

What it we Could Multiply Compassion Levels by 8,...Could That Make a Difference? Revisiting the Brains' Power Project with School Children

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Abstract

Schools often become environments where children feel unsafe, unseen, and disconnected. This climate can arise in spite of the efforts of many well-meaning adults. This paper illustrates a classroom project based on collaborative inquiries, which render visible young people's efforts, abilities, hopes, and preferred identities when solving conflicts. Students' skills are made visible through classroom interviews and playfully organized into "Brain Powers" (Beaudoin, 2014), which package strategies in evocative ways, while being actively connected to each students' unique life. The effects of this project were studied and 813 stories of conflict resolution from children's daily lives before and after the class visits, and compared to a control group, were analyzed (Beaudoin, Moersch & Schnare, 2016). More recently, and in light of the growing popularity of the project, the results of the analysis were revisited and an eight fold increase in compassion was identified. The different steps of the project are summarized in this article along with the story of ten years old Steven.

Common struggles in schools

Ten years old Steven, fuming with rage, paused for a second. On one hand he felt an intense surge of Anger towards one of his classmates, who just sneakily cut in the cafeteria line to get his lunch before everyone else. On the other hand, a firm part of his mind reminded him: "Keep the problem small, it doesn't have to be a big deal, it's not worth the risk of losing lunch time because of trouble about this".

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So he turned his eyes away and kept on talking with his friends. If any of the busy educators had noticed this sequence of events, they might have been surprised.

About eight weeks prior to this event, Steven had been referred for an urgent consultation with the SKIPS counselor of his school. He was described as needing immediate “anger management training”, was starting to get into fights every week with several different children on the playground, unable to graciously lose a game of tatter ball or basketball. Educators feared Steven was becoming increasingly out of control, and a suspension from school didn’t seem to help as he spent the free time on video games at home. Other students were becoming scared of his intense episodes of rage, pencil breaking tantrums, and impulses of spitting on people when he was overtaken by Anger. Steven had once even violently pushed a yard duty who had tried to restrain him from hurting another boy. Over the prior few months, Steven had developed a reputation of being scary; students and teachers were starting to “walk on eggshells” around him. People did not volunteer to play with him and avoided being on his classroom team whenever possible. Steven was now becoming more evidently the kind of person he preferred to be, patient and kind... but he hadn’t always appeared that way.

What allowed Steven to overcome the problem?

Given Steven’s frequent conflicts with others in his class, and the level of disruption this caused to everyone’s learning, it was determined that the SKIPS counselor would facilitate the Brain Powers classroom project. Unlike most socio-emotional skills project typically offered in schools, which focus on teaching specific ways of responding (for example, telling students: “use ‘I’ statements”, etc...), the Brain Powers’ project is informed by narrative practices (White & Epston, 1990; Epston & White, 1992), and seeks to identify and bolster children’s own unique burgeoning skills to address conflicts. This allows the enhancement of a style of response which perfectly fits the child’s mindset and struggles. Ultimately, most young people have the ability to experience compassion, perspective, and patience but those ways of being are often unnoticed, unsupported and not storied as possibilities. Conversations situated in the narrative approach (White & Epston, 1990) aim at creating a space for young people to notice, explore, and understand moments when they engage in actions



that are in line with their preferences even though these actions may not have been clearly planned out in the first place (Epston, Lobovits, Freeman, 1997; Marsten, Epston, & Markham, 2016; White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007).

Because these unique events are infrequently noticed, most adults tend to assume that if a youth engages in a problem behavior, it means that there is an absence of skills. This conclusion is profoundly incorrect and is oblivious to factors such as visibility, frequency, context, potential, and growth (Beaudoin, 2010). Problems are highly visible, while problem solving moments are often invisible.

In Steven's story above, none of the educators present noticed how irritating the event of a classmate cutting the cafeteria line was for Steven (especially when he was starving). There were a large number of students in line and as is necessary in those situations, the supervising adults focused on keeping order. Visible problems and invisible solutions tend to skew adult-child relationships (Beaudoin, 2014). Those invisible problem solving moments that children generate on their own represent a gold mine of skills (unique outcomes). Moreover, these constructive moments often happen ten times more often than their problematic counterparts, but they don't receive much attention, if any, as all of these skills are forgotten in a quiet corner of the mind. This leaves children not fully aware of their successes, and adults oblivious to precious moments, which in many cases, represent a completely different and more accurate story of who the child can be. With Steven for example, 118 persons knew of a particularly intense outburst and circulated a reputation that "he was mean", while in his heart (1 person), he preferred to be kind and patient with others. No-one knew that until the classroom project. Facilitating this type of narrative conversations in schools (Winslade & Monk, 2007; Winslade & Williams, 2011) and in classrooms in particular, requires facilitators to be practiced at interviewing children about their unattended skills using narrative conversation maps (White, 2007).

