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Compassionate pedagogy in higher education: A scoping review

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Abstract

There is strong evidence to suggest that the undergraduate student population have lower levels of wellbeing, particularly in terms of anxiety, than young people as a whole. Universities often have good wellbeing support services in place for students but these are most often separate to pedagogic practice. One response to supporting student wellbeing is by drawing on compassionate pedagogies. This scoping review investigates how compassionate pedagogy is conceptualised and realised in contemporary higher education contexts. Through a systematic search across electronic databases, 25 relevant articles were identified, revealing a lack of consistent definition for compassionate pedagogy. The authors synthesised these studies to propose a working definition made up of four components: 1) a noticing of suffering, distress, or disadvantage; 2) a commitment to address or mitigate the suffering, distress, or disadvantage; 3) the promotion of wellbeing and flourishing; 4) a concern for the whole student as a person. The review explores the realisation of compassionate pedagogy at various levels, including institutional, programme (curriculum), module, and individual lecturer perspectives. Further research should investigate the perspectives of students on how compassionate pedagogy can be realised. Institutional perspectives would also be beneficial to understand how compassionate values, policies, and leadership cascade down to the student and staff experiences of compassionate pedagogy in the learning and teaching environment.

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Introduction

There is strong evidence to suggest that the undergraduate student population have lower levels of wellbeing, particularly in terms of anxiety, than young people as a whole when measured against Office for National Statistics data in the United Kingdom (UK) (Neves & Hillman, 2016). Balancing assessment deadlines, part-time work, making decisions about their future, concerns about debt, and living away from home have been some of the issues raised which may contribute to greater anxiety levels than their non-university peers (Neves & Hillman, 2016). More recent UK based student academic experience surveys note that anxiety levels for students remain high and also identified that higher education can be a lonely experience, with almost one-in-four students identifying that they feel lonely “all” or “most” of the time (Neves & Brown, 2022).

There is an onus on higher education institutions to have services in place to offer wellbeing support to students (Neves & Hillman, 2016). These recommended services are often well established at universities. However, they are most often related to the student wellbeing team and separate from pedagogic practice, despite wellbeing being seen as a key aspect of inclusive education (Hubbard & Gawthorpe, 2023). Embedding wellbeing in the curriculum, such as through the inclusion of discipline specific mental health content, is important in complementing the work of support services as the Higher Education Academy (now Advance-HE) argues that we all have a collective responsibility to promote the wellbeing of students in providing a positive learning environment (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). One response to supporting student wellbeing is by drawing on compassionate pedagogies with values of kindness and care at their core (Waddington & Bonaparte, 2022). Compassion was a theme of the COVID-19 pandemic era scholarship (Andrew et al., 2023). The traumatic nature of the pandemic experience for many led to a greater humanising discourse around education by acknowledging a student’s humanity before their academic goals, alongside the need to be embracing pedagogies of compassion, kindness, and care (Stephens, 2021; Vandeyar, 2021). A return to humanising learning speaks to the critical pedagogy advocated by Paulo Freire who viewed humanising pedagogy as a revolutionary approach because instead of seeing students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, they were viewed as active and capable knowers (Freire, 1972; Olszewska et al., 2021). Humanising pedagogies move beyond solely cognitive techniques and consider questions of power, privilege, and access to counteract education inequities and instead address the needs of the whole person (Chand et al., 2022). Indeed, it is suggested that for students, the human side of being in higher education that comes first. For example, making friends, feeling part of the program of study and part of the institution that form the necessary starting point for success at university (Benkwitz et al., 2019).

The word ‘compassion’ comes from the Latin ‘compassio’ which is formed of two root words, ‘com’ meaning ‘with’, and ‘pati’ meaning ‘suffer’ (Barad, 2007). Together, the words mean ‘to suffer with’ (Parattukudi, 2019). Compassion has been defined as a four-stage process (Worline & Dutton, 2017) involving:

1. Noticing that suffering is present;
2. Making meaning of the suffering in order to create the desire to alleviate it;
3. Feeling empathic concern for those who are experiencing the suffering;

4. Acting to alleviate the suffering to some extent at least.

Empathy, care, and kindness are related to compassion, but the uniqueness of compassion is “its intrinsic motion-generated effect” (Schantz, 2007), such that it compels a person to take action in response to the distress they notice (Parattukudi, 2019).

Pedagogies of compassion are about seeking to create a learning environment that notices distress and disadvantage for all students and staff and takes steps to reduce these barriers to learning (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2023). Pedagogies of compassion take courage and strength, because they involve a turning towards suffering, and a commitment to address that suffering (Salzberg, 2002).

Compassion gaps have been identified in the university sector, attributed to the commodification of global higher education driven by neoliberal ideologies and marketisation where students are seen as consumers (Waddington, 2016, 2018, 2021). In response, approaches such as compassionate pedagogies, seek to ensure that education continues to be academically rigorous whilst supporting the wellbeing of students and staff (Waddington, 2021). There is a need for compassion in the 21st century university and universities which can demonstrate their compassionate pedagogy and credentials will be the successful universities (Waddington, 2018). Given the ongoing challenges to student wellbeing and the importance of compassion in the post-COVID era, the aim of this scoping review is to understand how compassionate pedagogy is conceptualised and realised in contemporary higher education contexts. This is important in synthesising the current literature available on compassionate approaches to learning and teaching.

Method

Research question and study design

A scoping review was selected as the study design for this evidence synthesis since the aim was to systematically identify and map the breadth of evidence available on compassionate pedagogy. It sought to address the following research question: How is compassionate pedagogy conceptualised and realised in contemporary higher education contexts? To answer this question, two objectives were developed:

1. To explore how compassionate pedagogy is defined in peer-reviewed literature;
2. To map how compassionate pedagogies have been practiced in peer-reviewed literature.

