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CHAPTER 1

The Need to Care

I feel the capacity to care is the thing which gives life its deepest significance.

—Pablo Casals

key principle

Mindfulness practices can stimulate the paradigm shift in schools and the new societal mindset needed to overcome the impact of trauma and stress.



Children live with nightmares. Whether it is the trauma of living through a hurricane or earthquake, feeling uncertain of where one's loved ones are, or living in a neighborhood of poverty or neglect, their trauma surrounds us today. Whether it is domestic abuse, school shootings, or graphic displays of killing on television and in video games, violence is all too prevalent. All too often for young children living with fear, anxiety, or violence, their experiences and unvoiced reactions create layers of damage (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Trauma touches the lives of children of all ages. It may be pre-traumatic, post-traumatic, or recurrent. It is not limited to youth who are in gangs or those who are of a certain age. While violence may not be the source of trauma for all children, the trauma could be related to abuse, or neglect, or simply losing a friend. While the impact of a traumatic event will not affect everyone equally, the impact of trauma resulting from each of these experiences could be significant. Sometimes teachers will be aware of the traumatic event the student brings into their classroom. We as teachers may hear about the death of a grandparent, for example. At other times, all we may see is that Christopher did not finish his homework or that Latosha seems to have withdrawn. Traumatic experiences are not left at home. Children come into classrooms and the school community every day carrying their school bags and the weight of their traumatic experiences.

There Is a Mounting Urgency

We know many teachers care deeply about children's emotional health and have the intention to nurture this emotional health even in a time of tremendous pressure to achieve academic gains. Many teachers understand that actualizing this intention requires being mindful that there is a myriad of impacting student realities to which they must pay attention (Feuerstein, 2006; Jackson, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). If you have cracked the cover of this book, you may already be aware of the realities and huge unmet needs that many students face on a daily basis. Factors such as poverty, racism, divorce, homelessness, and abuse, when coupled with the everyday stressors we all face, often lead to toxic or ongoing stress. Over time, this stress impedes brain development and creates blocks to learning, memory, and one's sense of security, safety, and happiness.

Trauma Causes Lifelong Damage

Potentially, the effects of profound, long-term damage that accompanies trauma permanently alter children's brain architecture, resulting in decreased learning and behavioral and emotional problems. According to an American Academy of Pediatrics (2003) report, the damage and cost of suffering extend well into adulthood, with social risk factors, mental health issues, substance abuse, violence, and risky adult behaviors increasing and parenting capabilities reduced, thereby continuing a cycle of adverse childhood experiences well into our next generation of children (Shonkoff, Garner, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, & Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 2012). These consequences have far-reaching, damaging tentacles that can profoundly impact society as a whole, with the potential to cripple a whole generation of children if their needs are left unmet.

Alarming Statistics

The following statistics support the need to mitigate factors harmful to student well-being and development.

- Over seven million young children a year are referred to a child protective agency for trauma due to neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016) cites this number as an underestimation because not all abuse is reported. The horrific reality is people do not automatically recover from childhood trauma, and 60 percent of adults report experiencing trauma during childhood. Stress from abuse distorts the brain's cognitive functioning, impairing judgment and contributing to slower academic progress and deflated test scores (Smith, 2010). The statistics of this reality are a cataclysmic foreboding for the

future of the United States. (The website www.recognizetrauma.org has more information.)

- For students of color, especially African American males, the reality of racial abuse is an additional ignored reality. At very young ages, the reality of racism results in negative perceptions children have about themselves, affecting their psychological and cognitive development (Starr, 2015). Tragically, the confrontations children of color personally encounter or view through the media happen so regularly and are internalized so profoundly that the term *post* in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been dropped in recognition that this cause of the trauma (racism) for African American males is ongoing. The designation is *traumatic stress disorder* (Kugler, 2013). Given the surge of police violence against African American males, particularly in the context of long-term racism, discrimination, oppression, and injustice, social work professor Samuel Aymer (2016) goes as far as to describe the fear and hyper-alertness as *pre-traumatic stress disorder*. Considered in the context of the number of African American males who are imprisoned, the number who are profiled, and the impact of such policies as stop and frisk, the urgency is great (Aymer, 2016).
- For indigenous students, whose people are native to America, the impact of the history of assault, abuse, and persecution has continued through centuries. Gone (2009) describes the “collective, cumulative, and intergenerational transmission of risk of adverse health outcomes that stem from the historically unresolved grief” (p. 2) for Native Americans. Contributing factors such as subjugation, forced cultural assimilation, and brutal corporal punishment have not been resolved and have led to alcohol and substance abuse as a means of escape.
- The misperception that students of color, including Native American students, construct about themselves due to the abuse of racism they live, reflects what Carol S. Dweck (2000) calls *entity theory*. As Dweck (2000) explains, tragically, individuals’ beliefs about their own capabilities, their self-concept, motivation, goal setting, and tenacity in school are affected by these inaccurate perceptions of self that abuse and discrimination perpetuated. Such beliefs about self ravage students’ learning potential and academic achievement. According to the entity theory, false and limiting beliefs about self that have been instilled as a result of racism and discrimination result in a *fixed mindset*, or a belief that indigenous students and students of color have that their intelligence is fixed and unchangeable (Dweck, 2000; Jackson, 2011).

