

mindful school communities



The Five Cs of Nurturing
Heart Centered Learning

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Introduction

A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination.

—Nelson Mandela

Imagine schools filled with joy, where learning is fun and engaging, where excitement fills the air, and where the vibrations of love are palpable and students step forth with confidence to tackle difficult problems. Imagine schools where students and educators gain a sense of *equanimity*—calm and balance—and where academic learning and social-emotional health are equally recognized and considered crucial to success in school, career, and life. Most important, imagine that compassion, love, and heart are at the core of everything we do and become in school communities.

And yet, the reality we face is far removed from this vision. Varying levels of stress and trauma accompany hundreds of thousands of students as they struggle to complete everyday tasks, learn new skills, and meet parents' and teachers' expectations—and their own expectations. The prevalence of the most severe forms of childhood trauma is staggering. According to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019) report, in 2017 child protective services (CPS) “received a national estimate of 4.1 million referrals involving approximately 7.5 million children,” mostly for neglect (74.9 percent) and physical abuse (18.3 percent; p. ix). While it's difficult to measure childhood abuse and neglect rates on a global scale because of differences in reporting methods, measures, and cultural norms, we know this issue influences the lives of children worldwide. For example, neglect happens to around 14 percent of children in Europe; in Asia, the statistics are around 25 percent (Moody, Cannings-John, Hood, Kemp, & Robling, 2018).

Stress and trauma invade the lives of many students regardless of their race, culture, gender, location, or socioeconomic status. Whether it is poverty, violence, abuse, neglect, bullying, rejection, or feelings of inadequacy, trauma and stress compromise students' well-being and futures (Shonkoff, 2012). Stress, whether short term or

pervasive, presents a huge barrier to learning, undermining people's "ability to concentrate, remember things, and control and focus their own thinking" (Thompson, 2014, p. 45). Under stress, people's minds may even shut down or slow down, their attention may wander, and they may suffer from low self-esteem (Breslau, Peterson, Poisson, Schultz, & Lucia, 2004; Scibberas et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Thankfully, there are strategies and techniques that teachers and administrators can use to improve all of these learning barriers. Our experience is that these strategies and techniques can make a difference for individual lives even in the midst of global anxiety, terrorism, and trauma. Somewhat surprisingly, it is almost like being in the middle of a blue sky in the eye of a hurricane—trauma whirling around us as we feel centered, calm, happy, and successful. We believe one viable and sustainable solution is what we call *Heart Centered Learning*[®]. Supported by neuroscience and neurobiology, Heart Centered Learning is where emotions, consciousness, and student interests and needs are central parts of curriculum and instruction and the essence of creating a compassionate learning community (Davidson & Begley, 2013; Kaunhoven & Dorjee, 2017; Lazar et al., 2005). We believe that Heart Centered Learning is the necessary ingredient to build strong, supportive school communities for students, teachers, and school leaders. While Heart Centered Learning may, at first blush, sound like it is all about being kind (which is important), it is based on years of rigorous scientific investigations documenting how to help children thrive. You will see that research cited throughout this book.

If you are like many educators, you think about how to help your students improve not only their academic achievement but also their self-esteem, self-regulation, and likelihood for lifelong success. You may come back to questions about what to do. If it isn't foremost in your mind, you may reflect on it when contemplating your successes and the barriers that stand between the students you serve and the dreams you have for them.

The education that we envision for the future will have heart—a true connectedness. Schools with a solely academic focus are not addressing these urgent issues, yet they could be a critical part of the solution (Blankstein, Noguera, & Kelly, 2015; Noddings, 2016; Wright & Ford, 2016). As sociologist and author Parker Palmer (2007) explains, the teachers who will help students thrive "possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (p. 11). This book ultimately answers how to create this connectedness. This introduction answers questions such as, What is connectedness? What is Heart Centered Learning? What are heart centered school communities? What will you learn in, and how might you approach, this book?

What Is Connectedness?

Connectedness is a sense of belonging, or *relatedness*, which is important for teachers and students alike (Marshik, Ashton, & Algina, 2017; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). It is crucial to psychological health, as well as to motivation (Marshik et al., 2017). Connectedness—belonging—is critical to healthy growth and development. Alienation, isolation, trauma, and stress mean there is a need for conscious development of connectedness. The repercussions from these experiences vary from individual to individual, but their effect on overall well-being and the capacity to learn is damaging (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Teacher-student connectedness is not often part of preservice teacher education or in-service professional development. However, to nurture and support the complex web of connectedness that Palmer (2007) describes, school leaders and teachers consciously weave webs of relationships with everyone in the school community. Connectedness is important to Heart Centered Learning.