This scoping review followed the framework set out by Peters and colleagues (Peters et al., 2020). The stages in this framework include the identification of the research question; identifying relevant studies; study selection; charting the data; collating, summarising and reporting the results in relation to the purpose of the review to note implications for the findings.

An *a priori* protocol was developed. This was important in pre-defining the objectives, methods, and reporting of the review to support the transparency of the process (Peters et al., 2020). The protocol was registered with the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/hjb7e>).

Eligibility criteria

The search strategy was not limited to a particular research methodology. Rather, all sources of peer-reviewed evidence were searched for, including primary or secondary studies and opinion articles.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed based on the research question and the key constructs of population (higher education students); concept (compassionate pedagogy); and context (higher education institutions) and were used to search for and screen articles (Tables 1 and 2).

The authors recognise that articles which sought to teach wellbeing strategies to support self-care or self-compassion, stress-management courses, or resilience programs could be argued to be compassionate. However, to place clear boundaries on this review the authors chose to focus on articles which were explicitly seeking to create a compassionate learning environment.

Table 1

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Articles with a focus on higher education students (undergraduate and post-graduate).	Primary or secondary school education students.
Focus on compassionate pedagogy such that articles are seeking to conceptualise and describe how these pedagogies are implemented / practiced, i.e., how a compassionate learning environment was created.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on teaching students to exhibit compassion to a particular population, e.g., how to train healthcare professionals to be more compassionate to their patients• Strategies to teach wellbeing e.g., specific mindfulness interventions to support self-care or self-compassion
Articles with a focus on higher education institutions.	Non-higher education contexts such as education or training in the workplace. Conference abstracts, posters, or grey literature.

Information sources and search strategy

A comprehensive search to identify relevant literature was developed. This followed a three-step strategy. Firstly, an initial search was carried out in two databases (Academic Search Ultimate and Education Source Ultimate). This initial search was used to test the search strategy and to do an analysis of the text words contained in the title, abstract, and index terms used of relevant retrieved papers. Any additional keywords were subsequently used to enhance the search strategy. The second step used a Boolean search strategy with all the identified keywords and index terms across the following databases: Academic Search Ultimate, Education Source Ultimate, CINAHL, and MEDLINE. The search strategy was designed and refined in consultation with a university research librarian. An example search strategy can be seen in Table 2. The third stage of the search strategy involved hand searching the reference lists of all articles which met the inclusion criteria.

The search was limited to peer-reviewed papers published in English. A date limit of January 2013 was applied to ensure that contemporary literature was located. The final search was carried out in July 2023.

Articles were initially screened for eligibility by CK using their title and abstract. Where it was difficult to determine if an article met the inclusion criteria based on title and abstract, they underwent full-text screening. Search results were handled using an excel spreadsheet to facilitate an audit trail. Full-text papers were independently reviewed by AT and assessed against the inclusion / exclusion criteria. Discrepancies regarding eligibility for inclusion were resolved by discussion and consensus with the research team.

Table 2

Key search terms and their alternatives

Key search term	Related words or terms
Search term 1: Compassion [title] AND	compassion* OR kindness OR humani?e OR humani?ing
Search term 2: Higher education AND	"higher education" OR Universit* OR tertiary OR undergrad* OR "post-graduat*" OR postgrad* OR "post-secondary" OR student* OR degree*
Search term 3: Pedagogy [title]	pedagog* OR practice OR teach* OR curricul* OR program*

Data charting and synthesis

Data charting was performed by the first author using customised data charting forms. This included information regarding authors and year of publication; aim and design; population / context (including country of origin); concept; and definitions of compassionate pedagogy (Table 4). To help organise the table, articles were categorised as focusing on an institutional, program (curriculum), module, or individual lecturer level approach. Where the approach spanned a range of levels this was also reported. Data charting was verified by AT. The data charting form was initially pilot tested with three of the included studies and refined by the research team. The purpose of the data charting was to identify, characterise, and summarise the evidence, including the identification of research gaps (Peters et al., 2020).

To address objective one which sought to explore how compassionate pedagogy is defined in peer-reviewed literature, the definitions for compassionate pedagogy from each paper were synthesised. This involved a three-stage process of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The individual definitions from the data charting process were imported into NVivo 12 data analysis software. The definitions were coded line-by-line in an initial phase of coding. In the second stage, the codes were organised into descriptive themes. The third stage involved generating analytical themes with a narrative summary. Each stage of coding was independently cross-checked by AT where the codes, descriptive and analytical themes were considered in relation to each study and to the research question to ensure there was consistency. This process of cross-checking led to valuable discussions which helped in refining the key aspects of compassionate pedagogy. Any disagreements were handled via discussion and reflection to reach a consensus.

