



TEACHERS
WITHOUT
BORDERS

TEACHING EMPATHY

Developed by Dr. Debra Eckerman Pitton

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Introduction

Inclusive education seeks to support all learners. To create an inclusive classroom, educators must consider students' openness to the diversity and differences among their classmates. With racial tension, ethnic divisiveness and violence found in our cities and countries, the world needs individuals who are empathetic. Teachers need to develop empathetic future citizens who embrace diversity. Students need to see, hear, and feel other people's experiences, even when they do not agree or share the same values or perspectives. The following resources will support educators as they embed empathy lessons within their curriculum and provide specific ways to demonstrate and engage learners in empathetic experiences and reflections.

As teachers work to provide inclusive education in all classrooms, it is important to consider students' openness to the diversity and differences within their class. With racial tension, ethnic divisiveness and violence found in many cities and countries, the world needs individuals who are empathetic. We need to develop future citizens and leaders who embrace empathy. We need to teach empathy so that all students can see, hear, and feel the perspectives of others, even when they do not agree. This will enable inclusive practices to be implemented more easily and effectively within schools.

Empathy in the classroom

Empathy is an important tool for both teachers and students to enable them to learn and grow socially, intellectually, and emotionally according to Wasabi Learning. Both the Harvard Making Caring Common Project and the Wabisabi post identify the importance of developing empathy in children in order for them to positively impact their future community. Two of two distinct types of empathy were named by Wasabi: Affective empathy, which is an individual's ability to share in another's feelings. Cognitive empathy is being able to understand another's perspective and comprehend why a person might be feeling a certain way. Both types of empathy can, and should, be developed in the classroom. However, in today's world, students especially need cognitive empathy to enable them to see and respect another person's point of view.

Empathy is a key response that young people (and all people) need to develop. For those who immediately shake their heads and regard the teaching of empathy as 'too touchy-feely', I reference Bonner and Aspy, (1984), who have identified the relationship between student empathy and GPA. Bonner and Aspy state that when secondary students in a classroom learned about empathy and enacted empathetic behaviors, they reported feeling safe and supported. As Maslow stated, our students need to feel safe in their learning space before they can move towards higher level learning and self-actualization. Classrooms where empathy is taught and expected from students are spaces where students feel comfortable and safe and can expand their learning.

Developing a sense of empathy is not only of value in the classroom, but a skill set that can benefit individuals, not only in childhood, but well into adult life as well. Goodstart (2018), states that, "developing empathy is a vital building block in a child's ability to regulate their emotion and is so valuable in being able to adapt and succeed in an ever-changing world."

The following resources provide information about how to foster empathy in their students. Using information from the Wabisabi and Educational Leadership articles, teachers can engage in the following activities to support teaching empathy:

- Modeling empathy: Teachers will discuss and identify situations where empathy is needed in the classroom and how to ensure their students see and hear the teacher responding in empathetic ways. Role playing, response to literature and Goleman's ideas for teaching emotional intelligence will be used to develop the language needed to respond empathetically, and to help students do the same.
- Perspective taking: Teachers will identify characters from literature with whom they and their students may not agree and develop have writing prompts for students to respond from the character's perspective and write about 'walking in the characters' shoes.
- Communicating with empathy: Teachers will practice defining and naming empathy so they can do this in their classroom. Using scenarios, teachers will practice responding to student behaviors in the classroom, communicating with empathy and naming their behavior so students can see this practice in action.
- Developing (and participating in) community building activities: Teachers will create ways for students to share their hobbies, interests, etc., and 'who they are' using Circle Maps (from the Thinking Maps Model) or by playing bingo to find classmates who share the same interests, backgrounds, etc. Taking time and using community building activities helps students see the similarities and values, between students and helps them get to know one another more fully.
- Identifying stereotypes: Teachers will participate in group discussions to define and identify stereotypes, and generate lists of characters from literature, movies or real life that can be used to point out and name stereotypes. These scenarios will provide opportunities for students take the 'upstander' role and be willing to step into interrupt actions or behaviors they witness that are biased or discriminatory. Discussions will also focus on how to share with their students the need to reject these stereotypes.
- Creating safe environments for students to discuss differences: Teachers will review Cooperative Learning strategies to enable them to create opportunities for their students to discuss differences. Literature Circles will also be reviewed to provide structured discussions to initiate classroom discussions from differing perspectives.

- Practice self-disclosure: Teachers will practice sharing stories or giving examples from their own lives to connect to students on a more personal level. Reflective writing and cooperative learning strategies will be used to facilitate this practice.
- Integrate mindfulness: Teachers will participate in mindfulness activities such as meditation or using breathing to manage emotions and stress, to enable them to teach these skills to their students, so that students can recognize and manage their emotions.
- Creating opportunities for positive group interaction: Teachers will participate in brain-storming and on-line research to develop ideas for group projects, team games and service-learning activities to enable their students to bond by working together. Johnson and Johnson's work on cooperative learning will be reviewed.
- Practicing Kindness: Teachers will develop a process for having students identify the norms for a classroom with the teacher modeling and naming acts of kindness that reflect these norms. Creating opportunities for students to enact kind responses to others (e.g. helping younger grades with lunch trays, reading to elders, etc.)

Teachers participating in this PD on empathy should be able to provide classroom activities that enable their students to:

- Demonstrate awareness and rejection of stereotypes
- Describe and discuss differences respectfully
- Listen carefully to other's perspectives and opinions
- Manage difficult feelings
- Work through social situations fairly
- Voice their own beliefs in a calm and respectful way
- Participate in activities that support the needs of others

Empathy Activities

Model kindness and compassion

Have you ever found yourself gossiping about a coworker, rolling your eyes at someone, or mocking someone's voice? Kids pick up on everything. They use our behavior as a barometer for their own interactions in the world. It's crucial for educators to model kindness and compassion, especially when they're feeling angry or challenged. Watch your facial expressions, your tone, and your reactions to emotional challenges. Model your own compassionate practice in front of your students.

Teach students how to recognize negative emotions

Teach your students to recognize their emotions, not just react to them. This can start by clearly stating your own feelings to students: "I am feeling a little angry right now. So I'm going to take a nice deep breath to calm myself down and then we can talk."

When a student is displaying their own negative emotions, ask them to explore and identify their feelings. "What emotion do you think you are feeling right now? Why do you think you might be feeling this way?" Or, take a group of students outside to observe the nonverbal cues of others and ask: "What emotion do you think that person is feeling right now? What makes you say that?"

Next, help students make connections between their emotions and subsequent reactive behaviors. "I've noticed that sometimes you throw your papers on the floor when you're frustrated. Why do you think you do that when you're frustrated? When you feel yourself getting frustrated, what else could you do?"

Stillness Challenge

Supplies: timer, calming music

You may not be able to just ask a room full of children to sit in lotus position for 30 minutes of blissful stillness, but you can slowly build a meditation practice over time. Start small and set a timer for two minutes. Perhaps turn off the lights and have some calm music on hand. Ask students to find a cozy spot and to sit comfortably. Tell them that together you are going to start a new stillness challenge and each day you'll see how long it can go. Track your meditation progress on a poster. The object of the challenge? To keep your eyes closed, sit in stillness and to focus on breathing slowly. Encourage students to avoid talking and fidgeting. They should attempt to sit as still as possible and if their thoughts wander, instruct them to kindly bring them back to the breath. The timer will go off when two minutes are up. Take a nice stretch and debrief how it went. The next day? Try three minutes!

An idea for special needs students who perhaps can't sit still:

Have your student sit where they can place their fingertips on the desk or their knees. Starting with the thumbs, tap each finger on the table to count in the breath—inhale 1-2-3-4-5 and then to count out the breath—exhale 1-2-3-4-5. This can also be done by raising arms or lifting feet off the ground with each breath.

Mindful Eating

Supplies: timer, candy or raisins

First, choose your edible. A piece of candy (like Skittles or Hershey's Kisses) or a raisin works. Set a timer for two minutes. The idea is for students to close their eyes, holding the object in their mouth and focusing on it without chewing. Let's say it's a Hershey's Kiss. For three minutes, students should focus on the candy melting in their mouth slowly. If their thoughts drift, they should simply bring them back to the candy. They should focus on the sensory experience—the taste and feel of the object. Doing so provides a tasty focal point for the mind and builds the capacity for stillness and mindful focus.

Breathing Buddy Meditation

Supplies: timer, calming music, stuffed animals or tennis ball

Have students lie down. Each student should get a stuffed animal or tennis ball to rest on their stomach. Set a timer, and for your determined length of time, students should close their eyes, taking slow deep breaths while balancing their stuffed animal or ball on their stomach. If the object falls off, they can simply put it back and keep breathing. The object is to keep the focus on the breath and to balance the object for the given time.

Sensory Challenge

Supplies: timer, calming music

This can be done anywhere—inside the classroom, on the playground, or on a field trip. Ask students to sit comfortably and close their eyes. Take a few deep breaths together and then offer the following prompts.

For 30 seconds, focus deeply on what you can hear. Even the smallest noises.

For 30 seconds, focus deeply on what you can smell.

For 30 seconds, focus deeply on what you can feel.

Open your eyes and look up. For 30 seconds, focus deeply on what you can see.