What Is Heart Centered Learning?

Heart Centered Learning is “education that is not overly dependent upon a focus on rigid academic scheduling or expectations for academic growth—instead taking a holistic approach” (Center for Educational Improvement [CEI], n.d.). This approach encourages and fosters the five Cs of social-emotional learning (external) and mindfulness (internal):

1. Consciousness
2. Compassion
3. Confidence
4. Courage
5. Community

Heart Centered Learning reflects recent neurobiological information that provides strong evidence of neuroplasticity—the brain’s ability to recover from stress (Davidson & Begley, 2013; Kaunhoven, & Dorjee, 2017; Lazar et al., 2005). Mindfulness, or conscious awareness, can help individuals who are experiencing trauma or stress by providing relief that calms hyper-alert neuropathways (Mason, Rivers Murphy, & Jackson, 2019). When we are conscious of our breath, of our emotions, and of those around us, we are more likely to act in compassionate ways and reinforce neuropathways that provide positive feedback about our lives (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). As we feel a sense of calm and goodwill, we are more likely to feel confident about our abilities. Over time, this sense of confidence can strengthen executive functions (including memory, attention, and organization; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Zelazo &

Lyons, 2012) and our potential to be courageous—standing up to bullies, helping others in need, and considering someone else’s feelings—thus strengthening a sense of community. Heart Centered Learning intentionally provides a new lens for the neurobiological challenges of youth who struggle with impulse control, de-escalation, anger management, and self-regulation as a whole. Through this new lens we are less likely to blame students for acting out and more likely to seek ways to alleviate their stress and nurture their well-being.

Put simply, when teachers and administrators strive for Heart Centered Learning, they place the learners’ social-emotional needs at the forefront of their instruction and policies while cultivating a natural safety net within the learning community. When their teaching is heart centered, educators’ conscious understanding of neuroscience (including neurobiology and also a conscious understanding of learning, perception, and behavior) and stress informs their attitudes, practices, communication, and instruction with learners. This effort can lead to a heart centered school community.

What Are Heart Centered School Communities?

In heart centered school communities, there is a shared belief that it is not enough to only *educate with our minds*, nor is it enough to only *educate our minds*. If we are to help mediate the inattention and inaction that so many decades of ignoring social-emotional factors have created, and if we are to teach students strategies to ameliorate trauma and stress, then new ways of being, learning, and leading together are necessary. In heart centered school communities, caring and compassionate action are embedded into practices, policies, and protocols. Further, as they implement Heart Centered Learning, educators also use the principles during interactions with families and the surrounding local community. Such a practice shows care for the whole heart centered school community. See figure I.1.

INTRODUCTION EXERCISE: Reaching for the Stars

To consider the benefits of adding heart, we would like you to pause, consider someone you love (it could be a family member or friend), and check to see how you feel. Now, participate in the following exercise (Mason & Banks, 2014). Read through the steps and then close your eyes and follow them.

1. Close your eyes, put your hands on your heart, and take a few deep breaths.
2. Focus on the warmth at your heart center and imagine stars twinkling in a night sky.
3. As you continue to look, notice that one star seems to shine a bit brighter. Focus on that star.
4. Visualize the face of a loved one on that star.

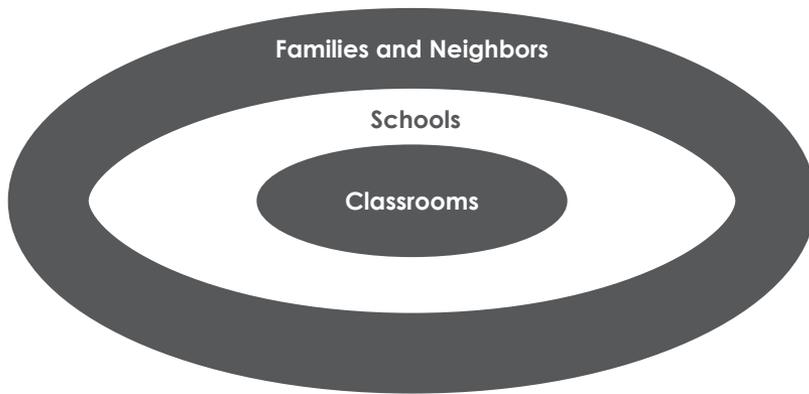


Figure 1.1: Heart centered school communities.

