



HNRS 398: Challenge Course
Teaching Empathy in the Classroom: Project Overview and Findings
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Background and Introduction

Even before the results of the 2017 presidential election, empathy was a hot button issue within the realm of education. Debates on how parents do or don't encourage empathy, how teachers do or don't teach empathy, how we ourselves do or don't practice empathy had been littered throughout scholarship, mass media, and Facebook feeds. For instance, there have been scholars such as Richard Weissbourd, who (in partnership with the Harvard Graduate School of Education) developed the Making Caring Common Project in order to help parents learn how to cultivate empathy in their children. And there have been researchers like Bridget Cooper, who, as she explores in her book *Empathy in Education: Engagement, Values and Achievement*, studied how and to what extent teachers empathize with their students. And we have seen the founding of an extensive number of non-profit organizations that are trying to figure out how they can persuade students to bully less and empathize more in schools.

Now, a month after the extremely divisive 2017 presidential election—an election divisive both in the way Americans were speaking and acting—many individuals' conviction in the importance of empathy has strengthened exponentially. As we saw others, and even ourselves, unable to take and understand the perspective of others, to then become angry, to fight, to say things that hurt those same people whose opinions many never tried to perceive or comprehend, we began to see even more clearly what research had already suggested and what we had already suspected: the necessity of empathy. We began to see even more clearly the importance of creating an environment in which empathy can be safely and respectfully practiced and cultivated before one becomes too locked into their own opinions and mind.

Early-on, our group members recognized the classroom as one environment in which this cultivation of empathy can occur, a supposition we then found supported by extensive research. Schools, often bringing together students of all different backgrounds and mindsets and personalities, already establish a setting in which incredibly varied individuals are mingling and interacting and socializing and perhaps—but perhaps not—empathizing. Schools already construct a situation in which children and young adults commit their attention to role models and authority figures (i.e. teachers) who can help direct their thoughts and emotions towards particular prosocial behaviors. And as Allemand et al. (2014) explain, adolescents in particular are at a key stage in their lives in regards to the development of social competencies such as empathy, their personalities and emotional development especially malleable at this time. Middle schools, consequently, present themselves as a potentially pivotal environment in which to influence the development of empathy.

According to leading scholar Richard Weissbourd (Harvard University), 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.” Currently, our country seems to struggle with both parts of this definition. We struggle with perspective-taking: with thinking about how a particular person understands themselves and others and places and situations. We also struggle with compassion: with feeling for the desires and dreams of another, with hoping for another’s well-being just as much as we hope for our own.

In this research study, we aimed to learn more about how middle school teachers understand both parts of this definition in relation to education and the classroom, as well as how they then encourage their students



(or fail to encourage their students) to *practice* both parts of this definition. How do we teach perspective-taking? But also, how do we teach compassion? And how do we teach these skills so that students are applying them, not just to those immediately around them and those like them, but to those distant from them and seemingly not like them at all?

Problem

In an increasingly non-empathetic world, how can teachers use their classroom and daily curriculum in order to encourage students to practice empathy—both perspective taking and compassion—and, ultimately, to become more empathetic individuals in their day-to-day lives?

Why Empathy Should Be Taught in Schools

As the increasing emphasis on standardized testing itself implies, many see schools as here to teach our children facts, numbers, history, science, analysis, information, history—*not* character development, or emotional well-being, or empathy. Some consequently argue that it is not an educator's job to be teaching and cultivating empathy in students, and instead see the instruction of those attributes, if the role of anyone, the role of a child's parents.

But considering again the role and function of public education in the United States, one increasingly finds the necessity of teaching empathy if schools are to achieve their purpose of developing civically-minded, employment-ready citizens. For example, as studies such as Jones et al.'s (2015) and Allemand et al.'s (2014) reveal, there is a positive relationship between empathy as an adolescent and social competencies such as communication skills, social integration and conflict management as an adult: skills necessary for students to be successful both in their employment. And the importance of empathy in the workplace is suggested even more directly in a study done by Gentry et al. (2007) which found that empathy led to higher job performance. Moreover, according to Omoto et al. (2010), empathy leads to increased volunteering and civic engagement, qualities essential for the development of active citizens.

