

Chapter 1 – Why Compassion matters



“Compassion Is Not Soft: It Is Strong Enough to Change Lives”

Story 1: The Compassionate Teacher Who Inspired My Compassionate Teaching Journey

Long before I ever stood at the front of a university classroom as a professor, there was Mrs. Kaeu, the teacher who first showed me, through the beauty of her daily example, that compassion and excellence could live happily together in the very same classroom, strengthening rather than competing with one another. She taught me mathematics and music from Grade One through Grade Seven, which meant that she watched me grow from a little girl who loved school into a slightly taller little girl who loved school even more and had already decided, with the complete confidence of childhood, that becoming a teacher sounded like the best job in the entire world.

Mrs. Kaeu was simply unforgettable, for she was elegant, enthusiastic, hardworking, and wonderfully alive, and every morning she entered the classroom looking as though she genuinely wanted to be there, which, when one pauses to think about it, is one of the greatest gifts a teacher can offer students. She dressed beautifully, smiled generously, expected excellence, and somehow managed to make mathematics and music belong together so naturally that even fractions seemed capable of singing; to this day, I still have not figured out how anyone could make numbers and melodies equally exciting, but Mrs. Kaeu certainly did.

As a little girl, I wanted to be just like her, and whenever I was not in school, I played school, because while many little girls enjoyed playing house, I preferred arranging a classroom of my own and stepping into the role of teacher with great seriousness. My classroom, however, had one small problem: it did not have many students; in fact, it had almost none, and so, like any resourceful educator faced with an enrollment crisis, I improvised.

I gathered little sticks from outside, lined them up very neatly on the ground, and declared them to be my class, and those poor, patient sticks received some of the finest teaching in Kenya as I enthusiastically mimicked everything I had seen Mrs. Kaeu do. Looking back, I can confidently say that they were among the most well-behaved students I have ever taught, because they never whispered during class, never forgot their homework, and, to the best of my knowledge, never complained about surprise quizzes.

Every now and then, my one and only little sister would join the class, and I was absolutely thrilled to have at least one student who could answer back, although she may not always have shared my enthusiasm for the lesson plan. Those pretend-teacher playtimes were some of the happiest moments of my childhood, because I copied everything Mrs. Kaeu did: I tried to stand like her, explain lessons like her, encourage my “students” like her, and even imagined myself walking around the classroom with the same confidence and grace she carried so naturally. Looking back

now, I realize that compassionate teachers do something truly remarkable, because they teach far more than a subject; they awaken imagination, stir possibility, and quietly plant dreams in children that may not bloom until many years later.

Mrs. Kaeu also taught me to love music, and oh, how we sang, not timidly or halfheartedly, but with our whole hearts, as though every song deserved to rise all the way to the sky. Music filled our classroom with joy, and somehow every lesson seemed brighter because of it, so I became so enthusiastic that I began creating songs at home from almost anything I could find, including newspaper advertisements. If a grocery store advertised cooking oil or soap, there was a very good chance that I would turn the advertisement into a song before the day was over, and I would proudly teach my little sister my newest “masterpiece,” some of which she still remembers to this day, much to the surprise of the advertising companies that surely never imagined their marketing campaigns becoming part of our family choir.

My little sister must have caught the teaching spirit too, because she later grew into an excellent and compassionate professor and was eventually promoted to lead Student Success at her university, which suggests that all those compulsory childhood lessons may have produced a better return than either of us realized at the time.

One song Mrs. Kaeu taught us included the words “Cuckoo, cuckoo,” and we sang it with such enthusiasm and such beautiful harmony that even the boys, especially my older brother, would stop whatever they were doing and stare in amazement at all the joyful cooing. If singing can persuade energetic boys to pause their adventures, even briefly, then the teacher responsible deserves a very special award, because few classroom accomplishments are more impressive than bringing mischief to a temporary standstill through music.

Behind all those joyful memories, however, was something much deeper than good teaching technique, because Mrs. Kaeu created a classroom in which every child mattered, excellence was expected, and kindness was never treated as an optional extra. She corrected without crushing confidence, encouraged without lowering standards, celebrated effort while inspiring us to keep growing, and long before educational researchers began speaking about belonging, psychological safety, and compassionate teaching, she was quietly living those principles every single day.

