Definitions of Empathy

While there are many definitions of empathy and a variety of theories on how people use empathy in social settings, the articles our research is based on looks at empathy from the lens of childhood development. Before we can understand how schools can promote empathy in their classrooms or learn how teachers do or do not instill empathetic values into their students, we needed to have a consistent framework of what empathy was. By looking at articles from leading researchers in the field of childhood development, we were able to find a clear definition of empathy. From this research, we also found that there was some debate over the right ways methods to take in order to actually teach true empathy.

The first two articles we looked at are both written by child and family psychologist Richard Weissbourd. He is one of the leaders in researching childhood moral development and is known for his work on teaching parents how to instill empathy in their children. In these two documents, In the article, “How Parents Can Cultivate Empathy in Children”, Weissbourd presents suggestions for parents who want to make their children more empathetic and caring. In doing so, he provides a clear definition of empathy: "Empathy begins with the capacity to take another perspective, to walk in another’s shoes. But it is not just that capacity...Empathy includes valuing other perspectives and people. It’s about perspective-taking and compassion”. Since this definition is a simple way to describe empathy and was relevant to our initial research question, it was used in our survey to provide teachers background context of the purpose of our study.

The second reason why we looked at Richard Weissbourd is because he makes an argument as to why it is relevant for children to learn empathy, especially in today’s society. In the blog post “True Empathy”, Weissbourd explains how empathy can be the solution to a lot of the extreme events happening in the world as the result of lack of understanding. This aligns with our hypothesis that teaching empathy to students can change the way future adults interact with each other in a more positive way. Overall, we used Weissbourd’s research to give us a clear understanding of what empathy is and to justify our study of proving that it is beneficial for students to learn empathy.

In her article, "What Is Empathy, and Can Empathy Be Taught?", Carol Davis outlines two frameworks and objectives for the piece: defining empathy and determining whether it can be taught. Davis argues that often times empathy is identified as something that it is not. This is an important component to include as it works to clear up conceptions of empathy that do not operate under the established definition for our project. Furthermore, given that empathy is commonly used, many have a number of different interpretations of what empathy means for them and for their lives. Davis asserts that it difficult to disassociate empathy from interpersonal actions that are similar to it, these include sympathy, the idea of “fellow feeling”, pity, sympathy with superior feelings, or simple identification or being closely oriented with someone.
This article is also important to our research because it supports our hypothesis that empathy is something that can be taught. Davis’s framework shows that teachers can do more than just model/demonstrate empathy, they can also explicitly teach it. This will allow us to move forward to see what practical steps schools can take to pass these values down to students.

The article, “The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?”, discusses the place empathy should have—including if it should have any place at all—in the history classroom. The authors argue that teachers are not using or thinking about empathy correctly, understanding the need for empathy merely as a need for students to feel sympathy for the suffering of those who came before us. However, empathy should instead focus on understanding the reasoning and thoughts of those who came before us, encouraging students to consider how an action or practice was “reasonable in its own terms” even if today we would consider the practice unreasonable and unjustifiable.

The article helps with our research because it gives an example of how empathy could be taught in a classroom setting. While Lee and Shemilt critique the way empathy is currently taught in history classes, they provide a theory on what teachers should be focusing on to develop empathy in their students.


Modeling Empathy

Although our group had originally decided to focus primarily on exercises that would allow students to themselves practice and develop empathy, when researching how teachers taught empathy, many of the studies and articles that we found looked instead at how teachers taught empathy through modeling: that is, through empathizing with students and thus acting as a role model who displayed to students how to effectively empathize. Researchers, in a fashion similar to our own study, often surveyed and interviewed teachers in order to better understand what they considered empathy’s role in education. However, many of these studies then went further and observed teachers as they actually taught and empathized with students in order to better understand how teacher’s written and voiced comments matched up (or didn’t match up) with how they actually taught and interacted with students in the classroom.

For example, Bridget Cooper (2004), a leading scholar on modeling empathy in the classroom, both interviewed and observed teachers and ultimately found four distinct different ways in which teachers empathize with their students. These four methods included fundamental empathy, profound empathy, functional empathy and feigned empathy. Of these four methods, profound empathy was the most effective form of empathy and feigned empathy the least, certain factors in teachers’ environments (such as whether teachers were interacting with students as a group or individually) impacting what kind of empathy teachers could practice. However, she also discusses poor teacher quality, rigid and over-filled curriculums, large class sizes, too little time, unempathetic management, and diverse classroom groupings as constraints on teachers’ ability to practice profound empathy with students. Peck et. al (2015) similarly interviewed teachers (specifically preschool teachers) but found, rather than four types of empathy, four ways behaviors/dispositions that teachers used to express empathy towards their students. These included embracing inclusion, being relaxed and balanced, accepting and responding to family culture, and engaging in meaningful communication with families. Peck et al., thus, provides those specific practices that teachers can use in order to potentially achieve the profound empathy discussed by Cooper.

