TEACH[R]

Fostering the development of empathy in the classroom

A strategic response to the problem of bullying

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Abstract

This article describes the development of empathy within children and provides classroom-based interventions that will foster its development. The development of empathy is a complex process involving both cognitive and affective functioning and awareness. Various perspectives of empathy are explored including what develops, when it develops, and how it develops. Cultural issues are raised that identify variations in development based on socialisation, gender, and cultural values. Abnormal development of empathy is discussed in the form of aggression and bullying. Interventions for fostering empathy within the victim and the bully and for fostering empathy within the classroom setting are described. The article concludes by placing empathy within the context of the Christian worldview of following Christ's example and identifies the many benefits of teaching empathy in schools.

> *Empathy is the act of 'feeling into' another's affective experience*

The study of empathy development is becoming increasingly important because of the implications for educators. President Obama (see Anburajan, 2008) described the current state of the world:

> I'm talking about a moral deficit. I'm talking about an empathy deficit. I'm talking about an inability to recognise ourselves in one another; to understand that we are our brother's keeper; we are our sister's keeper; that, in the words of Dr. King, we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny.

The expression of empathy is a component essential for accommodating human diversity in our world. Because empathy development and learning culturally acceptable social skills begin early in life (e.g., Hutman & Dapretto, 2009; Sangrigoli & de Schonen, 2004) an understanding of different cultures and perspectives must also begin early and the school setting provides an ideal stage for both development and intervention.

Empathy

The definition used for this paper describes empathy as "the act of 'feeling into' another's affective experience" (Strayer & Eisenberg, 1978, p. 191). Empathy therefore involves a two-part process. The first part is the cognitive awareness of the internal state of another person. The second part is the emotional response toward the other person (Hoffman, 1987).

Stages of empathy development

Hoffman (1987) outlines four general stages of empathy development. In the initial stage, infants have no comprehension that they are separate from other people. After this stage comes the awareness that one is physically a separate entity from other people. In the third stage, the realisation of physical separateness expands to emotional separateness—awareness that other people have different feelings from one's own feelings. Finally, comes the understanding that people's identities are made up of their previous experiences. Thus, one may conclude that empathy is complex and involves both cognitive understanding and emotional processing. As children gain experiences and develop cognitively, their potential for empathy also develops.

When empathy develops

The cognitive aspects of empathy can be broken down into three mental abilities: emotional decoding skills, understanding of emotional states, and perspective taking (Ickes, 1997). Emotional decoding or recognition appears earliest and occurs during infancy. Most research indicates that by the age of 4 months infants have developed preferences based on facial expressions. For example, infants spend more time looking at a smiling face than a frowning face, implying that prior to this, infants seem unaware of the meanings of facial expressions and thus that emotional decoding skills are not developed until face preference is observable.

Emotional decoding. The ability to name discrete emotions (an outcome of emotional decoding skills) occurs next at around the age of 4 or 5 years (Ickes, 1997). The first emotion to be labelled is generally happiness, followed by sadness, anger and then fear. The understanding of complex emotions such as contempt, pride and surprise come much later.

Understanding emotional states. Ickes, (1997) suggests that by the age of 2 years children have a rudimentary understanding of emotions and begin to talk about emotions and the actions that correspond with those emotions. From 3 to 7 years of age children develop the understanding that a person's emotions are based on that person's perspective of the situation rather than the situation itself. While at 5 years a child is only aware of one emotion at a time, by 7 or 8 years a child becomes aware of experiencing two emotions simultaneously but perceives them being of a similar valence (positive/negative), such as fear and sorrow. At age 10, a child has the ability to recognise multiple simultaneously occurring emotions.

Perspective taking. According to Ickes (1997), perspective taking seems to take the largest leap at the age of 3 years. At this time, a child has a strong concept of differences in desires between two people and their perspective taking utilises their understanding of others' desires to predict or interpret others' behaviours. The 3-year-old is also capable of inferring invisible states within others and themselves.

The attempt to recognise others' beliefs and cognitive patterns is more complex and develops at an older age. Generally, at a younger age, a child takes into account what a person desires in order to understand what another is thinking, whereas an older child would be more likely to consider beliefs and thoughts (What do I know? What does the other person know or think is true?) when trying to ascertain another's experience.

How empathy develops

Various factors influence how empathy develops. As early as 10 weeks of age a child begins his or her first noticeable acts of empathy when the infant imitates his or her mother's facial expressions of anger or happiness. Mimicry is the most basic act of empathy, and continues to play an important role throughout the lifespan. It has been postulated that motor mimicry occurs instantaneously as a means of expressing likeness within the group (Hoffman, 2000). According to Hoffman (1987), mimicry of facial expressions and other nonverbal cues play a role in forming bonds between a mother and child, between friends and even between interviewers and interviewees.

Classical conditioning (i.e., learning that two things are consistently associated with each other) also promotes empathy. For instance, a child that is held close by a smiling mother feels a happy sense of safety. The child begins to associate smiling with the current happiness. Soon a smile alone from the mother creates happiness in the child (i.e., the smile becomes a conditioned stimulus; Hoffman, 2000).

Direct association is a method of empathy that occurs when one observes another person going through a similar experience and having a similar nonverbal state (Hoffman, 2000). The person then feels what the other feels, based on his or her own memory of past incidents. Barnett (1987) conducted a study assessing preschoolers' empathy toward an upset child of similar age. A preschooler's level of empathy was higher when he/she had previously had an experience similar to that of the upset child. In terms of the development of empathy, it seems useful not to discourage a child from displaying strong emotions. Lenrow (1965 as cited by Barnett, 1987) conducted a study that found that preschoolers who cried more frequently were more likely to engage in empathic responses than those who cried less. Encouraging children to display their emotions is an important part of helping them to recognise emotions in others.

> ***"Preschoolers who cried more frequently were more likely to engage in empathic responses than those who cried less"***

Mediated awareness occurs when a person takes on another's emotional state after being explicitly told that person's thoughts and feelings. For example, Batson et al. (1996) presented stories to college students about an adolescent who hated going to school because he/she suffered through embarrassment and constant ridicule. The story told of how looking in the mirror brought about agony because of a terrible case of acne. Many of the college students reflected a high level of empathic distress after reading these stories. Women who reported that they had had similar experiences felt even greater empathic distress upon reading the story. Mediated awareness does not necessarily

have to come in the form of a story; sometimes a single word such as 'cancer' can arouse empathy. In general, mediated awareness involves language which is presumed to create visual or auditory images within the observer and those images are believed to result in an emotional reaction that is empathic (i.e., similar to that of the victim; Hoffman, 2000).

The most cognitively demanding state of empathy arousal occurs in role-taking. This happens when one observes someone else and then makes that person's beliefs, values, and emotions one's own. Three types of role-taking exist: self-focused role-taking, other-focused role-taking and a combination of the two. Self-focused role-taking occurs when one places oneself in the other person's shoes. One imagines how oneself would feel in that circumstance and assumes that the other feels the same as oneself would feel (possibly an inaccurate assumption). In contrast, other-focused role-taking occurs when one tries to become the other person and imagines how another person feels in a scenario based on what is known about the other person and allows for the possibility that someone else would feel differently than oneself in the situation (a more likely scenario). Research has shown that self-focused role-taking leads to the formation of stronger emotional bonds, yet can result in the empathiser losing sight of the other person and projecting one's own thoughts and feelings on the scenario (Hoffman, 2000).

Empathy and moral behaviour

Empathy is closely linked to moral thinking (cf., Okin & Reich, 1999). One cannot behave morally without empathy since moral behaviour is behaviour which takes the welfare of others into consideration—which is to say, moral behaviour is empathic behaviour.

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Cultural factors related to moral development include variations in parenting styles, beliefs, socialisation, and customs regarding childcare. These factors constitute the child's developmental niche. Depending on the cultural ideals and taboos, moral values and developmental paths differ among children from different cultures. Outcomes from similar socialisation practices may differ for children depending on cultural factors (for example, corporal punishment tends to have a negative impact on children's moral behaviours for one cultural group but a positive impact for another (Gershoff, 2002). Some of these differences are related to the degree of individualism versus collectivism among cultures. Differences have also been found between males and females in terms of whether moral decisions are made based more on a morality of justice (it's the legal and right thing to do to maintain the social good) versus a morality of care (it's the kind thing to do to maintain the welfare of others). Although findings vary from one study to another, it is likely that both genders use both types of moral reasoning to varying degrees.

Rather than adopt a universal expectation for how moral development should progress for all children, one must recognise the environmental and social factors unique to an individual child. Kohlberg's own notions of moral development emphasised that a child *constructs* each new, advanced stage of moral thinking based on experiences within his or her cultural context (Eckensberger, 1994).

