroscientists, Chierchia & Singer (2017), explain that compassion is the link between empathy and the motivation to act. Research in neuroscience has found that compassion stimulates cooperative behaviours, increases capacity for trust and tolerance, and reduces anger (Chierchia & Singer, 2017), with obvious application for inclusive education. According to Welford & Langmead (2015), compassion focussed therapy has also shown to be appropriate and effective in educational settings in supporting the social and emotional learning and wellbeing of pupils. Chierchia & Singer (2017) conceptualised compassion as a motor ability which can be taught, trained, and practiced which, according to Barton & Garvis (2019), makes compassion particularly appropriate for education settings. The impact of pupil and classroom level compassion-informed interventions on inclusion, such as compassionate mindfulness programmes and proximity to compassionate teachers, is well documented (Russell & Tatton-Ramos, 2015; Welford & Langmead, 2015). However, the literature, along with important institutions such as UNESCO (UNESCO MGIEP, 2021) and Samaritans (Samaritans, 2021), suggest that compassion is most effective as a whole school approach (Al-Ghabban, 2018; Woods D., 2015).

Compassion and inclusion

There is a strong argument that inclusion in schools has significant implications for inclusion in society (EASNIE, 2018). Shuelka (2018) believes that the successful implementation of inclusive education will rely on transforming values, and Regier (2020) and Slee (2014) argue that compassion is this transformative value. However, compassion and inclusion are both complex, socially, and contextually constructed phenomena. Both are emotionally laden and understood in diverse ways (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2002; Cigman, 2007; Florian, Black-Hawkins, & Rouse, 2017). In this study, compassion and inclusion are understood as interconnected ideas, sharing awareness of, empathy for, and equitable responses to, individual needs and differences (Al-Ghabban, 2018; Florian, Black-Hawkins, & Rouse, 2017; Vogus, McClelland, Lee, McFadden, & Hu, 2021). This notion of equity is a central feature of school inclusion (Florian, Black-Hawkins, & Rouse, 2017), however it is not easily achievable in the current educational landscape: schools and their leaders are hindered by significant staff shortages and substantial fiscal and performative pressures, inadequately supported by legal frameworks, and bound by constraining policies (Al-Ghabban, 2018; Schuelka, 2018). Perhaps this is why despite widespread support for compassion-informed schools (EASNIE, 2018), there is a significant gap in the literature of case studies and actual examples (Al-Ghabban, 2018), with resultant negative implications for inclusion (Commons Select Committee, 2018; Reiser, 2019).

The present study

This study aims to address the gap in the literature by imagining how a compassion-informed school might be realised. Shuelka (2018), and Cigman (2010), argue that barriers to inclusion are in the attitudinal, cultural, environmental, and social deficits within the education system, not in the individual learner. School cultures and attitudes grow out of the bidirectional relationships between school leadership and teachers (Cole, 2015; Spillane, 2015). The voices of pupils and their families are of course important to the discourse, however,

according to Schuelka (2018), support and training for classroom teachers and school leaders are key factors in implementing inclusive education. This study therefore sought the views of classroom teachers and school leaders to imagine and explore the complexities and possibilities of developing a compassion-informed school. This paper presents a qualitative comparative focus group study which contrasts and compares the imaginations, feelings, and experiences of both groups, to address the gap in the literature, empower the participants as compassionate practitioners, and to offer support to schools and school leaders seeking to further their own compassionate approaches to inclusion.

Positionality and purpose

I am a school leader with a professional interest in inclusion. Throughout my own learning journey, I have explored the topography of compassion, and sought to embed it in my own teaching, and latterly in my leadership, with varying degrees of success. As a result, I am aware of the challenging, and sometimes even treacherous terrain that awaits educators embarking on a journey of compassion. My purpose in carrying out this piece of research was to envision a road map to support schools and school leaders on their own journeys towards a whole school approach of compassion. I sought to learn from the different practice-based perspectives of my esteemed peers, to elicit from them what the roadblocks and hazards might be, and to jointly imagine a road map for exploring and navigating this daunting and ambitious terrain. Bias was mitigated by using an independent moderator, and a reflexive journal was kept throughout the process.

Method

The focus group approach offers a platform for differing paradigms or worldviews (Morgan, 1998) and values the interactions of the participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Two comparative focus groups, each lasting one hour, were carried out online and recorded. This allowed for detailed observation (appendix A) of tacit variables such as the participants' non-verbal signals, paralinguistic expression, and strength of feeling which is important to the emotive concepts of compassion and inclusion (Ghesquiere, Maes, & Vandenberghe, 2004; Morgan, 1993; Morgan, 1998).

