

Education for an Age of Interdependence

A series of provocation papers

Empathy Education: **Why it matters and how to do it**

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We have managed to harness the power of the wind, the sun and the water, but have yet to appreciate the power of our children to affect social change’.

– Mary Gordon, founder of the Roots of Empathy education programme

Introduction

In a geography class in Oxford, eight-year-olds are looking at photos and imagining the feelings and lives of street children in Delhi. In a moment they will be writing a story in the first person about the experience of leaving their village to find work in the city.

This is an example of Empathy Education in action. That is, the activities encourage development of the two, interrelated aspects of empathy: comprehending and sharing the emotional responses of another person (affective empathy); and understanding the perspectives or worldview of others, through the imaginative act of stepping into their shoes (cognitive empathy).

Empathy Education is at the forefront of contemporary education reform. Since the mid 1990s there has been an exponential growth in the teaching of empathy skills in primary and secondary schools in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, and in international schools in many other nations. Today, Empathy Education is more extensive than at any time in the past.

It is now accepted that Empathy Education is a vital element of learning for school pupils of all ages. The real debate is about precisely what form it should take. This paper, which is based on a longer report published by Oxfam called ‘You Are Therefore I Am: How Empathy Education Can Create Social Change’, outlines my vision for the future of Empathy Education so that its potential to generate social transformation can be fully realised.

The rise of Empathy Education

In 2005, the UK government created a new programme called Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). The programme has been extremely successful: it has been voluntarily adopted by around two-thirds of all primary schools in England, and from 2008 is being extended into secondary schools. One of the five skills SEAL aims to foster is empathy. The fact that the majority of school children are now explicitly

being taught how to empathise is an extraordinary change, extending education beyond the traditional focus on knowledge acquisition and the study of standard subjects such as English and mathematics.

How has such a change come about, not only in the UK, but in other education systems around the world? Why is Empathy Education now on the policy agenda after having been ignored for so long? Three main factors explain its new prominence.

First, there has been a growing interest in social and emotional learning (SEL) since the 1990s, particularly due to the impact Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ* (1996). Goleman argued that skills such as empathising are vital in helping us to form positive relationships with other people and to understand ourselves better. Numerous studies show that the results include: young people being less likely to engage in aggressive behaviour (such as bullying or violent crime), more pro-social behaviour, higher levels of self-esteem, better mental health and greater academic success.¹

A second factor is the rise of a ‘wellbeing’ agenda in government policy circles in the past decade. Richard Layard, the New Economics Foundation and others have suggested that if people are to live fulfilling and happy lives, we need to shift away from narrow notions of economic wellbeing, to broader notions of personal and social wellbeing. The idea of wellbeing is prominently featured in personal, social and health education (PSHE) in schools in England, and in the delivery of the government’s Every Child Matters framework. Layard puts empathy at the centre of efforts to promote wellbeing, arguing that schools should ‘teach the systematic practice of empathy’.²

Finally, financial considerations help explain the growth of Empathy Education. According to a study of the US government Head Start programme (which promotes the ‘social and cognitive development of children’), for every \$1 invested, between \$2.50 and \$10 of tax-payers’ money is saved in the long term.³ This and other studies of ‘early intervention’ programmes that address topics including anger management and empathy have got policymakers excited that ‘soft skills’ might actually save hard cash. Failing to invest in SEL skills such as empathy can lead to:

- Higher spending in the prison system due to increasing youth crime

- The need for greater provision of mental health services to deal with teenage depression and other illnesses
- More generally, bigger welfare budgets to tackle family breakdown.

Empathy Education is now seen as 'preventative medicine' for government welfare budgets and the criminal justice system.

Empathy and social change

A major failure of policymakers is to recognise that Empathy Education can also lead to fundamental social change.⁴ There is now compelling evidence that some of the most significant shifts that societies undergo cannot be fully explained without resorting to empathy, and that if governments wish to promote certain forms of change, they should engage in generating empathy on a mass scale through the education system. The historian Theodore Zeldin argues, for instance, that learning 'to empathise with people different from ourselves' is one of the 'the most effective means of establishing equality' that modern societies possess.⁵

