TEACHING IS MUCH MORE than helping students learn and remember facts. One way to think about the ABCs of education is to equate A with academics, B with behaviors and C with caring—one of the most important dispositions educators hope to instill in students.

However, the trend in many schools is to emphasize academics and skills to the point of neglecting attitudes and relationships. While some educators lament this trend, others argue that it’s not the school’s job to teach caring and that there is too much other material to fit into the curriculum. But recent research indicates that academics and empathy need not be viewed as mutually exclusive choices. Bridget Cooper, director of the Centre for Pedagogy at the University of Sunderland, U.K., indicates that modeling and fostering empathy in the classroom can actually improve academic achievement.
Cooper conducted a detailed study on empathy in teacher-student relationships. She found that caring interactions were positively related to students’ personal, social, moral and academic development.

“[Empathy] did clearly have effects on the quality of classroom relationships and achievement,” she says of her study. “Teachers modeled their values to children through their treatment of them as individuals, and children grew as a result and emulated the teachers’ empathy. For some children it was transformative in terms of their motivation, self-esteem and achievement in learning.” (A summary of this research can be found in Cooper’s book Empathy in Education and in her article “In search of profound empathy in learning relationships: understanding the mathematics of moral learning environments,” published in the Journal of Moral Education.)

Another researcher who has studied the relationship between empathy and academic achievement is Stanford Professor Emerita Nel Noddings, who has focused her entire career on caring in education. Noddings acknowledges there’s no guarantee empathy will lead to academic success but says, “Common sense tells us that care and trust would reduce failure rates... Kids do better in a culture of caring.”

Most educators are aware that stress can interfere with learning; they experience it in themselves and see it in their students. What’s not so commonly understood is that empathy can reduce the harmful effects of stress. With this in mind, it’s not hard to understand how explicitly teaching empathy in the classroom can boost academic achievement and capacity for learning. Richard Weissbourd, co-director of the Making Caring Common Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, notes how—conversely—the absence of caring and empathy can get in the way of achievement. “It’s hard to learn in an uncaring environment,” he says in an interview for On the Commons magazine. “Isolation and bullying get in the way of learning.”

Empathy in Hidden and Visible Curricula
Caring, Noddings says, should be part of the curriculum and taught through adult-student interactions at school. She argues for the necessity of authentic caring relationships in the classroom; if kids experience empathy, they are more likely to demonstrate it. For the teacher, “this means listening, not just talking,” she says. “It means affirming and recognizing students as valued people.”

Another of Noddings’ suggestions for fostering empathy in the classroom is to “back off of objectives” and focus on broader education goals, including “the development of more human attributes—intellectual, social, emotional, aesthetic and moral.” “Start by revising priorities,” she says. “The goal of education is to create competent, caring citizens. Go beyond learning objectives. Go higher and deeper.”

Noddings also recommends shifting away from telling children what is right or wrong and, instead, teaching them how to care. For high school students, Noddings recommends lessons on such
critical issues as poverty, war, race, class, gender and consumerism. Such lessons, Noddings says, can foster caring for others—not just those in one’s immediate circle, but strangers across the globe and even across the natural world. This type of interdisciplinary curriculum can help teachers “make connections between [different] subjects and between subjects and real-life issues,” a recommendation embraced by the designers of the International Baccalaureate curriculum. Building Empathy Through Play

Weissbourd suggests fostering empathy via a game called “Yes, No, Maybe.” Start with a simple question, such as “Is blue your favorite color?” Have students whose favorite color is blue stand on one side of the room, while students with a different favorite color stand on another side of the room. Continue by asking increasingly more complex questions, including questions about feelings (e.g., “Have you ever felt left out or excluded from something others were doing but you weren’t invited?” “Are you sometimes afraid to share your ideas in class?”). For each of these questions, students who aren’t ready to commit to saying “yes” or “no” can stay in their seats to form a “maybe” group. Weissbourd reports that one student, after participating in this activity, commented on how “Yes, No, Maybe” helped him connect with other kids he didn’t usually connect with.

For younger children, Joyce Davis, a veteran early childhood educator, recommends using puppets to foster empathy. “Puppets are effective because children feel safe with puppets,” she says. “They can talk to puppets.” Davis often uses puppets to model desired behaviors, including relating to other people and handling strong emotions, such as anger, sadness and disappointment. For example, Davis’ puppet might say, “I’m feeling angry, really angry. I feel like hitting somebody, but that’s not the right thing to do. I’ll just tell them I’m angry and I don’t like what they’re doing.” Davis finds that young children listen closely to puppets and are influenced by what the puppets “say” and “do.” Through these friendly alter egos, she notes, “Children can learn how to deal with conflict and how to stand up against bullying. They can also learn to care for each other.”

In an era where student achievement is paramount, the link between helping students care for each other and helping them achieve academic success is critically important to educators who have always prioritized teaching the C—caring. Teaching empathy is more than a means to a desirable set of test scores. As Weissbourd says, “It’s the right thing to do.”

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