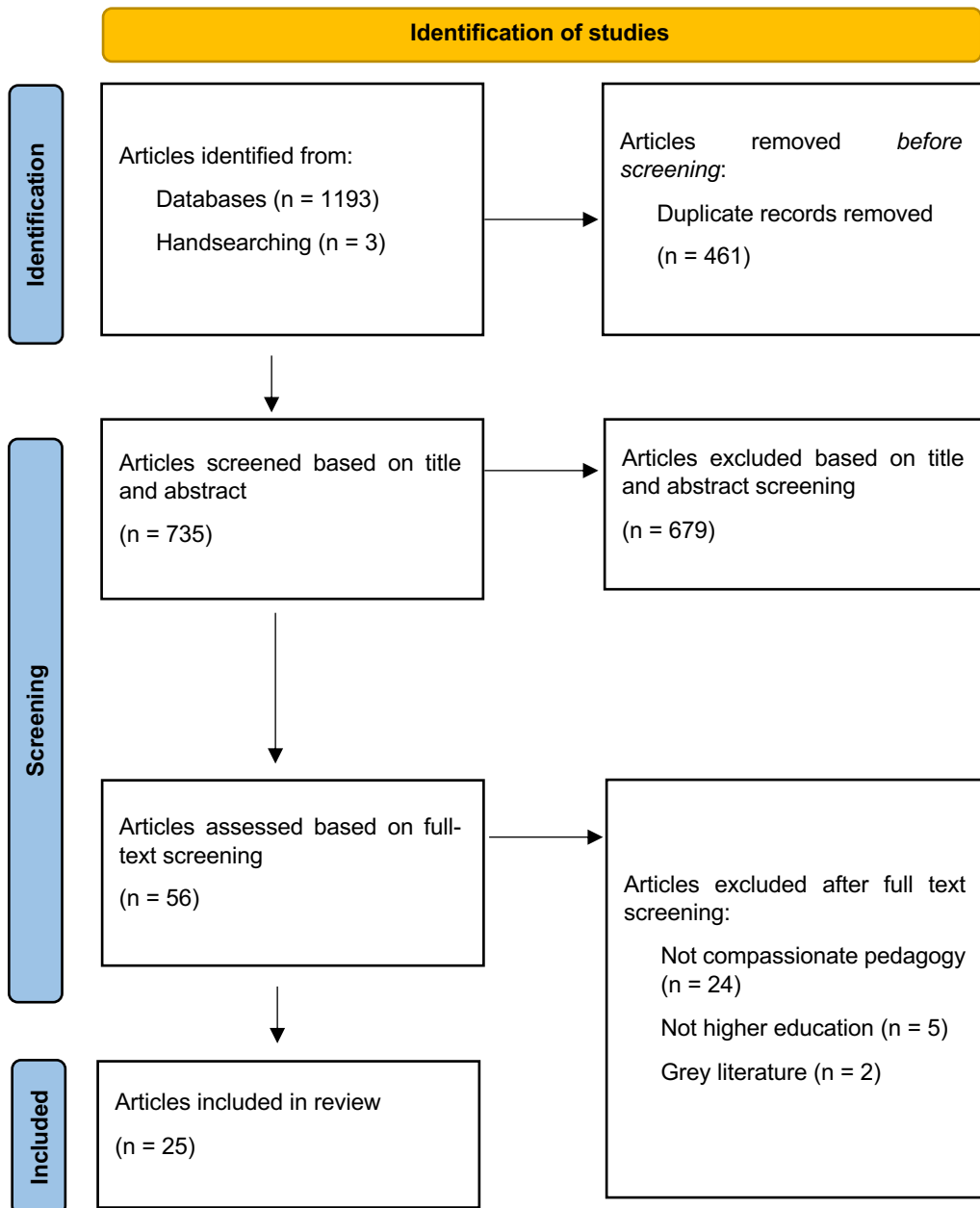
Objective two sought to map how compassionate pedagogies are practiced. To achieve this, each instance which described how compassionate pedagogy were enacted were extracted from each of the included articles and pasted into a word document. This was imported into NVivo 12 which was used to help organise the data. Here, each extracted example of compassionate pedagogy was mapped to four levels of implementation to summarise the findings. Instances of compassionate pedagogy relating to wider university policy, approaches or strategy were mapped to the **institutional** level. **Program (curriculum)** aspects related to context, structure, or processes for the overarching program of study, i.e. the specific undergraduate or post-graduate program of study. Aspects relating specifically to the module including context, structure, learning and teaching resources were mapped at a **module** level. Finally, aspects relating to the lecturer as a person and their personal approach were noted as **individual lecturer**. Once the data were mapped to the relevant level of implementation, they were grouped to aid application and any duplication of approaches were removed to provide a more concise summary of the ways in which compassionate pedagogy was realised in the literature. This process was cross-checked by AT and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved with the research team.

Results

The systematic search yielded a total of 1196 studies. Of the potentially relevant articles, 56 underwent full-text screening. A total of 25 articles met the inclusion criteria (Figure 1) (Page et al., 2020).

Figure 1

Flowchart of search outcomes and selection process



Study characteristics

Table 3 displays the data charted from the 25 articles included in this scoping review. Almost half of the articles were located in or had their main author residing in the United States of America, seven were from the United Kingdom, two from South Africa, and one each from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Canada. Publications were from a broad range of academic disciplines including education, sociology, healthcare, law, business, management, arts, humanities, social sciences, computer science, communication and media studies, recreation and tourism, or multidisciplinary contexts. Thirteen publications focused on undergraduate student populations, three were regarding post-graduate students, one included both undergraduate and post-graduate with the remaining either not specifying or considering a university wide approach.

Of the 25 included articles, 16 were conceptual in nature including reflective discussions or editorials. Nine were empirical with three case studies, two action research, three qualitative, and one mixed-methods design. Five of the empirical publications included the views of students in their study design. There appeared to be an upturn in the number of publications about compassionate pedagogy since 2020 (n=16) (Table 4).

Table 3

Data charting

Authors	Study aim and design	Population / context	Concept	Definition of compassionate pedagogy
Institutional, program/ curriculum, module, and individual level pedagogic approach				
Andrews et al. 2019	Aim: To propose core tenets of a humanising pedagogy for teacher education. Design: Conceptual article	Teacher Education, USA	Humanising pedagogy	To help students develop and maintain mindsets and practices that foster learning environments where the needs of whole student are considered and addressed.
Hamilton and Petty 2023	Aim: To explore how compassion can be enacted within interpersonal interaction, curriculum design, and leadership culture in universities. Design: Conceptual analysis	Neurodiversity in Higher Education, UK	Draw on principles of compassion-focused psychological therapies	Educators actively recognise the particular struggles that students face and seek to mitigate them.
Institutional level pedagogic approach				
Benkwitz et al 2019	Aim: To explore the experiences of students involved in a student staff partnership on peer mentoring interventions to support fellow students. Design: Action research	Higher Education context, UK	Humanised and compassionate approach to education	By responding compassionately to students through democratic engagement, the purpose and value of Higher Education can stay connected to a commitment to human flourishing and growth.

Waddington 2016	Study aim: To show how reflexive dialogue can be used to enable the development of compassionate academic practice Design: Critical reflection	Higher Education, UK	Promoting compassionate learning environments	Compassion reflects feelings of deep sympathy and concern for individuals who are troubled by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate their distress.
Waddington 2018	Aim: To argue for compassionate academic leadership in universities. Design: Opinion piece	Higher Education leadership, UK	Developing compassionate leadership	Attentiveness and noticing another's need, and a willingness to alleviate the suffering of others to enhance their wellbeing.

Institutional and program / curriculum level pedagogic approach

Andrew et al 2023	Aim: To critique and highlight key factors associated with compassion in Higher Education Design: Editorial	Higher Education context, primary author from New Zealand	Compassionate pedagogy	Compassionate pedagogy promotes human connection, communication and wellbeing.
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Program / curriculum level pedagogic approach

Dickson and Summerville 2018	Aim: To describe the development of a compassionate pedagogy. Design: Reflective discussion	Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, Canada	Compassionate pedagogy	Compassionate pedagogy arises from the contestation of and collaboration between ways of knowing that, if embraced, can be deeply unsettling and transformative.
Lane et al 2023	Aim: To identify perceived barriers and facilitators to compassion within the	Medical students, USA	Compassion cultivation a central	Compassion is the affectionate motivation to help alleviate suffering.

	daily responsibilities of educators and students		part of the content and pedagogies	
	Design: Qualitative			
White et al 2023	Aim: To explore compassionate teaching strategies, self-directedness, and grit in doctoral nursing education.	Doctoral nursing education, USA.	Compassionate teaching	Recognizing student struggles, supporting those struggles, making personal connections, providing feedback and support, and acknowledging shared humanistic challenges.
	Design: Mixed methods			
Worline and Dutton 2022	Aim: To use theoretical views to aid understanding of how suffering and compassion arise in management teaching.	Management teaching, USA	Promoting compassionate practices	A social process that involves noticing suffering, interpreting suffering in particular ways, feeling empathic concern in response to suffering, and acting to address or alleviate it.
	Design: Discussion piece			

Module level approach

Cramp and Lamond 2016	Aim: To consider the notion of kindness as a crucial value contributing to pedagogy and the development of meaningful learning relationships.	Master's in education online module, UK	Notion of kindness in Digitally Mediated Learning	The nature of the connection between kindness and teaching rests in the fact that both kindly acts and pedagogical acts require the actor to identify with the concerns of the other.
	Design: Case study			
Gilbert et al 2018	Aim: to explore the neuroscience that underpins the psychology of compassion as a competency	Humanities, business and computer science higher	Compassion focused pedagogy	The noticing of distress or disadvantaging of self or others and a commitment to reduce or prevent it.

	Design: Qualitative data reviewed against literature on compassion as a competency	education, UK		
Harvey et al 2020	Aim: To assess the impact of implementing compassionate micro skills of communication pedagogic approach for students and staff. Design: Qualitative	Psychology students, UK	Compassion focused pedagogy	Noticing distress or disadvantage in themselves or others and doing something about it.
Godfrey et al 2018	Aim: a case study of our attempts at intersectional compassionate pedagogy (ICP) that focused on creating authentic intimate connections and community as our pedagogy. Design: Case study	Sociology, USA	Intersectional compassionate pedagogy	Intersectional compassionate pedagogy seeks to create classroom climates conducive to helping students repropagate their 'mind-body-spirit-nature unity' to promote a collective healing journey.
Mehta and Aguilera, 2020	Aim: To draw on theories of critical pedagogy to interrogate recent trends in online education scholarship, calling for more humanizing pedagogies Design: Reflective discussion	Department of Curriculum and Instruction, USA.	Critical humanizing pedagogy	Draw on the lineage of humanizing pedagogies rooted in the Freirean approach being ideologically informed, concerned with issues of power and privilege and committed to issues of equity and social justice.

Module and individual lecturer level approach

Pacansky-Brock 2020	Aim: To present a model for humanised online teaching using a theoretical framework influenced by Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), social presence, validation theory, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Design: Reflective discussion	Teacher education (online), USA	Humanizing online teaching	To improve equity gaps by acknowledging the fact that learning environments are not neutral but often operate to reinforce a worldview that minoritises some students. Ensuring the noncognitive components of learning are addressed through instructor-student relationships and community, allowing connection and empathy to drive engagement and rigor.
Roy and Cofield 2021	Aim: To discuss the role of teaching with kindness Design: Reflective discussion	School of Information, USA	Purposeful kindness	Creates a learning environment that not only directs attention to learning but also helps students feel appreciated along their educational journey.

Individual lecturer level approach

Olszewska et al 2021	Aim: To investigate the teaching beliefs and practices of eleven award-winning faculty in diverse disciplines. Design: Qualitative	Multiple – interdisciplinary, USA	Humanizing pedagogy	A way to challenge students academically and intellectually while treating them with dignity and respect. It requires a caring student-teacher relationship, respect for the learner's reality and attention to understanding the socio-political realities that shape lives.
Bartholomay 2022	Aim: To reflect on the transformative lessons educators can learn from	Sociology, USA	Lessons in compassion	An awareness of the suffering of others coupled with a desire to relieve it.

	teaching during the pandemic. Design: Reflective discussion			
Vandeyar 2021	Aim: To explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the educational practice of academics. Design: Case study	Discipline not specifically stated, South Africa	Pedagogy of compassion	Dismantling polarised thinking and questioning one's ingrained belief system; changing mindsets to compassionately engage with diversity in educational spaces and instilling hope and sustainable peace.
Chand et al 2022	Aim: To describe how three educators employ modern technology to execute crucial humanizing pedagogies. Design: Reflective discussion	Degree in Primary Education, Fiji	Humanizing pedagogies in online learning	Embedding human values such as humility, tolerance, patience, decisiveness, courage, creativity, commitment, compassion, consistency, and character.
Sellnow et al 2022	Aim: To discuss the role of compassionate care in online teaching and learning. Design: Discussion piece	School of communication and media, USA	Compassionate care pedagogy	Honouring the burden of a student's lived experience while providing opportunities for them to accomplish rigorous course expectations amid life challenges.
Khene 2014	Aim: To present a reflective discussion on an attempt to apply a humanizing pedagogy in	Post-graduate research	Humanizing pedagogy	An approach where the teacher leads in establishing a permanent relationship of dialogue with their students to build confidence in those

the supervision relationship.