Therefore, the teacher has an opportunity to *create* experiences that promote moral development and thus the development of empathy. For example, if a child is functioning at a level at which determination of what is right or wrong is based on whether or not she gets punished for the behaviour, the teacher could set up a classroom skit in which Billy steals Sally's favourite pencil but Billy is not caught and so is not punished. The audience of students would know that Billy stole the pencil. The teacher could create an opportunity for moral development by asking the students to discuss: whether Billy had done anything wrong; whether something is wrong if one does not get in trouble for it; how Sally might have felt about losing her pencil; and whether an action is wrong when it causes hurt to another human being (higher level of moral thought which incorporates empathy) or only when the action causes the person to get in trouble (lower level of moral thought showing little empathy). Conversely, teachers may inadvertently validate a low level of moral reasoning. For example, in some instances, a bully is not punished because the socially inept victim may have provoked the attack resulting in the view that the bullying was 'deserved'. In a classroom where teachers ignore harm, bullies, victims and onlookers may conclude that it is acceptable to physically harm a person who 'deserves' or provokes it (a very low level of moral reasoning, particularly from a morality of care perspective).

Researchers have defined two general dimensions of moral development, both of which are of interest to teachers. The first dimension consists of prosocial behaviours such as comforting, sharing, and helping (all of which involve empathy). The second consists of antisocial behaviours such as aggression (which disregards others' feelings). In dialogues about resolving moral issues, youth who demonstrated features of the positive dimension (e.g., inhibiting one's emotional reaction, unbiased consideration of problem solutions, ability to empathically consider the other's point of view)

and inhibited features of the negative dimension (e.g., blaming others, ignoring others' emotions) demonstrated higher levels of moral behaviour (Haan, 1991). The interventions discussed below emphasise this relational, interactive nature of morality and identify some ways that teachers can promote the development of the positive dimension and diminish the negative dimension. Bear in mind, however, that culture influences how a particular behaviour is classified along these two dimensions and what outcomes may be considered fair or unfair.

Abnormal development of empathy

One example of abnormal empathy development is aggression. Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2008) describe hostility as the motive for aggression. Whereas hostility involves the *desire* to hurt someone, aggression is the explicit *action* that involves taking something, hitting or insulting someone. Various cultural factors influence the individuality and development of aggressive behaviour, the behaviours one observes and how one's own and others' aggressive behaviours are reinforced. Feshbach (1987) found that lower empathy in fathers was associated with more acting-out behaviour in their children and that lower maternal empathy was associated with both more acting-out behaviour and more internalising behaviour (e.g., withdrawal, depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety) in their children. Child abuse can also lead to behaviour patterns of aggression and delinquency. Children in abusive situations may show signs of withdrawal, low self-esteem, hostility, and aggression.

Any recurring aggressive action directed towards another is considered bullying (Olweus, 1991). Proactive bullying occurs when a student uses aggression as a means to accomplish a goal. Reactive bullying occurs when a child commits aggression as a response to another's actions (Crapanzano et al., 2010). Reactive bullying is characterised by poor impulse control and a lack of emotional regulation. It is believed that a child is more likely to exhibit bullying when he/she has temperamental traits of impulsivity and unmanageability. In general, this child is easily aroused to anger and fits of aggression (Rothbart & Bates, 1998), and shows little empathy for victims (Olweus, 1991).

Interventions

Okin and Reich (1999) describe empathy as an innate potential within children that guides moral thinking, action, concepts of justice, and the concern for others. Furthermore, Barnett (1987) describes an optimal environment for fostering empathy as one that: (1) meets the child's emotional needs and downplays self-concern so that one's focus is on others; (2) promotes the child's awareness and expression of a wide range of emotions; and (3) provides multiple opportunities for the child to observe his or her interactions with others while being actively responsive. However, based on research regarding aggressive, antisocial, and bullying behaviour, one sees that not every child has been given the opportunity to foster his or her potential for empathy. Thus, the following section describes classroom-based interventions for remediating bullying and fostering empathy.

Remediating bullying

For teachers who have encountered a bullying situation, a two-fold intervention may be helpful in addressing the parties involved. The first part of the intervention focuses on the victim. Studies have shown that a victim of bullying typically has very low emotional recognition of fear and anger (Woods, Wolke, Nowicki, & Hall, 2009). The phenomenon of bully baiting, in which the child provokes the bully into action also occurs. In both cases, the teacher should make sure to avoid blaming the victim for the incident but rather speak with the child to identify more socially appropriate behaviours to use in the future to accomplish the same goal but without emotional outbursts and without provoking the bully or giving power to the bully. A second intervention focuses on the bully. Rock, Hammond and Rasmussen (2002) suggest having the bully write a paper about a time when he or she was mistreated and relate that to how the bully thinks the victim felt. After reading the paper, time should be dedicated to devising alternative ways the bully could have handled the situation. Although it may seem that empathy helps influence a bully to want to act better, findings suggest that helping a bully empathise is most effective when he or she is given ways to communicate in a healthier manner (Rock, Hammond, & Rasmussen, 2002). Discussing alternative actions to receive the desired outcome should be approached in a non-condemning manner.