Ethics

The study was carried out with due care given to the five guiding principles of social science research as set out by The British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018), placing particular significance on the ethic of respect for the participants as knowledgeable professionals in their field. Ethical approval was given by the university, and the research was carried out in accordance with BERA's (2018) guidelines. Transparency, consent, and confidentiality were key priorities in the study, with all participants taking part voluntarily, with informed consent, and awareness of their right to withdraw. The focus groups were moderated by an independent qualified clinical psychologist to attend to the safety and wellbeing of the participants. Participants chose their own pseudonyms and the moderator made sure to check in with all members of each focus group to make sure that they had an opportunity to share their views.

Data collection

Both focus groups were facilitated by the same independent moderator, a qualified clinical psychologist with a professional interest in compassion and school inclusion. The moderator is experienced in managing group dynamics to ensure equitable participation, prevent harm (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), and to attend to the quality of the data (Morgan, 1998). The moderator and researcher coproduced a focus group discussion guide (appendix B) to ensure that the language and questioning across the two groups remained consistent (Knodel, 1994). The questions aim to recognise that even the most compassionate and experienced school leaders face significant barriers to embedding compassion in their schools (Al-Ghabban, 2018). The questions seek to

imagine how it could be, to identify the barriers, and to envision how to overcome them. The questions were designed to elicit imagination and emotion, to reduce the risk of conformity (Morgan, 1998) and expand the boundaries of the discussion. To facilitate this, the command verbs ‘imagine’ and ‘feel’ were key. Imagination and feeling were included in the discussion prompts and encouraged by the moderator throughout the discussion. The discussions were semi-structured, to attend to consistency, whilst allowing the moderator to respond to the natural flow of discourse, to explore interesting ideas which emerge, manage group dynamics, and keep the discussion on course (Morgan, 1998). The data from the two focus groups comprised:

- debrief discussion between moderator and researcher,
- researcher field notes from the observations,
- audio and visual recordings of both focus groups,
- transcripts of both focus groups.

Participants

Willing participants with a shared professional interest in compassion and inclusion, who were keen to engage in discussion (Morgan, 1998), were recruited from across different educational phases, types of schools, and counties. At the time of the focus groups, the participants were employed in schools in England as outlined in table 1 below. It is important to note that the participants were representing their own professional views, they were not representing their individual institutions.

Table 1

Focus Group A		Focus Group B	
Subject Specialist Teacher	Cross-Phase Pupil Referral Unit	Head of School	Mainstream Secondary School
Subject Specialist Teacher	Mainstream Secondary School	Deputy Headteacher	Mainstream Secondary School
Class Teacher	Mainstream Primary School	Teacher-in-charge	Primary Pupil Referral Unit
Class Teacher	Primary Pupil Referral Unit	Assistant Headteacher	Mainstream Primary School
Subject Specialist Teacher	Secondary Alternative Provision	SENDCO	Mainstream Secondary School
		Head of Department	Mainstream Secondary School
		Teacher-in-charge	Secondary Pupil Referral Unit

Morgan (1998) argues that grouping participants with peers from the same tier of the school hierarchy creates a sense of security and reduces the potential for any power imbalance within each group. The participants were invited from a network of education professionals interested in compassion and inclusion, and this deliberately biased (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) selection of participants is acknowledged. Some participants were known to the researcher in a professional capacity.

Data Analysis

The focus of the data analysis was to find common ground about what is important to both classroom teachers and school leaders by identifying the themes which were common to both groups. The results rest on the researcher’s and moderator’s interpretive assessments of the participants’ perceived strength of feeling and reactions, as well as their words. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach. Each group was asked to discuss six questions; thematic analysis then identified which themes were of most significance to each group in response to each question. Morgan’s (1997) process for

group-to-group validation was then applied using Venn diagrams to identify the themes common to both groups. These common themes are presented in tables 2-7 below.

Results

Quotations from one or more individuals are given in single quotation marks to illustrate the discussion.

Table 2

Question 1	'In an ideal world what do you imagine that the features of a compassion-driven school would be?'
Theme common to both groups	1. Multidirectional relationships

In response to this question multidirectional relationships arose as the key theme across both groups. Both groups imagined that relationships across the school community would be crucial, a member of group A envisioned adults 'Treating the students as you want to be treated, there is no them and us.' One member of group A and one member of group B envisioned 'staff and students being on the same team', speculating that it would take time to achieve and be facilitated by 'humour'. Group A imagined that meeting the needs of the individual child would be at the core of the school and that these needs would come to light because of trusting relationships between teacher and pupil. One member of group B imagined that the school would have an 'overt culture of compassion' which would support the relational approach to meeting pupils' needs. One member of group B imagined building relationships by 'having lots of conversations in corridors', and 'knowing what happened at the weekend, and what football team they support'. Another member of group B imagined that 'there would be lots of open doors'. Both groups felt that relationships would lead to open and honest conversations between teacher and pupil as well as between teachers. One member of group A expressed this as having 'a positive atmosphere that it's ok to be really, really honest, and that goes both ways, children and adults and staff and the whole team needs to be able to be really honest about what they need at any one moment in time'.