5. Feel the love bond, take a few deep breaths, and reach up with one of your hands and pull that star into your heart.
6. Take a few more deep breaths, feeling the love bond and a sense of peace, and open your eyes.

When you do the exercise, remember to take a few deep breaths at the beginning and at the end. How did you feel? Did you notice a difference in how you felt between simply thinking about someone you love and after doing the Reaching for the Stars exercise? You have activated a connection between your feelings, your mind, and your heart. A positive physiological change in your heart actually occurred (Childre & Martin, 1999).

What Will You Learn in This Book?

In *Mindful School Communities: The Five Cs of Nurturing Heart Centered Learning*, teachers of grades K–12, school counselors, social workers, and administrators get the research-based essentials to creating mindful classrooms and school communities that better prepare students to be more responsive to their individual, collective, and societal needs. We also provide the following.

- Insights into research
- Examples of how other educators have implemented the practices
- Guidance for thoughtful and conscious decision making
- Exercises to improve students' and educators' lives (Visit go.hbe.com.au to access free reproducible versions of these exercises.)
- Activities and tools to infuse heart centered factors naturally into curriculum in the context of academic subjects and across grade levels

Readers who have little knowledge about mindfulness, or “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 143), will find that *Mindful School Communities: The Five Cs of Nurturing Heart Centered Learning* gives them food for thought regarding consciousness, compassion, confidence, courage, and community—the five factors that compose Heart Centered Learning. Each of these topics is covered in an individual chapter, with examples of activities that can be used across grade levels and academic subjects. Each chapter also has examples of how teachers can build their capacity for awareness and heart centeredness in their interactions with students (and how administrators can do so in their interactions with teachers) and establish mindful school communities that are more caring and compassionate.

Will readers who are already implementing mindfulness also be interested in what we have to say in *Mindful School Communities: The Five Cs of Nurturing Heart Centered Learning*? Jeffrey Donald, a teacher and mindfulness coordinator in Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools, is implementing mindfulness across his district, and he thinks they will be interested:

Developing and sustaining compassionate classrooms is not a short-term investment. We are in such need of a curriculum that will help integrate compassionate practices, including the five Cs, across academic areas. Teachers need guidance and advice about how to incorporate these important practices while continuing to focus on academic development. (J. Donald, personal communication, June 5, 2019)

Mindful School Communities: The Five Cs of Nurturing Heart Centered Learning is divided into two parts.

Part I: Scientific Basis and Overview

Chapters 1 and 2, in part I, provide an overview of the theoretical, scientific, historical, and contextual information that is the rationale for Heart Centered Learning. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of Heart Centered Learning. Chapter 2 describes the physiology of the heart and why it’s important to help students understand their emotions (our bodies’ responses to external stimuli) and feelings (our mental reactions and associations to these emotions).

Part II: Heart Centered Components

In part II, chapters 3–7 each cover one of the five Cs that being a heart centered community requires. Chapter 8 centers on conscious leadership, and the epilogue reflects on the implications for schools, communities, and nations, and looks to the future. The appendix introduces the School Compassionate Culture Analytic Tool for

Educators (S-CCATE), a data-analysis and envisioning tool that ties directly to the five Cs. Visit go.hbe.com.au for free reproducibles of planning tools for each of the five Cs, heart centered leadership, and heart physiology and heart-mind connections. Figure I.2 (page 8) is an example of a completed planning tool.

Throughout the book, you will see the following.

- **Key principles:** Each chapter begins with an underlying principle that summarizes that chapter's main concept or theme.
- **Exercises and activities:** These are interspersed throughout the chapters in a purposeful order. The exercises are examples of how to implement Heart Centered Learning in classrooms and schools. Some are mindful breathing, yogic, meditation, or mindfulness exercises; some are discussion- or project-based activities. We recommend practicing the exercises first before implementing them with students.
- **Professional development opportunities:** We make references to resources and activities across a variety of subjects and grade levels for introducing each of the five Cs.
- **Reflections:** Each chapter ends with a few questions that may help you understand the relationship of the material to your own situation, including your students, your classrooms, and your schools.

In chapters 3–8, you will see the following organizing structures, where *It* stands for consciousness, compassion, confidence, courage, community, or conscious leadership.

