Developing a More Caring Classroom: Teaching Empathy Through Perspective-Taking Strategies

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Context of Action Research

(Authors Note: Our action research was conducted in a collaborative manner, but we open the paper and close it with our individual reflections.)

Bhashy Pather:
One of the worst experiences I had during school was when I was excluded from attending a party thrown by Lee.\(^{[i]}\) I recall hearing about the party from one of my close friends who had been invited. As I inquired about the party I found out that the entire class of three hundred students had been invited. I tried to think of various reasons for my exclusion, but I couldn't think of any. Everyday at school I walked by Lee hoping that my exclusion was an oversight and that she just lacked the opportunity to invite me. Each day brought me closer to the party date and increased my hurt feelings. I asked people why I had been the only one excluded from the party and some of my friends told me that Lee considered me a "loser" and did not want to invite me. The worst part of the whole experience was that my friends did not speak up for me, but instead, attended the party without regard for my feelings.

The feelings I harbored for this experience were far worse than being picked last for a
soccer team or not being chosen for collaborative working groups during school projects. I wished that I had an advocate who supported me. I wished that someone had helped others to realize how painful exclusion and indifference could be to an adolescent who was trying so hard to fit in to a world where he was different from those around him.

Kirk Deutschmann:
* Sitting in the desks with attached bucket seats on one particular day was the most embarrassing experience I can recall from my schooling experience. Madame Losielle, my grade nine French teacher, had left the room for a short time and I knew that it would happen again. Mike came over, stood above my desk, looked down upon me, and pushed the desk over with me in it. Nobody laughed. They just stared while he made some snide remark about me being a geek and physically weak.

All I wanted was for someone to understand what I was going through, to experience the fear resonating through my body during these brief, but life-changing moments, or the sheer embarrassment of being helpless. I wanted people to care enough to say a few simple words to show they understood what I was going through.

As a result of these personal experiences, which have driven us to carry out our action research, we believe everyone has the right to an education in a caring supportive classroom environment. Classrooms that are caring have "students [that] work harder, achieve more, and attribute more importance to schoolwork…in which they feel liked, accepted, and respected by… fellow students" (Lewis, Schaps and Watson, 1996, 20). There are students that may be deemed "different," who are not accepted by their peers around them. These students unfortunately do not experience the caring and supportive classroom that all students are entitled to.

As teachers we understand that all students are not treated equally in the classroom. We understand that some students are marginalized due to their differences and this affects the quality of their educational experience. The role of the teacher is more than simply teaching the curriculum. Teachers have the potential to impact the classroom in very powerful ways by teaching for social justice. Teachers can be advocates for those students who are marginalized by creating a supportive atmosphere where marginalized students are more centrally located within the social climate.

Through our combined fourteen years of teaching experience in middle schools, we have observed many facets of student interactions that are not always positive and conducive to a caring community within the classroom. Some of these situations have impacted on the learning environment, preventing successful teaching and learning. These negative interactions between students affect social relations, classroom unity, cooperative learning, and class discussions. Two stories illustrate these negative interactions that have been observed.

A grade eight student, Taz, perceived that she was being made fun of in the form of a "burn book." A "burn book" is a written instrument in the form of a journal written by students that makes fun of others without the knowledge of those being written about. Taz, upon finding out about the book, believed that two other girls, Betty and Rebecca, whom she had known for several years, were calling her names and making fun of her friendships and social skills with others in the class. Taz is an overly sensitive student who would be deemed socially naïve by her peers and feels that any teasing is an indication of how people feel about her. She feels bullied and unfairly treated, but does not have the confidence to
address the situation or people involved directly. Betty and Rebecca did not realize that those that they wrote about, including Taz, were uncomfortable being discussed privately in writing. Betty and Rebecca's understanding of the situation was that the book was theirs and no one else had a right to read or discuss their private material.

A grade seven student named Erica was asked by the teacher to help Holly, a special needs student who has a developmental delay, complete a task. When she was asked to do this, she leaned away from Holly who was sitting beside her and rolled her eyes. Erica is very aware of Holly's special needs in the classroom, as Holly works on a modified program and with a special education assistant. The inference in this situation is that Erica was upset at being called upon to help a student who is deemed different. Though this is a subtle gesture we believe that this indifference is related to a lack of understanding of Holly's situation and the premise of a caring supportive classroom community.