Table 3

Question 2	'What do you feel is the biggest barrier to the realisation of compassion informed whole school approaches to inclusion?'
Themes common to both groups	1. External Pressures 2. Internal Barriers

The themes common to both groups were: external pressures, in particular measurable outcomes; and internal barriers such as a lack of training and resistance to change. Group A felt that in their professional experiences, target driven cultures had led to 'a culture of judgement on both the teacher and the pupil', to the detriment of both. Participants in group A shared their concerns about the impact on inclusion in those schools where emphasis is placed on academic outcomes in the form of grades and results. The participants of group B expressed that finance is a barrier to compassion. They commented that in some instances this may be exacerbated by the way in which success is measured which risks resources being channeled into improving academic outcomes rather than inclusion. The groups put forward that if emotional success were a more important yardstick by which schools were judged, then they believed that this would change the educational agenda in schools and support leaders to push the agenda of compassion, and to direct resources to it. Both groups expressed the need for training and professional discussion to develop teachers' emotional intelligence and to overcome the 'fear' of thinking about compassionate approaches. They felt that compassionate approaches would help to engage those staff resistant to change, and that training staff in compassion-informed approaches and giving them a platform for their voices would be necessary to implement a compassion-driven school.

Table 4

Question 3	'What do you imagine is the starting point to removing the barriers you have identified?'
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Themes common to both groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leadership endorsed compassionate, whole school approaches 2. Child-centred approaches
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Two themes common to both groups emerged: compassionate whole school approaches endorsed by leadership, and child-centred approaches. One participant of group A imagined implementing the early years foundation stage framework (Department for Education, 2017) across all stages of compulsory education, as they experienced it as being both child-centred and focused on emotional and social development. The participants from both groups imagined a starting point of leadership listening to, and learning from, pupils. They envisioned that leaders would need to prioritise and ‘fully commit’ to compassionate approaches, and train and enthuse staff to employ these. Group B felt that it is imperative that those at the top of the hierarchy prioritise compassionate and inclusive approaches. They said that the school culture, led by the head, must support staff to act compassionately towards their pupils. They imagined the headteacher subscribing to a values-driven culture where relationships are prioritised, and the needs of the most vulnerable pupils are met.

Table 5

Question 4	‘What do you feel is the biggest barrier to the realisation of compassion informed, inclusive school leadership?’
Themes common to both groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. External pressures 2. The need for compassionate leaders 3. A lack of community services

The three themes common to both groups were: external pressures, the need for leaders with a personal epistemology of compassion, and a lack of community services and signposting. Group A named The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and target driven agendas as potential barriers to compassion at leadership level. Group B cited the external pressures faced by school leaders such as: finance, grades, and a curriculum focused on English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) subjects as barriers to compassion-informed, inclusive school leadership. Both groups expressed the possibility that the pressures on school leaders in some schools might cause them to direct finances and resources towards improving results for the middle and top attaining students. In some schools, the participants felt that parental pressures on school leaders to exclude students who disrupt learning may present a further barrier to inclusion. Group A expressed the importance of leaders themselves having, or being supported to develop, a personal epistemology of compassion to withstand the undue and unfair pressures on school leaders. Both groups expressed that these pressures had increased due to the lack of community support, finances, and resources with which to support families and pupils, and due to the lack of services to which schools can signpost parents and pupils. They discussed the difficulties of working with external agencies who, as one participant in group B felt ‘can - and do - walk away’ if the pupil or their family do not engage with the service on offer. They cited extremely high thresholds of support as a barrier, with a participant of group B describing the loss of locality teams as ‘criminal’.

Table 6

Question 5	‘How might a compassion focused leader begin to change school culture in order to facilitate inclusion?’
Themes common to both groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Whole school approaches modelled by leadership 2. Trust and support for staff 3. An open and emotionally literate culture