Then life unexpectedly became very difficult, because when I was in third grade, my older sister died in a tragic road accident, and although I was only a child, grief walked into the classroom with me every morning. Mrs. Kaeu did not make a public announcement about my loss, nor did she behave as though nothing had happened; instead, she simply noticed me, offered quiet kindness and gentle encouragement, and made sure that I still felt seen. She stood beside me without lowering her expectations, and through her actions she taught me that compassion and excellence are not opponents competing for space in a classroom, but faithful companions that become even more powerful when they walk together.

Many years have passed since those days in Mrs. Kaeu’s classroom, and I have now spent more than two decades teaching university students, mentoring faculty, speaking at conferences, and

encouraging educators to build compassionate classrooms, yet whenever people ask me where it all began, my mind returns to one classroom, one remarkable teacher, and one little girl teaching sticks under the African sun.

*Then, many years later, something extraordinary happened, because on August 1, 2026, I had just finished revising this story and believed it was finally ready for *The Compassionate Classroom and Workplace*. As I closed my computer and opened Facebook, the very first post that appeared was from Mrs. Kaeu herself, who was completely unaware that I had just written about her. There she was, smiling, while the song "God Is Still Writing My Story" by Elev8 played in the background, and as I listened to the lyrics, quietly said a little prayer, and paused in amazement, I felt in my heart that it was a gentle confirmation that Mrs. Kaeu's story needed to be shared.*

I immediately sent her a message and wrote, "Yes, God is still writing your story. More than forty years ago, you impacted my life, and today I have been writing about you in a new book. Thank you for impacting lives through your teaching."

What a beautiful reminder that the influence of a compassionate teacher never truly ends, because long after students leave the classroom, the seeds of kindness, encouragement, imagination, and excellence continue to grow in ways teachers may never fully realize. Somewhere today there may be another little girl teaching sticks, stuffed animals, dolls, or imaginary students because one compassionate teacher helped her believe that teaching was far more than a profession; it was a calling, and that is why I believe compassion is not soft, but strong enough to change lives.

Why Compassion Matters

Compassion has often been misunderstood as a soft virtue reserved for moments of crisis or reserved only for people in helping professions, yet I have come to believe through decades of teaching, leadership, and working alongside students and colleagues that compassion is one of the strongest and most transformative forces available to educators, administrators, and organizational leaders. It is not merely an emotional response to another person's suffering, nor is it synonymous with sympathy, kindness, or lowering expectations. Rather, compassion is the intentional choice to recognize humanity in another person, to acknowledge that every individual carries visible and invisible burdens, and to respond in ways that promote dignity, hope, growth, and flourishing.

In an educational setting, compassion is expressed when an instructor intentionally creates an environment where students know they are valued beyond their grades, where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning rather than occasions for shame, and where every interaction communicates the message, "You belong here, and your presence matters." In the workplace, compassion is demonstrated when leaders recognize that employees are not simply human resources to be managed but human beings with aspirations, challenges,

families, disappointments, and dreams, each deserving of respect, encouragement, and opportunities to thrive.

The need for compassion has perhaps never been greater than it is today. We live in an age of extraordinary technological advancement where communication is instantaneous, information is limitless, and people are more digitally connected than at any other point in history. Ironically, while technology has enabled us to communicate across continents in seconds, many people have become increasingly disconnected from the individuals sitting beside them in classrooms, offices, boardrooms, churches, and even around dinner tables. College campuses across the world are reporting increasing concerns related to anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, and loneliness, while workplaces continue to grapple with employee disengagement, emotional exhaustion, and declining morale. These realities remind us that although people may possess remarkable technological tools, they still long for the timeless human need to be seen, heard, valued, and loved.

My own work on compassionate classrooms has emphasized that learning is fundamentally relational and that students learn best when they feel psychologically safe, genuinely supported, and accepted as valued members of a learning community rather than anonymous occupants of classroom seats. Compassion, therefore, is not an optional addition to education; it is one of the essential conditions that enables meaningful learning and human flourishing.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned during my years as a university professor is that every student who walks through the classroom door is carrying a story that I may never fully know. One student may have spent the previous night studying until three o'clock in the morning after completing a late work shift to pay tuition. Another may have quietly received devastating family news before coming to class. Another may be celebrating the first A they have ever earned, while another may be questioning whether they belong in college at all. Some students appear confident but secretly battle anxiety every day. Others sit quietly in the back of the room because previous educational experiences convinced them that their opinions do not matter. The remarkable truth is that these stories are usually invisible. Attendance sheets reveal names but not struggles. Grade books record scores but not courage. Class rosters identify majors but not dreams. Compassion begins when we recognize that every individual we encounter possesses a rich and often hidden story that deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

This realization transformed my philosophy of teaching. Early in my career I focused primarily on helping students master content, develop professional competencies, and achieve measurable learning outcomes. Those objectives remain critically important, and I continue to believe that academic excellence should never be compromised. However, over time I discovered that learning becomes significantly more meaningful when students first

experience belonging. Before students are willing to participate in discussions, take intellectual risks, present their ideas before classmates, or collaborate effectively in groups, they must first believe that they are entering a space where they will be respected rather than ridiculed, encouraged rather than ignored, and challenged because someone believes in their potential rather than because someone wishes to expose their weaknesses.

