

# CREATING A LEARNING SPACE FOR AUTHENTICITY AND EMPATHY: BOOK-BY-BOOK

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## **Abstract**

If educators want to create a learning environment that promotes authenticity, empathy must be embedded into instruction. This requires students to understand intersectionality and acknowledge discrimination, condescension or oppression—open or hidden, macro or micro—that people experience day-to-day. In this article, the authors define empathy, present a foundational ideology, and provide examples of children’s and young adult literature that promotes student interaction, learning empathy skills, and awareness of intersectionality and authentic identity. Additionally, the authors discuss two common approaches to empathy, shared emotional response and perspective-taking.

## **Keywords**

empathy, intersectionality, children’s and YA literature, values, social and emotional

If educators want to create a learning environment that promotes authenticity, empathy needs to be embedded into instruction. By understanding another’s feelings, we learn empathy skills to communicate cross-culturally. Teaching empathy should be grounded in an understanding of intersectionality and should acknowledge discrimination, condescension or oppression—open or hidden, macro or micro—that people experience day-to-day due to their age, ability, ethnicity, faith, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic assigned status, etc. This is a lens that enhances awareness and strengthens empathy. Teaching empathy cannot be accomplished through one lesson or unit plan. It needs to be practiced time and again in order to become an internalized response. Creating a culture of empathy is part of building a classroom culture. When educators incorporate empathy into instruction, it can have positive results. Empathy can build a positive culture that strengthens the heart of a diverse classroom. Through empathy, learners understand each other and begin to build friendships based on positive relationships of trust. Empathy and compassion are meaningful when learners know, understand, and trust themselves, as well as when they know who

they are, what they have in common with others, and what sets them apart. Researcher Brené Brown (2010) suggests ...

Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance. (p. 26)

We need to teach children to be aware of emotions and self-regulate impulses, so they are able to focus on how others feel without dismissing their own feelings or letting those feelings get in the way. Only then will empathy and compassion build true connectedness.

These skills will transfer to students' lives in their community and allow them to lead and demonstrate a caring attitude to build trust and value for humanity. This broader skill set will help them think critically about the conditions that perpetuate injustice; think creatively about what they can do, today or in the future, to change those conditions; make a realistic plan that informs their choices and inspires their personal journey, short and long-term; and pursue those goals with resolve and purpose. Educators must equip learners to be the future leaders of our communities and beyond.

### **Defining Empathy**

Within the research literature there is no consensus to how empathy is defined. Dohrenwend (2018) writes that “empathy has been conceptualized as emotional and spontaneous, cognitive and deliberate, or some combination of the two” (p. 1754) and argues that empathy and sympathy are not interchangeable. Sympathy is the disclosure of feelings. Empathy is the process of identifying feelings. Furthermore, Dohrenwend (2018) contends that ...

... empathy is not “putting oneself in another’s shoes.” If I put my feet in your shoes, I will not understand you better. What is tight on me may be loose on you. What I consider worn you might find comfortably broken in. My feet distract me from understanding you. (p. 1755)

Decety (2015) suggests, “empathy reflects the natural ability to perceive and be sensitive to the emotional states of others, coupled with a motivation to care for their well-being” (p. 1). According to Brown (2015), empathy and sympathy are often grouped together but are very different. Empathy is a skill that can bring people together, while sympathy creates an imbalance in the power dynamic, which leads to more isolation and disconnection.

Therefore, educators must create ongoing learning experiences that allow learners to navigate emotions, hear how others navigate emotions, and consider appropriate responses to these interactions. Conversation around literature allows for a shared experience and practice in navigating these interactions with literary characters as well as hearing peers' reactions and different perspectives.

The absence of empathy and kindness in our society are clearly illustrated in the daily news headlines. Unfortunately, many learners lack social-emotional competencies and become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance, behavior, and health (Blum & Libbey, 2004).

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It has the capacity to transform individual lives for the better while helping to bring about positive social change in schools and communities worldwide. Empathy is hardwired in us from birth through what is known as the mirror-neuron system, and we intuitively feel what others feel (Harding, 2019).

### Foundational Understanding and Research

In the field of education, there is comfort in teaching academic content in the classroom but less comfort in dialogue about cultural competence, which is how we honor identity. This is why it is essential for educators to take time to develop and internalize a strong foundational ideology. Having a strong understanding of why educators implement instructional strategies will allow for consistent, authentic, and purposeful application. Using children's literature and young adult literature is a powerful foundation for this work. We must be aware of the construct of social identities and how these identities impact who we are and how our society identifies us. Being aware of the construct of social identity will allow us to be aware of our biases and different perspectives. This can impact our application of empathy. According to W.E.B. DuBois, intersectionality is an analytic framework which attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society (as cited in Cooper, 2016). Originally established by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to help better understand being female and Black, Collins (2016) defines intersectionality as

... a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves. (p. 2)

To understand and visualize intersectionality, Romero (2018) provides a Rubik's Cube™ analogy: The visual of six solid colors . . . arranged in various combinations in which each face turns individually to mix up the colors, helps in conceptualizing the rotating mix of intersections. The Rubik's Cube does not capture the fluidity of systems of domination but it may be useful in visualizing multiple layers of domination and the intersections of systems of oppression. (pp. 10-11)

Developing cultural competence is also an evolving, dynamic process that takes time and occurs along a continuum (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2014) If we consider, every human has a blind spot—educators grow cultural competency by embracing their awareness of intersectionality and the privileges and oppressions that are hidden in their blind spots. According to Snow (2000), in order for one to have empathy, the individual must first have experience or understanding of the emotion experienced by the individual who is to be empathized. Literature allows educators and learners to engage in human experiences through different perspectives.

### Common Approaches to Empathy

Teaching empathy must be embedded in the learning environment. This can be accomplished through modeled experiences and conversation. These models can be seen in any interaction between adults and students who are part of the learning community. Empathy can also be explicitly taught through literature, media, and lived experiences. According to The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2005), a randomized control trial supported the effectiveness of empathy curriculums such as *Kindness in the Classroom*® social emotional learning. This study found that elementary school students who,

participated in the program had higher teacher and peer ratings of prosocial behaviors (i.e., teacher ratings = perspective-taking, gratitude, perseverance, intrinsic prosocial motivation, altruism, empathy, peer acceptance, & closeness; peer ratings = takes views), and engaged in less anti-social behaviors compared to students in the control group (as cited in Schonert-Reichl et al, 2018).

Children’s literature and young adult literature can allow teachers to promote a brave learning environment by interacting with the text and learning empathy skills as well as awareness of intersectionality and authentic identity. CASEL (2005) states that “instruction should support student learning through multiple modalities, including: role-plays, visual clips, discussions, games, and cooperative learning activities” (as cited in Schonert-Reichl et al, 2018). Extending the reading experience with art, music, games, role-play, and mindfulness activities allows for individual reflection, interpretation, and internalizing. These experiences can extend the work of empathy into ongoing practice and engagement. In psychology, there are currently two common approaches to empathy: shared emotional response and perspective taking.

### **Shared Emotional Response**

When there is a balanced practice of emotional empathy, educators are able to allow space for sharing an emotional experience with another person while not letting their own emotional responses get in the way. When an educator’s vicarious emotional arousal becomes too great, it can actually get in the way of being compassionate and empathizing.

**Identify Emotions.** A child or teen who shows empathy is able to understand and appreciate the thoughts, feelings, and experience of someone else. Children and teens may need extra help learning to recognize and respond to other people’s emotions. A simple way to foster emotional literacy begins by teaching children and teens to identify their own emotions. Use emotional language with children and teens that recognizes when they are frustrated, angry, or sad. Before a child can identify and empathize with other people’s feelings, they need to understand how to identify and process their own feelings. When watching TV, streaming video, or reading together, take advantage of opportunities to cultivate empathy. Discuss instances when characters are being kind and empathetic. Discuss when characters are being hurtful and mean. Recognize how characters feel and how the situations are dealt with and how they may have been handled differently.

**Modeling.** In addition to teaching empathy, educators must also model it. Teaching and learning in schools have strong social, emotional, and academic components (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). It is also necessary for adults to recognize and respect children’s emotions. This does not mean they are given everything they want; instead try to recognize and understand how individuals feel in a given situation. Recognize and praise children and teens when they are kind or demonstrate acts of empathy. If adults make a mistake and behave rudely toward someone, acknowledge that mistake to children and teens. Educators can own up to moments that they choose to be kinder to the people around them. Acknowledging and talking about lapses in empathy when students are there to witness them makes an impression.

These competencies, in turn, should provide a foundation for better adjustment and academic performance as reflected in more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved test scores and grades (Greenberg et al., 2003).

### **Perspective Taking**

Educators often don't realize how much their experiences and own beliefs influence how they perceive people and situations. Slowing down to put those things aside can help focus on the other person and help tune in better to what the other person is experiencing. Skills of empathy can

be learned. There are many ways educators and learners can practice empathy. It has been posited that universal school-based efforts to promote learners' social and emotional learning (SEL) represent a promising approach to enhance children's and teen's success in school and life (Elias et al., 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006).

**Teaching Point of View.** Diversity, inclusion and equity are key to creating a culture of belonging. The words are often grouped together, but each have a different meaning. Diversity relates to people who may be different from each other and who do not all come from the same background. The differences may be those of age, education, gender identity, national origin, physical appearance, religion, or sexual orientation. Inclusion, while closely related, is a separate concept from diversity. Inclusion is an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, and have equitable access to opportunities and resources. Equity means everyone receives fair treatment. There's transparency to cause and effect, and everyone knows what to expect in terms of consequences and rewards. When equity exists, people have equal access to opportunities. It sets up an advantageous environment for all learners.

### **Teaching Empathy through Literature**

There are many ways to expose children and teens to the diversity of the world—like reading books, watching certain movies and TV shows, eating at restaurants with different cuisines, visiting museums, volunteering in communities, and attending events hosted by various religious, ethnic, or cultural groups.

The proximal goals of SEL programs are to foster the development of five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). Characters in a book are a good way to analyze these interactions and have a conversation around the choices to provide explicit instruction in the key skills. Sims Bishop (1990) suggests,

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

Schools have an important role to play in raising healthy children and teens by fostering not only their cognitive development, but also their social and emotional development.

### **Empathy Themes Book-by-Book**

Understanding the motivations and perspectives of characters in books can be a key element in teaching empathy. Books with characters who represent social identities that are different from the reader's provide opportunities to see different perspectives. Using books to engage learners in emotions or experiences they relate to is a beneficial way to promote empathetic thinking. The following children's and young adult literature are authentic teaching tools that have the potential to support understanding of empathy through an intersectional lens. The books have been categorized to reflect the core kindness concepts in the *Kindness in the Classroom*® (1995-2001) social emotional learning curriculum which contribute to empathy. An asterisk has been placed in front of the titles that are also categorized as picture books.

**Caring – showing concern for yourself and others**

*A List of Cages* by Robin Roe

\**A Sick Day for Amos McGee* by Philip C. Stead

\**My Friend Maggie* by Hannah E. Harrison

*Nowhere Boy* by Katherine Marsh

**Courage – being brave when facing new or difficult circumstances**

\**The Adventure of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend* by Dan Santat

*Bob* by Wendy Mass and Rebecca Stead

*How to Make Friends with the Dark* by Kathleen Glasgow

*I Am not your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sánchez

*Maybe He Just Likes You* by Barbara Dee

*Same Sun Here* by Silas House

*Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* by Kwame Mbalia

*Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli

**Inclusiveness – including, inviting, and welcoming others.**

#*Not your Princess* by Charleyboy and Leatherdale

*Amal Unbound* by Aisha Saeed

*Before I Had the Words: On Being a Transgender Young Adult* by Skylar Kergil

*Black Brother, Black Brother* by Jewell Parker Rhodes

*Blended* by Sharon M. Draper

\**Can I Touch your Hair?: Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship* by Charles Waters and Irene Latham

*Efrén Divided* by Ernesto Cisneros

*El Deafo* by Cece Bell

\**Eyes that Kiss the Corners* by Joanna Ho

*Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hung

*Free Lunch* by Rex Ogle

\**How my Parents Learned to Eat* by Ina R. Friedman

*I Am the Night Sky and Other Reflections* by Muslim American Youth

\**I Love my Colorful Nails* by Alicia Acosta

*Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus* by Dusti Bowling

\**I Talk Like a River* by Jordan Scott

*Ivy Aberdeen's Letter to the World* by Ashley Herring Blake

\**Jingle Dancer* by Cynthia Leitich Smith

*Marcus Vega Doesn't Speak Spanish* by Pablo Cartaya

\**My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis

\**My Rainbow* by Trinity Neal

*Planet Earth Is Blue* by Nicole Panteleakos

\**Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall

*Roll with It* by Jamie Sumner

*Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You: A Remix of the National Book Award-winning Stamped from the Beginning* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

\**Suki's Kimono* by Chieri Uegaki

*The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater

*They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei

\**What Color Is my Hijab* by Hudda Ibrahim

\**When Aidan Became a Brother* by Kyle Lukoff

**Integrity** – acting in a way that you know to be right in all situations

- \**One* by Kathryn Otoshi
- \**The Bad Seed* by Jory John
- \**The Cloud Spinner* by Michael Catchpool
- \**The Empty Pot* by Demi
- The Girl Who Drank the Moon* by Kelly Barnhill
- I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* by Jacqueline Woodson

**Respect** – treating people, places, and things with kindness

- \**Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes
- \**The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt
- The Miscalculations of Lightning Girl* by Stacy McAnulty
- Posted* by John David Anderson

**Responsibility** – being reliable to do the things that are expected or required of you.

- \**But It's not my Fault* by Julia Cook
- \**Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco
- Granted* by John David Anderson
- On My Honor* by Marion Dane
- Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman
- \**Someday* by Eileen Spinelli

**Gratitude** – showing appreciation or thankfulness towards others.

- Crenshaw* by Jan Carr
- \**Grateful: A Song of Giving Thanks* by John Bucchino
- \**Last Stop on Market Street* by Patricia Tauzer
- \**Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts
- \**We Are Grateful: Otsalibelig* by Traci Sorell

Literature allows for empathy instruction to be explored while promoting academic literacy growth and development. When engaging learners in reading books like the ones listed above, educators should consider utilizing shared emotional response and perspective taking strategies.

**Beyond the School and into the Community**

Ultimately, interventions are unlikely to have much practical utility or gain widespread acceptance unless they are effective under real-world conditions. Educators can prioritize empathy with small routines like taking time to share two kind things they did or writing down simple ways to be caring that they can all discuss together. Organizing volunteer opportunities and other ways to give back to the community will also teach and model empathy. Elias et al. (1997) defined SEL as the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively. Teaching empathy goes beyond recognizing emotions. It involves both cognitive and emotional response with the intent to use this response to interact with others. When educators have a strong foundational understanding of empathy and adopt an intersectional lens, learners feel compassion, understanding, and patience for people whose lives are different from their own. Educators can facilitate growth in children and teens towards being responsible citizens who make a difference in the world.

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