

## SELF-COMPASSION IN A PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

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### Abstract

*This case study is based on the phenomenological-qualitative paradigm. The study aims to examine how self-compassion may be reflected in lecturers' experiences in a pedagogical partnership program (PPP) at an academic college of education. A pedagogical partnership program focuses on learning-teaching processes between faculty and students at academies. The participants in this research were three lecturers at Kaye Academic College of Education. Our research tools included documenting dialogues held between students and lecturers at the end of each lesson, and reflective diaries written by each lecturer. The data were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis method based on open content analysis. The analysis connected to the self-compassion for its various components. Institutions of higher education that operate pedagogical partnership programs may consider incorporating compassion practices into their programs. They may greatly benefit all partners in both personal and professional respects.*

**Keywords:** *self-compassion, pedagogical partnership program, self-kindness, mindfulness, higher education.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This study offers a unique way of viewing pedagogical partnership programs by examining the integration of compassion practices. We are three lecturers at an academic college for teacher training who took part in a Pedagogical Partnership Program (PPP) operating in the college. In our daily life routines, we practice mindfulness. In the practice of mindfulness, compassion is a central principle. Combining our interests and participation in the PPP resulted in this study.

Our aim was to examine how self-compassion may be reflected in lecturers' experiences in a PPP at an academic college of education.

Compassion and self-compassion are emotions marginalized in the literature on organizational psychology (Neff & Germer, 2018). In the past, studies did not deal with emotions because they were considered inferior and irrational. Nevertheless, in the last twenty years, the study of emotions in organizations has gained momentum and a more comprehensive place (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990). Joining the pedagogical partner program involves accepting emotional experiences because it puts lecturers in a vulnerable position.

The concept of "self-compassion" has gained research momentum in the last decade and has proven successful in a wide variety of situations (Neff, 2020). Since Kristen Neff's first studies were published in 2003, many more studies have been using her Self Compassion Scale (SCS) and applying it in a new context. Yet, there is a lack of studies that examine the relationship between compassion and pedagogical partnership in academia.

One of the claims heard in higher education is that the academic staff members do not provide students with sufficient opportunities to express their voices and needs. Innovative concepts in teaching and learning have led to changes in the perception of students, who no longer seen merely as passive recipients of knowledge but as agents who should actively influence their studies (Cook-Sather, Bahti & Ntem, 2019). As a result, academic institutions have been initiating Pedagogical Partnership Programs involving both faculty and students and inviting students to participate in their teaching and learning processes (Harrington, Flint & Healey, 2014).

### *1.1. Pedagogical Partnership Program*

A pedagogical partnership is a program that advances analyzing pedagogical practices in teacher training. During this process, second- or third-year students observe their partner lecturer's classroom teaching. It is important to note that the partner student is not a student in the course but has been selected to participate in this project. The student focuses on pedagogy and the lecturer's teaching method during observation. At the end of the lesson, the student and lecturer hold a reflective dialogue on the pedagogical issues identified by the student. To promote the partnership process, the students participate in guidance sessions, in which they receive tools to understand pedagogical practices in the classes they observe and to conceptualize their feedback accurately. There are also joint guidance sessions involving lecturers and students, in which they process the experience of participating in the program (Cook-Sather, 2008).

Academic faculty need a framework to reflexively address their pedagogical practice. A partnership between lecturers and students, who together explore the teaching methods in class, serves this need as a forum for reflective work (Cook-Sather & Reynolds, 2021).

The partnership is based on agreeing to listen and learn from each other, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, whereby students can contribute their insights as learners (Cook-Sather, et al., 2014).

Pedagogical dialogue between faculty and students on authentic issues of teaching, learning, research, and evaluation will contribute to the conceptualization of higher education as a process that expresses shared responsibility (Kozminsky, 2018). The students' perspectives can drive important learning processes, change teaching and learning methods, and bring about cultural change in academia (Harrington, Flint & Healey, 2014). This is a democratic process both in terms of teaching and learning. Students' perspectives can improve existing practices, create a renewed discourse on teacher training reforms, and contribute to conceptualizing learning and teaching as collaborative processes (Matthews, 2016).

"Engaging students and faculty effectively as partners in learning and teaching is one of the most important issues in higher education in the 21st century" (Harrington, et al., 2014, p. 7).

Many Pedagogical Partnership Programs between students and lecturers have been launched in the last decade.

