

## Empathy

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### Abstract

*Empathy is a hotly contested keyword for educational purposes, with the field of counseling recording over 27 different definitions. The term has its roots in aesthetic appreciation of artistic endeavour, although it has evolved into an appreciation of matters from another's perspective. As such, it is a powerful tool for anti-bullying and anti-oppression pedagogical discourses. As "empathy" involves a potentially non-consensual gaze on another individual, the term continues to be contested not only from its possible and potentially asymmetrical applications in teaching to a potential for gendered, racial, or cultural bias in what groups or people are seen to be empathic or worthy of empathy.*

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A toddler, Aylan Kurdi, lies face down on the wet sand, unmoving, watched by a powerless man in uniform. In early September 2015, the boy's small dead body became a ghastly evocation of a much larger human tragedy. Kurdi was just one among thousands of Syrian refugees who died attempting to escape civil war, but images of his small body vomited up on a beach provoked a global outpouring of empathy. As the image occurred in the midst of the Canadian federal election campaign, Justin Trudeau turned the outpouring of public feeling into a campaign promise. If elected, Trudeau promised to expedite the process of bringing 25,000 Syrian refugees into the country by the end of the year. Trudeau won, though it took a little longer than anticipated to fulfill this campaign promise. Although clearly a signal demonstration of how individual feeling can be turned to political action, it doesn't on its own provide a reproducible model for encouraging a kinder, more humane world. Can teaching empathy promote, as Hannah Arendt (1990) suggests, a "general human solidarization . . . the capacity to lose oneself in the sufferings of others?" (p. 81). The answers lie partly in the evolution of the term.

"Empathy" has a comparatively recent etymology, with two direct antecedents. In its original German, it was first conceived as a physical characteristic of the nervous system: its 1895 translation of *Einfühlung* meaning "a physical property of the nervous system . . . believed to be correlated with feeling" (*Oxford English Dictionary* [OED], 2011). A second antecedent (first translated into English in 1903), the German *empathie*, was similarly individual: "the power of projecting one's personality into or mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciating it" (OED). The relevant point here is the distinction between something internal (experienced by an individual) and something external (enabling action ideally to alleviate suffering). The presence of empathy, however, does not necessarily presuppose tolerance. Julius Streicher, for example, authored three children's books (thus assuming an artistic disposition and an empathetic temperament), that were anti-Semitic. A leading Nazi, he was ultimately executed for his crimes against humanity (Jacobs, 2012). On the redemptive side, however, Marilyn Nelson's (2005) *A Wreath for Emmett Till* interrogates the horrors of the past (the unjust murder of Emmett Till) and encourages us to feel empathy for him (as well as for his mother), and to "speak now, or bear unforgettable shame" (Sonnet XIV).

Empathy has developed in its modern use from its roots in individual anatomy and aesthetics, and has expanded to include "[t]he ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc." (OED). That is not always as straightforward or obvious as it looks. In *Out of Africa*, Karen Blixen (1986) describes *The Merchant of Venice* to her servant, Farah Aden, who perversely empathizes with Shylock: "he could have used a redhot knife. That brings out no blood . . . Had the Jew no friends to give him advice?" (p. 182). As demonstrated by this reaction, empathy can be an unpredictable and mutable concept. In the Blixen example, empathy is not, as one would expect, for Antonio (who is in danger of having his heart cut out) but for Shylock, the despised character with whom Farah Aden identifies. Characters in children's literature, from the hero-villain Long John Silver to Boo Radley to the Grinch who stole Christmas, similarly problematize with whom we identify and empathize, in that we "feel" for them despite acknowledging that they are doing "bad" things.

In treating empathy as a keyword in education, the main questions centre on whether or not teaching it has any specific value, or if it even means anything. Florence Parry Heide's (2015) *The Shrinking of Treehorn* provides a brilliant example of false empathy, in that it speaks to the issue of mouthing platitudes masking a lack of action. Faced with the physically shrinking pupil Treehorn, who has been sent to his office for an apparent infraction (jumping up to reach the

water fountain), the Principal declares “mission accomplished.” Although he takes no action he speaks with empathy: “I’m glad I was here to help you . . . [a] team is only as good as its coach, eh?” (Heide, 2015, p. 37). Treehorn encounters the same complete lack of empathy at home: his mother is preoccupied with her falling cake and the comfort of her guests rather than with her son’s problems (Heide, 2015). Though empathy is a “fuzzy concept” (Cunningham, 2009, p. 681), its lack is portrayed as pernicious.

If, as its original meaning indicates, empathy represents a genuine emotional, individual experience, then it cannot be faked or taught uniformly (just as left-handed pupils cannot write naturally with their right hand). While being empathetic in medical contexts means being able to recognize, accurately the feelings of another, in educational contexts it is treated as something that can be taught. There is something almost sinister in the idea of forcing empathy on others. The definition of empathy as “the ability to interpret signals of distress or pleasure with effortful control,” (cited by Boyer, 2010, p. 313) in fact reads as a kind of punishment. Ideally, however, empathy has a role to play in, as Freire (2004) claims, “*ethicizing* the world” (p. 7, author’s emphasis).

Ethicizing the world is the aim of the widespread “Roots of Empathy” program, a registered charity in the USA, which is delivered in Canada, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, Germany and Switzerland (Roots of Empathy, n.d.). In this program, babies are brought into the classroom to encourage students to become sensitized to them. The program claims that empathy engendered through the interactions results in, “significant reductions in aggression and increases in pro-social behaviour” (Roots of Empathy, n.d.). In theory, the Roots of Empathy program claims to produce individuals who are, “less likely to physically, psychologically and emotionally hurt each other through bullying and other cruelties” (Roots of Empathy, n.d.). Without actually saying so, the program does set up gendered definitions of empathy in that sensitivity to the feelings of others is typically gendered feminine, while aggression is gendered masculine.

Empathy (despite being associated with feminine qualities) has also been characterized as “too Western and masculine” a concept (Cunningham, 2009, p. 681). While a study of 91 children aged 5 to 8 found that “girls and boys did not differ significantly on self- and emotion (*sic*) understanding,” (Bosacki, 2007, p. 165) it also found that “for girls only, significant positive relations were found between emotional understanding and self-understanding” (p. 165). A qualitative Turkish study of gifted Grade 6-7 students found that, “male students in the group did not give their answers as they really felt and made a reduction by showing reasons like ‘men do not cry’” (Nedim Bal, 2015, p. 2321).

Images of Aylan Kurdi stirred empathic responses that did, temporarily, stimulate action, as the resettlement of Syrian refugees demonstrates. The implications of defining empathy in a global educational context make the ongoing discourse on empathy a crucial one. Will empathy in education be used to, “demonstrate one’s morally sanctioned understanding of and cosmopolitan enlightenment regarding the Other,” (Taylor, 2007, p. 300), for “voyeuristic” purposes (Houser, 2008, p. 477) in a knowledge-power discourse, or be used for mutual understanding and empowerment?

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