An historical example demonstrating the power of empathy can be found in the struggle against slavery and the slave trade in Britain in the late eighteenth century. In the early 1780s slavery was an accepted social institution. Britain presided over the international slave trade and some half-million African slaves were being worked to death growing sugarcane in British colonies in the West Indies. But within two decades an unprecedented social movement had arisen that turned a large proportion of the British public against slavery, such that the trade was abolished in 1807. Recent research shows that standard explanations for this shift have failed to take into account the critical role of empathy. According to Adam Hochschild, there was a 'sudden upwelling' of empathy for the suffering of slaves due to factors such as public talks being given by former slaves, the use of posters and reports that educated people about their plight, and connections made between the pervasive practice of impressment of men into the British navy and the denial of liberty faced by slaves. Hochschild concludes that the success of the anti-slavery movement was based on the fact that, 'the abolitionists placed their hope not in sacred texts, but in human empathy.'⁶

There are many other instances where empathy has brought social transformation, such as the child welfare legislation that grew out of evacuation

in the Second World War and the public response to the Asian Tsunami in 2004. They illustrate how taking the perspective of others through a leap of the empathetic imagination erodes our ability to dehumanise strangers and treat them as being of less worth than ourselves. Empathy has the potential to create a microcosmic and personal form of social change, altering the way that people behave towards one another. That is, if we want change, we do not need a revolution of systems or institutions: we need a revolution of human relationships. And one of the best ways to bring this about is to develop empathy on a mass scale through the education system.

Models of Empathy Education

Empathy Education thus has a role to play not only in creating change on the personal and community level, but also on the wider national and international stage. So it is worth considering what different models of Empathy Education currently exist, and whether they can fully realise the promise that empathy offers.

Amongst the most successful forms of Empathy Education is the Roots of Empathy (ROE) programme in Canada, invented by the pioneering educational thinker and practitioner Mary Gordon. Since 1995 ROE has reached over 200,000 students and has spread to several other countries. Its positive impact on pupil attitudes and behaviour has been documented in numerous studies. The most surprising aspect of the programme is its unusual technique: the teacher is a baby. A class is visited on multiple occasions by a baby with its mother or father. The pupils observe the baby closely, discussing its feelings and changing view of the world, then use this as a way of exploring their own emotions and understandings of their classmates' feelings and perspectives. ROE is exemplary partly because it is such a hands-on and experiential form of learning, but also because it has a broader social vision. Gordon points out that 'during the Nuremburg trials, one of the judges described the war crimes as a failure of empathy... Empathy is integral to solving conflict in the family, schoolyard, boardroom and war room.'⁷

The International Baccalaureate's Primary Years Programme provides another model. The curriculum is organised not around traditional subjects but around core concepts, skills and attitudes, one of which is empathy. At the International School of Amsterdam, pupils develop their empathy abilities by visiting a museum of

blindness, where they are immersed in a darkened environment. They then have conversations with museum staff who are blind about what it is like to be visually impaired. In a unit on human migration, they interview family members such as grandparents about their experiences of moving location. Another task is to design, build and write a guidebook for a museum of empathy. This is a highly creative approach to Empathy Education, combined with a strong emphasis on conversational and experiential learning.

A third example is teaching resources designed by Oxfam as part of their Curriculum for Global Citizenship. In the materials for the theme of climate change, called Climate Chaos, pupils engage in a series of tasks intended to develop empathy. For instance, they read about a young girl from Tuvalu whose island is being affected by sea level rises and write a story from her viewpoint about her daily experiences, feelings and fears. In a second activity they imagine what life would be like in the UK in fifty years time, when they might have a grandchild the age they are now, if the climate continues to change. They then write a poem or story from the perspective of their own grandchild. The unit is innovative because children learn to empathise across space, with people in developing countries suffering from the effects of climate change, and also through time, with people from future generations.

A final model is the SEAL programme in England, outlined above. Drawing on Goleman's framework for developing emotional intelligence, the materials give empathy high priority. In one primary level theme, Say No to Bullying, pupils read a story about a girl who is bullied in the playground and learn about how alone and upset she feels. This is a springboard for discussions around how the girl is coping, what the bullies themselves might be feeling, and strategies to prevent bullying. SEAL mainly uses secondary materials rather than experiential or conversational methods. It concentrates on nurturing empathy at the community level, with people in pupils' immediate environment such as classmates, friends and family. There is little attempt to develop empathy at a global level, with people outside national borders: the lives of strangers remain unknown.

The future of Empathy Education

Drawing on the lessons from the above examples, I believe that if Empathy Education is to make a major contribution to social change, future

programmes need to address three essential areas of learning: Conversational Empathy, Experiential Empathy, and Global Empathy.

