

Ethical Award 2021
Winning Initiative
Dulwich College, Singapore

Overview of the school:

Dulwich College (Singapore) is a K-12 co-educational day school founded in 2014. We aspire to be one of the leading international schools in the world so that our students can make a positive difference by Graduating Worldwide. We do this by placing our students first and at the centre of the learning process. We believe that learning should be a meaningful experience where students enjoy making connections between new and existing knowledge and skills and conceptual understandings. Our programme is designed so that students are engaged and challenged and are able to reflect independently and collaboratively on their progress.

Summary of initiative:

At Dulwich College (Singapore) we are working to transform our support of student and staff well-being. One aspect of work in this area is our implementation of the “Compassionate Systems Framework” an approach to teaching and learning which looks to support the well-being and mental health of students as well as giving them deep thinking skills which will serve them well into their adult lives. The Compassionate Systems Framework is an educational reform project led by researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T) in Boston and our Assistant Head of College Jacob Martin. The Compassionate Systems Framework offers one approach to this aspect of a Worldwide education.

The framework combines two key components: the first, a series of systems thinking tools that can be used in any curriculum context to help students to understand the deep interconnectedness of the complex issues we discuss in the classrooms. These tools also structure their learning and encourage a conceptual understanding of the issue being studied, they are used in particular to explore complex issues like the UNSDGs which are the focus of many areas of our curriculum. The second component is a set of practices and approaches which work to develop emotional literacy with the students. Students gain a deep understanding of some of the World’s most challenging issues, at the same time they gain the compassion and empathy to appreciate the human connectedness in these issues whilst not becoming overwhelmed by the challenges they bring psychologically and emotionally.

How the initiative has resulted in the implementation of values across the school that nurture students as global citizens and/or critical thinkers:

During times of global crises, we often find that the apprehension, fear and worry of individuals can build to groups blaming other groups and even countries blaming other countries; arguments and acrimony build in the community and other very human responses. The Compassionate Systems Framework we are developing directly addresses these issues and helps to develop 'compassionate integrity' in our students which is a cognitive and affective skills foundation for global citizenship. Understanding the emotions of others, whilst understanding your own is a key component of this, coupled with a deep understanding and awareness of the profound interconnectedness of our world and the humans on it. Without this capacity we are left to react to circumstances that seem out of control and blame one another, entirely missing our own agency in shaping these circumstances. This understanding of global interconnectedness provides a perspective of global responsibility which is at the heart of the programme. The framework seeks to develop the value of compassionate integrity in all students but also in our community as a whole. We offer parent workshops, staff meetings and team workshops using the components of our pioneering programme. In a time where there is a global pandemic raging and an accompanying tendency to divide us into warring factions who seek only confirmation of the information we already believe to be true, whilst dismissing all other views, the framework develops critical deep thinking through its suite of classroom tools and approaches.

How the initiative has encouraged students to develop and articulate a clear grasp of how ethical perspectives and conventions can differ both within and between societies:

Two of the most important classroom tools we use in the framework are the 'Ladder of Inference' and the 'Ladder of Connectedness'. These tools are designed to help students of all ages to appreciate, be aware of and understand the perspectives of other, the biases we all have naturally and the perspectives that others bring to a situation. Taking one of these as an example, the Ladder of Inference describes the thinking process that people go through, usually without realizing it, to progress from a fact through to a decision or action. The thinking stages can be seen as steps on a ladder. The tool takes students through step by step how decisions are formed which then lead to actions. Students reflect on what actual facts they are basing their assumptions on. This tool highlights how decision making processes occur and inferences that may be present, focuses students on being cognisant of how they form opinions and if what they are responding to is truly valid. It encourages critical and reflective thinking which leads to challenging conversations where students examine assumptions. This tool develops compassionate thinking and international mindedness as students become more aware of how decisions are formed and what impact this can have on others in local

and global contexts. This encourages balanced and reflective views alongside awareness of principled actions. Students are encouraged to enter dialectic discussion and thinking and also practice the feelings of “being in someone else's shoes” before making decisions or forming judgement.

How the initiative has involved students in developing and owning ethical values:

The ethical framework we have to describe our aspirations for our students is summarised in our Graduate Worldwide vision. The ethical aspect of this vision is based on the UN Good Life Goals. Our curriculum is framed around this and we encourage all students to explore these goals in their lives. If we take the goal “Save Water” then the framework is first used to understand the complexities of this issue on a global scale, this includes an understanding of the emotions and feelings of the human beings caught up in this issue. The development of the compassionate integrity capacity is then applied to produce student action in this area. This framework has led to student-led awareness raising, fund-raising advocacy and other student activities. An example of one tool we use in this area is the ‘Ladder of Connectedness’. The thinking tool is arranged as a ladder; this shows that there are many levels of connection between human beings and that these connections have different qualities. Connectedness is personal understanding, knowing of self and other. This diagram or ‘tool’ graphically links together the levels of connectedness. Moving down the ladder shows an increase in connectedness and vice versa.

This tool allows students to identify their own level of connectedness within a context and encourages

the students to examine if they have bias and to explore that emotion of caring about an issue. It also unpacks compassion as something that can be developed over time.

How the initiative has addressed a challenge and how does it demonstrate the potential for longer-term development as a sustainable initiative for the school:

Within the college we have felt two significant challenges over the last few years. The first being that although we had a clear definition of intercultural understanding and also of ‘Graduate Worldwide’ our vision for students’ development, we did not really know how this would be achieved in terms of what we need to do in the classroom and in other areas of our College life. The second challenge is that we aim to have students to really deeply experience our curriculum and we hope that this emotional connection will lead to agentic students who feel confident to go out into the world to be active and to ‘Live Worldwide’, this was an area where we felt that we also were not really succeeding to the level we were aspiring to. Our Compassionate Systems Framework has addressed these

challenges directly and we are confident this will continue. The pedagogical approach has been applied to our vision for student's ethical development and gives teachers a practical toolkit to deliberately develop intercultural understandings in the classroom. We have also seen a significant increase in student led activities and activism in the areas of the SDGs particularly in our older students. We are finding a shared language and pedagogy is developing and this is developing a cultural shift in the institution which we believe will forever change it. The framework is being written into our learning beliefs and guiding statements and this will also ensure a lasting impact for our initiative.

Sharing beyond the school community:

We are curating the resources and lesson plans of all the framework and we are also collecting teacher and student feedback. These resources are being sorted, catalogued, and made broadly applicable ready to share. We are committed to delivering workshops, hosted by Dulwich College (Singapore) for other teachers in Singapore in the first instance and to the region as a whole when restrictions allow. This programme of capacity building begins with a three-day workshop, this is then followed up by online sessions of experience sharing and more capacity building. After a series of these on-line experiences we follow up with another workshop and hopefully offer a pathway to other schools to become a compassionate systems school and to in-turn develop their own connections. We are also reaching out to local Singaporean education professionals in an attempt to partner up with them to offer both teacher and student workshops to develop our ideas further. In parallel to this we are offering parental workshops in the coming months to bring this community on board and to hopefully spark conversations in the professional fields our parents represent as the framework is applicable well beyond students and an educational setting.