The Brain Powers project

The Brain Powers' project (Beaudoin, 2014) helps children notice, articulate, expand on, and repeat their successful socio-emotional problem solving in front of their classmates.



Theoretically rooted in collaborative inquiries (Epston, 1998; Friedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990; White 2007; White, 2011), it relies on facilitators' abilities to interview children about their lives using a specific socio-emotional skills map. This map was crafted based on the careful explorations of key helpful strategies children repeatedly reported using, and collected over many years of narrative practice (Beaudoin, 2010). It consists of remembering preferences such as:

1. Keeping problems small;
2. Considering the "invisibles" of the other person (unseen contextual factors which may influence a person's behaviors);
3. Anchoring in the kind of person one prefers to be;
4. Imagining the rippling effects of one's choices throughout the day. While the map can be used in any one-on-one conversation with children or adults, it was playfully modified and adapted for the Brain Powers' project.

In this project, every child writes a personal story of meaningful effort on a weekly basis. The facilitator initially starts off just introducing oneself as being interested in children's strategies and engages the class in discussions and interviews based on the written accounts. Young people's knowledges are brought to the forefront of the conversation. Over time, the strategies become progressively labeled, organized, and numbered according to the main brain powers' themes. The strategies listed above are discussed and re-organized into Brain Power (BP) whereas:

- BP # 1 is called Problem Shrinking.
- BP #2 focuses on seeing visible and invisible info about another person and is called Double Vision.
- BP # 3 encourages awareness of one's preferred self and is referred to as Anchoring.
- BP#4 is about predicting the future with foresight.

Each of the brain powers will now be explained in more details. Children typically use various combinations of these brain powers in solving different events in their lives.



Brain Power #1 Shrinking

Students are encouraged to examine how Mad feelings influence their thoughts and feelings, and get them to do hurtful things against their better judgment. They are invited to realize that Mad feelings can be helpful if one is attacked on the street but that in school, they tend to significantly inflate problems while in reality most students would really prefer to keep problems small and go about their day. Identifying the possibility of keeping problems small and hearing classmates recount their stories of doing so, week after week creates a context where this option becomes increasingly envisioned as a possibility. When unexpected or upsetting events occur, students can experience a sense of agency and ask themselves the question, “how can I keep this problem small?”.

When Steven was first exposed to this possibility, he had to think long and hard before remembering an instance when he kept a problem small. He eventually remembered accepting to play tatter ball with his friends at recess as opposed to basketball, which he much preferred. He was surprised and pleased to discover he had actually kept a problem small. The class was also surprised to hear him share such an effort which was unexpected given his problem reputation.

Brain Power #2 Double Vision

Double vision is about simultaneously considering the blatant expression of a person (the “visible”) and the unseen contextual factors which may influence their behavior (the “invisibles”). Children are remarkably drawn to the concept of “Invisibles”. In fact, given their extensive imagination, children are always able to come up with either a realistic understanding (such as “my mom is probably stressed” or “I know my friend is probably starving right now”), or a rather creative understandings (such as, “I wonder if he slipped on a banana peel on the way to school”, or “maybe his goldfish died and no-one knows”). Whichever “Invisible” they resourcefully imagine, it generally has the impact of broadening their focus from narrowly perceiving others as being intentionally “mean”, to an understanding that “something which I can’t see is probably influencing this person’s behaviors negatively”. Such understanding also explicitly correlates with the effect Anger typically has on people and gets them to assume hurtful intentions, which in turn justifies retaliation.



When Steven was exposed to the idea of Double Vision, he immediately thought of his dad's frequent anger outbursts. Steven knew his dad was becoming increasingly anxious about having lost his job a few months earlier and had been rather impatient with the entire family since then. Steven started making efforts to not "talk back" when his Dad yelled at him, and refrained from shouting that he "hated him". The idea of holding on to Invisibles when his dad was under the influence of Anger, helped him feel less hurt by the demeaning words occasionally spoken, and move on more quickly to doing his homework. The problem became a contextual understanding rather than representing a relational or personal failure.