Our observations of these negative student interactions seem to fall under the categories where students recognize these acute differences with respect to race, gender, social class and exceptionalities (gifted, learning disabled, physically disabled, and developmentally delayed). As a result, we desire to have a more positive, caring classroom. To accomplish this we want students to understand differences and similarities in themselves and others. We feel that using empathy through perspective-taking will achieve our goal of establishing and sustaining a more caring and positive classroom environment.

**The Research Question**

As a result of our observations and desire for a more positive learning environment, we want to see if we can create a more caring classroom in which students value themselves and others by teaching for empathy through perspective-taking strategies. We believe if our students view their classmates through a more normative perspective, they will come to understand one another and ultimately embrace similarities and accept differences.

**Literature Review**

In researching our goal of creating a more positive and caring classroom by using empathy, we chose a framework to guide our strategy (Grant and Sleeter, 2003). The literature supports that empathy can be taught and a more positive classroom can be achieved (Bruce and Shade, 1996; Cotton, 2001; Cress and Holm, 2000; Schonert-Reichl, 2006; Toranzo, 1996; Upright, 2002).

**Framework for the unit we taught**

The work of Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter (2003) discusses a Human Relations Approach to teaching. This approach is consistent with what we see as the role of the teacher in dealing with social justice issues within the classroom. They deal with problems that arise in the classroom based on differences among individuals and groups. The approach works on developing respect among individuals who are marginalized due to race, gender, class, and exceptionality. Their approach is consistent with our goal of having students accept each other based on similarities and differences. In their approach, Grant and Sleeter suggest lessons for sensitizing students to similarities and differences among different people. In our work we intend to sensitize students to be more understanding and
empathize with others through perspective-taking.

Teaching Empathy

In dealing with our goal of teaching empathy, the literature supports that empathy is a powerful tool in creating a positive caring classroom. Cress and Holm (2000) suggest that children develop empathy through literature by projecting human values on a story situation. By looking at literature, children can bring meaning to their lives and make sense of the world. Students remember, notice, and then make connections—engaging the thinking mind as well as what is called the "emotional side" (Cress and Holm, 2000, Para. 6). In this same study, the ability to take perspective of characters in empathetic situations appears to be the key element in student learning. Toranzo (1996) worked with a small group of special needs students, specifically deaf children, for two years and noted a significant growth in students' empathy development, resulting in positive behaviors and attitudes in the classroom. Cotton (2006) summarizes the literature on empathy using over fifty publications, concluding that empathy training and classroom strategies can enhance student caring. Using this argument, we decided to teach a unit on empathy using children's literature as one strategy for developing more empathetic responses.

Definition of Empathy and Perspective-Taking

The literature is quite varied in the definition of what empathy is (Cotton, 2001). Kathleen Cotton's review states that the confusion over empathy is with regard to what extent an empathetic response is a cognitive process or an affective experience. Bruce and Shade (1996) describe three components when explaining how to enhance positive attitudes towards those that are different. For the purpose of our research, we are defining empathy as a response that includes a cognitive, affective and behavioural situational response. In the cognitive domain, we contend that the individuals need to recognize reasons and details of an empathetic situation. In the affective domain, we believe individuals must recognize and identify with the feelings and emotions associated with the individual in that situation. Lastly, in the behavioural domain, we believe that the individual will respond or react in an appropriate manner for the empathetic situation. To illustrate this concept of the domains of empathy we use the tsunami disaster that hit Asia in 2004 to produce a better understanding:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example using Tsunami</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Reasons and details why a situation is empathetic</td>
<td>Tsunami victims are hungry because they are without food (washed away, spoiled).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Identifies feelings and emotions of empathetic situations</td>
<td>The girl is lonely, scared, and helpless because her parents have died in the tsunami.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>Actions appropriate to empathetic situations</td>
<td>Help the girl to locate her family or next of kin (familiar caregivers).</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Perspective-taking involves self-awareness. As a child grows they become less egocentric and more able to take on the role of the other. Schonert-Reichl (2006) describes Hoffman's developmental stages of empathy from the egocentric stages of newborns and toddlers to the beginning stages of empathy in elementary school children and the ability to experience
another's situation beyond the immediate in late childhood and early adolescence. The ability to empathize requires one to be able to take the perspective of another. The empathtetic response functions within an exchange with others; therefore, perspective-taking is involved in empathy (Toranzo, 1996). This involves higher-level processes. The ability to understand perspectives affects how we view and interact with the world. Perspective-taking is an emerging self-awareness that begins by being able to "step outside" of one's own world and into the role of the other. Underwood and Moore (1982) identify role-taking capacity as the basis for the greater levels of empathy/pro-social behavior one sees in older children as compared with younger ones. We believe that one needs to practice and learn how to take perspective in order to be empathetic.