Design: Reflective discussion

students, South Africa

who may be alienated or feel alienated from the process of supervision or research development.

Stephens 2021

Aim: To provide a brief synopsis of the pedagogy of kindness.

Design: Reflective discussion

Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management, USA

Pedagogy of Kindness

The pedagogy of kindness is grounded in believing people and believing in people.

Tan 2022

Study aim: To focus on the human(e) elements of learning and teaching, such as empathy, kindness, and compassion.

Design: Conceptual paper

College of Arts, Business, Law and Social Sciences, Australia

Humanizing and compassionate pedagogies

The compassionate teacher aims to not only inspire learning journeys that are engaging, positive and fulfilling, but to also foster learning environments that are more equitable, supportive, and conducive for learners of all capabilities and backgrounds.

Table 4**Number of publications by year**

Publication year	Authors	Total publications
2013		0
2014	(Khene, 2014)	1
2015		0
2016	(Cramp & Lamond, 2016; Waddington, 2016)	2
2017		0
2018	(Dickson & Summerville, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2018; Godfrey et al., 2018; Waddington, 2018)	4
2019	(Andrews et al., 2019; Benkwitz et al., 2019)	2
2020	(Harvey et al., 2020; Mehta & Aguilera, 2020; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020)	3
2021	(Olszewska et al., 2021; Roy & Cofield, 2021; Stephens, 2021; Vandeyar, 2021)	4
2022	(Bartholomay, 2022; Chand et al., 2022; Sellnow et al., 2022; Tan, 2022; Worline & Dutton, 2022)	5
2023	(Andrew et al., 2023; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Lane et al., 2023; White et al., 2023)	4

Definitions of compassionate pedagogy

The objective for this part of the scoping review was to explore how compassionate pedagogy is defined in the literature. A range of terms were used to represent compassionate pedagogy. For example, compassionate teaching, compassionate education practice, compassion focused pedagogy, compassionate care pedagogy, or pedagogy of compassion to name but a few. There appeared to be four key aspects to compassionate pedagogy following a synthesis of the definitions from the included articles as outlined below.

1) A noticing of suffering, distress, or disadvantage

Firstly, compassionate pedagogy involved an awareness or noticing of suffering or distress in the learning environment. This included an acknowledgement of shared human challenges and an understanding of the role in which power, privilege, equality, social justice, disadvantage, and the socio-political landscape can have on the learning environment.

2) A commitment to address or mitigate the suffering, distress, or disadvantage

Secondly, in response to the awareness and noticing of distress there was a desire and commitment to action in order to address or mitigate it. To enable a response, it was important to identify with the concerns of others.

3) The promotion of wellbeing and flourishing

Thirdly, promoting wellbeing appeared to be a key aspect of compassionate pedagogy. This was presented in the definitions in several ways. For example, helping students feel appreciated, instilling hope and peace, believing in people, promoting dignity and respect, and engaging with diversity. Furthermore, compassionate pedagogy was seen as transformative such that it can inspire a fulfilling learning journey with the value of being committed to human flourishing and growth.

None of the definitions specifically included the notion of staff wellbeing (either teaching or professional support staff) as part of the definition. However, the role of teaching staff was implicit in the wider contextual understanding of compassionate pedagogy in a number of the articles. In particular with those which sought to highlight compassion as an antidote to the neoliberal landscape of higher education with its challenges of the seeming objectification and measurement of students and teaching staff (Waddington, 2016) or the demands of the high workload for teaching staff (Andrew et al., 2023).

4) A concern for the whole student as a person

Finally, linked to the aspect of wellbeing, there was a sense that compassionate pedagogy was concerned with the whole student as a person beyond the cognitive role of education alone. That is to say, it includes the non-cognitive aspects of learning to promote human values such as humility, patience, courage, creativity, character etc. A positive, caring student-lecturer relationship was noted as being important in addressing the non-cognitive aspects of learning to promote human connection.

How compassionate pedagogies are realised

The objective for this part of the review was to map how compassionate pedagogies are realised in the literature and whether they broadly related to institutional, program (curriculum), module, or individual lecturer level and then grouped to aid application. These are displayed in Table 5.

Although presented as discrete categories and groupings, it must be noted that there was an overlap with some of the ways in which compassionate pedagogy were seen. For example, ensuring high-quality formative feedback should be applied at a module level, however, it is dependent upon the individual lecturers to produce that feedback. Similarly, there are aspects which related to program or curriculum which would ideally be enacted by the whole program team, however, if that was not possible, then it could be integrated into a module level. Proactively designing curricula or modules in consultation with diverse learners would be an example of this. Therefore, the ways in which compassionate pedagogy were realised cannot be seen as rigid depending on the operational level, but fluid depending on the context of the learning and teaching practice.

