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Emotional Capital and Compassionate Educational Space: Reflection on One Undergraduate Course

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Abstract

In this essay, I reflect upon my experience of creating and teaching a new undergraduate course, Students, Parents, Schools. I look at the course content and process through the lens of emotional capital. While being one of the themes in the course, emotional capital is also developed for the students within the class itself. I identified four aspects of the course that can be linked to building emotional capital: bringing focus to oneself; encouraging students to capitalize on their own experiences; building meaningful connections; and creating a non-punitive environment. I discuss each of the aspects, illustrating them where appropriate with students’ anonymous feedback. I reflect upon the importance of strengthening one’s emotional capital for our undergraduate students in general, and for our future teachers, in particular.
In the recent interview by Avraham Cohen and Thomas Falkenberg, Falkenberg noted: “Our education systems are good in helping learners to develop an understanding about life, but not so good in helping them with the actual living life” (2023, p. 6). Falkenberg further suggested that as educators and scholars, we need to focus on three things: what it means to live a flourishing and meaningful life; the ways to develop practical wisdom to live a flourishing life (well-becoming); and a focus on contemplative practices needed for developing those ways (2023). Both Cohen and Falkenberg talked about education as a way to recognize and foster our humanity and to see every subject as first and most of all, a human endeavor. I’ve been pondering upon what it means in my classroom as a university professor and a sociologist of education and childhood, especially because a significant number of our undergraduate students are future teachers.

In my research, I define the concept of emotional capital as an individual’s capacity to identify, process and mobilize emotions in a constructive way to achieve positive goals in their lives (Bodovski, 2019; Bodovski et al., 2021). As capitals operate, emotional capital can be built up and invested in. It also can be combined with, affected by, or transferred to other types of capital: human capital (knowledge and skills), cultural capital (attitudes and dispositions), and social capital (activating resources through social networks) to bring about desirable outcomes in a person’s life (educational or occupational success, a meaningful job, fulfilling relationships, etc.). Defined by Patricia Allatt as “emotionally valued assets and skills, love and affection, expenditure of time, attention, care and concern” (1993, p. 143), in sociological research emotional capital was mainly examined within the contexts of maternal feelings around children’s education. My research focuses on students’ own emotional capital, the ways it can grow and its various consequences. From this perspective, a variety of activities can contribute to building emotional capital. These activities and practices include but are not limited to mindfulness, meditation, and various contemplative practices; creative expression through music, art, and dance; journaling; qigong, tai-chi, yoga and other Eastern practices. These activities may take place at home, at school, or within an informal educational setting.

From this perspective, the rich body of research and practice around social emotional learning offers specific ways to nurture students’ emotional capital. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a foundational framework into Social Emotional Learning by identifying the key five elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jobel and Lloyd, 2023). The recent report from Child Trends (Anderson et al., 2023) shows that despite improvement in several social indicators of youth and adolescents’ wellbeing, the rates of anxiety and depression continue to rise, thus suggesting that the relationship between the commonly used indicators of physical, social, and emotional wellbeing have a complex relationship with mental health. In this context, Greenberg and colleagues (2017) argue for treating social emotional learning as a public health approach; this means relevant programs are offered to all school children, rather than focusing on children at risk, with a timely schedule for implementation and intervention. Further, as Greenberg and colleagues argue, support for the teachers and investment in their social-emotional competence is crucial to build these competencies in students. Thus, this aspect becomes more salient in preparing future teachers.

Two years ago, I developed an undergraduate course titled Students, Parents, Schools. I included a module on emotional capital as one of the six main themes of the course. Other modules were sociological theories on childhood and education; children and parents in historical
context; social class differences in parental practices and parental involvement in education; race/ethnicity, immigration, and education; and school discipline and children's rights. In the fall 2022 semester, the course enrolled 32 students, 26 of whom were first-year students. As any college professor knows, teaching a room full of 19-year-olds has its challenges. This cohort of students was also affected by COVID-19-related disruptions during their high school years. At the end of the semester, I received not only high ratings from the participants but positive and meaningful comments. (It’s important to note that the instructors only can access students’ anonymous comments 24 hours after the final grades for the course are posted).