Sound Focus

Supplies: timer, bell, singing bowl, [singing bowl app](#)

Ask students to sit comfortably and close their eyes. Using a bell, a Tibetan singing bowl, or tuning fork (or a video/app of any one of these), play a robust, reverberating tone. Ask students to breathe quietly, and listen intently to the sound as it fades. When they can no longer hear it, they should put their head down. You can repeat this a few times.

Body Scan

Supplies: [A Body Scan Meditation](#)

A body scan is a guided meditation that takes students through a head-to-toe scan of the body. Students should sit or lie down comfortably. Listening to the audio, students should follow the cues to breath and relax the body muscle by muscle. This practice can help students learn to assess tension and use their breath to release it and its especially helpful for students with sleep problems.

Lesson Plans

Showing Empathy

This lesson has students practice ways to be more understanding and reflect on the effects of empathetic listening.

GRADE LEVEL 9 - 12

Objectives

Activities will help students:

- understand empathy
- practice ways to be more understanding
- reflect on the effects of empathetic listening

Essential Questions

- What does it mean to put yourself in someone else's shoes?
- How empathetic am I?
- How can I better show empathy toward others?

Vocabulary

empathy [em-puh-thee] (noun) the understanding of or the ability to identify with another person's feelings or experiences

Overview

When we put ourselves in another person's shoes, we are often more sensitive to what that person is experiencing and are less likely to tease or bully them. By explicitly teaching students to be more conscious of other people's feelings, we can create a more accepting and respectful school community.

Materials

- [Are You Empathetic?](#)
- [Someone else's shoes](#)

Activities

1. Can you think of a time—maybe during an argument with a friend or when the boy or girl you liked hurt your feelings—when you wished that someone understood how you felt? When we try to relate to what another person is going through, we're being empathetic.

2. Do you think you're an empathetic person? Respond to each statement on Are You Empathetic? with "yes" if it describes something you do or "no" if you don't do what is described.

3. If you answered mostly "yes," you probably do a good job of showing empathy toward other people. The statements you answered "no" to are things you could do to be more empathetic.

4. As a class, use Are You Empathetic? to discuss how you can follow the behaviors suggested to show empathy toward others:

- One way you can try to imagine what it feels like being in someone else's shoes is to ask yourself, "How would I feel in this situation?" How else can you try to understand how others feel?
- When you listen to others, making eye contact, not interrupting the speaker, and asking follow-up questions can show that you're making a genuine effort to understand what they're going through. What other behaviors might show someone that you are being an empathetic listener?
- What can you do to be more attuned to other people's feelings? For instance, when you talk to your friends, how many "you" questions do you ask compared to the number of "I" statements you make?

5. Now you are going to practice what you've learned about being empathetic. Pair up with a classmate. Tell your partner one of the following: an embarrassing moment, a time you were scared or something that made you sad. If you are not comfortable sharing a real-life experience, you may pretend to be a fictional character and tell his/her story (e.g., as Juliet, talk about how scared you were to drink the potion the Friar gave you). Your partner should practice being empathetic as he is listening to your story. Then, switch roles: Practice being empathetic as your partner tells you what he experienced.

6. OR use the 'Someone else's shoes' cards to discuss perspective

7. With your partner, discuss how she showed empathy toward you, how it made you feel and what you wish she had done differently. Use statements like, "I could tell you were really listening to me because you maintained eye contact with me during the entire conversation, and that made me feel like you care."

8. Everyone in the class should now stand. Go around the room, sharing something you learned about practicing empathy, sitting after you share. If someone else shares your thought, sit down. Continue around the room until everyone is sitting.

Extension Activity

Make an effort to practice empathetic listening at home with a guardian or sibling.

Developing Empathy

This lesson helps students gain a deeper understanding of empathy and how to put it into practice.

GRADE LEVEL

6-8

Topic: Bullying & Bias

Subject: Reading & Language Arts, SEL, ELL / ESL

Social Justice Domain

Objectives

Activities will help students:

- understand empathy
- practice ways to be more understanding
- reflect on the effects of empathetic listening

Essential Questions

- What does it mean to put yourself in someone else's shoes?
- How empathetic am I?
- How can I better show empathy toward others?

Vocabulary

empathy [em-puh-thee] (noun) the understanding of or the ability to identify with another person's feelings or experiences

Overview

When we put ourselves in another person's shoes, we are often more sensitive to what that person is experiencing and are less likely to tease or bully them. By explicitly teaching students to be more conscious of other people's feelings, we can create a more accepting and respectful school community.