Felten, Bovill & Cook-Sather, (2014) indicate three operating principles underlying the program: respect, reciprocity, and responsibility between the lecturers and the partner students. Kozminsky (2018) suggests another principle, that of trust. Respect indicates the appreciation of what the other brings to the dialogue, honest listening to different points of view, and a non-judgmental attitude towards the other and their beliefs. Reciprocity is the method of operation in which the partner student takes responsibility for the teaching processes they offer in dialogue. At the same time, the faculty member perceives themselves as a learner in this partnership. Responsibility is the pedagogical duty of the lecturer and the partner student towards the entire process. The student is responsible for the teaching processes they offer, and the lecturer shares the responsibility for learning. Trust is the academic staff members's belief in students' responsibility for aspects of the teaching and learning processes.

Inspired by Pedagogical Partnership Programs in higher education institutions worldwide, such a program has operated at Kaye Academic College since 2018. The program's purpose is to create a culture of academic dialogue that allows students to express their opinions and examine learning, and where the culture of listening to student voices is part of the fabric of day-to-day activities and forms the infrastructure for partnership meetings between faculty and students (Kozminsky, 2018).

### *1.2. Compassion*

In Buddhist literature, compassion is described as the trembling of the heart at the sight of pain, and as the ability to meet our difficulties and those of others with a positive view and not run away from them (Goldstein, & Kornfield, 2001). Compassion is the ability to be with one's pain or with the pain of the other without it crashing or drifting; without being hostile, angry, or guilty; without trying to fend off,

reject or fight it; and without judging ourselves or others. Compassion allows us to be with the painful situation even without defining ourselves or others through it (Neff & Germer, 2018).

According to Kornfield (1994), compassion that does not include ourselves is incomplete.

Self-compassion is compassion directed inward, an emotionally positive self-attitude that should protect against the negative consequences of self-judgment, isolation, and rumination, such as depression (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion has three components (Neff, 2003): (a) Self-kindness; (b) Common humanity; and (c) Mindfulness.

**Self-kindness** means being kind and understanding toward oneself in pain or failure rather than harshly self-critical. This is a position of accepting the experience as it is, for all the feelings and thoughts it evokes. On the other hand, being judgmental and critical of the experience will cause excessive feelings of guilt, which torment the individual and make it difficult to function.

When a person judged themselves harshly, self-consciousness is strengthened, and this heightened sense of self increases feelings of isolation (Brown, et al, 2007). However, kindness toward oneself allows for more interconnection (Enescu, 2019). Self-kindness can serve to further increase mindfulness. For example, suppose one stops judging and berating oneself long enough to experience a degree of self-acceptance. In that case, the negative impact of the emotional experience will be lessened, making it easier to maintain a balanced awareness of one's thoughts and emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), and not to run away from one's feelings (Goldstein & Kornfield, 2001).

**Common humanity** means perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating. Acknowledging that imperfection, mistakes, and difficulties are part of the human experience we all share provides a sense of connection instead of separateness and isolation. Realizing that suffering and personal failures are shared with others reduces the degree of blame and judgment placed on oneself (Rubin, 1985), depersonalizing one's experience so that feelings of kindness and understanding are generated for all who are in pain, including oneself (Neff, 2003).

**Mindfulness** means conscious awareness of the present, intentionally and non-judgmentally, from a position of curiosity, openness, and acceptance of the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). This attention is systematically and uncritically directed to real-time experiences, emphasizing senses, body sensations, thoughts, and feelings (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Attention to the present experience allows one to stop daily involvement and explore one's behavior, feelings, thoughts, and mental state (Ergas & Ragoonaden, 2020).

In modern Western society, practicing mindfulness through meditation is considered a tool to improve physical and mental health. The practitioner does this from a non-judgmental approach so that whenever their attention wanders, they gently bring it back while simultaneously accepting that the attention has wandered (Lieblich, 2018). The practitioner learns to recognize the attention-based behavior of their consciousness so that consciousness undergoes a gradual process of transformation that affects the entire life experience (Ergas & Avishar, 2022). A non-judgmental attitude and delaying of response are principles of mindfulness. Non-judgmental attitude means awareness of the experience in the present moment just as it occurs, without labeling it as positive or negative and without self-criticism following it (Roeser et al., 2013). Delaying of response means accepting the situation from an objective and curious position without reacting immediately. It allows time to decide how to respond effectively (Creswell, 2017). Another study of ours that examined how mindfulness practices help to lead a pedagogical partnership in a teacher training college found that they benefit the partnership and contribute to mutual learning. The leading practices mentioned in the study were: compassion, a beginner's mind, a non-judgmental attitude, and non-attachment. It was also found that mutual relations are the central element in the partnership, and they are the ones that will influence its nature, meaning, and effects on the partners (Salfati, Cohen & Ben-Yair, 2022).

Compassion has been extensively researched in the context of teaching and education. Still, it has yet to be explored in the context of pedagogical partnership, hence the uniqueness of this research. The study

will examine the manifestations and impact of compassion practices on promoting pedagogical partnership in teacher training.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### *2.1. Research method and paradigm*

This qualitative study is a case study conducted at the Kaye Academic College of Education. The case study can be defined as an intensive exploration of a person, group of people, or unit, aiming to generalize over several units. It allows us to take a complex topic and narrow it down to manageable research questions (Thomas, 2021). "The case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Case studies have a combination of intensive and in-depth operations in the unit of analysis, and the specific rules require a much smaller sample size than survey research (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2001) . This research method was suitable for our study, which has a small sample.

### *2.2. Participants*

The research was conducted at the Kaye Academic College of Education in Be'er Sheva, Israel. The sample in our research included three lecturers teaching three different disciplines and three students not involved in a teacher-student relationship with these lecturers. In 2019, we participated in a PPP between lecturers and students.

### *2.3. Research tools*

The research tools we used are:

- Dialogue documentation – a dialogue was held between students and lecturers at the end of each lesson. In the dialogue, there was an opportunity for both lecturers and students to make their voices heard about different aspects of the lesson.
- Reflective diaries – these were written by the lecturers. Each lecturer described the feelings, thoughts, and emotions they experienced during the various lessons.

### *2.4. Research Question*

How can self-compassion practices be reflected in lecturers' experiences in a PPP at an academic college of education?

### *2.5. Procedures*

The president of the Academic College, Professor Kozminsky, initiated the PPP as part of lecturers' and teaching students' professional development. The partnership began in 2018 and continues to exist and expand. At the beginning of the process, a meeting of all the program partners was held with Professor Cook-Sather. The program lasted one semester and included 14 lessons. At the end of each lesson, the lecturer and observing student discussed the lesson and recorded the conversation. In addition, each lecturer wrote a reflective diary, and at the end of the semester, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students and lecturers.

### *2.6. Data analysis*

Analysis of the recorded dialogues and interviews was carried out using inductive content analysis, following Elo & Kyngäs (2008). In the first step, we selected the content unit for analysis. In the second step, we organized the data. This step involves open coding, creating categories, and abstracting. After the open coding, we grouped the list of categories under higher-order headings. Each category is named using words characteristic of the content.

### *2.7. Reliability and Ethics*

To ensure reliability, each researcher independently examined the data and analyzed it. At all stages of the data analysis, we returned to the raw data to ensure that our interpretation did not distance us from the original data. We received informed consent from the students to use the data for the research. The consent obtained was based on complete and relevant information regarding the objectives and course of the study, and the participants' free will, without any pressure. During the research, we maintained confidentiality, ensuring the participants' anonymity to preserve their privacy and well-being. The identities of the participating students are entirely confidential to protect them from any possible harm following their willingness to participate in the research.

### *2.8. The uniqueness of the study*

Our research suggests a new point of view: Self-compassion has been studied in various contexts but has yet to be examined from the perspective of pedagogical partnership between lecturers and students.

## **3. RESULTS**

In the data analysis, the theme of self-compassion came up prominently. According to the literature, components of self-compassion are self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. This study found a significant link between these components and the PPP.

It should be emphasized that the findings picture displayed a complex picture. Sometimes they reflected different expressions of self-compassion, and sometimes a gap between the presence and absence of self-compassion in the PPP. Moreover, some quotes demonstrate multiple themes that interact and support each other.

### *3.1. Self-kindness*

Lecturer H. expressed self-kindness when her partner student asked her to be more demanding to her students. She accepts her partner's suggestion without being self-critical, as follows:

“My partner criticized me for planning to show a full movie in class. She suggested I ask the students to watch the movie at home to prepare for the lesson. She told me I was making it easy for them and not demanding enough. I chose to be compassionate towards myself, not to be defensive, and I accepted her advice.”

Lecturer Y. experienced frustration due to her partner student's behavior, who did not come to the lesson as scheduled and did not inform her in advance; however, lecturer Y. chose to be self-compassionate and did not see this as a lack of appreciation towards her.

“My partnership student did not attend one of my lessons or inform me in advance. I was very disappointed because I had special preparation for her and expected her. Still, I chose to be compassionate to myself and her, not to criticize myself, and not see it as disrespectful.”

Another example emerges from lecturer S. regarding the criticism of her partner student:

“In one case, my partner student commented that I did not bring enough case studies for practice. In her opinion, additional case studies would have clarified the subject and enriched the students' knowledge. This criticism may hurt, but I chose to be compassionate toward myself. Therefore, I accepted her offer without criticizing myself.”

### *3.2. Common humanity*

The definition of common humanity is to feel that we are human beings and can fail. As human beings, we make mistakes, know that everyone makes mistakes, and this is part of the development process of every human being. It inspires modesty and self-compassion (Neff, 2003).

Common humanity was reflected in how lecturer Y. and lecturer H. explained their rationale for participating in the PPP.

“I came to the program willing to improve my teaching methods, understanding that I am a human being with universal characteristics that also include the possibility to fail once in a while.” (Lecturer H.).

“I joined the PPP with humility, which allowed me to see things that I did not pay attention to and learn from the students about points of view and my teaching methods” (Lecturer Y.).

Lecturer S. also expressed the idea of common humanity in her decision to join the program because, in her opinion, it is always possible to learn from everyone and renew teaching practices.

“I believe I can learn from everyone; I am not perfect, there are things that I am not aware of, and they can be seen only by others; I always have new things to learn about my teaching methods.” (Lecturer S.)

Common humanity was also reflected when the partner student commented to the lecturer about the long film screening being unnecessary and wasting class time.

“I received the partnership student's comment about the fact that screening a video about Freud's biography after I briefly explained about him orally was unnecessary.”

In most cases, self-compassion was prominent in the partnership program, but as mentioned above, a lack of self-compassion was sometimes found. For example, lecturer H. felt a lack of self-compassion when the partner student remarked to her that the style of exams was not relevant to our time.

“The partner student commented that the test I gave at the end of the course mainly included questions that tested proficiency and memorization ability. In her opinion, such questions are not relevant to the current time, and it is better to test understanding through case studies; I felt embarrassed; I thought she was right and wondered how I didn't think of it myself.”

### *3.3. Mindfulness*

The last component is mindfulness, which means being in the present moment mindfully and non-judgmentally (Creswell, 2017). This enables us to create an interval of time between a situation and our response, and to consider our reply and the students' input in an acceptable manner rather than employing a defensive mode as an immediate reaction.

Lecturer S. describes a moment of mindfulness, without identification with her anger after the partner student's criticism.

“In one of the reflective dialogues my partnership student suggested that I devote the last lesson to summarizing the materials of all the lessons, my partnership student remarked that I was teaching too much material in general. As she spoke, I felt pressure in my temples, I noticed that anger came up, but I decided not to identify with it, I paused my immediate response and continued listening to her.”

Lecturer Y. also describes how a partner student's comment about the seating arrangement in a classroom led her to a moment of mindfulness, which means observing the situation without labeling it.

“My partnership student suggested varying the seating arrangement in the class. Instead of regularly sitting in rows, she suggested arranging the seats in groups or a circle. She explained that the diversity of sitting might promote curiosity and active listening. I felt uncomfortable and embarrassed because her idea was good. I wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself, but I chose not to believe that I was not enough of a creative lecturer. I decided to accept her advice non-judgmentally. In the next lesson, my partnership student was surprised I had implemented her suggestion.”

An example of a lack of mindfulness:

In the following example, lecturer Y. was judgmental towards herself when a partner student drew her attention to the need to diversify the teaching methods, including ones that were not used even though they suited one of her classes.

“The student commented that I needed to enrich the teaching methods; she suggested teaching a particular subject using the Jigsaw approach; I felt uncomfortable that my teaching needed to be more varied and up to date.”

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

“Vulnerability is the state of susceptibility to harm from exposure to stresses associated with environmental and social change and from the absence of capacity to adapt” (Adger, W. N., 2006, p. 1). In this study, we aim to add the practice of self-compassion as an infrastructural component that enables the existence of the pedagogical partnership. In our view, self-compassion reveals an internal, hidden, and deep process which forms the basis for the existence and development of the pedagogical partnership. Our research question was: How may self-compassion practices be reflected in lecturers' experiences in a PPP at an academic college of education?

Previous studies have found that self-compassion is an infrastructure for a fruitful relationship characterized by reciprocity, mindfulness, and empathy (Clarke et al., 2019). According to (Wilson, 2020), a person's attentive compassion and awareness for themselves, along with seeing what is common to others when a person feels hurt and frustrated, increases the chance of having an open and honest conversation about feelings. We argue that open dialogue enables significant professional development, which is the purpose of the entire pedagogical partnership.

The study found that self-compassion contributes to a PPP at a teacher-training college. Compassion, in general, is an emotion that expresses a feeling of participation in suffering, often accompanied by a desire to alleviate or reduce the suffering of the other (Sayood, 2017). Self-compassion includes three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003). These three components were found in our study while interacting with one another when the boundaries between them are blurred. We discuss below the contribution of self-compassion to the pedagogical partnership and the components expressed in it.

Studies on self-compassion found that it enables the constructive practice of discourse and response (Lieblich, 2018). Self-compassion contributes to the development of compassion for others, and this enables the bond of pedagogical partnership. This finding is consistent with other studies in the field (Mikulincer, et al., 2004). For example, Neff and Pommier (2013) studied the relationship between self-compassion and concern for others among three groups: students, adults, and Buddhist practitioners. They found that the strength of the relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others varied according to the groups of participants, so among the Buddhist practitioners, it was the highest. Neff and Pommier (2013) explain this by stating that Buddhist practitioners went through emotional development and are, therefore, in a more heightened state of emotional awareness and compassion for others. Also, in a study by Fulton (2018) that examined compassion among older graduate students in counseling, a strong correlation was found between self-compassion and compassion for others.

Similarly, the findings of a study on people suffering from emotional difficulties show that self-compassion reduces the chance of emotional problems recurring, and improves social relationships (Mikulincer, et al., 2004). Another research finding that examined the relationship between awareness of our pain and awareness of others' pain found that the more self-compassion people have, the more attentive and sensitive they are in their reactions to the plight of others. The researchers conclude that the path to a more compassionate world begins with a person's compassion for themselves (Bayer-Topper, et al., 2020).

The pedagogical partnership is maintained with the help of self-compassion because the partnership is based on dialogue, self-acceptance on part of the lecturer, and acceptance of the partner student with understanding and without judgment and defensiveness. As presented in the literature, self-compassion includes three components, as mentioned above. First, self-kindness is reflected in our research on self-

acceptance even in the face of criticism from the partner student, such as teaching methods, classroom management, etc. Research findings (Neff, 2020) that dealt with self-generosity found that it increases mental well-being, helps in self-acceptance and the acceptance of others, and improves social interactions.

In this research, a perception of common humanity was reflected. For example, when the partner student presented to the lecturer a mistake in their teaching method, the lecturer realized that making mistakes is part of being a human being. Professional collaborations are based on the assumption that human beings are more similar than different, as in the PPP, despite the level of education that distinguishes the students from the lecturers. As a result, we are all human beings with similar characteristics that can learn from each other and go through a developmental process with the help of cooperation skills (Bovill, Felten & Cook-Sather, 2014).

Accepting common humanity within the partnership expresses the willingness to bear responsibility for mistakes. Self-compassion may increase the motivation for change, the willingness to take responsibility for the change process, and persistence in coping despite difficulties (Breines & Chen, 2012). A study that tested predictors for the performance of athletes (Mosewich, et al., 2019) found that self-compassion contributes to motivation and persistence in dealing with difficulties, while excessive self-criticism may harm performance.

In the pedagogical partnership, the lecturer aims to change teaching practices, listen to the partner student, and deal with criticism. Research shows that self-compassion helps raise the motivation to change and increase the willingness to take responsibility for mistakes (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Heffernan, et al., 2010).

Mindfulness was reflected, for example, when the lecturer was criticized about teaching methods and did not judge themselves. Studies which discussed mindfulness and education found significant benefits in practicing it with students (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Baer, et al., 2006).

We note that we often found prominent expressions for the categories of self-compassion. Still, sometimes we also found expressions for the absence of self-compassion, which created a complex picture of the experience of participating in the pedagogical partnership. The lack of self-compassion in this study is reflected in criticality and self-judgment following the criticism received from partner students. Studies have found that the lack of self-compassion harms interpersonal relationships and the individual's ability to change (Breines & Chen, 2012). From this, we can learn that the pedagogical partnership is a process that has ups and downs, whereas the attention to these processes enables its existence and adds depth to understanding and acceptance.

#### *4.1. Implications*

We suggest using self-compassion principles as a potentially effective tool for pedagogical partnership, as it enables mutual learning and professional development for all partners. We recommend considering the integration of self-compassion practices into teacher training programs.

#### *4.2. Limitations and future studies*

This case study is based on the phenomenological-qualitative paradigm.

In future studies, it is recommended that the researchers expand the sample and examine the dimensions of compassion using quantitative research tools such as validated questionnaires.

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