

Nurturing Kindness in School

(Original)

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“For you, Miss Emily!” It was a sweet, hand-drawn card with a lovely message inside. My student beamed as I thanked her, signed her worksheet and noted that she had nine more tasks to complete in order to claim the prize for the first 200 pupils to finish the 16 acts of kindness listed. This hands-on activity was part of a National Kindness Week project that I initiated in April, at the secondary school where I teach. In March, I had submitted a proposal to a local media company and received a cash grant to execute the project.

The impact was immediately noticeable. I received testimonies from colleagues whose stressful days were brightened by pupils’ thoughtful messages, whilst pupils excitedly shared about the new friends they have made through the activities. There were even anecdotes about school custodians cheekily withholding signatures unless pupils spoke to them in English, a language that many are struggling with. From these and other observations, I am convinced that any definition of kindness should be grounded in the afterglow it leaves recipients and the subsequent goodness it reaps.

However, as my pupil skipped happily away, I could not help but wonder if she would have made me a card on her own accord without the incentive of a prize. I also pondered if the other pupils could have independently ideated and executed ways to show kindness to the cleaners, guards, neighbours and even the environment, without being prompted by an activity. Clearly, running the National Kindness Week project has not only been fruitful and fun; it has also inspired me to reflect on the barriers we face in becoming a kinder society and how we might be able to overcome them.

On one hand, I understand that a rewards-based approach may create an artifice of kindness, thereby cheapening its intrinsic value to both the performer and recipient of a kind act. In our project, all pupils wrote reflective essays to accompany the ‘16 Acts of Kindness Challenge’. I strongly believe that it is important to help our youth make powerful connections between their kind deeds and the positive feelings that they experience as a result of connecting with others and creating a sense of belonging.

From the honest reflections written by pupils, I gleaned valuable insights into what was holding teenagers back from being kind. Many noted that they felt self-conscious about doing kind things when their friends were around because they were scared of being judged, labelled an attention-seeker or worse: ostracised. However, when the whole school participated in the National Kindness Week activities, pupils wrote that they felt more motivated and less afraid of being kind because everyone was doing it together. It was scarily interesting to realise how closely these insights aligned to game theory and how our youth, upon reaching adulthood, could still be making these decisions based on risk calculations.

Perhaps a solution to create a kinder society lies in reducing the risks and increasing the rewards for people who act kindly in situations where outcomes are unknown. However, are carrot-and-stick measures enough to guarantee that cheaters won't exist in the system and that ordinary folk would not react in a tit-for-tat manner?

My reflection after the project ended has led to a strong conviction that extrinsic consequences must be coupled with intrinsic motivation. The latter is characterized by a strong sense of personal enjoyment and satisfaction from doing something. I am convinced that when our youth and citizens have a deep and highly personal purpose to act kindly, they would automatically and authentically do so regardless of circumstance and external influence.

From an education viewpoint, instilling values and intrinsic motivation requires social-emotional learning which is currently a huge need in Malaysian schools. Organizing the National Kindness Week project was my first foray into this area and after my two-year Teach For Malaysia Fellowship ends this December, I am keen to undertake further studies in education policy to explore measures which can be implemented in the education system to support this. It is my sincere hope that every young person in the world can discover – and act upon – their intrinsic impetus to light up the world with kindness.