Empathy, Compassion, and Addressing Student Misbehavior

"There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit - the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us… we live in a culture that discourages empathy." Barack Obama

"While the traditional and punitive approach to school discipline involves taking action after student misbehavior occurs, this newer approach would suggest that schools address potentially problematic student issues by promoting the development of psychosocial strengths, and in particular, building blocks to resilience and well-being" (Fullchange, 2016).

“The act of experiencing what you believe others are experiencing — sometimes known as ‘empathy’ — is often viewed as having positive effects, motivating kindness and inhibiting aggression. In support of this, the experience of empathic distress increases the likelihood of prosocial action toward a suffering individual. Empathy has serious limitations, however, particularly when it comes to moral decision-making in the modern world. ... while empathy can motivate kindness, it can also spur cruel and irrational actions, including atrocities and war. There are alternatives to empathy. In particular, compassion — in the sense of valuing other people and caring about their welfare but without necessarily feeling their pain — may have all the advantages of empathy and few of its weaknesses.”

(Paul Bloom, 2016)

With the increased attention to social-emotional development, a greater focus on the role of empathy has emerged. In schools, much of the emphasis has been on enhancing empathy to reduce student behavior problems.

Schools are drawing on a robust body of research. One area of relevant research suggests that empathy can motivate prosocial behavior and can be a protective factor in coping with problems. Less attention has been paid to the literature cautioning the need for a refined understanding when applying the research. This brief highlights both.

What is Empathy?

For our purposes in exploring the concept, let’s start by defining empathy as feelings and thoughts that one understands what others are feeling. While as many as eight related but distinct phenomena have been defined as empathy (Batson, 2009), researchers have mainly categorized empathy-related responding as having two components and suggest it emerges as early as age one.

The two components are affective and cognitive empathy.

- *Affective empathy* (also known as emotional empathy or empathic concern) is an instinctive ability to feel and experience the emotions of another person (Spreng, Mckinnon, Mar & Levine, 2009). Reserach suggest that emotional empathy is linked to neural connections in the brain region called the insula (Fan, Duncan, de Greck & Northoff, 2011) and more specifically in mirror neurons (Carr, Iacobani, Dubeau, Mazziotta, & Lenzi, 2003). Mirror neurons are activated in the brain when a person performs a particular action or experiences a certain emotion of another person (Gallese, 2003).

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- *Cognitive empathy* is intellectually based and therefore is teachable. It is conceived as the ability to understand what another is feeling (Fullchange, 2016a; Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, & Levine, 2009). It includes "feelings identification" and "perspective taking." Feelings identification is the ability to perceive cues from another and understand what the person is feeling. Perspective taking is the ability to "put yourself in another's shoes." Cognitive empathy also is based in mirror neurons, but unlike affective empathy, it is intentional and controllable (Carr, et al., 2003; Fan, et al., 2011; Gallese, 2003; Hodges & Wegner, 1997).

Bloom (2016) suggests the following as the "four most common senses of 'empathy'".

- Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, as when you infer that someone is anxious, without necessarily feeling anxiety yourself. This is sometimes called 'theory of mind', 'naïve psychology', or 'mindreading' but is also known as 'cognitive empathy'.
- Experiencing the feelings of those in your immediate vicinity, as when spending time with an anxious person makes you anxious. This is sometimes known as 'emotional contagion'.
- Experiencing the inferred feelings of others, as when thinking about a person who is anxious makes you anxious. Unlike in emotion contagion, this person does not have to be present, or even exist – we can have this feeling toward fictional characters. This is also known as 'affective empathy' or 'emotional empathy' [Bloom focuses on this aspect in raising concerns about how empathy often is viewed.].
- Positive feelings toward others, a desire that others do well and do not suffer, as when you wish that an anxious friend would feel more calm without necessarily feeling any anxiety yourself. This also known as 'kindness', 'compassion', or 'concern' [this is what Bloom argues should replace emotional empathy as a moral motivation.]

About Morality and Empathy

Abstract from: The complex relation between morality and empathy by J. Decety, & J.M. Cowell (2014). *Trends in Cognitive Science, 18*, 337-339.

Morality and empathy are fundamental components of human nature across cultures. However, the wealth of empirical findings from developmental, behavioral, and social neuroscience demonstrates a complex relation between morality and empathy. At times, empathy guides moral judgment, yet other times empathy can interfere with it. To better understand such relations, we propose abandoning the catchall term of empathy in favor of more precise concepts, such as emotional sharing, empathic concern, and affective perspective-taking.

Research Suggesting the Positives of Focusing on Empathy

Eisenberg, Eggum, and Di Giunta's 2010 review states: "Empathy-related responding, including empathy, sympathy, and personal distress, has been implicated in conceptual models and theories about prosocial behavior and altruism, aggression and antisocial behavior, and intergroup relationships. ... In general, there is evidence that empathy and/or sympathy are important correlates of, and likely contributors to, other-oriented prosocial behavior, the inhibition of aggression and antisocial behavior, and the quality of intergroup relationships."

Batson and his colleagues (2011) report that, when participants in their study had the opportunity to help others and were encouraged to feel empathy for those needing help, the trend was to behave prosocially.

Research seems clearest in suggesting that low cognitive and emotional empathy often is associated with negative effects, while higher empathy is correlated with positive effects. In particular, both cognitive and affective empathy have been reported as resilient factors that play a role in mediating aggressive behaviors. However, research highlights that the two facets of empathy may play contrasting roles in mediating different types of aggression. For example, a study by Batanova and Loukas (2011) reports that high levels of empathic concern, or affective empathy, protected adolescence with social anxiety from relational aggression (non-physical form of aggression). Affective empathy was negatively related to both overt and relational aggression while there was no relationship between both types of aggression and cognitive empathy. However, when participants were tested a year later, cognitive empathy was a predictor of increased relational aggression.

With respect to reactive anger and aggression, some studies report cognitive empathy as more strongly related to reactive anger and aggression than affective empathy. For example, youth with conduct disorders were found to have low levels of overall empathy; perspective-taking, a component of cognitive empathy, was most strongly linked to their problematic behaviors (Cohen & Strayer, 1996).

Empathy and Resilience

As children develop, empathy generally is viewed as a core element of social-emotional development and functioning. It also is seen as a key component of resilience because empathy can play a role in successful coping (Brooks & Goldstein, 2007). For example, when confronted with adverse conditions, empathy can contribute to the type of positive adaptation and developmental outcomes that are designated as resilience.

As described by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, resilience is a dynamic process that entails positive coping and successful developmental outcomes in spite of the presence of adverse conditions. It is not the absence of personal struggling with adverse conditions; it is the ability to cope with and make a positive recovery from such conditions. In the past, resilience was considered a personality trait. Currently, it is understood as a process any individual can attain, and it is seen as situational.

According to Michael Rutter (2012), “The concept of resilience has as its starting point the recognition that there is huge heterogeneity in people's responses to all manner of environmental adversities. Resilience is an inference based on evidence that some individuals have a better outcome than others who have experienced a comparable level of adversity; moreover, the negative experience may have either a sensitizing effect or a strengthening "steeling" effect in relation to the response to later stress or adversity.” In reviewing the literature, he stresses the importance of accounting for environmental mediation of risk and gene-environment interaction. (He notes that there is some evidence that the genetic influences involve responsivity to all environments and not just bad ones and reviews life course effects in relation to evidence on turning point effects associated with experiences that increase opportunities and enhance coping.)

For Strategies that Build Resilience in Schools, see Child Trends’ synthesis at http://www.childtrends.org/what-can-schools-do-to-build-resilience-in-their-students/?utm_source=E-News

Concerns about Empathy as a Negative Force

Cognitive psychologist, Paul Bloom, and neuroscientist, Richard J. Davidson, raise some concerns about just focusing on empathy as a positive concept. For example, in a 2016 article Bloom states:

> Empathy has many fans and there is abundant evidence that it can motivate prosocial behavior. However, empathy is narrow in its focus, rendering it innumerate and subject to bias. It can motivate cruelty and aggression and lead to burnout and exhaustion. Compassion is distinct from empathy in its neural instantiation and its behavioral consequences and is a better prod to moral action, particularly in the modern world we live in. ... Empathy is biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism. [Because empathy focuses on the pain of others, people are more likely to feel the pain of those who are more like them, which would mean that empathy could be used to discriminate against others.] While empathy can motivate prosocial behavior, ...it can also spark atrocities. Even when it is put to good use, empathic distress can be an ineffective motivator, as it can lead to burnout and exhaustion. [Too much empathy can overwhelm.]

Research supports the need to contrast empathy and compassion (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). For example, Singer and colleagues gave study participants either empathy training (focusing them on trying to feel what others were feeling) or compassion training (feeling positive and warm thoughts toward others without vicariously experiencing their suffering). The empathy training led to empathic distress; compassion training led to more prosocial behavior, as well as increased positive affect and resilience.

Schools and Empathy

Those who advocate for schools to focus more on promoting empathy and compassion point to literature that suggests that doing so will

- inhibit aggressive behaviors, such as bullying
- increase prosocial behaviors
- strengthen intergroup relations and build a positive school community
- improve academic performance
- increase resilience to stressful events

(e.g., Bloom, 2016; Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010; Magnus, Cowen, Wyman, Fagen & Work, 1999; Malti, 2016; Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2009).

With specific respect to empathy, advocates also stress that enhancing both cognitive and affective empathy are necessary for the most beneficial results. They recognize that increasing cognitive empathy is easier for schools since it is intentional and intellectually based, but they stress that research suggests that affective empathy can play a stronger role in mediating behavioral problems. And, while there is considerable consensus that increasing empathy in appropriate ways is good for student functioning and school climate, there is less consensus about how schools should do this.

The increasing emphasis on whole child development is focusing more schools on both curricular and natural opportunities to promote empathy and compassion. These matters, of course, are an essential focus in pursuing any social-emotional curriculum. They also can be embedded into other areas of the curriculum (e.g., literature, history, science). And, they can be part of teachable moments that arise throughout the school day.

Of course, in any school, all this depends on teachers, student support staff, administrators, and other staff appreciating the potential benefits and enhancing their capacity to promote empathy and compassion. This includes modeling related behavior and enhancing student engagement in ways that foster moral development.

A Popularized View: “9 Essential Habits of Empathetic Kids”

(from Michele Borba, 2016)

DEVELOPING EMPATHY

Habit 1: Emotional literacy. Teaching emotion literacy as the gateway to empathy so children can recognize and understand the feelings and needs of others in their body language, voice tone or facial expressions. (can recognize feelings)

Habit 2: Moral Identity. Helping children develop ethical codes and caring mindsets so they are more likely to adopt caring values that guide their integrity and activate their empathy to feel with and help others.

Habit 3. Perspective taking. Stretching perspective taking abilities and Theory of Mind so children can step into others’ shoes to understand another person’s feelings, thoughts, and views.

Habit 4. Moral Imagination. Using and elevating, emotionally-charged images in literature, film, news and images as a source of inspiration to help children empathetic.

PRACTICING EMPATHY

Habit 5. Self-Regulation. Helping children learn ways to manage strong emotions and reduce personal distress to keep their empathy open, avoid the Empathy Gap and be more likely to empathize and help others. (can keep her/his cool)

Habit 6. Practicing Kindness. Developing and exercising kindness and pro-social behaviors to increase children’s concern about the welfare and feelings of others and enhance the likelihood that they will help, support, and comfort others.

Habit 7. Collaboration. Cultivating teamwork and collaborative abilities to help kids work with others to achieve shared goals for the benefit of all and develop a WE, not ME mindset.

LIVING EMPATHY

Habit 8. Moral Courage. Promoting moral courage and teaching children *Upstander* skills and situational awareness to embolden them to speak out, step in, and help others.

Habit 9. Compassionate Leadership Abilities. Cultivating altruistic leadership abilities to motivate children to make a difference for others, no matter how small it may be and boost their chances of becoming Social Changemakers. (wants to make a difference)

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A Personal Reflection on Developing Empathy at School

(from UCLA Student Justine Jamero)

Looking back on my elementary and high school years, I can distinctly remember when my teachers taught me about what it meant to put myself in another's shoes. In third grade, my teacher asked us to imagine that we were the main characters of the books that we read in class. Suddenly, nine-year-old me was going on adventures around the world, meeting interesting people, and taking on challenges. Our assignments consisted of writing diary entries in different points of view as we went through the book, and this allowed us to really think about how the main character and minor characters were feeling during different points in time. Writing about the different perspectives really helped us understand how multiple perspectives could exist in a single story. For example, I remember reading a book about slaves and the Underground Railroad. Through literature and my teacher's guidance, I was able to learn aspects of perspective taking.

My biggest inspiration for [wanting to study empathy] comes from particular history lessons that I had during high school. My teacher lectured on things such as the Civil Rights Movement and the bystander effects that occurred during the Holocaust. During each of these lectures, my classmates and I were stunned because we felt tortured, sad, and fearful. Our teacher taught them to us from the perspectives of the people living during those time periods. Rather than just giving us facts and statistics about these periods in time, my teacher used those lectures to really try to make us understand and feel the emotions of those from the past.

Concluding Comments

It is a given that a focus on social and emotional development is critical in any school effort to facilitate whole child development. And clearly empathy and compassion are core elements of this focus. These are matters that not only are essential for improving the lives of students, they are in the spirit of efforts to improve schools as reflected in the Every Student Succeeds Act.

At the same time, when framed mainly as practices to address problems manifested by some students, the tendency is to add on yet one more special program or initiative. Proceeding in this way increases what is an already highly fragmented approach to tackling problems at school, home, and in the community. Even worse, this type of systemic tinkering contributes to the ongoing marginalization of efforts to develop approach to addressing a full range of overlapping learning, behavior, and emotional concerns. (For a discussion of how to embed such mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable student and learning support system, see Adelman & Taylor, 2006, 2010, 2017).

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For more resources, see

>Start Empathy – https://startempathy.org

>Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) – www.casel.org

>Developing Empathy – http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/developing-empathy

>Pinterest – https://www.pinterest.com/explore/teaching-empathy/