

Towards a Compassionate School. From Golden Rule to Golden Thread, edited by Maurice Irfan Coles, London, UCL Institute of Education Press, 149pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-85856-526-2

Maurice Coles is the CEO of the CoED Foundation, a charity founded in England in 2014, but with international collaborators. The Foundation's name is compounded from **Cohesion, Equality and Diversity**, but as the charity has grown, its driving concept has emerged as **compassion**, and it has tasked itself with 'bringing compassion into education and learning' (p.xiii). That is the principal aim of this book. In pursuing this end, the book is also a radical critique of contemporary educational policy and practice in a society dominated by the neo-liberal agenda.

The 'Golden Rule' (we are informed in Coles's Introduction), is that we should treat others as we would wish to be treated, and compassion (as a 'consciousness') 'should become our Golden Thread that weaves together curriculum, pedagogy and behaviours' (p.xxi). But as is made clear in later pages, our compassion needs to extend not just to other *persons*, but to ourselves, and to all that is 'other': indeed, this very Earth (p.13). The organizing principle of all education should, he says, be 'global compassion' (p.1), and a shorthand for compassion is 'love in action' (p.5).

An important distinction throughout, is between compassion and *empathy*. An empathetic response to perceived suffering and distress of others, is one aspect of compassion, but on its own is not enough; compassion requires 'an active determination to alleviate this distress and, where possible, the causes of that distress' (p.4). A school in which compassion permeates all that is felt and done, is a school which will develop compassion in its students and maximise its contribution to the creation of a compassionate society. Coles uses the mnemonic *Acts for Love* to describe the qualities of a compassionate human being, and proposes ten 'self-evident truths' for why compassionate change is both possible and necessary. Compassion can be 'caught, taught and cultivated' by schools, and should become the central organizing value underpinning educational provision.

That this is all a long way from where we stand today, in a fragmented 'system' of schools dominated by curricular prescriptions, the marketization of schooling, and the fetish of testing and measurement, needs hardly to be stated, but it is, in numerous places (and sometimes trenchantly) throughout the other six chapters and the Conclusion. For example, John Lloyd (Chapter 6) rightly laments the Government's decision (which, he says, is simply 'appalling') to discontinue the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme (p.100), while Mick Walters (Chapter 7) sees the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as a 'curse' (pp. 109-110). It is clear that a move towards compassionate schooling faces a Herculean task if it is to replace the existing paradigm and narrative of what counts as the curriculum in an age when dogma and ideology trump evidence and rational argument wherever one looks.

But it is unwise to focus for too long on what this book is arguing *against*, since the aim is to be positive about the potential for change through a compassionate approach to teaching and learning. Each of the chapters provides the reader with ideas about how we can make compassion a meta-value for our schools, and - often as lists of bullet-points - how this may be translated into practical action. Throughout, the case is thoroughly grounded in rational argument and supported by empirical evidence. The latter is particularly visible in Chapter 2, by Tamara Russell and Tiago Tatton-Ramos, which draws on research in neuroscience to commend mindfulness and mindfulness-training as means to promoting empathy and compassionate practices in schools. This is a strong chapter in many ways, and helpfully ends with 'Ten things I can do right now' (p.40). However, I am puzzled by the report of research showing an 'increase' or 'decrease' in 'self-concept', when I suspect what is meant is *self-esteem* (p.31).

Spirituality is the focus for Coles in Chapter 3, and I was pleased to find here a discussion of the

meaning of this elusive concept which embraces the secular as well as the religious, which connects a holistic perspective on the spirit with the concepts of self-actualization and self-transcendence in the writings of Maslow and Rogers (p. 44), and which considers the link between spirituality and morality (p.45). Coles's 'taxonomy of spiritual development' is a useful contribution to clarifying a complex and difficult concept which caused (and may still cause!) the architects of the school curriculum and Ofsted inspectors such a 'headache' in the 1990s. While I found the 'mnemonic' ('BE ORACLES POWER') which he uses for this discussion unhelpful, the list of characteristics of schools which encourage spiritual development (P. 57) seems to me to be 'spot-on'.

Readers of this Journal may well find themselves most 'at home' with Chapter 4, where David Woods looks at the place of compassion in moral and social development. Of particular note here is the emphasis given to the 'rights-respecting school', taking the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child as the starting-point. Behavioural expectations, restorative justice, the citizenship curriculum and the student 'voice' are all given thoughtful consideration. By the end of this chapter, the spiritual, social and moral elements of the 'SMSC' curriculum have had a good airing, leaving only the Cultural begging discussion. This is made good in Chapter 5, where Gilroy Brown and Maurice Coles consider the place of compassion in regard to both the creative/artistic and anthropological meanings of 'culture'. In regard to the latter, the challenges of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-faith society - including extremism and recent 'scares' such as the 'Trojan-horse affair' (p.86) - are considered, and the need for a compassionate approach to diversity soundly argued.

It is possible to come out of a reading of this book feeling rather depressed, because it highlights just how far we, as a country, have drifted in our educational policy from the kind of holistic, caring and supportive school which was the object of the National Association for Pastoral Care (NAPCE) when it was set up in the early 1980s. It is, therefore, in places a rather *angry* book, and rightly so. But it is, ultimately, a positive and encouraging book which sets out the case for schools to re-orientate and transform curricula and pedagogy by embracing the capacity for love and empathy in policy and practice. This is not impossible; as Waters says of the curriculum : 'It is not a case of writing a new curriculum but more of reassessing the message of much of the content to make sure compassion is the driver' (p. 121). It is encouraging also to read of the many charities, organizations and networks which take a similar line (such as Human Scale Education and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham), to find many references to a substantial literature advocating compassionate approaches, and to find in Appendix 2, a directory of web-based resources for schools seeking to transform their practice.

In his Introduction, Coles states that 'the audience for this book is purposefully wide' including policy-makers, teachers and 'all those who work in schools', while also being of interest to the general reader (p. xxii). I hope it will find such a readership and that it will have a real impact.

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