



EMPATHY FOR THE 'A'

TEACHING EMPATHY NOT ONLY BENEFITS CLASSROOM CULTURE—IT CAN RAISE TEST SCORES.

BY RUTH WILSON ILLUSTRATION BY SHAW NIELSEN

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.



"GO BEYOND LEA

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

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



LEARNING OBJECTIVES. GO HIGHER AND DEEPER.

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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The Jigsaw Classroom

The Jigsaw Classroom is a cooperative learning technique used in many schools to promote empathy and caring. Psychologist Elliot Aronson, who—in collaboration with his students—developed this technique and conducted research on its effectiveness, says jigsaw groups have been used successfully to reduce intergroup conflict and to promote academic learning.

“Conflict in a classroom is often fueled by a competitive environment, and competition gets in the way of learning,” Aronson notes. The Jigsaw Classroom is designed to foster cooperation and diminish competition among students.

The first step in using the Jigsaw Classroom technique is to divide students into five- or six-person “jigsaw groups,” with each group being as diverse as possible in terms of visible and invisible identities: gender, race, language, ability, religious belief, sexual orientation, family make-up, etc. The day’s lesson is then divided into five or six segments, and each student in the jigsaw group is assigned to learn a different segment of the lesson. Then, each student joins the students from other the jigsaw groups who were assigned to the same segment of the lesson; these individuals become the “expert group.” The experts help each other prepare for a presentation to their respective jigsaw groups. After the jigsaw groups reconvene and all the presentations are made, each jigsaw group will have learned the complete lesson.

The Jigsaw Classroom is different from some other forms of cooperative learning because each student has a unique piece of information to share. As Aronson explains, “No one in the group succeeds unless they all succeed.” Success is determined by cooperation.

Aronson encourages teachers of all disciplines to use jigsaw groups in their classrooms. “It’s very easy, foolproof, and students prefer this approach,” he says. In addition to increased academic performance, Aronson notes that the benefits include “students paying more attention to each other and appreciating each other. If each student’s part is essential, then each student is essential.”

More information about the benefits of the Jigsaw Classroom and easy-to-follow directions can be found at jigsaw.org.