In response to question 5 there were three common themes: developing whole school approaches modelled by the top, trust and support for staff, and developing open and emotionally literate cultures and structures. Both groups said that changing school culture would require the involvement of the whole school community, including parents. A member of group A said that the change would require leaders to ensure that ‘every single person within the school, member of staff and child felt a part of it’. The groups discussed the importance of the compassionate head ‘leading from the front’. They commented that compassionate approaches were vulnerable to the personal limitations of the staff, but they said that by being afforded compassion by leadership, even reluctant staff could be enthused, especially once they see the merits of the approach. The group said that being afforded professional trust and autonomy, underpinned by peer support and professional supervision would be essential in embedding compassionate approaches. They imagined that it would be safe to be vulnerable, with a graduated offer of support available, in contrast to the current offer

described by a member of group A as ‘it’s either a quick chat with a colleague or your next step is an occupational health sort of thing’. Group A felt that schools become more responsive to their students’ needs when it is informed by the staff who are on the ground and who know the pupils best but that staff at all levels of the hierarchy should get to know the pupils. The group discussed how important it is for teachers to be human in their interactions with pupils, to understand them developmentally and in their own contexts, and to recognise that they are still children and that they need the support of trusted adults.

Table 7

Question 6	‘What do you feel has been the most important element of the discussion?’
Themes common to both groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussing compassionate practice 2. Reflecting on practice

The two themes common to both groups were: The opportunity to discuss compassionate approaches, and the opportunity to reflect on practice. Group A shared that they had found it validating and helpful to be in a discussion with like-minded people who share their values as they felt, that in their experience, this is not always the case in schools. They said that they had enjoyed the experience of imagining what a compassion-driven school would be like and how they, as individuals, can drive the compassionate agenda in their own classrooms. Group B expressed thanks to each other for a ‘validating’ and ‘energising’ discussion. They said that they had appreciated the peer support that this discussion had offered and felt that it had been a therapeutic experience. They also reported that it had provided an opportunity for reflection on their own compassionate practice.

Summary

The findings identify the following four barriers to, and seven priorities of, the compassionate and inclusive school.

Table 8

Key barriers and priorities in the development of the compassionate and inclusive school

Key Barriers:	Key Priorities:
External pressures Internal barriers A lack of community services A lack of compassionate leaders	Whole school approaches modelled by leadership Child-centred approaches Relationships Trust in, and support for, staff An open and emotionally literate culture The chance for self-reflection Discussion of compassionate approaches

By virtue of their significance to both focus groups, and to multiple questions, the findings suggest whole school approaches modelled by leadership as the most important priority, and external pressures as the most significant problem.

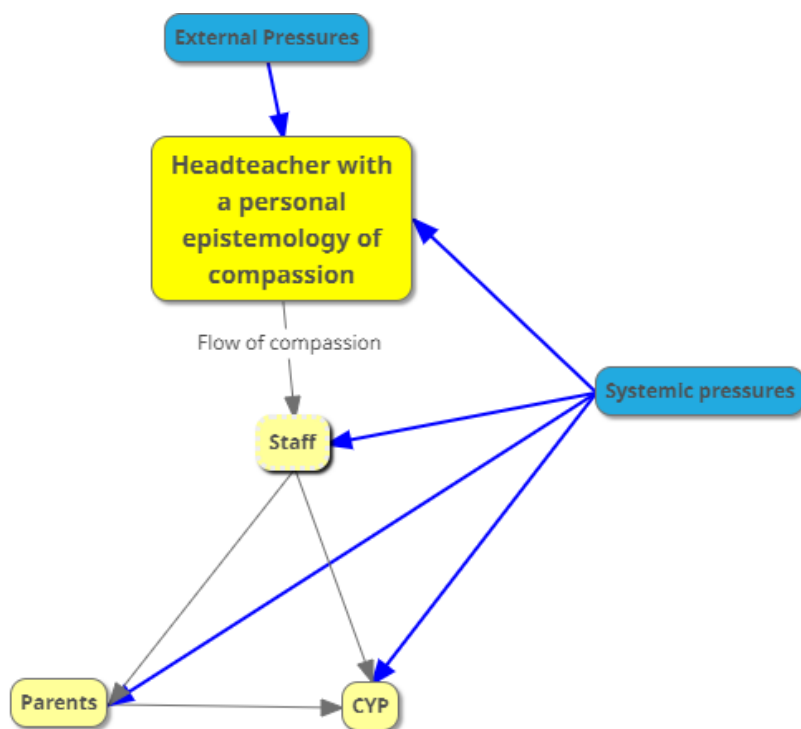
Discussion

The idea of a systemic approach to compassion was suggested by the moderator following the data analysis, from his professional experience as a psychologist, and is supported in literature from across disciplines (Coles, 2015; EADSNE, 2011; McLaughlin, 2015). A systemic approach seems appropriate here as the focus groups, and literature review, demonstrate that a whole school approach to compassion cannot be effectively implemented by focusing on one specific component of school life. Applying Rothbart & Allen’s (2019) definition of systemic compassion to a school setting helps to make sense of this idea. Systemic compassion would make compassion the norm in a school, with every element of school life organised around it. Systemic compassion would facilitate the ideas arising from the focus group discussions, for example: multidirectional and mutually beneficial relationships, trust for staff, connecting everyone to the central idea ‘overtly’ (participant quote) and to each other ‘like a family’ (participant quote). Systemic compassion offers a buffer to external pressures by strengthening relationships between layers of the hierarchy and pupils (Kadushin,