Teaching care-based ethics

Ruiz and Vallejos (1999) propose a model for moral education that promotes empathy as a teachable perspective using compassion and care-based ethics. Bullying behaviour is expected to diminish when the bully's empathy deficits are diminished through the teaching of three skill sets: (1) affective training and observational learning, (2) socio-affective experiences, and (3) social skills and moral development. Affective training involves learning to interpret and understand emotions in others through

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facial, bodily, or vocal expressions. Upon mastering this, one is able to feel what others are feeling. Having students observe realistic experiences that they can relate to personally is another approach that uses socio-affective experiences to foster empathy. Teachers ought to promote role-taking opportunities that engage students in identifying how others may feel, reflecting on these feelings, and finding ways to improve the well-being of others. For example, after acting out a Bible story, small groups could identify the feelings of the characters and link these to common school experiences that produce similar feelings. This could lead into a brainstorming of ways to resolve any identified problems. Empathy is also promoted when teachers model altruistic and charitable behaviours. Examples include organising a fundraiser for a local charity, participating in a food-drive, or setting up a donation box with school supplies to be sent overseas.

Finally, teaching social skills directly promotes moral and empathy development. The development of assertive behaviour (which gives equal consideration to one's own *and* others' rights), self-control (inhibiting one's response for the benefit of others), and communication skills through active listening and dialogue (which involves verbally reflecting back what one has heard the other say and is a feature of empathy) can increase empathy. Teachers may act as coaches to help students confront a problem, take the perspective of the other (even defend the other's view), and suggest alternatives to resolve the moral problem. Bullies, unlike more socially capable students, may not develop higher moral thinking and empathy without direct instruction from the teacher and a classroom environment that heightens social awareness and a shared sense of responsibility for one another.

> ***"The techniques actors use to portray a character can be used to develop empathy"***

Method acting

Verducci (2000) suggests that the techniques actors use to portray a character can be used to develop empathy. Three specific techniques are applicable to moral education and fostering empathy in students. One technique focuses on the cognitive understanding that comes from delving into the material and interpreting clues. Reflecting on and understanding the context of the character or person is necessary for developing the 'what' and 'why' of caring empathy. For example, using a book, chapter, play, or script as material, teachers can have students think about the context of the story and character to make predictions about the character's feelings and responses to various situations.

Another technique focuses actors' (and students') attention on others' behaviours. Actor A makes a verbal statement about what she observes in Actor B, such as "You have blue eyes." The two actors continue to use the initial statement until the internal (emotional) experience of one of the actors compels him/her to change the words or until the behaviour observed in the other actor compels a change in observation. For example, Actor A might change to, "You dislike having blue eyes", if Actor A noticed behavioural hints that this may be the case, such as the other actor looking down or using a sad tone when saying, "I have blue eyes" to reflect back the initial sentence. The repetition of the same sentence helps actors learn to attend to each other's behaviours instead of the content of the words. Attending to behavioural meanings is a core element of empathy and requires more than just decoding word meanings; empathy requires decoding meanings based on contextual cues, such as those that behaviour and voice tone suggest. Repetition exercises could be adapted to fit the classroom setting using a game-like approach whereby students attempt to communicate different emotional states using only facial expressions and body language or by using just a predetermined word ("apples") with changes only in voice tone and body language. The class could be divided into teams and students try to guess the emotion being displayed.

The third technique focuses on creating substitutions that engage the imagination. Substitution involves the process of using an experience from one's own life, which conjures an emotional response similar to that of the character's, to put oneself in the other's place. For example, if a student is sad and having a difficult day because his or her dog is sick, other students can practice empathising by thinking of a time when something or someone they loved was broken or sick, and how it made them feel. By exploring and utilising these techniques through acting, a split-self is created which enables a student to retain his or her identity while gaining a deep understanding of another's experience.