Empathy, additionally, is critical for creating a classroom environment in which students can effectively learn the curriculum's facts and information. As Bob Sornson explains, empathy contributes to a positive classroom culture by helping students develop healthy friendships with their peers, and according to Ernest Mendes empathy improves student-teacher relationships. And after the 2017 presidential election, many teachers began reporting a significant increase in bullying in their schools, but one of the few types of schools in which this was *not* the case were those that, according to Southern Poverty Law Center's report, "worked hard at establishing inclusive welcoming communities, have response programs in place, and nurtured qualities of empathy and compassion among students." One finds, consequently, that empathy is necessary on an individual/student level, on the school-wide level, and on the level of the nation as a whole.

Our Research

To answer our research question, we used a variety of primary and secondary research methods throughout the semester that allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of what empathy is and how it impacts the classroom.



In addition to the traditional academic research we studied, we wanted to engage local teachers to gain their insight on the topic of teaching empathy, as while there has been research completed on how teachers modeled empathy, we found little research on how teachers *taught* empathy. In this section, we will outline each method used and discuss its impact on our study.

Academic Research

To introduce ourselves to the current discussion on empathy, we read a series of academic journal articles and other pieces literature related to the topics of empathy, early childhood development, and the education system. Approximately 45 articles were referenced for this study and later used to guide our research questions. By reading about what leading scholars and researchers had to say on this topic, we were able to learn about some of the key issues surrounding the topic, including whether or not empathy could be taught and if the best place to teach it is indeed in the classroom. These conversations on empathy helped shape our research by prompting us to narrow our research questions and focus specifically on whether or not teachers believe empathy could be taught, whether they believe it is appropriate for them to teach it, and, if they answered the previous questions affirmatively, how they went about incorporating empathy into their own classroom.

While we focused on academic research in the primary stages of our project, we continued to draw on journals throughout the semester. At the end of our project, we created an annotated bibliography highlighting our key research articles.

Survey

The second phase of our research involved creating a survey that was distributed to 364 D.C. public middle school teachers. The purpose of this survey was to get a sense of whether or not teachers had thought about the role of empathy in their line of work. The survey consisted of three sections, the first focusing on learning about the teacher (i.e. demographics), the second asking questions designed to determine whether they model empathy (adapted from questions developed by Boubette Bouton (2014)), and the third asking if they believe that empathy is important to teach in the classroom. Through our questions, we looked at how empathetic the teachers rated themselves in relation to how important they thought it was to teach empathy to their students. We also were able to gain insights into what teachers were thinking about the topic, including the challenges they faced when teaching subjects outside of the standard curriculum. Overall, these survey questions allowed us to challenge and complement our academic research and see what actual teachers thought about the topic.

Out of the 364 surveys sent out, we received a total of 28 responses, representing a response rate of 7.69%. The respondents were local DC middle school teachers from each Ward and a variety of disciplines. The survey provided support for our hypothesis that teachers believe it is important to teach empathy to their students and that they would be interested in learning more about how they can do so. The survey, however, also showed that teachers on average were reportedly more likely to encounter challenges when trying to teach empathy than when trying to teach material outside of the standardized curriculum. Specifically, 64.2% of respondents reported at least some challenges with teaching outside standard curriculum, and that number jumped to 82.1% when discussing challenges about teaching empathy in particular. This data suggested to us the importance of further investigating what those challenges are and how we can help teachers work around those challenges and teach empathy despite them. The survey also served as a our primary means of contacting local teachers to collect more in depth information through interviews.



Interviews

Our final method of research was a series of interviews with respondents who indicated on the survey that they would be interested in talking with us further. We were able to conduct and transcribe 3 interviews with local teachers. The questions asked in these interviews were extensions of the survey and the same for all three interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain more insight into some of the responses we got in the survey, including asking why teachers often reported being unable to teach empathy in the classroom despite generally believing that it is something that teachers should teach. Within these interviews, we also asked questions to learn more about each teacher's background and explore whether that may shape the way they model or teach empathy in the classroom. Other purposes included clarifying some of the responses to questions in the survey and finding out what kinds of activities and practices teachers had found that successfully helped their students develop empathy.

Deep Dive on Findings

Through survey responses and individual interviews, we were able to learn a great deal from DC educators in regard to teachers' perspectives on the instruction and development of empathy in the classroom. In both the survey and the interviews, teachers reflected on the importance of empathy in the classroom, discussed the challenges associated with teaching empathy, and articulated strategies and activities that have worked for their instructional practices.

Importance of Empathy Development in Students

The vast majority (92.9%) of teachers who responded to our survey believe empathy is something that everyone is capable of and is something that can be learned. However, teachers differed when discussing whether empathy should be explicitly taught or modeled through teacher behavior. 53% of coded teacher statements on empathy were in support of *modeling* empathy, while 47% of coded teacher statements on empathy were in support of *teaching* empathy. Our survey also asked teachers to not only reflect on the question of empathy, but also on the role teachers have in instilling values in students more generally. In several survey responses, teachers referenced the importance of providing students with a plethora of skills that included empathy, social skills, communication skills, and life lessons. One teacher stressed the importance of "making hidden curriculum visible" and bringing this form of education to the forefront. Upon reflecting on the broader purpose of teaching empathy, teachers cited the influence empathy has on our political system, interactions with other members of society, personal development and success, and a deeper understanding of the course content.

While many teachers endorsed the importance of teaching empathy, survey responses and interview responses associated empathy with a number of other prosocial behaviors like conflict resolution, altruism, and respect for others. In other words, they viewed human empathy as the basis for which other prosocial behaviors are cultivated and nurtured.

Challenges with Teaching Empathy

While teachers supported the development of empathy in the classroom, they also provided great insight into the challenges associated with teaching empathy to students. Three common challenges that represented a



trend across our findings were: institutional barriers, ambiguity with respect to the definition of empathy, and addressing how to convey information to students.

Institutional Barriers

Teachers discussed a number of barriers at the school level that make it difficult to teach empathy directly. One of the challenges in responses and in the literature was the difficulty of standardizing teachings of empathy. Teachers believed that there is no single way to teach empathy, and thus there is also no single way to measure or assess the development of empathy. The ambiguity reflected also has implications for teachers and their comfort when engaging with the topic of empathy. Teachers also discussed the culture of their school communities and the dual opportunity and challenge school culture potentially has for promoting empathy. Several teachers reflected on how the missions of their schools support and endorse a culture of empathy, even though they may not explicitly refer to empathy.

Ambiguity with Empathy

As evidenced in the literature, there are many different interpretations on the definition of empathy. Given the personal nature of empathy, there are differing understandings of empathy and educators are not exempt from this. Particularly in the interviews, teachers associated empathy with other prosocial behaviors; this conflation suggests a relationship between the development of empathy and the development of other prosocial behaviors. However, this ambiguity in definition poses challenges to teachers in regard to both planning curriculum as well as assessing and measuring the impact of empathy education.

Student Resistance to Empathy

While teachers in the study by and large support teaching empathy, teachers also discussed how students have to be in a place where they are ready to receive this education. When reflecting on their experiences, teachers referenced the difficulty some students have with engaging in difficult conversations and developing empathy for those on the other sides of these conversations. Student resistance to perspective-taking is not a commentary on whether empathy should be a part of the curriculum, but is representative of the challenges that teachers confront in the classroom. Similarly, one teacher referenced the cognitive ability of students as a factor in empathy development. Because there is not one uniform way to teach or assess empathy, students cognitively struggle to translate the empathetic skills learned in class into peer-to-peer and societal interactions.



Summary of Best Practices

After compiling academic research, the work of organizations, and findings from this study, we compiled a list of best practices and examples on how teachers can work to develop empathy in their students. The literature and findings emphasize the importance of a comprehensive, multilevel approach to teaching empathy; below, schoolwide, classroom, and teacher level best practices are outlined.

Schoolwide Level Best Practices

"Best Practice"	Description	Example	Source(s)
Trainings for teachers on empathy, emotional intelligence, etc.	Hold trainings, workshops, talks, etc for teachers to learn about what empathy is and how they can better model and teach it to their students. These trainings can be a time where teachers share ideas and what has personally worked for them in their classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unconscious bias trainings - Guest lecturer on empathy development in adolescents 	Teacher Interview; McCallister (2002)
Positive messaging through school culture	Reinforce empathy throughout the school both verbally and physically with quotes and mottos that relate to caring and empathy. This can be done, for example, through posters that show people displaying empathy, or by saying/reading a quote related to empathy over the loudspeaker each morning	<p>"The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy." - Meryl Streep</p> <p>"The opposite of anger is not calmness, its empathy." - Mehmet Oz</p> <p>"I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it." - Maya Angelou</p>	Teacher Interview
School-wide Town hall meetings	Hold meetings at school modelling a town hall meeting that allows students to take on the role of residents of a town. Permit students to voice their opinions regarding what they like and don't like about the school and to make suggestions on how the school can improve.		Teacher Interview
School-wide community initiatives	Allow students, teachers, and administration to come together for a student-led initiative. Students can work with teachers to take action on a cause they care about. This will develop a community within the school, allow the students to work collaboratively, and be involved in the community where they can learn about new perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop community partnerships where students can do service on a regular basis 	Teacher Interview; Bradshaw (2016)
Communication between teachers regarding styles and methods	Use the way you communicate with colleagues as a means to practice modeling empathy in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practice empathy when communicating with other teachers 	Teacher Interview