We believe that perspective-taking is necessary for empathy. However, we believe that a person who can perspective-take is not necessarily empathetic. An empathetic person is able to perspective-take. For the purpose of this action research we define the following: **Perspective-Taking**, the skill of putting oneself in the role of another; **Empathy**, a response that includes a cognitive, affective and behavioural aspect.

Our research posits that if students understand each others' differences, and their feelings, they will act or behave in a more empathetic way, which will potentially help establish a more caring and supportive classroom.

### Research Methods

To carry out our research, we created a literature-based unit to teach empathy. We taught this unit to two different classes at two different middle schools in Coquitlam, British Columbia. A grade six and seven class of thirty-one students at Montgomery Middle School and a grade eight class of thirty-one students at Scott Creek Middle School. The students who attend Montgomery Middle come from mostly middle class families with a small group of students coming from low income homes. At Montgomery Middle, the class was composed of a heterogeneous mix of students, including four ESL students, one gifted and three special needs (two with developmental delays and one with a learning disability). At Scott Creek, students come from higher middle class homes largely with two income earners in the family. In addition, Scott Creek has a high ESL and International Education population and many of these students are sent to study here on their own. The class included a heterogeneous mix of students, including six ESL students and four special needs (one behavior, one developmental delay, and two with learning disabilities).

Our unit began by discussing and articulating vocabulary associated with empathy in order to give students a more comprehensive list of words that describe feelings. This was done in order to make their vocabulary more accurate for specific contexts where empathy is needed. The next aspect of the unit was to teach students what perspective-taking means. We used the stories *Snow White*, both the original and an alternate version, and *Rumpelstiltskin*, to allow students practice perspective-taking through discussion of the characters in these stories. Once students developed the cognitive ability to see another's point of view, the concept of empathy was introduced through the story *The Little Match Girl*. In this story a poor, abused little girl is forced to sell flowers and matches on New Year's Eve to earn money for her family. She was told not to come home until she earned some money. She suffers a tragic death due to the severity of her situation. In our activity, the students needed to empathize with the poor, cold, hungry, lonely, abused and unsuccessful girl, by creating a new ending to the story. Next in the unit, we created a series of simulations (stations) where students experienced realistic life situations in which
they would require empathy. Some examples of these situations included, blindfolding students to resemble a physical disability, understanding what a new immigrant would feel like when placed in a new culture, and simulating a learning disability by completing a maze using a mirror to disorient an otherwise normal function.

![Image of a simulation activity](image.jpg)

*Our research method included simulation activities where students experienced situations different from their own and needed to practice empathy. This image is from "Dinner Time," where students needed to take the perspective of someone who is poor and hungry.*

In the next part of our unit, we worked with students to help them understand empathy through gender stereotypes. Students were asked to identify common gender stereotypes such as, males being athletic or playing video games, or females being more involved in shopping or being more talkative. With this activity students were required to understand and empathize with others, both male and female, who do not fit the common gender stereotypes.

In our culminating activity we used the story *The Ugly Duckling* as a springboard for discussing all things that are "different" and not within the realm of our own experiences. An assignment titled "A New Ugliness" was given to see how students would empathize in situations where others are different from them in the categories of race, gender, social class, and exceptionalities (gifted, learning disability, and developmental delays).

To coincide with the unit we collected data in two ways: anecdotal observations of students interacting with one another and journal entries. Between the two teacher-researchers who were also observers, we collected twenty-two specific anecdotal observations, which we later grouped into four categories. These categories resulted from a combination of our observations from our years of teaching practice and discussions about what was important with respect to "caring classrooms" as teacher-researchers in preparation for our research study, and preliminary literature review in which Toranzo (1996) identified certain negative behaviours. In addition to the anecdotal observations, we had students complete journal entries to help us note changes and/or growth in understanding, feeling and responding, with regard to empathetic situations. In the journal responses, we asked students to give information about the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of a variety of empathetic situations. We had students complete between eight and ten journal responses each.