Although dramatic empathy and caring empathy have similar characteristics, they also have distinguishing ones. Verducci (2001) mentioned that caring empathisers respond *to* others rather than *as* others. Additionally, caring empathisers are more open to receive and respond to others. Verducci concludes by maintaining the value of using dramatic method techniques in schools to foster empathy because they train students to read environmental clues found in behaviour and in situations. Opportunities may be used to discuss moral and ethical implications of taking on various roles. Teachers and students should be selective in the plays, movies, and characters they chose to study and emulate.

Because method acting techniques present novel tasks that would typically be enjoyed by all students, the teacher may be able to side-step resistance that bullies might otherwise put up if they thought they were the targets of interventions. Using experiential exercises such as these, instead of a lecture or workbook assignment, can circumvent resistance and lead to learning that is more meaningful. This type of experience-based learning is more easily incorporated into one's memory and behaviour. We tend to believe what we do rather than do what we believe, so having bullies act out moral, empathic behaviours stands a good chance of promoting the development of their morality and empathy.

Using moral dilemmas

A final intervention, proposed by Upright (2002), outlines ways to use moral dilemmas to foster empathy. Each dilemma provides opportunities for role-playing and learning how to empathise. The author describes empathy as the ability to care about someone else and understand where he or she is coming from. The first phase begins by assessing the students' current level of moral understanding. This can be done through informal interviews or by observation. Next, an appropriate story is chosen, and students are given time to brainstorm and collaborate about the details and implications of the story. After this, the story should be presented in an enjoyable and interesting way (orally, written text, the internet, a video, etc). Following the story, students are asked thought-provoking questions to encourage discussion of the dilemma. If further debate is necessary, the implications of the story may be broadened. Finally, activities may be assigned to encourage further student reflection. Any signs of moral progress should be recorded. Throughout each of these phases, role-playing is encouraged. These activities help students, including bullies, 'try on' different perspectives, and thus foster the development of empathy.

A quick application of moral dilemmas to facilitate empathy is to give students opportunities for decision making when presented with various choices. The teacher could present a brief story describing a controversial topic (e.g., minor cheating, lying to protect someone, etc.) and ask students to create a "value lineup". Value lineups involve having students physically move to one side of the room or the other or somewhere in between to represent their level of agreement with the character's actions. Value lineups can promote empathy development by helping students understand that people's beliefs, feelings, and opinions vary.

Trouble-shooting interventions

It is possible that some students will not respond well to some of the interventions. Students may not fully grasp the seriousness of the activities of role-playing, writing moral dilemmas or method acting. Some may simply feel uncomfortable participating or engaging in such behaviour. A possible resolution may be to allow students to form groups or choose a partner with whom to practice the activities. Another possibility would be to ask senior students or parents to lead out in the various interventions in order to model empathy for the students (a suggestion made by Ruiz & Vallejos, 1999). This not only demonstrates the serious nature of the activity but may also reduce student apprehension by having someone else model the behaviour first.

Following Christ's example

In the life of Christ, one finds many illustrations of empathy. In one such instance Jesus started to receive the disciples he had sent out to heal the sick and preach the Word. As they were returning, everything became so busy that Jesus could not even find the time to eat. He asked His disciples to come and escape with Him to a quiet place.

> 32 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. 33 But many who saw them leaving recognised them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. (Mark 6:32–34, NIV)

In this text, empathy is given as the reason for Jesus' actions. First, He became cognitively aware of the internal state of the people who had come to see Him. He understood what they needed and how they felt. Even after teaching them, He was aware of their internal state of hunger as this story ends with Jesus feeding the 5000. Next, took action because he was moved to compassion. His cognitive awareness brought about an emotional response to teach and later to provide food for the crowd. A basic Christian premise is that our actions, like Christ's, should stem from love. The emotions that promote the choice to help others come from one's capacity to empathise.

"These activities help students, including bullies, 'try on' different per-spectives, and thus foster the development of empathy"

Conclusion and implications

This paper has described the development of empathy, identified abnormalities, explored cultural variations, and presented interventions to remediate poor empathy skills and to promote positive empathy development. The interventions provide teachers with useful tools that will aid in resolving classroom conflicts, protecting against bullying, and fostering

> *The emotions that promote the choice to help others come from one's capacity to empathise*

the development of empathy (even in bullies). Associated increases in prosocial behaviour will improve the development of healthy relationships and expand cognitive processes. Interventions targeted at fostering empathy and remediating hostility, aggression, and bullying are expected to decrease these behaviours and increase the expression of empathy. Improved empathy will socialise a generation of youth who will more likely be in tune with one another, caring, and by following Christ's example, of benefit to those in the classroom, the school, the community, and society at large. TEACH

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