Conversational Empathy

A major gap in much Empathy Education is the lack of attention given to the role of conversation.⁸ Theodore Zeldin, partly through the work of his Oxford Muse foundation, has shown that a key way to create an empathetic bond is to get two people to have a conversation that moves beyond superficial talk and addresses the real issues of importance in their lives. Empathy programmes need to engage pupils in these kinds of dialogues on three levels: having conversations with each other, both within their own year group and with other year groups; with people in the local community who they might rarely come across, such as asylum seekers, the elderly and people of different religions; and with pupils in schools in other countries, using technologies such as Skype. On all three levels they can be stimulated to talk about topics such as aspirations, fears, friendship, family, compassion and cultural practices. That is, the issues which serve to unite people as human beings and which give insights into another's worldview.

Experiential Empathy

It is obvious that real-life experiences can have the biggest impact on changing the way we see others and ourselves. Empathy Education needs to incorporate experiential learning. This could be done through integrating programmes such as Roots of Empathy. Students could also be given opportunities to develop empathy through travel. This could be very local travel, for instance to a Mosque or homeless shelter, where empathetic understanding is the focus on the visit. It could also be travel abroad, building on language exchange programmes and allowing complete immersion in another culture. Activities including community service (as takes place at United World Colleges) and job shadowing (part of many careers programmes in schools) could become part of a programme of Experiential Empathy.

Both Experiential Empathy and Conversational Empathy should be used to supplement regular learning techniques that have been developed in Empathy Education, such as using photos, role-plays, stories, imaginative writing exercises and thought experiments.

Global Empathy

It is crucial that Empathy Education is extended to the global level. Children need to be encouraged to empathise not only within the local community, but also with people who live in other countries, especially those in developing countries whose lives are very different from their own, as a way of promoting global citizenship. Why should a child at a school in England not be taught to empathise with the plight of a flood victim in the Indian state of Orissa, or with a child who has been injured in an earthquake in China? Not to do so is to ignore our common humanity and interconnectedness, and misses an important opportunity for fostering social change. That is why programmes such as SEAL need to globalise and incorporate new topics such as inequality, climate change, migration and intercultural understanding. Global Empathy teaching resources should expand the horizons of the next generation beyond the narrow confines of national borders.

Conclusion

What of the long-term future of Empathy Education? The history of education is a history of change. At certain moments new subjects have been invented and taken their place on the curriculum. English (language and literature) did not become a subject of study at Oxford University until 1894. It was not until the early twentieth century that politics and economics divided to become independent disciplines. Citizenship Education was only introduced as a school subject in England in 2002. I believe that Empathy Studies should be established as a distinct, multidisciplinary subject, which pupils follow throughout their school years.⁹ Empathy Studies could be the educational experiment of the twenty-first century.

For the moment we must recognise that Empathy Education is at a turning point in its history. It can either stay localised, or its potential for creating social change can be realised by broadening it to the global level, so students develop mutual understanding across frontiers, with people whose thoughts, emotions, values and beliefs might otherwise remain a mystery. At the same time, Empathy Education must step outside the classroom, so that students are given the opportunity to engage in real conversations and experiences that will shift not only how they look at others, but how they look at themselves. By expanding our vision of Empathy Education we can bring out its full potential so that it can help

tackle major problems such as inequality, climate change, intercultural conflict and community fragmentation. The historical evidence shows that empathy has the power to produce mass social change. Let us learn from history and turn empathy into a tool for a revolution of human relationships.

In the 1850s, Henry David Thoreau wrote, 'Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?'

An instant of empathetic understanding need not be seen as a miracle. It is a real possibility that education could provide to a whole generation of young people.

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¹ See, for example: DFES 2005, 48-50; Gordon 2005, 241; Goleman 1996, 305-9.

² Layard 2005, 234. See also Layard 2007, 20.

³ Allen 2007, slide 18.

⁴ See Krznaric (2007a) for a more detailed analysis of the relationship between empathy and social change.

⁵ Zeldin 1999a, 1633; 1999b, 3; 1995 236-55, 326.

⁶ Hochschild 2006, 5, 222, 366.

⁷ Gordon 2005, xvi-xvii, 6, 9.

⁸ I have discussed in more detail the importance of conversation and experience as ways of developing empathy in Krznaric (2007b).

⁹ I have argued elsewhere that empathy should also be taught as an independent subject in the tertiary sector. See Krznaric (2007c) and Steuer and Marks (2008, 21n61).

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