In order to ascertain growth of empathetic responses we designed a rubric to measure the
three components of empathy. This rubric was created from our research literature (Bruce and Shade, 1996; Cotton, 2001; Cress and Holm, 2000; Toranzo, 1996). We had hoped to see students giving information showing understanding on the cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. Depending on the specific journal question, we wanted students to detail what makes the situation empathetic (the cognitive aspect), feelings and emotions needed in the empathetic situation (the affective aspect), and actions appropriate to the empathetic situation (the behavioural aspect).

Research Analysis and Findings

Over the course of our five week empathy unit, we have made some general conclusions based upon anecdotal observations, student journal entries, and our position as a teacher-researcher about students' abilities to empathize. Anecdotal observations were collected based on student interactions as they completed the unit. Journal entries were analyzed for common themes throughout the course of the unit. Lastly, the teacher-researcher has an inside knowledge of the students' lives, which gives us a framework to make conclusions about students and empathy.

After analyzing our data, we grouped our anecdotal observations into four specific themes. These included, jokes and put downs, exclusionary practices, indifference, and insensitivity. Of the twenty-two specific anecdotes, we found many involved jokes or put downs (11 of 22), some involved insensitivity (6 of 22), and a few involved exclusionary practices (3 of 22) and indifference (3 of 22). In creating this unit, our ambition was to use empathy as a tool to help students understand each other better and reduce these negative interactions, replacing them with more positive ones.

Our first finding after analyzing the journals showed that most students who have a variety of experiences and/or background knowledge seem to be able to empathize better than those that don't. We believe the reason that students with more life experience and/or background knowledge seem to be more empathetic is that having more to draw from allows them to connect new situations to their experiences or knowledge. From analyzing their journals, many of our students who have these varied experiences seem well able to place themselves into the fictional situations in the created unit and provide responses from the role of the other. Perspective-taking is the skill of putting oneself in the role of another. In other words, perspective-taking is a necessary skill for the cognitive aspect of empathy.

For example, Thomas, a grade seven student, is an only child with a breadth of knowledge that comes from traveling, from having highly educated and supportive parents, and a wealth of life experiences. Thomas' alternate Snow White response discusses curfew, dress, and tone in dealing with parents, which shows an ability to take perspective and, ultimately, empathize fully. Thomas displayed the ability to understand what the alternate Snow White (an angry, rebellious teenager, quite unlike the loyal, cooperative traditional Snow White) would experience in a new situation in his journal response by giving specific examples of her talking back to her parents and wearing revealing clothing. Conversely, students with limited life experience and background knowledge were unable to assimilate such limited resources to a new situation or context that required empathy. John, also a grade seven student, had limited life experience and responded inadequately in his journal entries. For example, in his response about how Snow White would behave in response to the new context of a high school dance, he said, "there would probably be no adults there because of the high school people." A high school dance would have numerous supervisors to deal with issues of alcohol, drugs and sex. The implication is that John does not have the
background knowledge or experience of a high school dance to know the measures that are actually taken for safety of students in this type of situation.

In our second finding, we noticed that students appear to frame their empathetic responses by what they are seeing and feeling. For example, Jane displayed her understanding of empathy by associating her feeling of loneliness in her journal response. In her journal she states, "I feel desire for friendship with the Queen because we are both lonely. Her position as the queen and my position on the wall is isolating but our conversations cure our loneliness." Jane is an ESL student who the researcher knows to house feelings of loneliness in her personal life as a result of being separated from her family through studying English in Canada. She connected the feelings of loneliness in her personal life with the loneliness felt by the mirror. Therefore, we surmise that students' personal experience filters what they initially empathize towards.