Gretchen McAllister (2002) also interviewed teachers but specifically those who had completed a program intended to help them teach urban students. Looking at how these teachers understood empathy’s role in the classroom, she found that teachers for the most part supported her original thesis that empathizing with students is necessary, but not sufficient, when teaching diverse students. Empathy helped teachers interact with their students and encouraged more student-centered practices, but teachers recognized the importance of also understanding their very different background compared with their students. Finally, Chezare Warren (2015) interviewed and observed white female teachers and their interactions with black male students and found that, though teachers believed empathizing with students is important, they rarely actually practiced that empathy.

There were also some articles in the literature that discussed more generally if and how teachers should model empathy, supporting the concept but not providing, with this support, research involving teachers as the previously discussed studies had. For example, Julie Lindquist (2004), using her own personal experience, argues for the importance empathizing while teaching—even if that empathy is staged—as this will open up classrooms to more authentic discussions of class and will allow greater understandings to take place between teachers and their students. Paul Swan and Philip Riley (2015) also believe in the importance of practicing empathy as, they argue, the more empathy a teacher has the more likely it is that he or she will be able to understand and respond to the needs of his or her students.
Considering these studies all together, we see a general consensus between both researchers and teachers that it is important for teachers to empathize with their students. However, researchers also all generally found that teachers actually practice and display that empathy to varying extents and with varying degrees of effectiveness, certain factors and constraints preventing teachers from effectively acting as they’d like to act. This finding regarding the gap between teachers’ expressed beliefs and teachers’ actual actions that was drawn from researchers’ observations in the classroom—a step we were unable to take in our own study—suggested to us one of the limitations of our research: our reliance on self-reporting, which may not in fact line up with how teachers actually act and teach in the classroom. We were also able to use this research to back up our hypothesis that teachers would believe teaching and encouraging empathy in students is important. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, we were able to use these studies that interviewed and surveyed teachers as models and examples for our own study, looking at the questions and format that the researchers used to help inform our own questions and survey/interview formats.

Works Cited:


Teaching Empathy

A key part of our research was looking into what kinds of actual practices and methods teachers can use in order to teach empathy to their students and how teachers can alter their lesson plans such that students themselves have the opportunity to actually practice empathizing. In general in the literature, there were two different kinds of articles exploring this topic: articles that discussed as-of-yet unproven methods for the development of empathy, and articles that discussed experiments examining whether a particular method is indeed effective at promoting empathy in students.

For example, a qualitative study by Arianne MacBean (2014) analyzed the effectiveness of incorporating dance into the curriculum to promote students’ empathy and acceptance of diversity. For example, students would take on the postures of the groups of people they studied in history (e.g. bending down as if picking cotton during a lesson about slavery) to provide students with more authentic, hands-on knowledge of what life was like for slaves. Matthew T. Vogt’s study (2016) promoted the idea of teachers incorporating literature about marginalized groups in their classrooms so that students can engage in perspectives different from theirs and develop empathy through seeing the protagonists’ points of view. Finally, Deborah Yost and Robert Vogel’s study on the writing program Writers Matter (2012) encourages teachers to bring writing into their curriculum (in the form of journaling, reflections, etc.) to help students find their voices and improve their self-esteem. After finding these studies and noticing that they were primarily divided between these two categories (teachers’ empathy (i.e. modeling) and students’ empathy) we would have been interested in finding an experiment that looked at which was more effective at promoting empathy in students: modeling of empathy by teachers, or practices that encouraged students to practice empathy themselves.

There is only a small amount of experimentation on lesson plans’ and activities’ ability to actually promote empathy, and all of these studied only the short-term effects of the program involved. For example, there is the fairly well known study by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2016) in which the two researchers experimented on the relationship between reading and “theory of mind,” a mental action that involves considering others’ beliefs and taking another’s perspectives (half of what is, according to our definition of empathy, required in order to empathize). The researchers eventually found that literary fiction (but not popular fiction or nonfiction) correlated with an increased Theory of Mind. In another quantitative study, Jason Allen Imman (2016) used a pre- and post- empathy scale to see how Narrative4 (a program that uses writing to promote empathy in teens) affected students’ empathy levels. Though Imman’s data suggested that, surprisingly, the program actually decreased empathy, he argues that because of his very small sample size (N=13) his finding should not be taken as conclusive. Finally, slightly unlike the previous studies, R. Darden Bradshaw (2016) completed a qualitative study on a nine-day art unit involving persuasive writing and collaborative art and its effectiveness at increasing students’ empathy. Through observation, the researcher/educator found that the unit was successful at promoting empathy individually, inter-relationally and within the community.