After I shared the students’ comments with a close friend, she encouraged me to see the class as an intervention of sorts. She asked me to reflect on what exactly took place in the course that allowed meaningful learning and positive interactions among the students, as well as between the students and myself. It was a particularly interesting angle to explore because the majority of the students enrolled in the course were education majors, thus this experience in the course had a potential to contribute to their investing in the emotional capital of their students down the road. After taking a close look at the process and the content of this undergraduate class, I was able to identify four aspects of the course that can be linked to building emotional capital: bringing focus to oneself; encouraging students to capitalize on their own experiences; building meaningful connections; and creating a non-punitive environment. I discuss each of the aspects below, illustrating them where appropriate with students’ anonymous comments. (I kept the original punctuation of the comments).

Building Emotional Capital

Bringing Focus to Oneself

“The passion that Dr. Bodovski has about her class made me want to attend the class and helped me find the passion as well.”

“The aspects of this course that helped me learn was definitely Dr. Bodovski’s passion in what she teaches… I thought that most of the class and myself were very appreciative of how much she cared about what she was teaching. It made the class more enjoyable, and I will carry the lessons she taught with me. They will stick with me because of how well she knows what she is talking about.”

I started the first class of the semester with an explanation of the benefits of mindful breathing. When some students looked surprised, I explained that we cannot be there for others, in a classroom or elsewhere, without being aware of our own state of being and taking care of ourselves. Likewise, I encouraged the students to ask themselves what it is they are interested in learning, be it in their choice of majors, specific courses, or choosing a project to focus on. Throughout the semester, at almost every class meeting, I reminded students to check in with themselves and to make sure to provide space for self-care, whatever that self-care may look like. I emphasized that in case students are not feeling well or something happens in their life, they are allowed to miss class, as long as they communicate with me in writing. Throughout the semester, I reminded students that they bring their emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual self to every situation and so do the teachers, students, parents they encounter. Where appropriate, I highlighted that the focus of education is on the whole self of a student.

The module on emotional capital was our fourth module. By that time of the semester, the
students were used to the language of (self) awareness and centering oneself, as well as understanding the complexity of the interaction between a teacher and a student, a teacher and a parent, and parents and their children. It was a natural progression to explicitly discuss the importance of emotional capital and its connection to students’ academic success and to different aspects of parenting. I used Brene Brown’s *Atlas of the Heart* (2021) and recommended several episodes from her podcast *Unlocking Us* (2020-2021) to establish the language of emotions we can utilize referring to different situations. One example was the differences among compassion, empathy, and pity (Brown, 2021, pp. 118-120); another useful example was the distinction among guilt, shame, humiliation, and embarrassment (Brown, 2021, pp. 134-135). In addition, we discussed Susan David’s work on emotional agility (2016), as one way to strengthen and nurture emotional capital.

**Encouraging Students to Capitalize on Their Own Experiences**

“Professor Bodovski’s personal experiences were really helpful to my learning.”

“Dr. Bodovski includes stories from her own life or people that she has met to show us how concepts can apply to the real world. Her content is also very up to date and critical to our jobs as future teachers. She creates a warm classroom environment and I always look forward to coming to her class.”

I invited students to reflect on their own experiences growing up, connecting the class material to the interactions they witnessed or participated in when they were in school. I modeled this by sharing my personal stories and experiences, having had a firsthand experience in three different languages and in three education systems on three continents (I grew up in Russia where I finished high school; I spent a decade in Israel completing my bachelor’s and master’s degree; and received my doctoral degree in the United States). Creating an environment that includes students’ own personal stories placed their attention on including and accepting the stories of others. Simple awareness of “my story is important” allows for conversations that otherwise wouldn’t have taken place.

**Building Meaningful Connections**

“At least once a week, Dr. Bodovski would have the class break up into small groups and conduct discussions on topics related to what we were learning. These small groups allowed me to compare opinions and understandings with classmates while building meaningful friendships.”

“An aspect of this course that helped me learn was our group discussion questions that we have every unit. These group discussions really help me connect the content to real world situations or problems and help me grasp the meaning of the concepts deeper.”

Group discussions throughout the modules (at least once a week for 15 minutes during class) and the group research project as a final product were central to the course. Students got to know each other throughout the semester and were committed to their peer group because 30% of their grade is the final presentation of their collective project. What may have started as a requirement grew into a much-appreciated part of the course, as evidenced from the students’ comments. The first year in college may prove lonely for many students, despite living in the dorms surrounded by their peers. Having formed these groups visibly helped students to build social connections as I saw them leaving the building together and talking in groups before and after class.
The culmination of the class was groups’ research presentations. Prior to that, each group submitted an outline of the project for my approval. Having taught the class three times, I’m amazed each time at the creativity of the students both in choosing their topics and the content of their presentations. One group (that included white and Black students) discovered in their informal conversations that attending schools in different states, they were taught different versions of the U.S. history, particularly around the topic of the Civil War. They decided to investigate how social studies and history curriculum varies by state. Another group that included a non-binary student focused on the topics of adoption for non-traditional families, including same-sex partners and single parents. This project was a great example of how students’ personal stories fit into the course. Further, the research projects allowed synergy among the courses the students were taking that semester. One group focused on various types of child maltreatment and their consequences, as the students in that group happened to be taking together a class in educational psychology that in their view complemented well the content of our course.

Creating a Non-punitive Environment

“There was no pressure in the class, which was really nice. She is very understanding and considerate of her students, and she has a welcoming environment, so I feel excited to come to class and participate in discussions.”

“I liked the use of open-ended essay prompts instead of multiple-choice exams in this course, I think with the nature of this course and its content the open-ended questions add to the conversational element of it all.”

For assessments, in addition to the group project discussed above, I used two take-home exams. I chose this type of assessment for two main reasons. First, an open book exam and a home environment tend to decrease the test anxiety that many students suffer from. Second, the 48-hour period allowed me to use open-ended questions that encouraged a deeper engagement with the material than multiple choice questions would. There was no penalty for late submissions, as long as the students communicated with me in advance. About half of the class needed an extension of at least a few days which I granted each time. To me, it circles back to the concept of self-care and awareness of one’s state. If students were sick or had to go home for a family emergency, it was very much aligned with the content of the class that they should be aware of their own state of mind and body, should be able to communicate it with me, and will be granted the time and space to solve whatever the challenge they encountered. As their comments indicated, they very much appreciated it.

It seems particularly important to model such a non-punitive environment to our future teachers. Often, if schools set rigid deadlines for assignment submissions, it’s the students from less advantaged homes who end up being penalized. A high school student who didn’t submit her term paper on time may be the one who takes care of her younger siblings, who is helping a parent with physical/mental health challenges, who must work to contribute to the family finances—or all of the above. It’s not much different with college students. Many must work to afford school, many experience their own physical and mental health challenges, or navigate complex family environments. I could have cited specific studies here, but I’ve been a university professor for 17 years and witnessed all of these things, sometimes in a single class.

Concluding Thoughts

Reflecting on an undergraduate class and its routine provides an opportunity to explore how
any educational space, at any level of schooling (from elementary school, or even preschool, to college), can be turned into the space to build emotional capital without any content sacrifice or much additional effort. Our mere awareness as educators of wanting to create such a space translates into practices that bring it forward. Similar to the three teachers in the Jobel and Lloyd study (2023), who shared their experiences of responding to the high school students’ needs (what the authors called Social Emotional Learning or SEL-in-Action), I observed the undergraduate students’ experiences of growing their emotional awareness and as such, investing in their emotional capital during one semester. Often, SEL-in-Action takes place in our spontaneous responses to various situations that we face in and out of the classroom. We capitalize on our intuitive understandings and feelings that arise guiding us to respond in supportive ways to another person, be it a student or a colleague. I would argue that strengthening one’s emotional capital leads to a stronger sense of agency that we want in our undergraduate students in general, and in our future teachers, in particular.

It seems to me that the experiences described above in my undergraduate class are very much aligned with the sentiments expressed by Avraham Cohen and Thomas Falkenberg’s interview (2023). I wholeheartedly agree that rather than striving for success narrowly defined by ranks and rankings, scores, promotions, and so on, the focus, starting with us as teachers, should be on human thriving and flourishing. That was certainly my intention in the course. I’m also aware that I’m just scratching the surface. We can do much more. It is time to turn any educational space into a compassionate space, to our own selves and others, to ensure such thriving and flourishing.

I’d like to finish this essay with the quote from Joyce Rupp:

We plant the seeds of compassion by being aware of our thoughts and feelings, and by the deliberate intention to think and respond in a kindhearted manner…. We can teach our minds to activate compassion, so that we do not react on impulse, or go about our lives unconsciously, missing opportunities to alleviate suffering—and create more suffering. (2018, p. 21-22)
References