A third finding in our study is that in many cases students lacked the ability to use accurate feeling words in the proper context. We began to see evidence of this in their definitions of common feeling words where they used words in a slang and/or incomplete fashion. When giving situations requiring empathetic responses, students would misuse the words based on popular culture. For example, the word "dejected" was used to mean "rejected." "Rejected" is a commonly used slang term used by students to mean a failed attempt or not accepted. When asked to define feeling words in context, students often defined the word as a feeling such as "he felt bothered" with no context or reason to explain the feeling, thereby showing minimal understanding of the term. In addition, students had difficulty using the appropriate intensity of feeling vocabulary for the emotion in the empathetic situation. For example, in discussion about a disabled man who had his motorized scooter stolen, a student stated that the man would be "annoyed" in the situation rather than being "angry" or "irate." Though these words identify feelings, the more specific words imply a greater level of empathetic understanding.

A fourth finding in our study was that a majority of students were simplistic in their understanding of empathetic situations. In viewing a situation, students relied on the "quick fix" approach, where they changed or removed the situation under which empathy is required. Their simplistic understanding of the empathetic situation is to service the need and not think about the long term effect of what the other person will continue to go through. For example, in the story The Little Match Girl students were asked to finish the story after hearing that the girl was cold, poor, hungry, unsuccessful and scared. In responding to this situation, many students simply responded by creating a situation where the factors requiring empathy were removed in favour of a happy ending where the child sold all of her goods and made enough money to get food and warmth. The students failed to understand that once the money ran out, the girl would still be affected by those factors, continuing to be poor, hungry, cold and abused. In contrast to this type of simplistic response, a few students created a scenario where the Match Girl was adopted. The significance of this ending shows a higher level of understanding of the factors that make the situation empathetic and considers the long-term change of the girl's situation and condition.
Students created endings to the story The Little Match Girl with typically "quick fix" approaches, like the one illustrated in this image, where the girl receives money and her problems are over, showing a lack of understanding of the factors that make the situation empathetic.

In addition to fixing the differences rather than understanding what it would be like to have the differences, students were also simplistic in their understanding by not looking at all the factors that made each situation require empathy. Whereas many of the situations held more than one reason for needing empathy, students often responded with one or two ideas, despite being asked to list all the factors of the empathetic situation. For example, in The Little Math Girl many students were able to discuss the facet of being poor, but did not go further to discuss that she was cold, abused, unsuccessful, and lonely. When students completed the story, they often gave the girl a lot of money, which they believed would allow the girl to buy clothes, get food, or leave her abusive situation. In order to show full understanding of an empathetic situation, students need to look at all the aspects together that build an empathetic situation, rather than looking at one or two factors in isolation.

A fifth finding of our study was that students did seem to understand perspective-taking in the context of putting themselves in the role or place of the other characters. However, this ability was limited in that it did not view the situation from all perspectives; the kids focused on the most obvious point of view. Often, students were able to explain one reason the character acted the way they did but were unable to suggest or discuss extensive reasons that might have contributed to the situation. For example, although students suggested that the reason the Miller lied to the King in Rumpelstiltskin was to show his importance, they were not able to discuss the notion that the Miller may have lied in order to better the circumstance of his daughter. The notion here is that the Miller understood that he could not provide for his daughter in the manner he wished, but by introducing his daughter to the King, even though a lie or an impossible task was given, he gave his daughter the opportunity to overcome her lot in life by overwhelming the King with her beauty.

In another example, students were able to perspective-take by listing the situations requiring empathy in The Little Match Girl. What was lacking in their responses were the feelings associated with the situation, in that the students did not discuss that the Match Girl was cold because she was too afraid to return home for fear of her abusive father. The result of this difference was that we were continually forced to define and redefine the meaning of perspective-taking and empathy, and draw connections between the two while still maintaining a distinction between the terms and meanings.
Originally we intended to use the empathy rubric, which we created to measure students' growth and/or change in empathy. We started to find difficulties within the first few lessons of our unit. Difficulties arose when we tried to use the rubric to assess journal responses. We found that we could not separate each of the journal entries into the categories of cognitive, affective and behavioural, because each aspect was intertwined with the others. The boxes were problematic in that we could not take whole situations and cross-reference them with the rubric. In addition, the language of the rubric was not consistent with what we had been teaching in the unit. The language of the rubric came from our research and discussion about the research literature on empathy rather than from a working knowledge of empathy. Furthermore, despite explaining the language (cognitive, affective, behavioural) of the rubric to students they did not understand how that applied to the responses they were being asked to do in the unit. For example, in Snow White, the original version, we asked students questions requiring responses in each of the three domains. Unfortunately, journal responses were interpreted by students to discuss facts rather than feelings and vice versa. This made it difficult to separate each aspect of empathy into the categories we framed.