Compassion, therefore, does not replace rigor; it provides the emotional foundation upon which rigor can flourish. Students are often capable of achieving far more than they initially imagine, but they are most willing to stretch themselves when they know someone genuinely believes they can succeed.

One misconception that deserves careful attention is the belief that compassion lowers standards or excuses poor performance. Throughout my career I have discovered precisely the opposite. Compassion and excellence are not opposing forces competing against one another; they are complementary partners that produce deeper learning and stronger communities. A compassionate teacher still establishes high expectations, meaningful assignments, and clear accountability, but those expectations are accompanied by encouragement, constructive feedback, and authentic care for each student's growth. Likewise, compassionate leaders in organizations continue to pursue excellence, productivity, and innovation, yet they recognize that sustainable excellence emerges when people feel trusted, appreciated, and empowered rather than constantly criticized or overlooked. High expectations without compassion often produce fear, while compassion without expectations may fail to inspire growth. Together, compassion and accountability create environments where individuals are motivated to pursue excellence because they know they are supported throughout the journey.

One of the most significant insights I have learned in my compassionate teaching journey is that compassion should never be treated as something that is merely "added on" after problems arise. Instead, compassion should be intentionally designed into the structure of the classroom from the very beginning through thoughtful course design, collaborative learning experiences, reflective activities, policies that promote belonging, and everyday interactions that communicate respect and care. When compassion is designed into a course, students are less likely to experience isolation because opportunities for connection, reflection, encouragement, and mutual support have already been woven into the educational experience. Such intentional practices move compassion from being an occasional response to becoming an enduring culture that shapes the identity of the classroom itself.

I have also become convinced that compassion extends beyond relationships between teachers and students; it must also characterize relationships among students themselves. One of the simplest yet most effective strategies I have implemented has been intentionally

forming study clusters during the first days of class, encouraging students to choose meaningful group names, learn one another's stories, check on classmates who are absent, celebrate one another's successes, and collaborate throughout the semester. What initially appears to be a simple icebreaker gradually develops into a community where friendships are formed, loneliness is reduced, and learning becomes a shared rather than solitary experience. Students who might never have spoken to one another discover common interests, celebrate each other's achievements, and provide encouragement during difficult seasons. These seemingly ordinary interactions often become the moments students remember long after specific lectures or examinations have faded from memory because they experienced something every human being longs for – a genuine sense of belonging.

The principles that shape compassionate classrooms are equally essential within workplaces and organizations. Employees flourish when supervisors know their names, recognize their contributions, encourage professional growth, and create psychologically safe environments where questions are welcomed, mistakes become opportunities for learning, and diverse perspectives are genuinely valued. Compassionate workplaces acknowledge that organizational success is inseparable from employee well-being because people who feel seen and supported are more likely to demonstrate creativity, collaboration, resilience, and commitment. Conversely, workplaces characterized by fear, indifference, or constant criticism often experience declining morale, increased turnover, emotional exhaustion, and diminished innovation. Organizations frequently invest significant financial resources in strategic planning, technological infrastructure, and productivity initiatives, yet some overlook one of the most powerful investments available: cultivating a culture where people genuinely care for one another.

Ultimately, compassion matters because it reminds us that education and leadership have never been solely about transmitting information, completing projects, or achieving organizational goals. At their deepest level, they are about shaping lives, nurturing hope, building meaningful relationships, and creating communities where people discover both purpose and belonging. Knowledge may inform the mind, but compassion transforms the heart. Skills may prepare individuals for careers, but compassion prepares them to become leaders who elevate others. In a world increasingly marked by loneliness, division, anxiety, and uncertainty, compassion offers something profoundly countercultural: the assurance that every person possesses inherent worth and that every interaction provides an opportunity to affirm another person's dignity. When compassion becomes the foundation upon which classrooms and workplaces are intentionally built, people do more than achieve success - they flourish, together. Yes, compassion Is Not Soft: It Is Strong Enough to Change Lives.