Table 5

Summary of the ways in which compassionate pedagogy is realised

Institutional	Program/Curriculum	Module	Individual lecturer
<p><i>Institutional and structural integration of compassion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compassion should be evidenced at institutional and structural levels through program design and curriculum. Consider university wide peer-mentoring to promote compassionate approaches to education and support student transition. Recognition that policies do not always promote compassion and adapt as necessary. Courageous conversations are required to challenge dysfunctional 	<p><i>Inclusive curriculum and assessment design</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a diverse range of authentic assessment types across the program. Proactively design curricula in consultation with diverse learners. Ensure inclusive assessment approaches. Factor in ways for students to draw on life experiences to build cognitive empathy for the perspectives of others. <p><i>Student wellbeing and support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create wellness inventories for students to reflect on their overall wellbeing. Promote the importance of selfcare at a program level. 	<p><i>Inclusive and assessible teaching approaches</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Select course texts, activities, and assignments to help students engage with varying perspectives. Use multimodal / blended approaches including synchronous and asynchronous platforms. Ensure materials are available in advance and use exemplars where appropriate. Inclusive material design for students with disabilities. Ensure online tools respond to a range of viewing devices. Ensure that the online content is written in a friendly and supportive tone. Where non-literal language such as metaphor is used then provide alternative ways for students to access meaning. Use trigger warnings. Make sure learning resources are freely available. 	<p><i>Active listening and empathy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively listen to (neurodivergent) students and be curious and empathetic in response. Noticing distress in students in a classroom. Respond empathetically to requests for clarification. Actively check in with students on their wellbeing. Show genuine care and concern for students. <p><i>Student-lecturer relationships and trust building</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek relational student-lecturer engagement to create trusting relationships and relate to the student as a person. Show interest in students and build trust by

organisational systems and processes.

Leadership and organisational culture

- University leaders – as the carriers of culture – need to embody compassion in their leadership practice.
- Recognise care, kindness and compassion as fundamentals of humanity in the workplace.
- Leadership development programs should include the application of skills of compassion in organisational settings.

Physical and emotional learning environments

- Think about physical classroom environments to minimise sensory stress.

- Have compassionate role models and teachers on the program team.
- Respond in a timely manner to students' program requests.

Communication and interaction

- Use a variety of modes of communication including synchronous and asynchronous.
- Define roles to also include expectations regarding respectful interactions as part of program participation.
- Demonstrating respect for students by using their preferred personal pronouns.

Student engagement and involvement

- Involve research students in research seminars.

- Have pre-recordings of learning materials.

Student engagement and collaboration

- Develop opportunities for students to create knowledge in collaboration.
- Use prompts and activities to enable interpersonal knowing and psychological safety in small group interactions to promote relationship building including learning names.
- Create a wisdom wall where at the end of the course students reflect on their experience, identify a piece of advice for future students.
- Provide students with the option to create small study groups to promote peer support.
- Use a survey in week one with information such as first in their family to university, being the main carer for someone etc. to support students who would benefit from more regular communications.
- Ask students for suggestions about improvements. Where feasible, implement their

promoting small talk before class.

- View students as people who are trying their best to balance a multitude of responsibilities and expectations.
- Put humanity on display by sharing stories of struggle and pain and encouragement to respond to suffering.
- Use of humour to connect students with content.

Recognition of student humanity and individuality

- Acknowledge students' humanity before their academic achievements.
 - Recognise the unique experiences of individuals, especially of those in marginalised groups.
 - Be sensitive to addressing inequalities among students.
 - Be intentional and strategic about reminding students of their inherent worth as individuals rising to the challenge of learning while
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- Be attentive to the language and representations of compassion in everyday experience.

suggestions and when not, acknowledge the feedback and provide rationale.

Feedback, reflection, and improvement

- Teach students to set small goals, evaluate, and self-correct.
- Use rubrics for feedback where appropriate and provide prompt, meaningful, regular feedback to promote self-improvement.
- Ensure high-quality formative feedback.
- Regularly highlight the relevance of module content to learning outcomes.
- Support the transference of learning to the real world.
- Champion accountability by asking students to notify about absence or extension requests.

Care and wellbeing

- Integrate self-care strategies into modules.
- Find opportunities for movement where possible and build in regular breaks.
- Establish boundaries with students by informing and reminding students of wellbeing

balancing complex life experiences.

- Embrace histories as resources by valuing student stories.

Encouraging student growth and development

- Provide friendly support and communications as appropriate.
- Encourage and motivate students to support their relational and personal development.

Lecturer self-reflection and professional growth

- Embody humanised qualities of creativity, commitment, compassion, consistency, and character.
 - As a lecturer engage in sustained critical self-reflection to consider their values, assumptions, and beliefs.
 - Ensure ongoing lecturer engagement with content
-

resources and help them access as needed.

to remain informed of latest trends.

Module design and communication

- Have a visually appealing and homepage with welcome video and clearly signpost to access content.
 - Agree a class contract at the start of the module.
 - Training in compassion-based micro communication skills for group work.
 - Draw on Socratic methods of teaching and learning through ongoing intellectual dialogues.
-

Discussion

The aim of this scoping review was to understand how compassionate pedagogies are conceptualised and realised in contemporary higher education contexts. This knowledge is important given the ongoing challenges to student wellbeing and the need for compassion in the post-COVID era. This study has four contributions to make to the pedagogic conversation around compassion in higher education.

Firstly, the number of peer-reviewed publications related to compassionate pedagogy has seen an upturn since 2020. This could be attributed to the rise in concern for compassion in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research gaps were noted in the literature around the number of articles which sought to capture the student and institutional perspectives of compassionate pedagogy. Only five of the articles included the perspectives of students (Benkwitz et al., 2019; Gilbert et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2023; White et al., 2023). Given that the students are the *raison d'être* for compassionate pedagogy then further research which seeks to include their perspective would be beneficial. As Waddington and Bonaparte state (2022, p. 13), “seeing compassion through students’ eyes is crucial in order to highlight previously hidden aspects of students’ experiences”. The other research gap noted was in relation to the literature around institutional perspectives of compassionate pedagogy. Only six articles focused on this level of understanding (Andrew et al., 2023; Andrews et al., 2019; Benkwitz et al., 2019; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Waddington, 2016, 2018). Having an organisational structure that has processes, policies, and networks in place to support a compassionate learning and teaching environment is important (Gibbs, 2017). As more universities are including compassion in their vision and values, the question remains as to whether institutional level compassionate principles are cascaded down to the student and staff experiences of compassionate pedagogy in the classroom. However, we must always be mindful that caring and compassionate responses need to come from a place of authenticity and cannot be mandated or obliged; we cannot contract compassion (Gibbs, 2017).

