

## LOVE AND COMPASSION CHALLENGE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED ASSUMPTIONS

Several months ago, co-author Patricia Guerra was walking her dogs when she came upon a woman who lives nearby. Walking alone, the woman asked if she could join Guerra on her walk. As they walked, the woman explained that she had just started volunteering as a teacher assistant at the neighborhood elementary school. She was excited about no longer being a stay-at-home mom and shared experiences from her first week on the job. In the middle of a story, she suddenly stopped, became very serious, and said, “You know, when my kids attended this school a few years ago, it was a different place. The parents attended PTO meetings, volunteered in classrooms, and helped with homework. Today, some of these parents just don’t care about their kids.”

Having heard comments like this before, Guerra suspected the woman was not talking about the white middle-class parents who had lived in the community for years, but rather families of diverse backgrounds who had more recently moved into the neighborhood. Guerra considered challenging her neighbor’s deficit thinking, but to what end? Direct confrontation would likely end in alienation. What would this accomplish? Yet ignoring the comments would send the message that Guerra agreed with her. Rather than reacting from a place of anger, switching subjects, or even walking away, Guerra listened. She asked the woman to say more so Guerra could better understand her position. As the woman spoke, she expressed concern for the welfare of the students she was serving. However, she lacked cultural knowledge to understand what she observed in the classroom. Viewing parent involvement through her lens, the woman determined certain parents at the school don’t care about their kids because they do not attend PTO meetings, volunteer in the office, or work in classrooms. She judged this group of parents because they did not meet her expectations for involvement.

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After talking for about 15 minutes, the woman stopped and asked Guerra what she thought of the situation. That day, Guerra’s usual 30-minute walk turned into an hour-long journey. As they walked and talked, Guerra “disrupted” the woman’s thinking with questions and alternate explanations of what might be occurring at the school. The woman listened intently. Guerra did not transform the woman’s deficit thinking that day, but the encounter led to several more conversations over the course of the summer. Once school started and their schedules changed, Guerra didn’t see the woman again until one Saturday morning in early fall. While driving down the street, the woman saw Guerra walking her dogs and pulled over, saying, “I hope you don’t mind, but I gave the principal your name. She really needs to hear what you have to say.”

What made conversations with her neighbor so effective? The answer lies in the approach. Some assert deficit comments must be met with direct force. The story of Guerra and her neighbor illustrates there is another way. Love and compassion are powerful tools in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions.

Love in this context is not romantic. Love that is the foundation for transformative dialogue (Freire, 1970) is “rooted in recognition and acceptance ... [and] combines acknowledgement, care, responsibility, commitment, and knowledge” (hooks, 2000, p. 104). This kind of love, which demonstrates concern for another, is central to helping teachers develop cultural proficiency. What does it mean to engage in loving and compassionate conversations with teachers?

### 1. Assume everyone is well-intentioned and express this belief.

In other words, do not transfer the target of deficit thinking from parents and students to teachers. Just as we believe all parents care about their children and value education, we believe teachers truly want to make a difference with all children but may lack the cultural knowledge and skills to do so. Believing individuals are well-intentioned paves the way for a sustained conversation, which is necessary to change beliefs.



In each issue of *JSD*, Patricia L. Guerra, above, and Sarah W. Nelson write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).



## 2. Communicate your intentions.

Just as you believe teachers are well-intentioned, remind them that you are, too. Clarify that the purpose of these conversations is to increase cultural understanding to better serve all students and families and not to produce feelings of guilt. Explain that at times they may feel uncomfortable, but it is a natural part of the process.

## 3. Regardless of what is said, put personal feelings aside and resist the temptation to judge teachers.

What you believe about teachers influences your interactions and behaviors. Like students and parents, teachers sense when they are being judged and act accordingly.

## 4. When others express deficit thinking, respond out of love and compassion rather than anger.

For example, if you have concerns about a teacher's behavior, sit down with the teacher and share your perspective rather than make accusations. Allow the teacher to address the issue. Teachers are more receptive to messages, even unpleasant ones, if they believe you respect and care about them and have their best interests in mind. Challenging in an angry, confrontational manner shows neither respect nor care and will only serve to shut down communication.

## 5. Even when you disagree, allow teachers to voice their assumptions and beliefs.

Respectfully listen and acknowledge their views. Do not allow others to openly attack or belittle a teacher. The point of these conversations is to surface and deconstruct deficit thinking. That will not happen without a safe environment in which all participants know that risk taking is valued and they can explore a difference of opinions without humiliation.

## 6. Disturb teachers' thinking with questions that challenge their assumptions and require them to consider alternate explanations.

Modeling this behavior will encourage others to use the same approach.

Although we have found that this approach, used consistently, is highly effective in transforming teacher beliefs, it is not infallible. What happens when loving and compassionate conversations do not lead to change in a teacher's thinking? Such teachers must be counseled out of the field. Teachers with deficit beliefs do serious damage to students and families and should not be allowed to work with children. But even the kind of pointed conversations it takes to remove a teacher are most effective when conducted with love and compassion. Let us give you an example from one of our graduate students who used this approach even in

the most challenging circumstances.

Jason, who is Latino, was standing in a movie ticket line when the man behind him loudly stated, "This looks like a welfare line." Initially, Jason ignored the man. The man began making more pointed, blatantly racist remarks, trying to provoke a physical confrontation. Instead of reacting in anger, Jason turned to the stranger. The man continued his rant. Jason noticed the man was wearing a cap with a university logo on it. Jason asked him about it and discovered they both graduated from the same university. This did nothing to deter the man, who persisted with disparaging comments. Jason was wounded by the remarks and suspected others around him were, too, but he knew this type of thinking could not be fought with anger, which does little to change deep-seated beliefs and can escalate to violence. Instead, Jason chose to fight with love and compassion. Jason calmly attempted to disturb the man's thinking through probing questions. After several minutes they reached the ticket booth. Jason turned and thanked the man for sharing his thoughts, saying most people are not willing to be so open. Dumbfounded by this unexpected response, the stranger hung his head and turned away.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (2001) once wrote:

"If you think that compassion is passive, weak, or cowardly, then you don't know what real compassion or understanding is. If you think that compassionate people do not resist and challenge injustice, you are wrong. They are warriors, heroes, and heroines who have gained many victories. When you act with compassion, with nonviolence ... you have to be very strong. You no longer act out of anger, you do not punish or blame. Compassion grows constantly inside of you, and you can succeed in your fight against injustice. Mahatma Gandhi was just one person. He did not have any bombs, any guns, or any political party. He acted simply on the ... strength of compassion, not on the basis of anger" (p. 128).

Jason knew a simple act of love and compassion would have more power than the strongest punch and would make a lasting impact on this stranger. When working with teachers who are well-intentioned, and even those who have proven they are not, this is the source from which we need to act.

## REFERENCES

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