Brain Power #3 Anchoring

Anchoring is by far the more complex to discern as it encourages students to think about their identity, something not often facilitated in modern times. Yet, when children progressively start recognizing who they prefer to be in the world, and how they wish to be perceived, the concept fuels their intentional decision making process and allows them to proactively resist internal hurtful impulses and external peer pressure.

For Steven, the idea of anchoring in a preferred self did not come readily at first. He needed help in thinking through and examining certain moments he was rather pleased with his response.

Through supportive questioning, he eventually recognized he liked to be patient, just like his mother. Having identified that increased his commitment to relate to others in this way and increased classmates' awareness of when Steven actually did that. Some classmates even started thanking Steven for having been patient when, for example, they inadvertently bumped into him.

Brain Power #4 Foresight

Foresight is the ability to read the future. It is easily understood and much more compelling than adults' lectures about "thinking of the consequences". Children are much more proud to discover in themselves the power to successfully read the future, rather than having thought of the consequences. When Steven was exposed to the idea of Foresight, he thought of his frequent impulse to push



another student in his class whom he intensely disliked. This student was much smaller than him in height, and very talkative. Steven had done it only once, under the impulse of intense annoyance, and had pushed him in the trash can, which led to big consequences. Since then, he had been tempted to get revenge but had never done it. At first, Steven was not entirely sure why he hadn't done it, but after talking about it, he realized it had something to do with thinking about the potential trouble. This realization, that he did think about consequences and used brain power #4, led to Steven experiencing pride at controlling this impulse to hurt rather than cultivating the annoyance associated with this other student. Annoying moments came to represent moments of capabilities about Steven rather than a problematic totalization of the other student as annoying. It shifted the relational and emotional focus.

Back to the cafeteria line and the effect of the project

So when Steven, fuming with rage, saw a student cut in the cafeteria line, he remembered that this student had been benched during recess and had probably not eaten his snack. Considering the “Invisibles” of this student helped him remain anchored in patience and allowed him to make a conscious choice of proceeding with the unfolding of his own day without letting others' actions change the direction of his lunch and the kind of person he preferred to be.

Spreading of the project

The concept of “Invisibles” turned out to be so popular with students and educators, that a number of principals started using it when doing conflict mediation on the playground. It facilitated the experiences of compassion. Many educators who believed that children like Steven did not experience empathy, revised their understandings and started circulating stories of children's efforts in the staff lunchroom, rather than accounts of their mistakes.

The cumulative effect of large cohorts of children becoming well versed in their own unique ways of using their Brain Powers represented, in many schools, a shift in gaze from problem saturated reactivity and gossiping, to an "effort-acknowledging" community. Creating a context where a community becomes an audience to children's preferred selves is in line with other narrative practices such as More to Me report cards (Kaldor, 2020).



Over the years, this project, which was initially facilitated in two schools, became requested in five, then seven, nine, and now beyond. Supported by a Shine A Light (SAL) narrative therapy grant in 2014, a group of researchers blind coded over 813 stories from 353 children, before and after the project, over two years with different cohorts, in different schools, and compared to a control groups of classrooms not receiving the project. The results were beyond anything expected (Beaudoin, Moersch, & Schnare, 2016). We knew from students' feedback and teachers' gratefulness that these ideas profoundly transformed classrooms into communities where children were more patient with each other (they knew everyone made efforts), helped each other resolve issues (they had concrete questions to ask and strategies to use), were more focused on learning (they were less distracted by upset feelings), and importantly, became more compassionate (they were more patient with each other and noticed a different side of ostracized children).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to detail all the activities for this project and the empirical study demonstrating its effectiveness, two of the findings will be shared. First, their social awareness, as defined by empathy and consideration of others' "Invisible", was ...eight times greater than that of the control group as illustrated in figure 1. Second, children's written accounts of resolving social disagreements in their personal lives and using specific strategies to avert conflicts dramatically shifted as represented in figure 2. The empirical study and the statistician's analysis quantified what everyone was noticing. The practice of exploring children's preferred experiences of themselves and increasing their awareness of their own unique skills can be immensely transformative.