- **What Is It?** This is a definition and explanation of the factor and how it relates to education. We also talk about issues you might have to take into consideration when planning to practice or teach the factor.
- **Why Does It Matter in School?** Here are the rationale and research for teaching this factor to students.
- **How Do We Teach It?** You get examples of how to infuse the factor into academic curricula.
- **What Does It Look Like Historically?** We discuss historic leaders who personify or who have advanced one of the factors. This topic can work as another way to introduce the factor into the curricula. Additionally, you can tap into current events or visit websites such as the Smithsonian Institutions (<http://americanhistory.si.edu>) for inspiration. Look for examples of these factors in the news or on social media, consider other gifted adults, and compare some of the traits they share.
- **How Do We Measure It?** We share several ways to assess how thoroughly or well each of the five Cs, plus conscious leadership, is incorporated into a

school or district. Examples of three S-CCATE items for measuring each of the Cs are included as well.

How Might You Approach This Book?

How can you put more heart into your life? We expect that each of you has your own special interests and needs. You may be most interested in building students' confidence or courage, for example. Before jumping to that chapter, please consider the advantages of reading this book cover to cover, starting with this introduction, and following the chapters in sequence. There is a rationale for the sequence, and our discussion of each factor will help you gain knowledge and skills that form the basis for the factors that follow. Also, you will gain the most if you savor the experiences of the exercises. Unlike in many other books with academic content, we have woven mindfulness exercises throughout the chapters. These exercises will enhance your preparation and understanding.

As you proceed through this book, *we urge you to practice the exercises before implementing them in class with students.* You will be better prepared, with a more thorough understanding of the material, if you practice the exercises individually first. You may want to take notes, recording how long it takes to go through the recommended steps and comparing how you feel before and after the exercises. This individual practice is particularly important for any of the exercises that have a breathing, yoga, or meditative component. We also recommend that you consider the following.

- **How to embed the exercises and activities into your routines and procedures:** We provide some suggestions, but some might work well at specific times of day, during transition times, or even as a routine part of opening or closing your lessons.
- **When you may need to discuss the process and implications with administrators or parents:** We provide examples of educators and school leaders introducing Heart Centered Learning into their classrooms or schools and how they encouraged buy-in from key stakeholders.
- **How you can benefit by reading and applying this in a book study group:** The reflection questions at the end of each chapter are helpful for this. The authors have successfully used this approach for virtual study groups for the 2019 companion book, *Mindfulness Practices*.
- **If, and with whom, you will share results from any assessments measuring a five Cs component:**
 - Teachers may or may not want to share individual student outcomes with students. In some cases, it may be wisest to share some general findings with the class and use the information primarily to help make instructional decisions about the types of activities to pursue.

- We recommend that teachers use care in sharing results so students are not embarrassed, but rather empowered to share only what *they* choose to share with others. Err on the side of maintaining confidentiality. For example, a teacher could conference individually with a student or students, discussing strengths and needs, or could walk through an example of hypothetical results with students and suggest the implications of the results. For example, the teacher might say, “These hypothetical results show us that this student . . .”
- Depending on the class, students’ ages or grade, and circumstances, teachers might walk the class through how to interpret and use the results for a hypothetical student, and demonstrate how the hypothetical student uses the results in a metacognitive way—that is, in a way to gain a greater understanding of him- or herself. The class could discuss the implications of the results and decide on one goal that this student might develop. The teacher could then circulate results to individual students, giving each the opportunity to develop one goal.

This book has been designed as a resource. It is not a step-by-step curriculum with rigid expectations. Rather, we encourage readers to approach a chapter with a sense of curiosity and wonder, being open to what it might reveal. You might even review an exercise for, say, preschoolers and think, “Ah, I can modify this for my middle school students.” Or you might find two exercises in a chapter that most appeal to you and start with these. While we have sequenced exercises within a chapter, it might be, for instance, that you are quite interested in the area of self-confidence and will consider how to introduce that topic, rather than starting with the first exercise in the confidence chapter. In other words, let your intuition, your heart, and your expertise guide you through the selection of what to present in your class or school.

Also, please keep the following in mind.

- Some of the background material may work well as a way to introduce or explore specific aspects of the five Cs. The historical background information we provide might make good introductory lessons, providing exemplars and inspiration. For example, you can introduce or reinforce multiple C factors by explaining Mary Wollstonecraft’s confidence in speaking out in support of women’s rights to strengthen her community.
- We encourage you to build community, which is covered in chapter 7, as you work through the other Cs. Creating community begins with consciousness and is essential to establishing compassion, confidence, and courage.