What was evident from the articles which discussed institutional approaches towards compassionate pedagogy was an awareness of the challenges around higher education cultures and teaching staff workload. The competitive, neoliberal context of higher education was highlighted with a sense of increasing marketisation where students are seen as consumers which can lead to a compassion gap in universities (Waddington, 2016). Furthermore, Waddington (2016) argues that if students do not experience a compassionate learning environment at university, then it will be difficult for them to translate compassionate behaviour into future working practices. The audit culture of neoliberalism places an increased burden on teaching staff (Andrew et al., 2023). An example of this is evidenced in the marking workload and feedback deadlines such that it is not untypical for marking to spill over into evenings and weekends to meet the required deadline (Arnold, 2010). This situation has been suggestive of a lack of compassion from the institution towards the marking burden and stress placed on teaching staff (Andrew et al., 2023). This can impact on students such that time pressures may limit the ability of teaching staff to notice and respond to distress presented by students during the assessment processes or means that educators may emotionally distance themselves from students (Andrew et al., 2023). The response to this would be to have institutions build time into workloads for academics to take time for students (Gibbs, 2017). The notion of time is an important consideration in relation

to compassionate pedagogy as while it does not necessarily take any extra time to notice distress, it will no doubt take additional time to respond meaningfully to that distress. This is important because one of the circumstances that shuts down compassion is when we do not have the resources and capacity to respond (Worline & Dutton, 2017).

The second contribution this review makes to academic conversations around compassionate pedagogy is regarding its definition. In the studies included in this review, authors seemed to define compassion but stopped short of defining compassionate pedagogy, i.e. that translation of compassion into the learning and teaching environment. There was no consistent definition of compassionate pedagogy in the included literature. This was expected in part given that the phrase “compassionate pedagogy” was used as an umbrella term to encompass a range of pedagogies including humanising or pedagogies of kindness. However, even within the literature that explicitly referred to compassionate pedagogy, no universal definition appeared to exist. Literature beyond the contemporary date limit applied to this study have predominantly focused on definitions of compassionate pedagogy with a critical lens, i.e., drawing on the traditions of Freire and Giroux with the notion that education and politics are inseparable (Giroux, 2021). For example, the political nature of education is implicit in Hao’s (2011) definition of Critical Compassionate Pedagogy (Hao, 2011):

A pedagogical commitment that allows educators to criticise institutional and classroom practices that ideologically underserve students at disadvantaged positions, while at the same time be self-reflexive of their actions through compassion as a daily commitment.

Waddington and Bonaparte’s report for the Society for Research in Higher Education (2022) similarly draw on “critical pedagogy” and “critical compassion”. These were used as theoretical underpinnings of their report investigating the core components of compassionate pedagogy and the perspective of students at one UK Higher Education Institute. The critical aspect of compassion here highlights the politics of compassion which was posited to help understand structural inequalities and injustices (Waddington & Bonaparte, 2022). Importantly, staff wellbeing is included. As such they advance the following definition of compassionate pedagogy (p. 4):

Recognising and noticing the difference, discrimination, and bias in how people are being treated, how students are learning and being taught, and the compassionate actions – both strategic and small – that we all need to take to promote and support student and staff wellbeing.

To complement the above definitions, this current review noted four key aspects to compassionate pedagogy from a synthesis of the included literature: 1) a noticing of suffering, distress, or disadvantage; 2) a commitment to address or mitigate the suffering, distress, or disadvantage; 3) the promotion of wellbeing and flourishing; 4) a concern for the whole student, i.e., beyond the cognitive role of education alone. Thus, these authors offer the following working definition for compassionate pedagogy in higher education:

Compassionate pedagogy is an educational approach that notices and actively addresses or mitigates distress and disadvantage in the learning environment, with a central emphasis on the promotion of student and staff wellbeing and flourishing and fostering holistic student development.

Whilst similarities exist between all the definitions, what this definition offers is the addition of wellbeing as flourishing, and the explicit inclusion of moving beyond the purely cognitive aspects of learning to consider the student as a whole person. Definitions are important because some hesitancy exists within Higher Education around compassionate approaches with the perspective that they can be seen as soft, fluffy, or overly emotional (Andrew et al., 2023). Some argue that compassion is too deep and problematic, moving into the territories of spirituality or religions or too far towards therapeutic models where academics are taking on skills which do not necessarily connect to their discipline (Robinson, 2018). Thus, while discussing what is defined as compassionate pedagogy it would be prudent to mention what was deemed to be beyond its scope. Authors were clear that compassionate pedagogy does not mean that lecturers need to become counsellors (Bartholomay, 2022) or that it negates the need for students to take responsibility or lack accountability in relation to attendance or extension requests (Stephens, 2021). Compassionate pedagogy is not pandering to every student request or enacting every piece of feedback from students. But it is responding to requests or feedback such that there are explanations around what can and cannot be enacted (Stephens, 2021). Compassionate pedagogy cannot leave full responsibility at the feet of the institution and the teaching staff, as Hao (2011) would maintain that students also have a responsibility to strive to become the best students they can be; there must be shared compassion.

The third contribution from this review was an offering of the ways in which compassionate pedagogy are realised in a range of disciplines and levels from institutional to individual lecturer as displayed in Table 5. The authors are mindful that the goal here was not to provide a checklist of best practices which if replicated would meet the criteria for a compassionate teaching and learning environment (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). Rather, what we sought to do was to bring together a range of examples of compassionate pedagogy. The caution here is akin to the translational aspect of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers do not necessarily generalise findings to wider populations but encourage readers of the research to consider the context and findings and whether there is any translatable learning to their own situation. Therefore, with this consideration in mind, we offer this synthesis (Table 5) on how compassionate pedagogy is realised in a range of disciplines with examples which others have used and found to be helpful in seeking a compassionate pedagogy.

It must be noted that many of the practices discussed in the context of developing a compassionate teaching and learning environment are not necessarily new. For example, the diversification of assessment types, ensuring learning materials are available to students in advance, or using multimodal approaches are synonymous with creating an inclusive, student-centred, authentic learning experience. As such, the reader may be left wondering what is new with regards the use of a compassionate lens to frame pedagogy? Perhaps the answer lies in that question. That compassionate pedagogy offers a lens for educators to view their practice; to be mindful of students as people; as people with complex lives and facing multiple challenges (not unlike our own lives), not least in navigating their way through their learning journey at university, be that undergraduate or post-graduate. The more we pay attention to compassion as a lens through which to view our education practice the more we shine a light on distress in the learning and teaching context. As compassion expert Paul Gilbert once wrote “attention is like a spotlight—

whatever it shines on becomes brighter in the mind. This knowledge can help us build compassion” (Gilbert, 2013).

The fourth contribution this review makes to better understanding compassionate pedagogy is in relation to the importance of reflection on education practice. Of the articles included in this review, 16 were reflective discussions. These reflections offer a valuable contribution to expose educators to the ways in which others have approached compassion in their education practice. Andrews and colleagues (2019) encourage educators to engage in sustained critical self-reflection as part of pedagogic practice. This is important as educators need to consider their own values, assumptions, identity, beliefs, and stereotypes so that we can be honest about our practice (Andrews et al., 2019). This also helps us become more considerate of the values and perspectives of others. Thus, a recommendation from this scoping review is a reminder for educators to practice self-reflection regularly and ask themselves where they are noticing distress in students (at an individual, module, program, or institutional level), and what steps they can take to mitigate this distress or disadvantage.

This self-reflection starts with the noticing of distress which can help attune us to the suffering of those we come into contact with. If we notice distress, we can then do something to respond to it (Denney, 2020). Indeed, if distress or suffering is never noticed, then it can never be met with compassion (Worline & Dutton, 2017). However, the noticing of distress in the learning and teaching environment is only the first part of compassionate pedagogy. The next part involves a response in relation to the wellbeing of “the other”, in the championing of wellbeing and the consideration of one another as whole people; compassionate pedagogy needs to have a proactive element which seeks to pre-empt and prevent future suffering or barriers to learning. In this way, there are overlaps with adaptive pedagogy with its focus on anticipating potential learning barriers during the planning phase, making reasonable adjustments before and during sessions, and implementing responsive, real-time adaptations during the learning process (Sors & Bloom, 2024).

Having said this, compassionate pedagogy does not necessarily mean alleviating **all** distress or suffering in a learning and teaching context. There will always be an element of suffering as part of education as learning challenges and stretches us. In the education context, it has been said that “students are not suffering for the sake of suffering, but to achieve certain educational goals and gain value from suffering” (Zheng & Zhang, 2021). Zheng and Zhang (2021) argue that some forms of suffering as part of education is meaningful because it promotes self-improvement and development. Thus, educators need to be mindful that compassionate pedagogy cannot and should not alleviate all forms of suffering in the learning and teaching context but rather mitigate suffering which is creating a barrier to learning.

It is also important to be mindful that there are numerous instances of compassionate responses already evident in the classroom and beyond; we need to remember these positive stories. Appreciative inquiry may be helpful in noticing these positive stories of compassion. This is something that Waddington (2016) highlighted in her reflexive dialogue on compassion gaps in universities by using Creede’s notion of generating identity stories as a compassionate practice (Creede, 2014). Creede encourages a noticing of our most cherished stories and how we use them, to notice the stories of others, to notice conversational patterns in critical moments, to make choices in those critical moments to reinforce the cherished stories of others, and to notice new

stories of self through reflexive inquiry (Creede, 2014). Therefore, a positive noticing of compassion is also important in our self-reflections to help us become more cognisant of the compassionate practice already taking place in and around us.

It seems pertinent to close by echoing the warning by Worline and Dutton (2022) regarding the risk of simplistic approaches to compassion: "To teach with compassion is an expression of skilled practice that bears continual learning over a lifetime of work" (Worline & Dutton, 2022). Let us therefore seek to develop our compassionate practice and be courageous in calling forth greater compassion in higher education learning and teaching environments.

Strengths and limitations

As far as the authors are aware, this is the first scoping review to consider how compassionate pedagogy is conceptualised and realised in contemporary higher education. The strength of the review is that it draws on an international perspective from a range of disciplines. This is important because compassionate pedagogy is of global concern to educators.

Whilst the authors attempted to carry out a comprehensive and rigorous search strategy there is always a risk that not all relevant articles were located. In addition, the articles included in the review were limited to those published in English and grey literature was not included. This may have led to the exclusion of some relevant articles.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand how compassionate pedagogies are conceptualised and realised in contemporary higher education contexts. Overall, the findings suggest that there was no consistent definition of compassionate pedagogy available in the literature. Based on a synthesis of the included studies the authors offer a working definition: Compassionate pedagogy is an educational approach that notices and actively addresses or mitigates distress and disadvantage in the learning environment, with a central emphasis on the promotion of student and staff wellbeing and flourishing and fostering holistic student development. This review also offers examples of the ways in which compassionate pedagogy are realised from a range of disciplines and levels including institutional, program (curriculum), module, and individual lecturer. It is recommended that educators reflect on their pedagogic practice to notice where distress may be occurring in the learning and teaching environment and consider what proactive steps they can take to address these barriers to learning.

Further research should investigate the perspectives of students on how compassionate pedagogy can be realised. Institutional perspectives would also be beneficial to understand how compassionate values, policies, and leadership cascade down to the student and staff experiences of compassionate pedagogy in the classroom. This could be achieved with appreciative inquiry such that an asset-based approach is used to understand where compassionate pedagogy is currently being realised.

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