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Classroom Level Best Practices

“Best Practice”	Description	Example	Source(s)
Sentence starters	Teach students to engage with each other by prioritizing an understanding of others’ viewpoints before beginning to make their own points, and by using “I statements.”	- “I see your point, but…” - “I understand what you are saying, however…” - “I don’t understand what you are saying, can you explain more?”	Teacher Interview
Seminar format	Break students into small groups to discuss topics that come up in their classwork. Give students a few questions to discuss amongst themselves for 30 minutes each week.		Teacher Interview
Reading literary fiction	Use literature to encourage empathy and to start conversations about the ways we understand people who are different from us.	Use books that depict people that otherwise often marginalized from the classroom and whom students may otherwise be less understanding of, such as <i>Wonder</i> by Raelin J. Palacio or <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian Summary</i> by Sherman Alexie.	Kidd and Castano (2013); Vogt et al. (2016)
Students teach students	Break students up into mixed groups and have each group member learn a different part of the lesson plan; after learning their section, have students each teach their section to the other members of their group		The Jigsaw Classroom (Organization)
Metacognitive questions	Explain to students what it means to listen mindfully and then ask that students throughout the week observe the way they listen to others, recording these observations in a journal and then identifying what changes they need to listen to others mindfully.	Ask students to reflect: - How well do you focus when someone else is talking? - How do your habits of judgment, blame and distraction interfere with your ability to see things the way they really are? - How willing are you to listen to other points of view?	Mindfulness Without Borders (Organization)
Bringing in real world examples	Incorporate global news into class discussions when applicable, and have students put themselves in the shoes of the parties discussed.	- Syrian Refugees, how we relate	Teacher Interview
Debates	Have students divide into sides for a debate on a controversial topic, but require students to argue for the side that they DO	- Have students debate a current or historical event, such as whether or not it was right for the U.S. to drop the atomic bombs	Teacher Interview



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Teacher Level Best Practices

“Best Practice”	Description	Example	Source(s)
Verbally model empathy	Bring emotion into your teaching by practicing empathy with students during discussions, even if empathy is not what you really feel. Verbally model taking the students perspective and feeling compassion for them	- During a discussion about class, DO NOT take a rational, unemotional stance; rather, use emotions to appeal to students, telling them how you feel and why you feel that way	Teacher Interviews; Lindquist (2004); Cooper (2004); Swan and Riley (2015)
Physically model empathy	Use your body language to show your students that you care; do not appear apathetic when teaching and talking to students	- Respond to students’ needs and questions in a relaxed and balanced manner - Listen to students’ concerns and refrain from speaking over them	Teacher Interviews; Peck et al. (2015)
Communicate caring	Support students’ cognitive and emotional development by modeling empathy and by helping students to develop a positive sense of self.	- Remind students of their talents when they express self-doubt and communicate to them your desire that they do well, learn and earn good grades	Teacher Interviews; Cooper (2004)
Explicitly point out when students show empathy	When you see a student practicing empathy or showing empathy, point it out to them. Call attention to and label your students’ action so that they know what they’re doing and can see what it looks like outside of a lesson plan. This should help them become more self-aware of how they do or don’t practice empathy.		Teacher Interview

Limitations

As the majority of this study had to be completed over only one semester, time was a major limitation that restricted us from doing all that we had initially hoped to do. For example, we were unable to organize and hold a focus group among teachers to talk further about these ideas. In part due to this lack of time, we also had a small sample size (for the survey, $n = 28$; for the interviews, $n = 3$). Due to the small sample size, the results from our survey did not have statistical significance. Another issue with our sample is the likelihood of selection/respondent bias; the teachers that submitted responses to our survey were likely those who were already interested in the topic of empathy, and thus our selection likely does not fully represent the variation in DC teachers’ perspectives on empathy. We also had to rely on self-reporting, resulting in data that may not be entirely accurate. In the interviews, for example, we asked teachers about what kinds of activities they found helpful for promoting empathy, but because it is so difficult to determine how well a student empathizes, a teacher may believe an activity is beneficial when in fact it has little effect on student empathy. Finally, the interviews revealed to us just how subjectively teachers interpret and understand empathy. Even though we



provided a definition of empathy to teachers before both the survey and the interviews, we found, during the interviews, that teachers were thinking about many different factors (some more related to empathy than others) when we asked them about empathy. These factors included: success, gratitude, emotional intelligence, discipline, cultural competence, etc. This is potentially problematic for our survey, as it suggests that teachers were each understanding and thinking about empathy differently when responding to our questions.

