



# Studying the teaching of kindness: A conceptual model for evaluating kindness education programs in schools



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## ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that school-based kindness education programs may benefit the learning and social-emotional development of youth and may improve school climate and school safety outcomes. However, how and to what extent kindness education programming influences positive outcomes in schools is poorly understood, and such programs are difficult to evaluate in the absence of a conceptual model for studying their effectiveness. In partnership with Kind Campus, a widely adopted school-based kindness education program that uses a bottom-up program framework, a methodology called concept mapping was used to develop a conceptual model for evaluating school-based kindness education programs from the input of 123 middle school students and approximately 150 educators, school professionals, and academic scholars. From the basis of this model, recommendations for processes and outcomes that would be useful to assess in evaluations of kindness education programs are made, and areas where additional instrument development may be necessary are highlighted. The utility of the concept mapping method as an initial step in evaluating other grassroots or non-traditional educational programming is also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Strong social-emotional skills and a positive school climate are widely regarded as important ingredients for students' academic success. Research has found that programming that aims to develop students' social-emotional skills positively influences a range of academic, health and social outcomes. Social-emotional skills are broadly defined as the skillset which enables one to regulate emotions, have positive relationships, and engage in effective goal-setting (for reviews, see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Tough, 2013). Relatedly, school climate, defined as "the quality and character of school life" (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009), is also known to have a measurable impact on the academic success and wellbeing of students. Past research has demonstrated that positive school climate is associated with positive emotional and mental health outcomes, increased self-esteem and self-concept, increased motivation to learn, decreased bullying and violence, decreased student absenteeism, and also mitigates

the impact of socioeconomic risk on academic performance (for a review, see Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Moreover, improving the social environment of a school has been identified as one of the top strategies for preventing and intervening in school safety concerns such as bullying and peer aggression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

In the context of this research, there is growing momentum for the idea that kindness is a valuable social-emotional skill and component of school climate that should be explicitly taught in schools. A number of school-based programs focusing specifically on "kindness education" have been developed to meet this demand, such as the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation Kindness in the Classroom Program (The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, 2015); the Center for Investigating Healthy Mind's mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015); Think Kindness (Think Kindness, 2015); and the Ben's Bells Kind Campus Program (Ben's Bells Project, 2015). School-based kindness education is a burgeoning – and consequently loosely defined – category of programming, but typical components among programs include dedicated time for exploring what kindness is and why it is important, mindfulness or self-awareness exercises, gratitude reflections and exercises, and a programmatic structure for acknowledging and performing acts

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of kindness at the student, classroom, school and/or community level.

Preliminary research about the mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum, a program for preschool children based largely in secular mindfulness instruction, found that the program had positive effects on social competence, social-emotional development, cognitive flexibility and delay of gratification (Flook et al., 2015). Beyond this study, very little research has focused on school-based kindness education programs, and other existing programs have not been systematically evaluated. There is a paucity of research focusing on kindness interventions in youth even beyond the school setting, although developmental literature suggests that compassion and mindfulness training in adolescence may promote pro-social behavior, empathy, perspective taking, compassionate evaluations of self and other, and enhance self-regulation and emotional awareness (Roeser & Pinela, 2014). Separately, research on a gratitude intervention for adolescents found that gratitude practice had positive immediate and longer-term effects, and was related to optimism, wellbeing, life satisfaction, and school experience satisfaction (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Recent research on one Positive Psychology Intervention (PPI) designed for middle school students that included gratitude and kindness as part of the intervention also found that the curriculum increased life satisfaction among participants (Suldo, Savage, & Mercer, 2014).

