

BUILDING A CULTURE OF COMPASSION IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

A positive classroom climate supports learning. A compassionate classroom culture helps to address the socio-emotional needs of learners. This helps learners to realize that they are valued members of their class and makes every class a precious space for connecting and collaborating. This study surveys how teachers contribute to creating a classroom culture of compassion. It looks at some challenges faced by teachers in the same and attempts to identify healthy practices followed by teachers to build a culture of compassion. A convenience sample of 20 high school teachers was selected. The overall efforts put in by teachers to build a culture of compassion are significant. The study reveals that syllabus completion and influence of media on students are the most prominent challenges perceived by teachers. Few schools have structured programmes to institutionalize practices that promote a healthy ethos for compassion. Thus it is seen that teachers are aware of their role in building a classroom climate that supports socio emotional learning and they also work towards enhancing a robust climate. However they need support from their institutions in terms of training for socio emotional learning strategies. Efforts also need to be made to share stories of success so that all schools can work towards building a compassionate classroom culture.

Key words: *Socio-emotional learning, culture of compassion, connection and collaboration*

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Introduction:

Learning depends upon a myriad of factors that could be classified as intrinsic to the learner and extrinsic to the learner. Among the intrinsic factors one can include the disposition of the learner, intelligence, previous knowledge, cognitive and metacognitive abilities whereas the extrinsic factors comprise of factors like the learning material, support extended to the learners, factors related to teacher, learning environment and so on. A positive classroom climate goes a long way in ensuring that learning is maximized. Nurturing a positive classroom climate means setting standards and creating an ambience where students feel accepted and valued by the teacher and peers. Such an atmosphere fosters individuality promotes self-esteem and enhance learner creativity. There is trust among teacher and learners and all these factors help the learner to learn effectively. A culture for compassion, both towards self and others, is the hallmark of a positive classroom climate.

While teachers do aim at creating a positive classroom, there could be challenges that they face in doing so. This study aims at identifying the efforts made by teachers in building a culture of compassion in their classrooms. It also tries to study challenges faced by teachers in the same. Teachers and schools may have some time tested

practices that help in building a culture of compassion . The study tries to identify robust practices in this direction.

Theoretical Background:

In 2008, Karen Armstrong in her acceptance speech on winning the TED prize asked for help in creating, launching and propagating a Charter for Compassion, based on the fundamental principle of the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule means treat others as you would like to be treated. People from over 100 countries contributed to the Charter. Advocates of global peace such as Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu endorsed the Charter. The Compassionate Action Network was launched in 2009 and since then the network has taken up many initiatives to build compassionate communities. Schools are the garden where human values are nurtured. Therefore ensuring an ethos of compassion in schools will help to build a compassionate world.

Review of related researches:

A number of studies point out to the significance in nurturing compassion in the classroom. Roeser and Pinela(2014) noted that the neuroplasticity of the adolescent brain is conducive to cultivating compassion. Emory University developed a cognitive based compassion training (CBCT) programme for elementary students. In this programme, the participants progress through eight topics: developing attention and stability of mind, cultivating insight in the nature of mental experience, cultivating self-compassion, developing equanimity, developing appreciation and gratitude for others, developing affection and empathy, realizing wishing and aspirational compassion, and realizing active compassion for others. Neff and McGehee(2010) studied 235 adolescents for self-compassion and found that self-compassion and connectedness are highly correlated. Students with high level of self-compassion report less substance abuse and psychological distress.

Estrada Marta and others (2021) examined how emotional intelligence plays a key role in optimising student's academic performance in the classroom through compassion and academic commitment. The research model was tested with a questionnaire addressed to 550 students from four higher education institutions and one secondary school. The results of a structural equation analysis confirmed the study hypotheses. Emotional intelligence was shown to be positively related to compassion and higher levels of commitment, which, consequently, led to better academic performance.

Marcela Matos et.al (2022) tried a Compassionate Mind Training Programme for teachers and found that the programme shows promise as a compassion-focused intervention for enhancing compassion, wellbeing and reducing psychophysiological distress in teachers, contributing to nurturing compassionate, pro-social and resilient educational environments.

The related studies helped to gain an understanding of the basics of positive classroom climate. This led to the formulation of the following guiding questions for the study

1. What are the efforts made by teachers to build a classroom culture that embodies compassion?
2. What difficulties do teachers face in building a classroom culture of compassion?
3. What are some healthy practices followed by schools to build a culture of compassion?

The study was entitled 'Building a Culture of Compassion in the Classroom'.

Culture of compassion in the classroom in this study refers to an environment where learners are accepted as complex people. It is an environment where learners feel respected and valued where their ideas and views are listened to and acknowledged. It is an ethos where the learner is not under any threat and inclusivity is celebrated.

Methodology of the study:

The study involved a descriptive survey where the investigator studied the efforts of 20 high school teachers towards building a classroom climate that nurtures compassion. The sample was a convenience sample with teachers whose teaching experience ranged between 2 to 5 years. The tool used for the survey included 13 statements that had to be responded on a five point rating scale. These statements aimed at studying the teachers efforts towards building a classroom climate that promoted compassion. Challenges faced by teachers in their endeavor to nurture the same were identified through a checklist. Open ended questions in the tool sought information about the healthy practices followed to nurture a classroom climate that builds compassion. The tools have been prepared by the investigator and have not been standardized.