Conclusions and Implications

- Addressing empathy cannot only be done on an individual level—it has to be done systematically. On a school-wide level, empathy can be promoted through a school’s mission statement and overall culture. Cultivating a culture of empathy, along with having teachers commit to treating their coworkers and students with empathy and to modeling empathy when conducting lessons, can reinforce the importance of empathy to students.
- Empathy is a platform by which students achieve and cultivate other prosocial behaviors. Particularly for adolescents, the development of social competencies such as empathy enhances their personalities—which are especially malleable at this time—and their emotional development. Development of empathy also helps them develop other skills such as conflict resolution and altruism.
- Empathy is not going to be taught in a single lesson plan, and the outcome of any lesson—even of multiple lessons—is not necessarily going to be seen the next day, or the next month, or even the next year. The development of empathy, rather, is an ongoing process that requires continuous attention, teaching, and modeling. It must be brought into the classroom, not just on a single day, but as often as possible over the school year such that empathy and its necessary components (i.e. perspective-taking and compassion) are repeatedly reinforced. Teachers, then, must not be discouraged when they do not see immediate outcomes; it takes time to learn empathy, and changes that occur in students may be small and difficult for teachers to perceive. Just because they are small and imperceptible, however, does not mean they are not incredibly important. Teachers must empathize with the difficulty students encounter when trying to empathize.
- Teaching empathy is not one size fits all—teachers have to meet students where they are and acknowledge difference and background. For example, when teaching at a school where students are from mainly working class families and/or are students of color, teachers must incorporate their emotions in discussions of race and privilege, and should not remain rational and unemotional when acknowledging class differences. Teachers will require more than one strategy to appeal to students’ emotions and develop empathy and other prosocial behaviors in them.



Resources for Bringing Empathy into Education

Start Empathy / Ashoka

- <https://startempathy.org/>
- A group of individuals and institutions dedicated to promoting empathy in students and providing the resources for teachers to do so
- Comprise a network of schools labeled “Changemaker schools”: schools that meet certain criteria related to leadership, innovation and empathy
- Created a Toolkit for teachers who want to teach empathy in the classroom

Roots of Empathy

- <http://www.rootsofempathy.org/>
- One of Start Empathy’s fellows
- Aim to build caring, peaceful adults and children by breaking cycle of violence and poor parenting
- Run program during which, every three weeks, children observe and learn to label a baby’s feelings/emotions. Students also receive lessons on how to challenge cruelty and injustice

Peace First

- <http://www.peacefirst.org/our-story-1/#peace-first>
- One of Start Empathy’s fellows
- Teach children about courage, compassion, and collaborative leadership in order to help them deal with and properly respond to the challenges in their communities and lives
- Developed a “manifesto” with nine items that students actions for students to follow (such as “take a stand”) to help students become active citizens
- Provide students with self-service tools, a supportive community and up to \$250 to help students with their peacemaking projects

Narrative4

- <http://www.narrative4.com/>
- Nonprofit founded with the purpose of promoting empathy in students through writing
- Students write a memoir, share that memoir in a face-to-face meeting with a student in another country/state/town, and students then read and explain that individual's memoir

Mindfulness Without Borders

- <http://www.mindfulnesswithoutborders.org/>
- Organization that develops programs to promote mindfulness, emotional and social learning, and community building in students across the world
- MAC Global For Mainstream: 12 lessons that aim to help students regulate emotions, think critically, act compassionately and become agents of social change
- Sample lesson provides instructions on mindfully listening and then asks reflective questions to get students thinking about how well they focus when listening to another person speak and how easily they can take another’s point of view

The Jigsaw Classroom



- <https://www.jigsaw.org/#overview>
- Uses research-based cooperative learning technique to help students develop empathy
- Created lesson plan during which students break up into groups and each learn a part of the lesson plan; after learning their section, the students each teach their section to the other members of their group

Character Counts

- <https://charactercounts.org/>
- A youth development program that focuses on how to use students' character and ethics to help them be more successful in school and beyond
- Includes a significant number of classroom and schoolwide activity suggestions to help teachers cultivate students' ethics

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