Moreover, children reported trusting themselves more in conflictual situations (89.57%) and feeling more capable of solving problems (85.35%). In more recent years, the Brain Powers project was expanded to include a fifth power: Mindfulness. While mindfulness training provides a remarkable opportunity for students to develop inner calm, patience, and compassion, it was evident from our work in schools that the children who most needed to learn it were the least likely to engage in the traditional exercises. After much research on curiosity, we developed a collection of intrigue-based mindfulness exercises, which involve a mystery. This collection of exercises has allowed countless children of all ages to discover stillness and calm in themselves, which they can access at will. It has



enhanced their ability to navigate various upsetting experiences, take a pause before acting, and choose to respond to upsetting events in a more compassionate way.

This is consistent with other practitioners' experiences of incorporating mindfulness in narrative practices (Marlowe, 2017; Percy, 2008). Experiences of mindfulness allow people of all ages to reclaim their attentional choice in the face of problems, which otherwise capture and dominate their mindset (Percy & Pare, 2022). When children experience choice, have articulated their preferred selves, and can trust their abilities and strategies to handle conflicts, they are in a better position to act kindly.

Schools provide immense audiences to children's behaviors and reputations, so any work that can shift the community into a more compassionate stance is likely to have life-changing rippling effects on its members (Dickerson, 1998; Friedman, 1995). The voice of students acknowledging this shift became further heard when a film-maker became interested in these projects and created a video of their feedback, which can now be seen on Youtube.

In conclusion, young people can become remarkably compassionate, when given an opportunity to articulate preferred versions of themselves and their genuine relational efforts in appreciative school environments.

And the world can surely benefit from more compassion right now...

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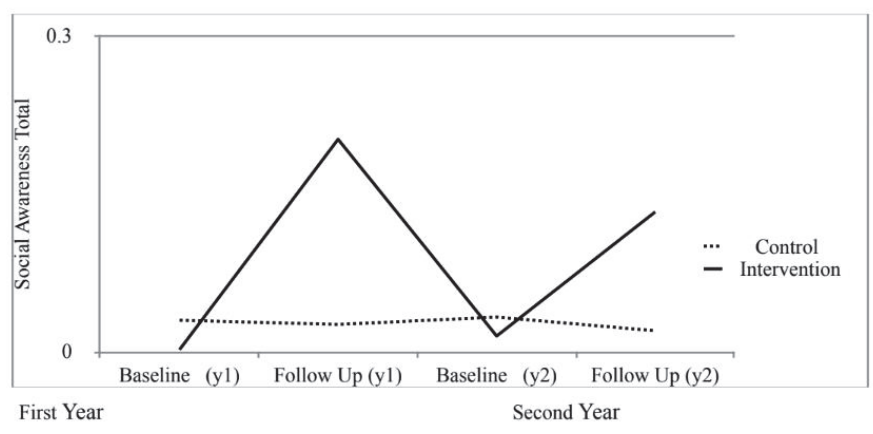


FIGURE 1. Pre and Post Changes in Social Awareness (reprinted with permission from Journal of Systemic Therapies).

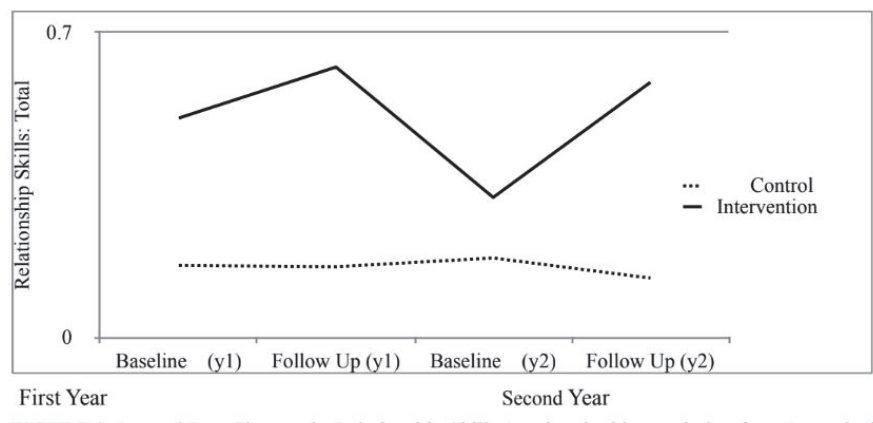


FIGURE 2. Pre and Post Changes in Relationship Skills (reprinted with permission from Journal of Systemic Therapies).