These studies and other articles, looking at very specific programs or activities, could provide examples to teachers of things that they themselves can do or use in their classroom in order to get their students practicing empathy. However, as concerns the studies that experimented on the effectiveness of particular programs, we also realize the limitations of any research that looks at how well one can empathize, particularly as empathy (that is, whether or not one can and does in fact empathize outside of a testing setting) is so difficult to know for certain.
Works Cited:


Yost, Deborah S., and Robert Vogel. “Writing Matters to Urban Middle Level Students.” *Middle School*
During the inception and question formulation stage of the project, thinking about empathy led us to ask questions both about curriculum and the culture of schools themselves. While school culture and curriculum are fundamentally different, the interaction between curriculum and school culture proves especially relevant in the context of understanding the development of empathy. As David Hargreaves (2011) emphasizes, it is essential to look at schools comprehensively, with consideration of the curriculum, culture, and community. In other words, when looking at empathy in the classroom, we wanted our inquiries to be informed by research of empathy in multiple facets of student life. The research highlights the dichotomy between local and national initiatives to promote empathy in schools and classrooms. The dichotomy between local and national is present in much of education policy literature, but this review provides insights into how these challenges are different in regard to the promotion of empathy.

Peter Knight (1989) is one of the early scholars to posit the existence and importance of empathy in curriculum. In Knight’s article in the Oxford Review of Education, he provides historical context to the integration of empathy teachings into national curriculum, and the consequences of this integration. Peter Knight, while an advocate for differentiated education, particularly as it relates to creating empathy in the classroom space, addresses the difficulties of doing so at the national level. Many of the difficulties he points out as problems in 1989, are issues that remain true when it comes to integrating empathy into instructional practices. More specifically, Knight cites the confusion of teachers themselves when it comes to teaching empathy. Knight argues the difficulty in scaling up empathy education, as differentiation and difference is what the major components of building empathy are. This early historical perspective proved to be an essential cornerstone for the research process; as one of the early scholars on the topic, he is widely cited and the historical, yet modern presence of these challenges is compelling.

More contemporary scholars have used evaluative criteria to determine the effectiveness of curriculum that incorporates empathy. Erica Stetson, Angela Hurley, and Gloria Miller (2003) evaluated five different empathy programs in schools across the United States with differing goals. The goals of these programs included violence prevention and encouraging prosocial behavior. The authors used practicality and generalizability as their evaluative criteria (Stetson, Hurley, and Miller 2003). Elisabeth Lazarakou (2008) analyzes whether the Greek history curriculum encourages and teaches empathetic processes. Though Lazarakou’s article is international in nature, the evaluative criteria she establishes for determining how empathetic a lesson is holds domestic relevance. According to Lazarakou (2008), empathetic classroom activities will “emphasize whole-child development, have a pupil-centered nature, encourage the activation of pupil imagination and intuition, recognize and accept differentiated learning outcomes, emphasize the social and emotional development of pupils, move pupils forward in their knowledge and learning skills, and respect and render value to any type of differentiation” (32). These evaluative criteria will prove helpful in the sharing of different activities and strategies with teachers, as well as helpful guidance for teachers themselves to consider when integrating empathy into their instructional practice.

Jason Barr and Ann Higgins-D’Alessandro (2010) examine the development of empathy and prosocial behavior as it relates to the school culture. Barr and Higgins-D’Alessandro (2010) compared a traditional high school to students enrolled in a Just Community School. The authors found no significant relationship between prosocial behavior and school culture, but did find significant relationship between empathy and school culture. The students in the Just Community School, where relationship building was
actively promoted in all facets of life (curriculum, programming, and hidden curriculum), saw higher empathy scores when measuring peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships (240). Stephanie Jones and Suzanne Bouffard (2012) studied the schoolwide implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs across the United States. While Jones and Bouffard cite positive outcomes across the country, they cited a number of limitations to current programming. Limitations included the short term nature of the programs, a lack of integration into the educational mission of the school, development being constrained to the classroom, and insufficient staff training (Jones and Bouffard 2012, 7). The above articles show us that student development of empathy is most successful when embraced as a normative schoolwide value, both in policy and practice. Furthermore, the holistic approaches in the methodologies above have influenced the scope of our interview questions; as a result, we asked about their experiences in the education system, curriculum development, and external factors that influenced their teaching styles.

To conclude, the above articles emphasize the importance of looking at school culture and curriculum as complementary and reciprocal, and not separate from one another. This insight is crucial when considering which best practices to include and the scope of those best practices.

Works Cited:


