The Relevance of Empathy to the Intentionally Inviting Stance

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Abstract

A core component of invitational education is taking an intentionally inviting stance, whereby the teacher achieves and maintains an optimally inviting environment by intentionally practicing care, trust, respect, and optimism with students. These elements are rooted in the affective domain. Affective teaching involves the use of empathy. Humans are born with the capacity to feel the expressed emotions of others. This affective attribute is the basis for demonstrating empathy. However, empathy is a progressive construct. Initial affective mirroring must be augmented with cognitive, social and cultural experiences in order to be transformational. An intentionally inviting stance provides the potential for development of high-levels of empathy to occur.

Introduction

The framework for Invitational Education practice is designed for educators to take an "inviting stance" with their students using the following elements: *care, trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality* (Purkey & Novak, 2015; Shaw, et al., 2013). Caring teachers display positive regard for their students, actively encourage learning, and celebrate achievements. Trust is essential in the classroom to ensure collaboration, cooperation, and working relationships. Respect requires acknowledgement of one's presence and direction in life. Optimism expects the best outcomes for students whereby good things are permanent and bad things are temporary. Finally, through intentionality, educators deliberately invite their students to learn, succeed, and realize their fullest potential (Purkey & Novak, 2015). Arguably, these elements are rooted in the affective domain because emotions are involved when intentionally designing and conducting a caring, trusting, optimistic, and respectful learning environment. "No matter what is being taught, emotions are always happening and will influence and often determine results" (Radd, 2006, p. 85). American psychologist Carl Rogers advocated that affective elements should be provided for learning to have meaning:

> "Significant learning involves the whole person; it combines cognitive and affective experiential elements. It is a unified learning, yet with awareness of the different aspects. It does not separate the mind from the heart, from feelings, as most education attempts to do" (Patterson, 1977, p. 20).

Beyond subject knowledge and professional preparation, affective teacher qualities are essential for effective and meaningful learning to occur (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Such practices not only help students learn but "actively strengthens their capacity to learn" (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 27). Indeed, in order for a teacher to take an intentionally inviting stance, the understanding and application of these affective elements are crucial for education practices to

be invitational. When considering how to engage human emotions and human relationships, a basic understanding of empathy is paramount.

Empathy

Empathy is a process of both feeling (affective) and thinking (cognitive) through the perceived situation of another. Commonly referred to as *putting oneself into another's shoes*, empathy involves a "willingness of an observer to become part of another's experience, to share the feeling of that experience" (Rifkin, 2009, p 12). In part, empathy is often referenced as an affective mode of perceiving and sharing the emotions of others (Davis, 1996; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Hoffman, 1987; Rogers, 1983). Research has shown empathy to be an innate human predisposition that tends to increase responsibility, caring, and helping behavior (Kohn, 1990). The 1992 discovery of the brain's mirror-neuron system appears to have established a biological basis for empathy (Rifkin, 2009; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). This system enables humans to sense and feel the emotional state of others. Mirror neurons fire both when someone does an action as well as when observing another doing an action. This allows humans to autonomically sense and feel the emotional state of others and simulate observed actions, which helps with understanding and learning through imitation. Therefore, humans are designed to be social beings and emotionally connected to each other (Rifkin, 2009).

Although humans are born with an affective empathic capacity, its further development is largely cognitive and dependent on the cultural and experiential conditions of education and upbringing (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, Davis, 1996). Empathy becomes a key element to successful learning. Teachers who work on knowing and understanding students in order to gauge their perceptions and abilities accordingly will more likely have success than teachers who ignore empathy as a key element. Crucially, when involving both affective and cognitive understanding, education has been shown to develop higher levels of empathy in students. Studies conducted on empathy development during teacher/counselor education in social work (Pinderhughes, 1979), cultural studies (Cruz & Patterson, 2005), counseling (Hatcher et al., 1994), music education (Kalliopuska & Roukonen, 1993), and physical education (Monahan, 2013) suggest empathy can be enhanced by an educational program.

Developmental Levels of Empathy

Although most humans are born with a capability to vicariously feel another's emotional condition, empathy is an evolving ability. It must be cultivated through human interaction and experience to fully develop. The following developmental levels of empathy are adapted from Hoffman (1987):

Global empathy.

Global empathy represents the rudimentary operation of mirror-neurons in normally-functioning human brains. This level of empathy, demonstrated by most infants, is a basic response to the emotions of another. An infant who is resting comfortably, clean and nourished, would likely cry when hearing another infant cry or when witnessing the distress of the mother. This basic response is purely affective and involves little cognition. The human observes an action, simulates the observed emotion involved, and reacts accordingly. If empathy were fixed at this level, it would be extremely difficult for one to go through life. Just walking down the street would be a virtual roller coaster of sensation from viewing and mirroring the emotions of others.

Egocentric empathy

Egocentric empathy is commonly exhibited by young children. At this level, one experiences the basic understanding of another's condition, but either not yet prepared or possibly concerned to feel beyond the self. A young child seeing something distressing such as starving children on the television might yell, "Change the channel!" While perhaps understanding the plight of the starving children, the child is not prepared to fully feel their distress. It is natural for children to be egocentric and develop a social awareness with age and experience (Piaget, 1967). Young children naturally have less life experiences than adults, therefore, less cognitive understanding of observed actions and emotions. Nevertheless, empathy does not necessarily mature with age.

Since empathy is developmental, not all humans progress beyond this egotistical level. Studies have demonstrated that wealthy people have difficulty reading the emotions of others, while showing a lower compassion and generosity to those less fortunate (Piff, 2014, Pickett, & Wilkinson, 2011, Kraus, et al. 2010). This suggests entitled individuals tend to retain their ego while not considering the misfortune of others. While children displaying egotistical empathy might not be cognitively ready to place themselves in the shoes of others, children of wealth might not be concerned or inclined to do so.

Situational empathy

This level, common among adults, represents an increased awareness to empathize with another person's situation. The development of situational empathy is more dependent on cognition, such as accumulation of knowledge, culture, and social experiences, than affective mirroring (Lamm & Majdandžić, 2015). An individual demonstrating situational empathy has the ability to fully put themselves in another's shoes. However, people tend to empathize, and socially connect with those people who are most like them. Therefore, some situations can produce a more empathic response than others. This could be seen as a consequence of the social connection where like-group members share positive interactions toward each other but not toward unlike-group members (Seppala, et al., 2013). Empathy is practiced, but not necessarily toward all people or all groups. Situational empathy can thus be directed, shaped, and blunted, depending on the situation. Individuals demonstrating situational empathy may focus their empathy on specific groupings: Race, gender, class, sports, politics, religion, etc. Empathy is experienced in full, but only for the favorite team, politician, or spiritual leader, not for those on the other side.

Transformational empathy

Operating at this level of empathy exhibits identification of "someone else's situation as one's own" (Hoffman, 1987, p. 48). Transformational empathy is considered a higher-order empathy that represents a thorough capacity to empathize with entire groups of people, including those who are different. This includes keen cognitive perceptions, along with affective mirroring. Transformational empathy is believed to be a precursor to higher levels of morals, prosocial, and altruistic behaviors (Hoffman, 2003). An important aspect of transformational empathy is the ability to fully immerse oneself into another's experience while leaving the perceiving self behind; thereby resulting in a complete experience of the actions and feelings of another without judgment or bias. It should be noted that although the transformational empathic experience views the world through another without bias, it does not automatically put the viewer in a position to condone or

even agree with the actions of the other. More so, the experience may be seen by the viewer as why a particular action was taken. For example, to empathize with a murderer does not mean to condone murder. However, it may lead one to understand the reasons why such a crime was committed.

The Empathic Invitational Stance

Care. The requirement of care is a basic human need. Since humans are born unable survive on their own, the ability to care is absolutely necessary for human existence (Lieberman, 2013). Empathy is the social mechanism that allows humans to feel for others and respond to their needs. Infants are cared for because empathetic parents and care-givers feel compelled to ensure their health, comfort, and safety. In a school setting, care is the most essential element to the intentionally inviting stance (Purkey & Novak, 2015). It is necessary to foster a nurturing environment whereby students feel comfortable learning, exploring, and socializing. In addition, caring teachers tend to develop a caring capacity within their students (Noddings, 1992). Higher forms of empathy appear to be compatible with caring, prosocial practices, and higher moral development (Hoffman, 1987). Furthermore, higher-level empathy can lead to a more caring disposition that increases one's generosity and involvement in social causes (Monahan, 2013, Hoffman, 2003).

Trust. To be intentionally inviting is to be trusting. Trust involves the effort to work interdependently with others, to establish open and honest relationships, and to help others pursue goals and dreams (Purkey & Novak, 2015). It encompasses the qualities of reliability, genuineness, truthfulness, intent, and competence (Arceneaux, 1994). A teacher's ability to teach others by changing and shaping perceptions is dependent on the students' trust. The intentionally inviting stance assumes trust to be unconditional. However, that could be difficult without involving empathy. Trust enables student cooperation, harmony, and production (Arceneaux, 1994). Empathy helps to facilitate the relationship between teacher and student. Higher-order empathy allows the teacher to be fully immersed in a student's situation, regardless of how different the student. "When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems *to the student*, then again, the likelihood of significant learning is increased" (Rogers, 1983, p. 125).