Findings of the study:

Efforts of teachers toward building a classroom culture of compassion:

70% teachers were always open to learning and honoring what students bring to the classroom. 85% teachers said that they always treated their students with dignity and respect and had a genuine desire to help them learn. 65% teachers always tried to understand difficult situations that their students were in and added that they responded to the pain and suffering within them. 50% teachers said that they made efforts to cultivate a cohesive community of students to promote a humanitarian educational experience. 50% teachers said that they listened deeply, fully and actively, absorbing their students' words, gestures, and silence. 45% teachers offered opportunities for their students to feel, reflect, and express themselves. 55% teachers felt that they themselves always radiated positivity. 35% teachers said that catering to the students' feelings and emotions is more important than completion of the syllabus. 45% teachers made efforts to integrate teaching learning activities to build compassion, trust and co-operation. 60% teachers shared their own experiences so that students are inspired to be compassionate and caring. 55% teachers said that they always made efforts to ensure building respect for one another in the classroom. 95% teachers said that they dealt with bullying on the spot. 70% teachers made efforts to ensure that students learn to be empathetic and caring towards all.

Challenges faced in building a classroom culture of compassion:

The teachers were given a list of probable challenges that come in the way of building a compassionate classroom. 95% said that the stress of syllabus completion leaves them with less time to cater to emotional needs of students. 30% teachers said that their students value marks more than building emotions and this is a challenge they face. 40% teachers said that competitiveness seen in students becomes a challenge to ensure a compassionate classroom. Only 10% teachers cited their own lack of training a challenge in building a culture of compassion. 60% teachers felt that media influence is strong and this becomes a challenge to have a culture of compassion in the classroom. Only one teacher cited own stress as a hurdle in building a compassionate classroom.

Healthy practices in building a classroom culture of compassion:

Respondents shared the best practices followed in their institutions to help build a culture of compassion. Some interesting practices followed are

- Presenting case studies and video and following it with discussion
- Rapport building, counseling for students is commonly used to help them be compassionate towards self and others
- Inclusive learning and cooperative learning is followed
- One of the schools has initiated a programme known as RF21 (Ready for 21st Century Skills) wherein the school focuses on instilling life skills like ‘Compassion’ amongst many others. The program is designed in such a way that only one skill is focused on during the week through various activities, role plays, worksheets, and media that provides enough scope for the educators to drill the value in students.
- Some schools follow empathy building practices like respect for the support staff by appreciating their work, participating in school cleanliness, visiting orphanages and homes for the aged.
- One school has a program on Mindfulness where once a week there is one lesson reflecting on the needs of having compassion for each other. This is done through role play activities, videos or even presentations by students.
- Pairing high achieving student with a low achieving student (in terms of academics achievement) to make sure they realise the importance of helping each other is another healthy practice.
- One of the teachers said that he formed a secret superhero group of students called ‘Avengers’ (A+ students). The function of this group is follow up and help their classmates who are academically weak, to understand concepts and help complete their class work.
- Reinforcing the vision mission and core values of the school at assembly, engaging in sharing sessions where students can share what worries them are some healthy practices followed.
- One of the teachers shared that generally the students are caught for lack of discipline or for breaking the rules. Instead let students be ‘caught for being kind and helpful’, meaning when the teacher observes such instances then the kindness, co-operation or empathy displayed by the students should be acknowledged so that it becomes an example for other students to emulate.

Discussion of the findings:

The findings of the study offered many insights into awareness and efforts made teachers in order to have a culture of compassion in the classrooms. It is evident that most teachers are committed to making efforts to dovetail compassion, empathy and mindfulness into their teaching learning so only content is not the focus of learning. The responses shared by the teachers indicate that they value student diversity and treat them with respect. Reflective practices are integrated into learning experiences thus giving students a platform to examine their own actions. There is zero tolerance towards bullying and thus the emotional needs of students are catered to. Schools give importance to socio-emotional learning and in campus as well as out of campus activities are duly organised. However only 2 out of 20 teachers i.e 10% teachers said that their school had a structured approach to socio emotional learning. In case of the rest of the teachers, efforts were on an individual basis and

not institutionalized. Teachers cited syllabi completion and effect of media are two major challenges that come in the way of building a culture of compassion. The extreme competitiveness and hype over high marks sometimes contribute to neglect of socio emotional values.

Implications of the study:

The results reveal that the teachers are aware of the need for socio emotional learning which can build a culture of compassion. They work towards the same in their own individual capacity. However if these efforts are institutionalized then the effect will be multiplied as students see all teachers involved in the socio emotional learning programme. One more observation was that teachers do not seem to have any formal training in Socio Emotional Learning (besides the inputs during their Teacher Education Course). It is necessary for schools to formulate some tried and tested strategies that can help to make socio emotional learning a part of the regular classroom activities. Teachers lack material and activities that can help promote a culture of compassion. Schools may collate best practices in this area and publicize them so that the entire teaching fraternity is benefitted. Ideally such experiences can be integrated into regular lessons and formulating learning outcomes based on the psychomotor and affective domains should be treated on par with learning outcomes of the cognitive domain. The results of the study are limited to just 20 teachers. But such a study taken up on a larger scale will help to gather more data. The results can be correlated with students' self-esteem or emotional health and valuable inferences could be drawn.

Thus it can be said that socio emotional learning is the need of the hour. With the increasing thrust on Global Citizenship Education, building a culture of compassion in the classroom will be helpful as when compassion is ingrained in students, they will be able to extrapolate it to others even out of class. It will help to have empowered students who can contribute to their own well-being as well as the well-being of others.

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