

Cultivating Kindness: An Educator's Guide

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Cultivating Kindness: An Educator's Guide

By John-Tyler Binfet

Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2022, 248 pages (paperback)

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Drawing on his own and others' research, Dr. J. Binfet sets the tone for this educators' guide by situating his focus on kindness as a central feature within social and emotional learning (SEL). Many school districts and teacher education programs across Canada have made systemic changes to support the development of students' social and emotional capabilities because research has shown that SEL supports all areas of academic learning (Wentzel; Datu and Park; cited by Binfet, pp. 39, 47). Using resources such as those provided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), evaluations of school and classroom culture seek to answer whether they are environments conducive to fostering social and emotional learning through indicators such as, "ample warmth and nurturing interactions between adults and children, clear behavioural and academic expectations, an organized structure that reduces

unpredictability and uncertainty, plentiful opportunities for children and adolescents to have input as the authoritative or democratic leadership style of the adult welcomes and invites that, and regular opportunities to put into practice the newly learned and emerging social and emotional competencies” (p. 29).

Binfet (2022) acknowledges that “acquiring social and emotional competencies is a process in which individuals have low, medium and high levels of proficiency” and that this learning is acquired over time (p. 23). Teachers hold a central role in supporting students’ SEL development by “mentoring, monitoring, and supporting children and adolescents in their completion of kind acts”; “just asking [students] to be kind is not enough” (p. 52). To support teachers with this task, the second part of the book addresses how kindness can be viewed as three different types: responsive kindness whereby the person “offers a form of support to someone or something in a moment of need – it is reactionary” (p. 63); intentional kindness, which is ongoing in nature and “requires reflection, perspective-taking, and planning (p. 72); and quiet kindness, an act “for which there is no immediate audience” (p. 89). Within each type, there are four domains: physical (e.g., a student dropped his books in the hall and a classmate stops to pick them up); emotional (e.g., a student stumbles upon someone crying and asks if he is okay); social (e.g., a student sees a new student looking for somewhere to sit in the school cafeteria and invites her to sit at the table where her friends are gathered); and environmental (e.g., picking up trash outside the school to show respect) (p. 63). Each condition arises in response to the “perception of a need” (p. 63).

The third section of Binfet’s (2022) educators’ guide includes practical ideas for building kindness within a classroom and school. Many of the strategies are low-cost and can be implemented immediately and daily (see, for example, p. 106 for a list of ideas). The outcome will be teachers, children, and adolescents who can “reflect on who around them needs kindness, the driving force behind their kindness (i.e., their time and energy versus materials goods), how they would like to be kind (e.g., responsive, intentional, or quiet), and the impact on themselves and their recipients” (p. 138). This guide offers an “opportunity for educators to guide, mentor, and encourage” their students by setting an action plan through a kindness regime (p. 138).

Anecdotes from student-submitted questionnaires illustrate help the reader to visualize implementation of the strategies contained in this guide. The student voice helps to connect the presented theory and ideas to the educators’ classroom and school. Further,

the appendices include tools for evaluating school or classroom culture for evidence of kindness, which can be used to set a baseline and for ongoing progress monitoring of the school culture. Binfet (2022) provides a framework for any school to work together to develop a culture of kindness, where all members (teachers, staff, learners) thrive and become the best possible humans they can be through planning for and reflecting on kind acts toward themselves and others.