2012). Systemic pressures, in this context, are those which create tensions within the school, for example disagreements over sanctions. Systemic approaches can be hard to conceptualise, but they can be modelled and understood through social network theory. Social network theory allows highly complex social structures to be presented “at a glance” through simple diagrams (Kadushin, 2012, p. 7). It understands and explains systems of relationships and external pressures as networks which can be drawn and mapped. Figures 1-5 below borrow from social network theory and attempt to map out a systemic approach to a compassion-driven, inclusive school (Mercer, 2015).

Figure 1

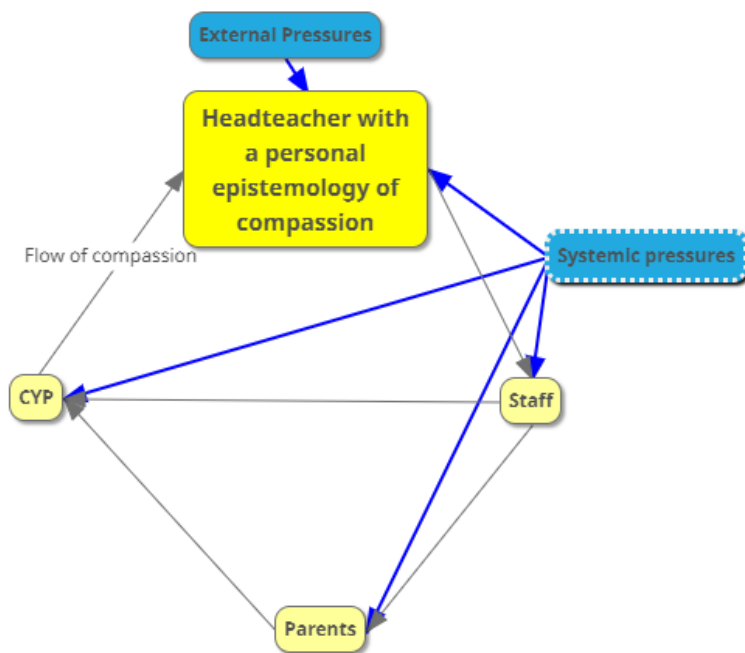
A model of the traditional top-down social network in school, where the head is the driving force of compassion for all the people in the system.



In providing the ‘buffer’ to external pressures (participant quote) the head is vulnerable to intense pressure. The staff are positioned between the head, parents, and children and young people (CYP). Due to their lack of social connections, in social network terms the head and the staff are “structural holes” (Kadushin, 2012, p. 27), perhaps accounting for burnout in teachers (Frost, 1999). The relationships are mostly dyadic, leaving the system vulnerable to polarised thinking (Kadushin, 2012), the opposite of compassionate and inclusive thinking. Enormous amounts of compassionate energy will be required from the head to reach the pupils, as systemic pressures reduce the flow of compassion through the system. Even in this model however, compassionate approaches in the classroom are still possible, the participants offered ideas such as class wellbeing walks, sessions of mindful self-compassion, soothing breathing sessions, and compassionate conflict resolution to strengthen classroom relationships (Rothbart & Allen 2019).

Figure 2

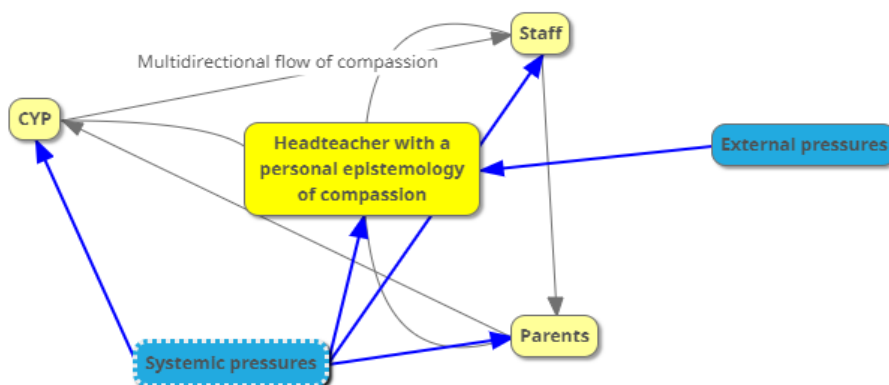
A model of compassion which is cyclical and permeates all levels of the hierarchy (Al-Ghabban, 2018).



Both groups expressed that ‘compassion breeds compassion’ (participant quote), and that there should be a closer connection between leadership and pupils; both focus groups spoke of the importance of the ‘visible’ head (participant quote). Here the head still provides the ‘buffer’ (participant quote) but in a more compassionate sense as the head, now in more close contact with pupils, is both the benefactor and beneficiary of compassion. This might be facilitated by the headteacher running a club, spending time in the classroom, or having regular social check-ins with pupils such as ‘hot chocolate with the head’ which was offered by one of the participants as a good example. However, every point in the system is still a potential point of failure. Furthermore, each time compassion passes from group to group it dissipates due to systemic pressures and fragmentation (McLaughlin, 2015). Here, training staff, parents, and pupils in, for example, compassionate conversations (NHS England, 2023) would strengthen relationships and increase the flow of compassion within the system.

Figure 3

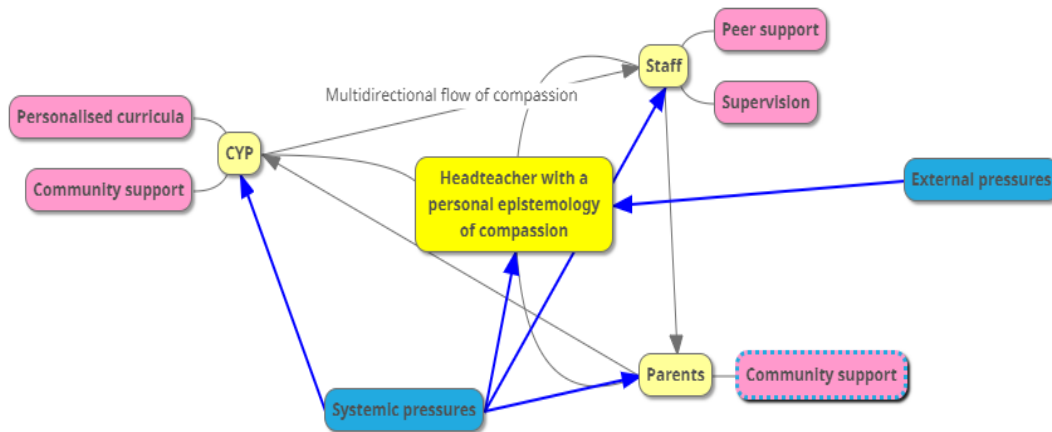
A model which facilitates compassionate interactions between all groups of the school community, a whole school approach.



The focus groups expressed that compassionate approaches must include everyone. In this model, the flow of compassion is multidirectional, no single layer of the hierarchy is a point of failure. With training and support, the head encourages and fosters compassion across the school community and becomes more resilient to external pressures. According to social network theory, this model, with every person directly connected to every other person, is the most cohesive (Kadushin, 2012). Parents and staff coffee mornings or other informal

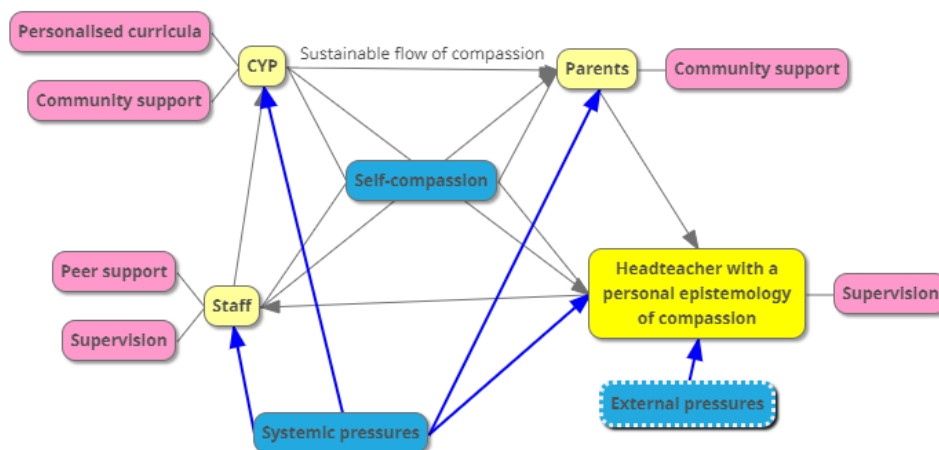
social events were suggested by participants as an example of a bonding opportunity that furthers home school relations. The participants offered letter writing between members of the school community as a way of showing compassion, as well as noticing and checking in with others.

Figure 4
A model which focuses on strengthening the individual nodes.



