

Medford Public Schools

The Center for Citizenship and Social Responsibility

Teaching Empathy in the Classroom and After-School Projects

by

Samantha Liu, CCSR Tufts Intern

*This program is funded by the Cummings Foundation and the
Krystle Campbell Community Betterment Project*

Empathy

In the last few decades, there has been a growing interest in cultivating empathy – from the classroom to the workplace. By teaching empathy and increasing positive and kind behavior, people are not only making the world a better place, but also creating the future leaders of tomorrow.

Empathy, simply put it, is the capacity and ability to feel what others are feeling. Empathy is a quality that allows individuals to assume the perspective of others and to gather a deep understanding of the feelings and emotions of another individual, in turn, strengthening other characteristics such as compassion and gratitude (Berk 417).

In the case of empathy, is it the result of nature or nurture (genetic or learned)? It appears that empathy is the result of both influences on the development of the individual. The genetic underpinnings of empathy can be observed early in development. When a baby cries, it is his or her inherit way of communicating emotionally with their caregiver. Their cries prompt parents to take care of them and ensure that their basic needs. Like their parents, babies are also sensitive to the cries of other babies. In a study, it was found that babies cry at the recording of other babies crying, but not at their own recordings, prompting the idea that empathy is an inborn quality (Berk 135). While genetics may play a role in empathy, empathy is a quality that can be learned through the teaching of parents, educators, and other members of the community.

Empathy and Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Over the years, education has seen an increase in more personalized, learner-centered, applied skills approach, with a greater emphasis on teamwork, collaboration, and project-based work. Project-based learning, or the “learning by doing” approach, makes learning meaningful through relevant problems and challenges that students investigated over a period of time. This approach of learning also gives students the opportunity to express engagement, curiosity, creativity, and motivation (Allan). PBL is unlike assigning any ordinary cumulative project, instead, it allows students to personalize and take ownership of their work in something they are truly interested and engaged in. It inspires them to explore, ask new questions, and challenge themselves in a rewarding and enjoyable way, thus fostering social awareness and self-awareness. PBL highlights intellect, passion, and skillfulness and combines these qualities into a whole, which can transform empathy into a catalyst of change. PBL is a great approach to encourage prosocial and helping behaviors, and with that, students can actively become leaders and contributors in their community to make a positive difference in their world (Markham, 2017).

Mirror Neurons, Empathy, and Education

Mirror neurons are a specific type of brain cell found in the cerebral cortex of primates, including humans. Mirror neurons fire when individuals hear or see an action performed by others, and when they carry out that action themselves. Humans have an elaborate neural system, in which individuals can observe the actions of others while simulating it in the brain even before imitating it (Berk 146).

It is hypothesized that mirror neurons could provide a partial explanation as to how humans learn empathy through social learning, or the observation and imitation of others. Like “motor” mirror neurons, “empathetic” mirror neurons allow individuals to experience, or at least partially experience, the same feelings and emotions of others. Older toddlers can engage in basic affective perspective-taking, or the ability to infer how others feel by imagining themselves in their place (Berk 417). Their capacity increases as they develop from responding to a person’s immediate distress to general life conditions, such as the ability to empathize with the poor, the oppressed, and the sick. These mirror neurons are vital to a child’s learning as they are the basis of understanding what appropriate behaviors and mannerisms are socially acceptable (Hoffman, 2000).

While mirror neurons contribute to the learning of positive behaviors, they also can lead to destructive and delinquent behaviors. The environments in which children live and are exposed to play an especially important role. For example, children who grow up with stable, warm, and motivated parents are more likely to model after those positive characteristics, whereas children who grow up opposite of such an environment may not (Berk).

It is important for educators to understand the significance of mirror neurons in cognitive, as well as social and emotional development, so that they can actively foster a positive learning environment for children. Through imitation learning, educators can better communicate information and influence students’ learning performance (Berk). For example, allowing in class experiments provides students an opportunity to visualize information that they would otherwise just read in a textbook, or working through a math problem on a white board may help students see the step by step process of getting to the answer. There are many pedagogical devices that

pave a way for more effective learning of material. Without them, it becomes difficult to attach meaning and relevance to what is being taught, thus reducing what “sticks” in the mind.

Interpersonal relationships are important in the lives of students. Building positive and friendly relationships between teachers and students can also foster a positive learning environment. Emotions can be transferred from one person to another, including teacher to student. If a teacher is smiling, relaxed, happy, and motivated, it will encourage students to mirror that behavior. By creating a relaxed environment, it reduces amount of stress within a student. Negative, anxiety producing emotions such as stress, fear, and tension are believed to inhibit mirror neurons, in turn, inhibiting learning (Berk).

Mirror neurons can also be used by educators as a tool for learning to empathize and understand people of different cultures, races, and ethnicities. By observing a student of another culture, race, and/or ethnicity, educators and other students can put into context the unique experiences and hardships faced by those individuals as if they were their own. Teaching emotional and social intelligence in and out of the classroom leads to increased capacity and ability to sense emotions in others and to appropriately respond to such emotions.