**Research Significance**

We believe that we should be providing students with life experiences and background knowledge to help them connect with a variety of situations. For students to empathize effectively, they need to have context or experiences to draw upon when a new situation that requires empathy arises. As classroom teachers we should be providing students with curricular experiences both inside and outside the classroom where student experiences can be broadened. For example, programs such as Roots of Empathy where students are in contact with a developing baby needing support and understanding from those who care for the child can provide meaningful experiences. Another example may include visiting a senior center to understand and experience the situation that people go through as they grow old and lose their physical and cognitive abilities. Through a variety of experiences, students can connect or assimilate their understanding of a new situation with their prior knowledge and thereby develop their ability to empathize more effectively.

Our research supports the idea that students need time and practice to reflect on empathetic situations in order to explore all the factors that bring about these situations. Students need opportunities and guided practice to empathize with those around them. This involves perspective-taking so students can see several points of view and possibilities that were lacking in their journal responses. Students need to look beyond the most obvious factors and fully discuss the issues. One way this can be achieved is to have students discuss the situation in groups that utilize a multitude of perspectives to define the empathetic situation.

We need to help students to understand that "quick fixes" are not a realistic solution to empathetic situations, in that they are neither attainable nor sustainable. Students need to understand that while they may not have the ability to change a situation, they can understand what the other is going through. A person with a learning disability cannot be cured, but we can understand and empathize with that experience, with what that person goes through. The goal is not to change the situation but to understand and become more aware and accepting of differences.

We need to provide students with opportunities to practice their skills in empathy in order to build and scaffold on their existing abilities. These opportunities will allow students to
see situations in a variety of ways expanding their limited abilities to perspective-take. This will allow students to recognize the various feelings and actions associated with the empathetic situation.

New Questions in Light of Research

Our goal of creating a more caring classroom in which students learn to value themselves and one another through empathy was not attained as clearly as hoped. As a result, several questions have been raised that would benefit from further time and investigation. However, some of our preliminary research investigation suggests that teaching for empathy can make a significant difference in the classroom (Bruce and Shade, 1996; Cotton, 2001; Cress and Holm, 2000; Schonert-Reichl, 2006; Toranzo, 1996; Upright, 2002). Our study was limited to a five-week time frame, which may have affected a more positive outcome. Therefore, one must question whether our research findings would be more positive if we were able to spend more time in actually teaching for empathy. We observed that many teachers teach empathy throughout the year across various subject areas not limited to curriculum and/or a Language Arts program. Should our approach have been broader with respect to curriculum? Should we be teaching students empathy in all subject areas?

Another question that requires further investigation deals with the issue of empathizing with individuals of different abilities. We did notice a difference with students who teachers know have more life experience and/or background knowledge to empathize more effectively. Yet, what we would like to discover are the differences across grade levels (grade six, seven and eight) in the ability to empathize. We would expect older students to have a greater level of empathetic response than younger students due to the opportunity for more life experiences. We are also interested in gauging this difference comparatively and analytically with regard to males and females. We would expect females to be more empathetic than males because they are socialized to be this way. Lastly, we are interested in examining the differences with respect to socio-economic status (SES) and how this impacts on students' tendency to be empathetic. From our study we know that different life experiences do impact on student empathetic responses, but we are unsure as to which life experiences have more power and have more affect on empathy.
Questions arose as a result of our teacher research, such as "Which gender is more empathetic and why?" A sample assignment shows how we attempted to teach empathy through perspective-taking.

Though we taught a unit on empathy, does our unit actually translate to greater empathetic interactions between students in the classroom? We found that students were able to empathize with the characters in the children's literature and the empathy stations, but it was very difficult to observe changes in everyday student interactions. Included in this question is the notion that students were responding to what they perceived as the correct responses desired by researchers, and not really giving responses that accurately reflected their subsequent actions.

Our goal of creating a more caring classroom in which students value themselves and one another through empathy was not as clearly attained as hoped.

Concluding Thoughts

Having classrooms where students interact in positive ways is a first step to a healthy education. One of the ways we as teacher-researchers thought that such a classroom could be created, where greater acceptance and support would take place, was by developing more caring relationships between students, by teaching students to be more empathetic towards each other and more accepting and understanding of differences.

Although we didn't see the "caring classroom" develop in the way we thought during the time of our action research unit, we now realize this will necessarily be an ongoing development. Having students who are empathetic towards each other is far too valuable a condition not to have, and the work of helping students become more empathic by striving towards a greater caring classroom is something we both as teacher-researchers are committed to.

Post Script

Bhashy Pather:

In my experience, children who are different operate to hide their differences from those around them. Perceived differences tend to marginalize students setting them up to be targets for ridicule. I grew up and went to school in an area where I was different from those around me because of race. I worked hard to try to blend in and assimilate with those I saw as being the norm. Anything that would cause me to be perceived as different I would work to avoid.

As I grew older, I began to realize that I did not really understand who I was. The identity I spent most of my adolescence working toward was not really there for me. I avoided my own culture and heritage; and so, I no longer understood it. I was an outsider looking in; I was not "white" nor "brown," but different from both. The experience I describe in my opening vignette reflects the sense of disassociation I felt. The experience also illustrates the indifference that others hold, choosing not to act when others are being marginalized. This lack of identity and sense of isolation led me to my action research project to create a more inclusive educational setting through teaching for empathy.
In conducting this research, my hope was to create a classroom where all students could become aware of differences and learn to understand one another as unique not different. I believed that if we could learn to understand and appreciate our differences through empathy teaching we could get beyond labels. In addition, my hope was that giving students lessons in empathy would naturally evoke a positive response from them to social situations of injustice where students were otherwise content with being indifferent. My goal was that this type of teaching would reduce the marginalization I saw with some of my students and allow them to have richer educational experiences, where all students are valued because of their uniqueness rather than victimized because of their differences.

As a classroom teacher, I learned a lot from my action research project. Though the results were not conclusive, I was able to grow as a teacher and reflect on my teaching practice, gaining a greater understanding of what matters. My study gave me the insight to understand that students want to connect and share their ideas with others. I was pleased to see how enthusiastic students were to the empathy unit. The children's stories we read energized the classroom as each student felt a sense of familiarity and confidence with the material. I was taken aback by the responses coming from kids who would otherwise not participate in classroom discussions. Furthermore, carousel activities and collaborative group assignments produced work that was equitable. These factors lead me to the belief that students need greater opportunities to interact and connect with one another in meaningful ways. Empathy teaching is a meaningful skill that should be taught throughout the school year at all levels and in all classes.

Kirk Deutschmann:
Mike came over, stood above my desk, looked down upon me, and pushed the desk over with me in it. He made some snide remark about me being a geek and physically weak. After the incident, several classmates came over and asked if I was okay and understood the sheer embarrassment and fear of being ridiculed like I was. One or two talked with me afterwards while I was still shaking, making sure I would be all right.

This is the way I had hoped my introductory vignette would have played out. This type of caring and understanding by students for students who are marginalized for their differences is what I desire to see within my classroom and was the purpose for carrying out this action research. In school, I was not the "cool" kid, nor was I the "nerd," nor the "jock." I was who I was, in all my awkward social-emotional-physical ways. All I wanted was for those around to accept me for who I was.

This time of action research has been an invaluable learning experience. As a teacher, I have come to recognize those students who are marginalized for their differences. I have learned there is no quick solution to this social dilemma that unjustly affects many kids, influencing learning and classroom dynamics. As a result of my own personal experiences, where others lacked empathy for me due to no understanding, I do not want students to experience the same. I have discovered internally through reflection and discussion and, more concretely, in practice that developing a caring and supportive classroom is important for me as a teacher. And, despite the limited success of developing that during this action research, I must continue working on its development knowing the seeds planted will produce good fruit in due time. I have also discovered that although I may have worked out my own identity issues, many of my students have not, and the role of the teacher is to provide structure for the classroom to be a caring and supportive place, acting as an advocate for those marginalized students. Empathy through perspective-taking is a powerful tool for building understanding between students and to help them develop caring for others. My hope is that what was started during this action research, both for my
students and me, will carry on so that such a classroom will indeed come into play.

Children's Books


References


Endnotes

[i] All the names in this article are pseudonyms.

About the Authors

Bhashy Pather has been teaching in the Coquitlam School District for the past 10 year at
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