Here, improved community support reinforces the pupil node (Kadushin, 2012), and the school makes use of social prescribing to mitigate the lack of official services and create connections to the community (The Kings Fund, 2020). Based on the focus group feedback and concurrent with the literature, personalised curricula further improve and cement relationships between teachers and students (EADSNE, 2011; Schuelka, 2018). Offering parents compassion training, or interventions such as compassionate journaling was put forward by the participants as a good way to foster relationships between home and school. The literature, and both focus groups, recognise the benefits of good teacher-teacher relations, which can be nurtured through compassionate conversations (NHS England, 2023). This study offers the participants’ experience of the focus group as a ‘compassion enriching conversation itself’ (participant quote) as further evidence of the importance of peer support at teacher level. Al-Ghabban (2018) presents evidence from a school which put reflective sessions in place for staff, which the staff reported had enabled them to approach pupils with more compassion and understanding. The sources of compassion and support now outweigh the pressures, and the system becomes more sustainable and less reliant on the head.

Figure 5
A model organised around compassion including explicit teaching and learning about self-compassion.



Here, the addition of structures within the school for the consideration of the self, as well as of others leads to improved teacher attitudes to inclusion (Aydin & Kuzu, 2013), and improved wellbeing, motivation, and prosocial behaviours in the pupils (Russell & Tatton-Ramos, 2015; Welford & Langmead, 2015).

Al-Ghabban (2018) argues that consciously teaching and practicing self-compassion in school is crucial to the goal of compassion as well as generating its own time and resources. Compassion focused therapy has application here. In compassion focused therapy, the client cultivates compassion towards another person, which they then learn to cultivate towards themselves. When pupils learn about, and socially construct, their identities in a compassionate system, they are much more likely to become compassionate people themselves (participant comment) (Dewey, 1938; Triplett, 2007). Discussing case studies with students that cultivate compassion, using compassionate conflict resolution, and using compassion to de-escalate students in crisis are examples of this (Al-Ghabban, 2018). Peer support, attitudes to diversity (Stonewall, 2019) and relationships are also improved, reducing the frequency and impact of bullying (Al-Ghabban, 2018).

Limitations

The researcher's and moderator's interpretation did not consider the participants' personalities and idiosyncratic ways of expressing themselves. However, bias was mitigated through participant validation as the findings were shared with the participants who were asked for their subjective feedback about the accuracy and interpretation of the findings (appendix C). The focus groups consisted of volunteers with a shared professional interest in the subject matter, they were not random samples. Eight professionals volunteered to take part in each focus group, but not all were able to attend their focus group, and it is acknowledged that their voices may have altered the discussion. The study is not intended to create universal truth and is therefore not appropriate for statistical enquiry or for predicting future behaviours (Morgan, 1998). However, it is hoped that the study provides a springboard for educators seeking to develop their own compassionate and inclusive practice.

Conclusions

The research set out to imagine and envision a road map towards the realisation of a compassion-informed, inclusive school culture. It sought to stimulate imaginative discussion about the barriers facing schools and their leaders on their journeys towards this goal, and to support these schools and their leaders to navigate these barriers. This paper concludes that a systemic approach, with compassion as its organising principle, stands to benefit everyone in the school. It also offers to be a self-sustaining system as it "infuses compassion into all its activities" (Vogus, McClelland, Lee, McFadden, & Hu, 2021, p. 560). Systemic compassion builds relationships and connections in a holistic sense so that the group identity of the school can take shape. These ties create a strong, cohesive, and resilient, organisational model (Kadushin, 2012), which fosters the conditions for school inclusion. In a system of compassion, the pupil learns compassion explicitly, as well as experientially (Dewey, 1938), and everyone within the system can learn to think about, reflect on, and harness the mutual influence between the system and the people within it (Senge, Boell, Cook, & Martin, 2019). The systemic approach to compassion offers to build pupils' emotional and social capital through connections to themselves, the world, and the people in it, and expedites social change and inclusion (Cottingham, 2016; English, 2008). Introducing systemic compassion to a school will inevitably take time and will require the long-term commitment of everyone in the school community. However, as research in the field of compassion grows, so does the evidence base, and the resources available. In 2023, a system of compassion is not just something to be imagined, it is evidence based, and tangible. Compassionate conversations, compassionate mindfulness activities, compassion focused therapy, compassionate journalling, compassionate conflict resolution are all tools which are readily available to schools. McLaughlin (2015) calls for a new approach: perhaps compassion, as a promising area of research, which can be taught, can be caught, and which continues to surprise, might answer the call (Coles, 2015; Rynes, et al., 2012).