Materials (click on the following links to access)

- [Are You Empathetic?](#)
- [Someone Else's Shoes](#)

Activities

- Can you think of a time—maybe during an argument with a friend or when the boy or girl you liked hurt your feelings—when you wished that someone understood how you felt? When we try to relate to what another person is going through, we’re being empathetic.
- Do you think you’re an empathetic person? Respond to each statement on [Are You Empathetic?](#) with “yes” if it describes something you do or “no” if you don’t do what is described.
- If you answered mostly “yes,” you probably do a good job of showing empathy toward other people. The statements you answered “no” to are things you could do to be more empathetic.
- As a class, use [Are You Empathetic?](#) to discuss how you can follow the behaviors suggested to show empathy toward others:
 - One way you can try to imagine what it feels like being in someone else’s shoes is to ask yourself, “How would I feel in this situation?” How else can you try to understand how others feel?
 - When you listen to others, making eye contact, not interrupting the speaker, and asking follow-up questions can show that you’re making a genuine effort to understand what they’re going through. What other behaviors might show someone that you are being an empathetic listener?
 - What can you do to be more attuned to other people’s feelings? For instance, when you talk to your friends, how many “you” questions do you ask compared to the number of “I” statements you make?
- Now you are going to practice what you’ve learned about being empathetic. You will each receive one character card from [Someone Else’s Shoes](#). You are going to complete the rest of the activity as this character, so take some time to think about how he or she feels in the given situation.
- Pair up with a classmate (be sure your partner’s character card is different from yours; if you have the same character, you need to pair up with someone else). As your character, tell your partner about your situation. Your partner should practice being empathetic as he is listening to your story. Then, switch roles: practice being empathetic as your partner, as his character, tells you what he is experiencing.

With your partner, discuss how she showed empathy toward you, how it made you feel and what you wish she had done differently. Use statements like, "I could tell you were really listening to me because you maintained eye contact with me during the entire conversation, and that made me feel like you care."

Everyone in the class should now stand. Go around the room, sharing something you learned about practicing empathy, sitting after you share. If someone else shares your thought, sit down. Continue around the room until everyone is sitting.

Extension Activity

Create a way to teach others how to be more empathetic (e.g., perform a skit, create a comic strip, write a short story, sing or rap original lyrics).

Resources

Borba, M. (October, 2018). The promise of social-emotional learning. *Educational Leadership*, 76 (2), pp. 22-28.

Bonner, T.D. and Aspy, D. (June, 1984). A Study of the relationship between student empathy and GPA. *The Journal of Humanistic Education and Development*, 22 (4) pp. 149-154.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. NY: Bantam Books.

Goodstart Early Learning. (February 22, 2018). Why teaching children empathy is more important than ever. <https://www.goodstart.org.au/news-and-advice/february-2018/why-teaching-children-empathy-is-important>

Harvard University. (Nov. 1, 2018). How to build empathy and strengthen your school community. Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Johnson, D., Johnson, R., (March,1999) Making cooperative learning work. *Theory Into Practice*, 38(2):67-73.

Wabisabi Learning. The Best Ways of Becoming a More Empathetic Teacher.

Additional Resources

Specific lesson plans for teaching empathy (from Teaching for Justice) for secondary students:

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/lessons/showing-empathy>

<https://www.oakland.edu/Assets/Oakland/galileo/files-and-documents/Empathy%20in%20Your%20Classroom%20Teachers%20Guild.pdf>

<https://resilienteducator.com/classroom-resources/teaching-children-empathy-sel/>

About Dr. Debra Eckerman Pitton

Debra Eckerman Pitton, Ph. D., has served as a high school and middle level language arts teacher as well as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Learning and as an elected member of her local school board. She is retired from the faculty of Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN, where she served 22 years in the education department. She taught middle school methods and philosophy, secondary methods, supervised student teachers and served as the department chair.

Dr. Pitton received her undergraduate degree in Communication and Secondary Education from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, her M.Ed. in Language Arts from Northeastern University in Chicago, IL, and her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of North Texas. She has authored three previous books: *Stories of Student Teaching*, *Mentoring the Novice Teachers*, and *Case Studies for Supervision*. She has published numerous articles and conducted workshops on mentoring, literature circles, and communication skills for school districts across the country as well as given presentations at national educational conferences.

Dr. Pitton's focus on globalization and service learning led her to develop international courses where she worked with students in local communities teaching English. It was during one such course in Peru that the experience shared in her current book, *No One Left Behind*, took place.

Dr. Pitton currently works part time at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis, MN, and lives in Bloomington, MN, with her husband, Jon. They have three grown children, one granddaughter and two grandsons. She enjoys spending time with her family at their cabin in northern Minnesota.

About Teachers Without Borders

Teachers Without Borders (TWB) is a global network of volunteers that connects teacher leaders to information and each other in order to bring about social change and close the education divide — on a global scale.

All Teachers Without Borders resources and programs have been conceived and led by local teacher leaders who make it their passion to connect education with health, economic development, livelihoods, and overall well being.

Learn more about TWB at <http://TWB.org> and on social media: [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Linked In](#).