Relatedly, previous studies in adult populations demonstrated that performing intentional acts of kindness and recognizing kindness in others has positive mental health outcomes, including reducing depressive symptoms and increasing subjective happiness and life satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Post, 2005). Compassion cultivation practices have been associated with decreased stress response and negative affect, as well as increased positive affect, feelings of social connectedness, and increases in personal resources such as physical health, sense of purpose in life, self-acceptance, mindfulness, and positive relations with others (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011; Pace et al., 2009). Compassion is defined as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010, p. 352). Therefore, although compassion is a related construct, compassion-based interventions may be distinct from kindness-based interventions (which typically aim to increase kind, pro-social behaviors even in the absence of witnessing suffering).

In sum, the limited existing research suggests that kindness education programs may improve student social-emotional skills and the overall social environment of schools, thereby having positive impacts on students’ wellbeing, achievement, and success. Kindness education has emerged as a promising but under-evaluated area of school-based programming.

### 1.1. Kind Campus and the present study

Kind Campus is a widely adopted kindness education program currently reaching more than 200,000 students in over 300 schools in the United States. The program was developed by Ben’s Bells, a non-profit organization headquartered in Tucson, Arizona. The goal of Kind Campus is to educate entire school communities (students, families, faculty, and staff) about the positive impacts of kindness and empower them to cultivate a culture of kindness in their schools and beyond. The program is based on four tenets: the Kind Mind (becoming aware of the nature of mental experience), Self-Kindness (becoming self-aware and practicing self-compassion), Social-Kindness (understanding interdependency and cultivating empathy), and Kindness in Action (putting kindness

in action to benefit others). Program materials are provided to participating schools at no cost and include age-appropriate classroom activities, school-wide activities, take-home activities, and exercises for school faculty and staff. These materials are distributed to participating schools on a monthly basis, and each month addresses a different theme related to kindness. In the context of other kindness education school programs, a unique feature of Kind Campus is its inclusivity of the adults on school campuses. This stems from the organization’s philosophy that the working environment perceived and created by adults is an important component of overall school climate and social learning.

Kind Campus uses a bottom-up, non-traditional program framework. In contrast to more traditional school-based programs that proscribe a set curriculum, Kind Campus invites schools to adapt the program to meet the unique needs of their individual school environment. Schools are encouraged to incorporate activities and materials into existing school and classroom routines, such that they become a “way of life” for the campus community. This type of grassroots, bottom-up approach is known to be valuable in helping to assure that programs can fit the complexities and needs of diverse schools (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005).

Evaluating Kind Campus presents two key design challenges. First, the grassroots nature of Kind Campus leads to both dosage and practical differences in how participating schools are implementing the program. An evaluation of a grassroots program like Kind Campus therefore also entails consideration of how the teaching and practice of kindness naturally unfolds from the bottom-up in diverse school types and demographics. Second, as little research has been done in the area of school-based kindness education, the field presently lacks a conceptual framework for this type of programming. It is unclear how the construct of kindness concretely manifests at the classroom and school levels or across the developmental trajectory. What outcomes could kindness education programming reasonably be expected to change, and through what mechanisms? How can these outcomes and mechanisms be meaningfully measured? Establishing a conceptual model for kindness education is crucial to designing evaluations that can answer questions such as to what extent these programs are effective, where and under what conditions they work best, which program components are most effective, and the degree to which dosage matters in program implementation.

In light of the growing number of both grassroots and more traditional kindness education programs and the rising number of schools that have adopted them, rigorous evaluations of such programming are important for helping schools allocate their limited resources towards empirically-based efforts that are known to keep students safe and help them thrive. In partnership with Ben’s Bells and Kind Campus schools, the present study used a community-based participatory research method called concept mapping to develop a conceptual model for researching and evaluating kindness education programming in schools.

## 2. Method

With the goal of developing a conceptual model for evaluating school-based kindness education programs, a mixed method, community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to construct conceptualization called concept mapping was selected for this project. Previous reviews have noted the substantive benefits of CBPR methods in intervention, health and community research: minimization of the gap between research and translation in program implementation, buy-in and trust that enhances data quality, and an authentic framework for developing and testing culturally appropriate instruments (Viswanathan et al., 2004; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

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