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the moderator Dr James Fairburn, and all the participants of the focus groups.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Focus group discussion guide

<p>Aims and Objectives To prompt imaginative discussion across two distinct groups of people, teachers and school leaders, regarding the realisation of a compassion-informed school with the goal of facilitating inclusive education.</p>	
<p>Moderator instructions This is a semistructured interview. Please ask the questions in the same order for both groups but please also use your professional skills and instincts to probe and explore lines of enquiry which meet the aims and objectives. Please use your skill professional judgement to ensure that all participants are heard and that the group dynamic remains equitable between participants. Please make notes throughout the discussion, either on paper or mentally, regarding the emerging interpretations of the content of the focus group in order to maintain a reflexive and self-aware position (Morgan, 1997).</p>	
<p>Welcome and introductions Researcher and moderator to welcome and thank participants for their willingness to participate. Check that all participants have read and signed the consent form. Remind participants of their unconditional right to withdraw.</p>	
<p>Purpose The reason we are having these focus groups is to explore the barriers and potential starting points for the realisation of compassion informed whole school and leadership approaches to inclusion. We want to hear as many different viewpoints as possible and would like to hear from everyone. Please bear in mind that we are not here to find consensus or to create a unilateral response, we want to hear any and all ideas so we hope you can be honest even when your responses may not be in agreement with the rest of the group. As mark of respect for each other, we ask that only one individual speak at a time and that responses made by all participants be kept confidential.</p>	
<p>Ground rules</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We want you to do the talking 2. There are no right or wrong answers 3. What is said in this room stays here 4. The session will be audio and video recorded on Zoom. 5. You will remain anonymous. <p>Please share with the group the research assumption underpinning the research aims: <i>Compassion (characterised by ameliorative actions towards - and facilitative relationships with - individual learners) enables inclusion (characterised by high quality education and engagement for all learners).</i></p>	
Engagement Questions	Rationale
<i>'Please share the most recent act of compassion you have encountered?'</i>	Ice breaker question which sets the mood and relaxes the group (Morgan, 1997)
<i>'In an ideal world what do you imagine that the features of compassion-driven school would be?'</i> Reserve question in case of low responses: <i>'How close do you feel we are to realising compassion informed schools?'</i>	Discussion starter questions encourages everyone to respond (Morgan, 1997) and gives you, as the moderator a sense of the diversity of ideas within the group and aides the analysis as well as the group dynamic (Morgan, 1997). Eliciting the ideas of the participants provides an excellent and empowering segue into the exploration questions and bestows as sense of ownership and belonging onto the participants. Knowing the participants' starting points also gives you, as moderator, a point of reference from which to reignite the discussion, should it wane (Morgan, 1997).
Exploration Questions	Rationale
<i>'What do you feel is the biggest barrier to the realisation of compassion informed whole school approaches to inclusion?'</i>	The use of pre-planned questions minimizes bias whilst the open-ended techniques spark the imagination of the participants.

<p><i>'What do you imagine is the starting point to removing the barriers you have identified?'</i></p> <p><i>'What do you feel is the biggest barrier to the realisation of compassion informed, inclusive school leadership?'</i></p> <p><i>'How might a compassion focused leader begin to change school culture in order to facilitate inclusion?'</i></p>	
Exit Questions	Rationale
<p><i>'What do you believe should be the first priority in moving towards compassionate and inclusive cultures in schools?'</i></p> <p><i>'What do you feel has been the most important element of the discussion?'</i></p> <p>(Eliot and Associates, 2017)</p>	Asking the participants to provide a final summary statement is useful for the purposes of analysis and creates the opportunity for changed perspectives to be shared and previously unexpressed sentiment to be shared (Morgan, 1997).
<p>Summing up</p> <p>Please thank the participants for their contributions and present any tentatively identified issues to them for confirmation or clarification.</p>	
<p>Post-session debriefing</p> <p>You and the researcher should now discuss these issues and your respective impressions of agreement, expressed or nonverbal dissent, or coercion. This discussion will be included in the analysis and write up of the research.</p>	

Appendix B

Coding of participant non-verbal communication

Behaviours observed in the listener conveying strength of feeling.		
Kinesics	Participants' body displacements and postures	K
Proxemics	Interpersonal space to communicate attitudes	X
Behaviours observed in the speaker conveying strength of feeling.		
Paralinguistic	Variations in volume, pitch and quality of voice	L
Chronemics	Temporal speech markers e.g. gaps, silences, and hesitations	C
Kinesics	Participants' body displacements and postures	K

Appendix C

Validity and Reliability of the Thematic Analysis through respondent validation

Group	A	B
Percentage of participants responding to the findings	80%	85.7%
Percentage of feedback (participant and moderator) concurring wholly with the thematic analysis	100%	100%
Percentage of feedback (participant and moderator) concurring in part with the thematic analysis	0%	0%
Percentage of feedback (participant and moderator) not concurring with the thematic analysis	0%	0%