Resources, Instructional Activities, Pedagogies

Webinars and Websites

- “Cultivating Kindness: A Foundation for Digital Citizenship”

This edWeb.net educational webinar discusses how to use kindness and empathy to promote learning in classroom. It provides educators skills and innovative ways that they can incorporate in their lessons to encourage citizenship. Other webinars are frequently available online on-demand, making it accessible to most educators. Commonsense.org and edWeb.net

are joint websites that have great resources for educators and educational applications for students.

- Teaching Tolerance – tolerance.org

This website has webinars on building empathy through a culturally sensitive and social context. Teaching Tolerance webinars offer helpful guidance on explaining difficult and sensitive topics such as understanding white privilege, LGBTQ+ culture, Black Lives Matter, etc. This resource is free and on demand, allowing participants to watch when they please.

- “ALL MY BAM! RADIO SHOWS ABOUT SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING” by
Larry Ferlazzo

<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2017/04/11/all-my-bam-radio-shows-about-social-emotional-learning/>

In his podcast, Larry Ferlazzo talks about a variety of SEL topics and the science behind the approach, and its effect in the classroom. Some topics include ELL students, metacognition, grief, and self-control.

Literature

- *Teaching the Whole Child Instructional Practices That Support Social-Emotional Learning in Three Teacher Evaluation Frameworks*

<https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/TeachingtheWholeChild.pdf>

This teaching aid from the American Institute for Research helps educators understand social-emotional learning and provides teaching practices that promote students' social-emotional competencies from kindergarten to high school.

- *Setting the Standard for Project Based Learning: A Proven Approach to Rigorous Classroom Instruction* by John Larmer, John Mergendoller, and Suzie Boss

This book can be purchased on Amazon for \$25.25.

This book teaches educators a step-by-step process of creating, implementing, and evaluating PBL in formal classroom settings, as well as informal settings such as after-school and summer programs. This book also clarifies the distinction between projects and project-based learning, which in PBL, the project is not the assessment piece. Descriptions of previous projects used by educators are also included.

- “New Study Shows the Impact of PBL on Student Achievement” by Nell K. Duke and Anne-Lise Halvorsen

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/new-study-shows-impact-pbl-student-achievement-nell-duke-anne-lise-halvorsen>

This article highlights a study that showed a correlation of PBL in high-poverty communities, and its positive effects in statistically significant gains in social studies and reading comprehension.

- “6 Strategies for Differentiated Instruction in Project-Based Learning” by Andrew Miller

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/differentiated-instruction-strategies-pbl-andrew-miller>

This article provides educators example strategies for implementing PBL into their classrooms, from team-based work to mini-lessons.

- “Want Better Project-Based Learning? Use Social and Emotional Learning” by Thom Markham

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/project-based-learning-social-emotional-learning-thom-markham>

This article highlights the intersection of social and emotional learning and project-based learning. It has been shown that higher emotional intelligence and positive psychology are core factors that maximize individual effort and desire to learn. Teachers can foster the relationship between PBL and SEL through creating caring relationships, a desire for meaning, and a desire for mastery of skills.

- “Teaching Children Kindness & Empathy Using Social Emotional Learning” by Jennifer Gunn

<https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/teaching-children-empathy-sel/>

This article promotes social-emotional learning as a way of enabling learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to one’s environment. The neuroscience behind SEL and practicing kindness is also touched upon.

- Childrens Books:

At a young age, teachers can begin teaching students how to experience empathy through the exposure to a variety of literature, from poetry to novels. Characters and conflicts in stories

can expose children to a range of social situations, and with the guidance of teachers and active discussions, children can begin to learn how to express their feelings and thoughts, thus allowing them to actively participate in empathy practices.

- *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio
- *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman
- *What's Wrong with Timmy?* by Maria Shriver
- *Sumi's First Day of School Ever* by Joung Un Kim and Soyung Pak

Pedagogies, Methodologies, and Key Characteristics

Some practices include teaching responsibility and choice, offering warmth and support, cooperative learning, classroom discussions, self-reflection and self-assessment, and competence building through modeling, practicing, feedback, and coaching.

Consider modeling, teaching point of view, promoting leadership, encouraging active listening, and teaching empathy explicitly. Modeling will help students in imitating positive empathetic behaviors. Teaching point of view will help students understand that people view the world differently, in turn, improving acceptance and toleration. Teaching leadership teaches students how to be socially responsible and collective thinkers.

References

- Allan, A. (2017, December 12). Project-Based Learning and STEM Afterschool. Retrieved February 17, 2019, from <https://naaweb.org/professional-development/item/781>
projectbased-learning-and-stem-afterschool
- Berk, L. E. (2013). *Child development* (9th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Hoffman, M.L. (2000). *Empathy and moral development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Markham, T. (2017, December 03). In Our Connected World, What If Empathy is Learning Retrieved February 17, 2019, from [https://pblglobal.com/connected-world-empathy learning/](https://pblglobal.com/connected-world-empathy-learning/)
- Winerman, L. (2005, October). The mind's mirror. Retrieved February 17, 2019, from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror>