

## “Who has Family Business?”

### Exploring the Role of Empathy in Student-Teacher Interactions

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#### Abstract

*The quality of student-teacher interactions is shaped by both the capacity of the teacher to cultivate trusting relationships with students and his or her ability to establish a safe, supportive classroom environment. This proves especially important for individuals teaching in multicultural and urban education settings. In recent literature, empathy has emerged as a useful tool for accomplishing the aforementioned goals, yet it is difficult to pinpoint concrete approaches teachers may immediately adopt to bolster its application to their interactions with diverse youth. Family Business is one such instructional strategy – designed by a practicing public school educator – useful for helping teachers to understand empathy’s pragmatic significance to improving the outcomes of everyday student-teacher interactions. A description of “family business” is presented and empathy’s role for producing favorable student outcomes as a result of its implementation is discussed.*

Just as the bell rings to signal the transition period, Ms. Williams (pseudonym) – a White female athletic trainer, sports aficionado, and science teacher in her eighth year of teaching – plays her favorite Michael Bublé tracks as she cheerfully greets each one of the African-American and Latino juniors who enter her first period anatomy class. The students excitedly stream in one by one and take their seats at desks arranged in the middle of the room adjacent to the lab tables. The space is characteristic of a traditional science lab: high stools, black topped lab tables, a scientific methods poster, and rules for handling lab materials. Student work and lab expectations adorn one wall while large cabinets filled with beakers and Bunsen burners line another. Notwithstanding these standard accouterments, the students treat the space as if it is special and unlike other classrooms. Ms. Williams is warm, welcoming, and well organized, and the classroom is a reflection of her positive energy. The scattered handmade cutouts of Ms. Williams’s 125 students populate a brightly colored bulletin board, aptly titled “Our Family,” in the rear of the room. Students carry on casual conversation with

one another as they take their seats and compliment (or lament) Ms. Williams’s music selection. With the second bell, Ms. Williams turns off the music and assumes authority over the classroom. The daily entrance routine culminates with Ms. Williams’s emphatic salutation, “Good morning young lovelies. Who has family business?”

*Family Business* (hereafter referred to as FB) is a daily classroom routine teachers may use for at least two primary purposes. First, FB offers education practitioners an approach to proactively building rapport with students in a large group setting. Second, FB provides a platform for teachers to access the most intimate, discreet aspects of students’ real life experiences – the facets of their personal lives that institutional and instructional norms tend to mute. During FB, the classroom is transformed into one large living room where students offer personal insights, critiques, and observations most adults in the school are hard pressed to find elsewhere. FB is structured to afford students the space in school to be completely transparent without fear of judgment or backlash. Students get to tell their own stories, through their own eyes,

using the words and forms of expression they feel are most appropriate to adequately communicate their ideas and experiences.

Classroom teachers who allow students to act, think, speak, and perform their various social identities without judgment create the atmosphere for high-quality student-teacher interactions. The quality, or efficacy, of student-teacher interactions supports the production of positive academic and social outcomes for students of color (Cornelius-White, 2007; Irvine & York, 1995). When making personal and professional decisions that ultimately lead to favorable outcomes for students, teachers engaged in negotiating high-quality student-teacher interactions take minor consideration for their own comfort level or professional goals. In this article, the authors, one a practicing public school teacher and the other an education researcher, outline an innovative classroom practice (Family Business) that helps teachers develop their capacity to learn about their students, on their terms, through their eyes. The description of this classroom practice helps to make concrete the benefits of empathy as a professional teaching disposition. Casting a vision for implementing FB also helps practitioners and those influencing their professional development imagine the utility this practice for improving the quality of students' overall schooling experience.

The following discussion of FB was derived from a larger research study undertaken to investigate the utility of empathy in cross-racial student-teacher interactions (Warren, 2013a). One of the authors of this paper is a classroom teacher who has adopted FB as standard practice and has first-person knowledge of best practices for implementing FB. Her experience is also invaluable in analyzing classroom

observation data on Ms. Williams' implementation of FB. The second author conducted the research inquiry where FB was identified. He determined that FB is a laudable example of how empathy can be cultivated as a professional teaching disposition for educators aiming to become (more) culturally responsive. This article spotlights the merits of FB for helping teachers apply empathy to interactions with students. Considerations for FB's successful implementation are also offered here. Before discussing FB and its implementation, it is important to understand the role of empathy in student-teacher interactions.

### **Understanding Empathy as a Variable of Student-Teacher Interactions**

**E**mpathy has been characterized as multidimensional. It includes both an emotional (empathic concern) and an intellectual (perspective taking) domain (Davis, 1994). Empathic concern (EC) is similar to sympathy. In other words, EC is the tender feelings developed in response to one's perceived needs, plight, or condition and represents a shared affect. EC is learning how to emote in ways congruent with the individual for whom the empathetic response is targeted. Perspective taking (PT) is an attempt to adopt or acquire another person's psychological point of view. PT is a process of learning to imagine life from the "other" person's perspective – seeing that individual's circumstance through the social, cultural, political, and historical frames that shape his or her lived reality. PT undergirds empathic concern and therefore represents the core of empathy in social relationships (Batson et al., 2007). Over time, teachers who sharpen their perspective taking skills are more likely to become adept at responding to the social and intellectual needs of students than those who do not.

Perspective taking is the first step in the application of empathy. Several mediating factors impact the application of empathy in diverse classrooms, such as teachers' personalities, teaching experience, and familiarity with students who are different from them. Moreover, employing empathy in the professional teaching context is an elaborate cyclical process that includes perspective taking, teacher decision-making, and student feedback (Warren, 2013b). The more empathy in teachers' verbal and physical exchanges with students, the greater the likelihood his or her interactions with students will produce the intended academic and behavioral outcomes. Thus, empathy is understood in this paper as an essential aspect of student-teacher interactions. Studies completed by Dolby (2012) and McAllister and Irvine (2002) isolate empathy as significant for improving the quality of teachers' interactions with their students of color in multicultural schooling contexts. Family business represents one teacher-friendly approach for using empathy to negotiate high-quality academic, behavioral, and social/relational interactions with youth.

### **Building a Context and Case for Family Business**

**A**t its core, FB is about building classroom community among the teacher/adult(s) in charge and the students. Researchers find that students thrive in academic environments where they feel understood, cared for, and heard (Valenzuela, 1999; Dance, 2002). This may be especially true in multicultural classroom settings for students whose cultural norms and expressions differ from or collide with the cultural norms generally accepted in their school (Beachum & McCray, 2011). Empathy is thought to improve how teachers communicate and respond to youth across racial and cultural difference, yet, few straightforward instructional strategies

are available to help teachers cultivate and manipulate empathy as a professional disposition of their teaching practice. Identifying such strategies is particularly important to developing teachers' capacities to acquire person-level knowledge of diverse students' views of and experiences in school. This is where FB can be of greatest use.

Furthermore, scholars find that capitalizing on students' motivation and engagement in school increases the possibility they will achieve high performance (Brophy, 2013; Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011). The emotional and social barriers students construct to avoid building meaningful relationships with teachers can pose real threats to a teacher's capacity to communicate and respond effectively to students' needs. FB helps teachers *establish trust* with students. There are few requirements for how students should participate in FB thereby leaving its implementation more open-ended. This sends the message that who students are as individuals is a welcomed and valuable addition to the classroom "family." The primary rule of engagement in FB is that every student has to listen attentively, no one can use real names, and what is said during FB is not repeated outside of the classroom. Over time, students who initially were not talking or demonstrating much motivation in class begin to show greater levels of enthusiasm and participation, although this varies from class to class and student to student. Practitioners may find that FB's implementation significantly improves some students' motivation and engagement in school, while for others it does not. Evidence from Warren's (2013a) research suggests participation in activities such as FB worked to improve several students' preparedness for school, contributions to classroom conversation, and completion of assigned tasks and projects.

The intention of FB is to provide educators with a simple process for adopting student perspective or points of view. It is a tangible example of perspective taking. For example, implementing FB has supported Ms. Williams' willingness to imagine her own professional practice through students' eyes. As a point of caution, the authors make no generalizable claims for the utility of FB to bolster student academic achievement. On the contrary, it is likely that utilizing family business positions education practitioners to navigate student-teacher interactions in a more effective way, which can lead to an overall improvement in the quality of students' schooling experiences. Also, it is reasonable that FB is a platform for increasing student engagement and motivation in school. Its implementation actively promotes free expression. The open conversations among members of the "family" help students feel heard, cared for, and safe. The remainder of the article will outline considerations for adopting, adapting, and executing FB. The parameters for implementation described hereafter represent one teacher's approach based on fieldwork (see Warren, 2013a). Personal modifications to this outline are to be expected.

## **Implementing Family Business**

### ***Defining Family***

At the beginning of the year, Ms. Williams explains to her students, "We are a family." She asks them, "Do you get mad at your mom sometimes?" The students respond, "Yes!" in chorus. She then asks, "Does your mom get mad at you sometimes?" The students reply with an emphatic "Yes!" She then goes on to tell them, "You are going to get mad at me sometimes and I am going to get mad at you, but we will work it all out in the end. We are a family." She builds classroom culture around the concept of family by taking extra special

effort to collaborate with students to co-construct conceptions of family. She also spends the first few weeks developing a shared set of classroom norms with students. These norms represent the mutually agreed upon language, expectations, and behavior for members of the classroom "family" / community. The teacher connects course requirements and expectations to the framework of family co-created between students and their teacher. Ms. Williams offered:

I tell them to view their classmates as their brothers and sisters and we are all in this together. After I establish the family, I tell them we are going to talk about things like a family does around the dinner table every day. I establish a routine that family business is a part of. Students raise their hand to speak and nobody talks while others are talking.

Implementation of FB begins by offering "family" as a general concept that students can immediately connect to in some form. Students further unpack the concept of family in order to dialogue about discrete aspects of its manifestation in the range of interactions "family" members are likely to experience. Students are then given license to identify with and become invested in maintaining a brand of family appropriate to their individual needs as members of the class. Explicitly exploring the joys, challenges, benefits, and drawbacks of being family members helps students locate their responsibility for making the family work. This may take some time, but the language and norms must be widely agreed upon. The teacher has to be consistent and vigilant about sustaining a sense of family and belonging for each student.

### ***Posing Questions***

Asking questions is another key aspect of implementing family business. Ms. Williams

tends to ask clarifying questions or questions that further probe students about what they are sharing. Students are also encouraged to ask questions of their classmates. Asking questions makes each student feel as if what they have shared is important and valuable to the family. It also demonstrates that the teacher is taking a genuine interest in what is being said. The dialogue creates a safe, inclusive space. Ms. Williams, for example, will often repeat back to the student what she has heard to demonstrate that she is drawing the appropriate conclusions. The verbal, real-time feedback students receive helps to make them feel seen and heard. The teacher is a participant in a family dialogue during FB, so she must model and practice active listening skills. He or she is less of an authority figure and more a participant and referee that ensures the conversation remains positive and on track. The teacher should be a modest contributor, just one voice among the various individuals who participate.

### ***Maintaining Anonymity and Discretion***

A third aspect of implementation is the maintenance of anonymity and discretion in conversation. Williams found it very important for students to make all names anonymous in the stories they told during FB. Williams insisted, "They are not allowed to use anyone's name that is out of the family. They have to use 'Jane Doe' or 'John Doe.'" A couple of stories students shared turned into "gossip sessions" after using a student's real name, so Ms. Williams had to ensure she set up clear expectations for discussion during FB in order to protect all students involved or implicated in the stories members of the "family" were telling.

### ***Listening Attentively***

Ms. Williams emphasized that FB is more about listening than talking. Some students like to talk so much that they do not listen to others or allow other students the opportunity

to share. Williams often says to students, "If you are talking while another student is talking, you are conveying the message that you are more important than they are and what they are saying is not important." It takes practice for the class to develop a routine that honors the voice of each individual student. Implementation of FB requires that teachers regularly communicate the urgency of respecting the general commentary and/or cultural expression of individual students.

### ***Cultivating Patience***

One of the most important aspects of implementing FB is patience. Practitioners who implement FB cannot expect students to want to share personal stories right away. It is not enough to tell students to simply talk out loud about what is happening in their lives at that moment. The teacher has to model transparency by being willing to share personal aspects of his or her life appropriate for discussion during FB. For example, Ms. Williams does this in multiple ways, including playing her favorite music as the students enter class or by opening FB by sharing what she did over the weekend. Furthermore, the teacher must ask detailed, specific questions about students' lives to extract the most meaning from what students choose to divulge to the class. Sometimes Ms. Williams asks a question that stimulates interesting discussion, such as, "What did you have for dinner last night?" This is a simple question, but it both breaks the ice and gets students to start talking. It is a question that students can easily relate to their personal lives. Williams confirmed, "Students love talking about what they eat and it is a topic that is non-exclusionary." Any student can comment and the discussion can lead to other topics relevant to student cultural expression. Moreover, it's a non-threatening way to catalyze rich classroom dialogue. Starting with simple prompts similar helps to quickly

build trust. The questions can become more sophisticated over time as the teacher deems appropriate. It cannot be understated that FB thrives after students start to trust the teacher and their classmates.

#### *Sample Family Business Topics*

- Loss of family members, friends, loved ones
- What students had to eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner, snack
- Parties/kick-backs students are going to/went to
- Movies students saw
- Problems with mom/dad/brothers/sisters
- Trips students are going on
- Any trouble students got in (being in jail, getting arrested, getting grounded, traffic tickets)
- School issues (grades, homework, teachers)
- Athletic competitions (if they won, lost)
- Scholarships students received/colleges they were accepted to
- Being sick or down (In cases like these, Williams offers “hug therapy” to comfort students after a loss or feeling down for the day.)
- What students’ dog or pet did at home
- Sick/injured family member
- New clothes or material items they bought

#### ***Results of Implementation***

This section outlines some results to be expected by implementing FB. Every teacher has a different personality, group of students, and competing demands. Therefore, not all results will resemble those described here. These results relate specifically to Ms. Williams’ implementation of FB. One way to validate the utility of FB is to spotlight the various types of outcomes that could result from its use by a classroom teacher or education practitioner.

Ms. Williams applies the metaphor of family to begin the process of establishing meaningful, trusting relationships with her students. Her interactions with the young people in her class are heavily influenced by what she has learned about them during FB. FB offers her a fairly structured, routine opportunity to engage in perspective taking. Similarly, Warren (2013a) found that empathy is beneficial for building relationships, shaping classroom climate, and improving a teacher’s willingness to take risks in interactions with students. Ms. Williams reported that Black boys characterized as “problematic” and/or “at risk” by some of her White female colleagues demonstrate high academic achievement in her class. They are motivated to excel and as a result, exhibit fewer behaviors that lead to excessive discipline referrals or the need to be dismissed from class for misconduct.

Colleagues consult regularly with Ms. Williams to get insight about how to work with certain students who are often reprimanded for misbehavior in other classes. These students’ behavioral profiles tend to be different in Ms. Williams’ class. Discipline referrals written for students, namely Black males, in Williams’s class are significantly lower than the school average for this same group. She believes that family business and the trusting relationships facilitated through its implementation are key to minimizing

behavioral disruptions. As mentioned previously, Williams negotiates behavioral and academic expectations with the students. They owe her their minds for the remainder of the period because she gave them space to talk freely during family business and even, at times, to perform a talent in front of the class.

It is not likely that these young men's lack of regard for being academically successful or their "oppositional orientation" (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998) toward school caused them to fail before entering Ms. Williams' class. There is much evidence suggesting that Black males care tremendously about being academically successful in school (Harper & Associates, 2013; Harper & Davis, 2012; Noguera, 2003). On the contrary, it may be that no teacher had taken the time to understand these young men from their own points of view and then accounted for that point of view when lesson planning or reprimanding them for their misbehavior. FB is centered on acquiring students' points of view for the express purpose of figuring out how to relate to them and translate care in a manner they understand and recognize. Teachers can use the stories students tell and the way they articulate their ideas and experiences as the building blocks for culturally responsive teaching. This approach to negotiating positive, productive student-teacher interactions conditions teachers to recognize and account for students' cultural and intellectual strengths and gifts in every aspect of their professional decision-making.

Other outcomes of FB surface at the student interpersonal level. In addition to allowing the teacher time to engage in perspective taking, FB allows students to get to know one another much better. Young men and women who ordinarily would not communicate with one another find they share life experiences and personal interests.

Moreover, the time given to family business creates an environment where students learn to be critical by posing thoughtful questions. Students get to take off their academic faces for a period of time to be themselves without repercussion. In observations of FB in action, the entire classroom community appears connected and captivated by what is being discussed. If for some reason, Ms. Williams forgets to ask for family business, the students quickly prompt her to ask, "Who has family business?" The students complain if family business has to be skipped to accommodate an extra long lab assignment, official exam, or state standardized assessment. When students see Ms. Williams before or after school, they say, "Oh, Ms. Williams, boy do I have family business! I can't wait for class!" Ms. Williams administers student surveys at the end of each semester, and students consistently cite family business as their favorite part of the class.

Family business can also produce positive academic outcomes. One student reflected, "I'm almost sure I failed the test on the bones, but studying was actually interesting. By now, I'm sure I got the upper body down, the lower body, not so much, but I'll get there." Curious about the student's assertion, Ms. Williams looked up the rest of this student's grades. She found that out of all the classes the student was taking that year, the grade the student was earning in anatomy was her highest. Williams admits that the class is challenging. "I know science is not every student's strong suit." All of this student's other grades were Ds and Fs, yet she was performing best in what was arguably one of her tougher classes. Williams sees this trend too often with her African-American and Latino students widely labeled as low performing.

There are instances of students who perform much better academically in her class than

any other class. Ms. Williams attributes their success to their participation in FB. They enjoy coming to class, and they work hard to do well. They might not get the grade they want, but “the students never give up,” Williams said. They tend to be tremendously resilient. Williams maintains that the standards for academic performance are very high in her class, and she emphasizes this point with students regularly. She uses FB as a non-threatening way to highlight the importance of skill mastery and critical engagement with course content, both in her class and other classes. Still, FB is not a panacea to the problems that lead to academic failure. A range of supports must be in place to ensure academic success. FB makes the classroom a place students enjoy coming. It serves as a daily launch pad for learning to take place each day.

### **Impediments to the Application of Empathy: Family Business and Perspective Divergence (PD)**

It is fair to assume that empathy, namely perspective taking, as described here may sound as if it is much easier said than done. This assumption would be correct. Placing the necessity of empathy in student-teacher interaction in the foreground raises the issue of perspective divergence (PD) (Warren, in press). PD represents the disparity in interpretation between individuals around a specific issue, condition, situation, behavior, or value. Minimizing PD requires that teachers learn to supplant their own perspectives, inclinations, norms, and judgments about students with the perspectives, inclinations, norms, and judgments of students. To do this, teachers need easily adaptable instructional strategies that allow them the space to practice interpreting students’ realities, desires, and needs through culturally congruent and appropriate frames of reference. FB is one such instructional strategy appropriate for

helping teachers do this work.

### **Conclusion**

In today’s urban school, the priority of teacher content knowledge and credentials above their ability to create a classroom environment that values individual student difference must be revisited. For six to eight hours a day, students are engaged in countless interactions with one another, the classroom teacher, and many other school and community stakeholders. These interactions have the potential to put students on a firm trajectory toward high academic achievement or utter disenfranchisement with school and learning. The interactions between teachers and the young people they teach, however, have a significant and important role in shaping each child’s schooling experience. A kind glance, affirmation, or simply the willingness to listen attentively can make all the difference in the efficacy of school for a young person from a historically marginalized cultural group.

The application of empathy in the professional teaching context is central to establishing classroom norms and practices that allow students the space to act out the totality of their various social identities (e.g. racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, etc.). Use of empathy in stakeholder interactions with youth and families is about re-humanizing the profession so that those invested in urban education are reminded that the many Black and Latino students populating urban schools are more than a test score. In this article, empathy has been considered as a mechanism for helping urban educators think about their work through students’ eyes, to consider the pertinence of developing a professional orientation that builds on the gifts, points of view, and cultural expertise of students.

Family business is a concrete example of the abstract concept of using empathy to negotiate student-teacher interactions. Effective classroom management must take a backseat to the primacy of facilitating meaningful human interactions. Describing family business offers a baseline understanding of empathy's practicality in student-teacher interactions. It also provides teachers who are interested in getting to know their students better a structured, non-threatening approach to doing so. Adopting family business as a classroom practice presupposes the teacher's vulnerability and flexibility to respect and value diverse viewpoints, experiences, and affinities. This is a strong step in the right direction toward improving how schools respond to the needs of urban youth.

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