



Book Review

Towards the Compassionate University. From golden thread to global impact

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Waddington, K. (Ed.) (2021) *Towards the Compassionate University. From golden thread to global impact*. Routledge: Abingdon & New York

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From Darwin to dreaming, and embracing history, psychology and philosophy along the way, there is something here for everyone. Whether you are coming new to the topic of compassion in education, looking to put ideas into action, or exploring areas such as self-compassion, *Towards the Compassionate University. From golden thread to global impact*, has something to offer every reader. The book is introduced and concluded by Kathryn Waddington - previous guest editor of a special issue of JPAAP on Compassionate Pedagogy (2018) - and Kathryn contributes to several of the chapters herself in a voice that is always authentic. The ideas that she presents through her writing, whilst often challenging on the one hand are always clearly expressed and engaging on the other, drawing the reader into avenues of discussion that might otherwise have been left unexplored, and raising the question of why have I not considered this before? And how could these ideas not have been uppermost in my mind? There would be no criticism of these feelings, however, as Kathryn and her co-contributors model a compassionate approach throughout their writing that leaves you turning to each chapter for more; for a new perspective, for a different angle, for fresh ideas and perhaps most of all for *help* with areas of our practice that may have become troubling.

We are all familiar with the idea of compassion at an individual and societal level, and perhaps never more so than in the last two years when the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a huge outpouring of compassion, but are we familiar or comfortable with the notion of organisational compassion? The compassionate university? We may have quite a strong response to that concept on a number of levels. Waddington herself argues at an early stage that "... there is still some way to go on the journey towards the compassionate university" (p5) but that this book is for all those "... aspiring to develop their own understanding of the role of compassion in professional life" (p6).

The book is divided into three sections, each with a particular focus, looking firstly at need, followed by action and then moving forward in relation to the idea of compassion. Individual chapters are also written as a result of different approaches to thinking about compassion in the university, where action learning sets, case studies, and the introduction of models and lenses further illuminate the topic. One of the aims of the introductory chapter is to provide a framework to support the reader in:

cultivating critical compassion, based upon the premise that compassion is a discrete and evolved emotional experience that must be acknowledged and acted upon in higher education organizations (p5)

Waddington encourages the reader to feel free to dip into the chapters in any order but I recommend an early start with chapter 2, written by Maurice Irfan Coles "... shortly before he died on 10 April 2020 from a COVID-19-related illness. This book is dedicated to his memory and would not have been written without his inspiration and pioneering work ..." (p36).

What then is meant by the 'compassionate university'? Coles's description is a good one to set the scene.

Put simply, compassionate education is a perspective, a way of seeing the world that places love in action at the heart of everything we do and is predicated upon a vision and narrative, which elevates collaboration above competition, and service above self-interest. This is the golden thread that should be part of the warp and weft of university life. It is underpinned by the compassionate knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by students of all ages if they are to survive in this increasingly hostile world (pp 27-28)

Equally important is the reflection on what compassion in education *is not*; and should not ever become. Waddington muses on this.

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Questions regarding authenticity and motivation for compassion also need to be asked. For example, is a compassionate act motivated by a genuine and heartfelt desire to alleviate suffering? Or is it motivated by instrumental goals such as good public relations, or a high score on a—hypothetical— Compassion Excellence Framework? Let us hope it never comes to this. Critical lenses with which to see, and magnify, compassion are necessary to ensure that it does not. (p12)

Having reflected on chapter 2, the reader is well placed to engage with the idea of compassion in the university setting as it is examined and expressed in the remaining chapters; and always from a critically reflective perspective, with Waddington's sure editorial touch providing a consistently useful way into the heart of each discussion. While outlining Worline and Dutton's (2017) characterisation of compassion as a four-part process, Waddington describes compassion as "... more than simply just an emotion. It extends beyond that to a specific felt and enacted desire to alleviate suffering", but also acknowledges that "... in higher education organizations, the notion of suffering may not necessarily be part of the language used by students and staff to describe their everyday experiences". Waddington then goes on to provide the reader with a way into this idea with which we may more readily identify:

Perhaps, a different starting point might be to recognize and notice difference, discrimination and bias in how people are being treated, and how students are being taught.' (p7-8).

Immediately, we can recognise and identify with this idea.

Coles provides further insight into the use of compassion as an idea in our everyday practice in his explanation of how a colleague, Louise Darby, distilled a "working group's detailed thinking on the skills of compassion" into:

... a simple straight forward mnemonic, NEAR, which contains the higher order skills of Noticing, Empathizing, Acting, and Reflecting, all of which are broken down into a series of sub-skills, which are accompanied by a range of activities that can be used in any educational settings for all abilities ... all attributes that we would recognise from our day-to-day practice. (p34)

Approaches such as this enable the reader to access and relate to the concept of compassion in the university.

In each chapter, questions are regularly posed, challenges presented and possibilities explored, with an important level of criticality providing another constant throughout the book. Waddington and Kaplan, in their chapter on action learning for compassion, provide a warning to:

Guard against the adoption of compassion in an unthinking manner—as something that can be 'rolled out', measured, audited, and commodified ... [as] has occurred with the concept of mindfulness and the notion of 'McMindfulness' (p68)

Introducing the argument of Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, and Margolis (2012) "that seeing care and compassion through an organizational lens offers new possibilities", Waddington posits their question of: "... what it would mean to *infuse care and compassion* into the practices of management, research, and teaching?" and reflects that the "... notion of infusion, as a continuous, slow process is important here. Compassion is not a quick fix; it takes time to cultivate ..." (p12).

The concept of 'compassion' is thus picked up and examined in several different ways throughout this book and there are several threads with which the reader will be familiar, perhaps inevitably for a book written and published in these times, that run through the text: COVID-19, mental health issues, neo-liberalism. And yet I genuinely felt I was approaching each of these with a fresh rather than a jaundiced eye.

This is a gem of a book; and while it deals with a topic that may be new to many and poses significant questions and challenges for our practice, it provides inspiration and hope in equal measure. I can do no better than leave you with an encouragement to engage with the idea of the compassionate university and to reflect on the words of Ruth Barcan (2013, p30), "writing about academic life and labour in the new university", as introduced to the reader by Kathryn Waddington:

there are times when it is good to remember that hope remains a choice. (p11)

Barcan, R. (2013). *Academic life and labour in the new university*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing

Rynes, S. L., Bartunek, J. M., Dutton, J. E., & Margolis, J. D. (2012). Care and compassion through an organizational lens: Opening up new possibilities. *Academy of Management Review*, 37(4), 503–523.

Biography

Lorraine Anderson is an Assistant Director of Student Services and Head of the Academic Skills Centre at the University of Dundee. She is the co-author of several books and articles on teaching and academic practice in higher education and is a member of the JPAAP Editorial Team. She is also a member of the Cloud Appreciation Society.