The lifelong consequences of trauma are significant. According to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, where over seventeen thousand patients were interviewed regarding childhood trauma and their current health, people don't just get over childhood experiences and trauma (Felitti et al., 1998). Rather, according to that watershed longitudinal study and subsequent research, "unhealed emotions have a profound impact on personal relationships, health choices and chronic diseases that subsequently develop from self-diminishing choices" such as smoking, using illicit drugs, or having multiple sexual partners (CDC, 2016). While you may find this information unsettling, what is most encouraging is that the presence of a caring adult can mitigate the negative impact of trauma and stress. And, this caring adult does not need to be the parent or other relative. More often than not, the stable, caring adult is a teacher, and his or her impact can be significantly ameliorating (Flanagan, 2015).

Shared Responsibility

The damage that students experience due to trauma happens during a critical time in their development. This is especially true for elementary-age students. According to the Kresge Foundation (2016):

These early, formative years serve as the foundation for all of life's later endeavors. If, as a society, we fail to meet the needs of our young children, it is not just the children who suffer. We as a society suffer as well. Their success is our success.

In the life of a child, there is no greater time for action than *now*. It is, after all, the foundation of success developed in early and formative years. Multiple societal interventions to address long-standing and escalating problems facing students of color, including Native American students, are needed. For all students to attain strong cognitive development, educational achievement, economic productivity, and ultimately responsible citizenship, we must all bear a shared responsibility early in their development. For all students to obtain lifelong health, sound mental health, and ultimately the successful parenting skills for life success, we must all bear a shared responsibility early in their development. For all students to be welcomed members of communities, we must all bear a shared responsibility early in their development (Child First, n.d.).

Compassion Increases the Power of Protective Factors

Greater consciousness and more compassion in a school community can lead to increased protective factors to counteract what is missing for so many students as they experience unthinkable trauma and stress. Protective factors such as having a caring adult to turn to, teaching consciousness and compassion in schools, strengthening

an array of social connections, and providing parents concrete support in times of need help combat trauma and stress.

We naturally decrease risk factors when we make conscious decisions as educators and leaders to increase protective factors like building adult and student relationships (through mindfulness and self and social awareness), supportive interactions with students and families, and increased compassion and understanding of the circumstances and experiences that children face. A buffering adult relationship is one of the most important deterrents to decreasing risk factors. Adult relationships provide the personalized sensitivity, support, and safety that help buffer children from developmental disruptions, which occur when the impact is severe enough to impede their development. Adult relationships also build resilience, which is their ability to recover quickly from difficult experiences. Such relationships help students to become more resilient and more likely to overcome challenges that come into their lives (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.a). Within the school community, we have a unique opportunity to promote and develop this buffer through developing strong and caring teacher and student relationships.

We believe that schools as social institutions serving children and youth have a significant role to play (Noddings, 1998, 2003; Wall, 2010). We agree that schools have a moral imperative to become involved, to consider what they can do as they plan and implement their curriculum and instruction. So, the question becomes, With what we know about trauma, where do educators go from here?

With Mindfulness, Imagine Compassionate Communities

Mindfulness is the first step we recommend to change the way we think (mindset) and educate. Mindfulness is a foundational and essential practice to create caring, compassionate school communities. However, it is important to note that while teachers can teach mindfulness, it is also critical that compassion be a key classroom theme as well. Otherwise, students might not get the help they need to overcome the impact of their traumatic experiences. Mindfulness without compassion in classrooms is like tea without honey or dinner without dessert; we lose the opportunity to savor the richness of it. Without a conscious effort to enhance compassionate interactions, protocols, and policies in schools, we fail to hit the sweet spot.

With the approach we suggest, mindfulness plus compassion, both parts of the equation are integral to the effectiveness and result of practice. Significant research on mindfulness, compassion, and community building supports our suggestions for a focus on mindfulness and compassion (Brock, 2015; Broderick, 2013; Brown &

Olson, 2015; Cole, et al., 2005; Davidson & Begley, 2012; Flook et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2010; Kohler-Evans & Barnes, 2015; Schmalzl et al., 2015; Singer & Bolz, 2013).

Children experiencing trauma need compassionate interactions and support every day. It is only when we develop a *heightened awareness*, greater *consciousness*, or *mindfulness* of our own self, surroundings, feelings, and others that we are capable of acting more compassionately toward ourselves and others (Kohler-Evans & Barnes, 2015). This holds true for everyone: teachers, principals, other staff, and students. It is when we take a deep breath, pause, and cultivate the awareness of any moment between an action and a reaction that we heighten our understanding of what is really happening (Siegel, 2012). As Siegel (2012) indicates, this consciousness starts with a simple deep breath and a pause (chapter 4, page 61). And, from the base of mindfulness or greater consciousness comes an increased capacity to demonstrate compassionate caring and understanding. This includes compassion for self and for others.

We can make a difference if we choose to act, to believe, to elevate our collective consciousness with compassion. As educators, we have an enormous charge before us. If we are to properly prepare the next generation for their future, helping all students develop into healthy, well-adjusted, caring, and contributing individuals for their success and ours, then a paradigm shift is critically needed: a paradigm shift in mindset, in the way we think and act regarding education, our children, families, and our world. Our collective and shared work on this shift begins now.

Mindful Reflection

As an individual or with your study group, respond to the mindful reflection questions, taking notes on the following page.

- What do you know about the trauma your students experience at home or at school?
- What steps, if any, is your school community taking to combat trauma and increase social well-being for students and teachers?
- Racism, intolerance, and prejudice are major factors contributing to trauma. How prevalent are these in your local area? Who is addressing them, and how?
- What do you know about mindfulness?
- Are you implementing any mindfulness practices in your classroom, your school, or your own life? If so, describe the practices and their impact to date.
- Describe your school community. How compassionate is it? Has there been a conscious effort to increase compassion? Explain how.