Chapter 2
Compassion-Focused Social-Emotional Learning in the Online Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In today's fast-paced world of online education, faculty are under immense pressure to achieve high levels of academic success in their classrooms. However, in the pursuit of academic achievement, the psychological well-being of faculty and students is often overlooked. Compassion-focused social-emotional learning (CFSEL) can support online teaching faculty in cultivating and transmitting a compassionate mindset, which can help them create a supportive, relational, and nurturing learning environment. This chapter provides educators with a comprehensive guide to implementing CFSEL strategies in the milieu of online education with a focus on compassion-based practices and strategies. This chapter explores the benefits of CFSEL for students and educators. The chapter provides practical strategies for (a) integrating CFSEL practices into the classroom, (b) creating a more dynamic and relational online learning environment, and (c) addressing common challenges within this medium.

COMPASSION-FOCUSED SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

This chapter examines the current literature on compassion, social-emotional learning (SEL), and relational theories of human development and makes the argument for an integrated, trans-theoretical approach to learning, privileging the educator–learner relationship as a catalyst to spark positive communication, learner engagement, and prosocial online learning. Educators will become acquainted with compassion-focused pedagogy (CFP) and its integration into SEL and have a blueprint for implementing compassion-focused social-emotional learning (CFSEL) to foster a more dynamic relational online learning environment, mitigating the challenges within the rising educational medium of online education.

The heart of CFSEL strives to build the relational experience in the classroom through the felt experience of compassion, resonance, and coregulatory experiences supporting educator and learner psychological well-being while cultivating self-compassion, distress tolerance, and building emotional resiliency. Educators skilled in CFSEL can motivate students by cultivating a safe, inclusive, and accessible space for engaging, learning, and practicing self-regulation skills, processing emotional stressors, and working through activating events. Learners in environments infused with CFSEL are encouraged to work with mindful awareness of the present moment experience and respond to stress and challenges within themselves and peers with self-care, kindness, and compassion. First-hand accounts of CFP and CFSEL are included in this chapter, along with strategies, practices, a case study, and small steps for using CFSEL in an online learning environment.

SEL as an Evidence-Based Approach

SEL originated in the 1960s with the work of Comer (2013) at Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center and addresses the social and emotional needs of students in low-income communities. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017), founded in 1994, has built on the foundations of Comer's original work and has created a robust evidence base for social and emotional learning and an integral part of education from preschool through high school. Led by Weissberg et al. (2015), CASEL lists five key SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies strengthen academic performance, positive social behaviors, and positive social relationships during school years, reduce behavior problems and psychological distress, and prepare young people for success in college, work, family, and society (Elias, 2014; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

SEL continues to occupy the research, with multiple studies finding positive effects of SEL in education (Duncan et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2017; Muratori et al., 2017). Research demonstrates the link between SEL and higher academic achievement in learners (Mahoney & Weissberg, 2018; Zins, 2004) and academic performance (DePaoli et al., 2017). When evaluating the continued efficacy of SEL programs in schools, four large-scale meta-analyses reported that learners who participated in SEL educational programs showed significantly more positive outcomes with respect to enhanced SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, and academic performance, and significantly lower levels of conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wiglesworth et al., 2016). These findings underscore the significant benefits of SEL programs for participating learners, leading to the general consensus that well-implemented SEL programs are beneficial for learners (Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wiglesworth et al., 2016), with a study on the long-term impact of these SEL on academic achievement yielding an 11 percentile-point gain in achievement (Taylor et al., 2017).

Social-emotional competence (SEC) through SEL equips learners with the essential skills, experiences, training, and awareness to understand and manage emotions, demonstrate empathy for others, cultivate positive relationships, and make responsible decisions—all working in unison to support prosocial learning environments. Educators' SEC in the classroom informs the classroom climate and ripples into the experience of SEL for learners. The prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) emphasizes the role of the educator's SEC and well-being in creating a positive classroom climate conducive to learning. Educators fluent in SEC have the psychological flexibility to work to manage classrooms, model appropriate expressions of emotion, and respectful communication, enable smooth transitions, and provide learner support by responding to the needs of learners with kindness and compassion.

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