Respect. Students should be treated with dignity and as valuable and responsible contributors to the classroom (Purkey & Novak, 2015). To show respect is to give undivided attention to another, perceive from the other's point of view, and validate it. Respect is indeed earned but not through fear or intimidation. Rather, respect is based on valuing and sharing another's perception as an equal perspective. Respect requires acknowledgement and understanding another's point of view before challenging or debating it. Another's viewpoint should be seen as a valid contribution to the learning environment. Giving respect to others is to dignify, empower and elevate their status (Keltner, 2016). Empathy allows for the perception and sharing of another's point of view, initially without judgment, which gives authenticity to the sentiment. This allows the teacher to give attention to the backgrounds, experiences, views, and beliefs, of students in order to incorporate them into the learning process. Validation of students' contributions to their learning environment is respecting their worth within the classroom.

Optimism. The optimistic person is predisposed to view life's challenges in a positive light. Optimism is seen as an inclination to have confidence in favorable outcomes. This optimistic outlook is commonly referred to as *the glass being half-full* rather than the pessimistic referral that, *the glass is half-empty*). An optimist views good things as permanent and bad things as temporary, whereby setbacks are considered challenges with which to work harder on (Seligman, 2006). An optimistic teacher extends this positive view to students. "It is not enough to be inviting; it is critical to be optimistic about the process" (Purkey & Novak, 2015). Exhibiting optimism through an intentionally inviting stance is expecting positive outcomes for students. Intentionally inviting teachers nurture and care about their students' success. In turn, optimism is seen as a key factor in teacher likability ratings (Frymier, 1994). Research has shown empathy to be positively correlated with optimism and other affirming personality traits (Hojat, et al., 2015). Empathic understanding of students' circumstances and challenges can help the teacher to be committed to the students' success. Additionally, by understanding empathy can be enhanced through an educational program should cause teachers to become more optimistic about their students' empathic development.

Intentionality. The inviting stance centers upon the teacher's explicit behaviors that welcome, accepts, and facilitates students within the classroom. Intentionality epitomizes the primary effort of the teacher to create a consistent and dependable environment focused on students' realization of their fullest potential (Purkey & Novak, 2015; Shaw, et al., 2013). By being intentionally inviting, the teacher makes a conscious effort to care, trust, respect, and optimistically assist students to optimally achieve. Yet the teacher also needs to comprehend students from an interpersonal perspective. Empathy helps the teacher to accurately read students' emotions or concerns and to understand them from the students' perspective. This ultimately enhances the teacher's ability to unconditionally accept students for who they are rather than based on how they behave or perform on tasks (Kohn, 2005). It can be assumed that the intention to help students realize their potential is also shared by the students when students are seen as equal contributors to their education. Both empathy and shared intentionality are capacities that are necessary for moral agency to occur (Hourdequin, 2011). While empathy represents attunement to the emotions of another, shared intentionality can be seen as attunement to others' goals and ends (Hourdequin, 2011). Thus, the teacher's motivation to recognize and assist students' in the realization of their potential is intrinsically connected to empathic awareness of the students' situations.

Practical Implications

The alignment between an intentionally inviting stance and optimal progression through levels of developmental empathy discussed above may help teachers recognize and further develop their own empathy levels, which will help them effectively seek to cultivate their students' level of empathy. Teachers must acknowledge that during the school day, their empathic attention should be focused on their students. There are numerous student-focused empathy activities posted on the internet. However, empathic approaches can be categorized within the following avenues:

Discovery. This involves getting to know students and the self. Knowledge of each other is an important feature of working together. A simple day-one exercise is to have students share their name, including any nickname or preferred name. Then have students share where they are from, their hobbies/ interests, and something unique or less known about them. From the teacher's perspective, this provides a starting point for getting to know each student. Common interests can lead to further conversation and enhanced familiarity. Ascertaining the uniqueness of each student

allows the teacher to accept them as distinctive individuals. Another suggested discovery activity, titled *Who are you?,* is located from www.invitationaleducation.net >Programs & Services> Member Resources> Activities.

Dialogue. Encouraging dialog between students during class discussions helps the teacher understand perspectives beyond the textbook. Freire (1993) considered dialogue to be essential in education. It leads students and the instructor to work together to understand mutual problems and develop solutions. The intentionally inviting stance is important when engaging students in dialogue. Teachers who trust students' experiences and opinions demonstrate respect for their contributions to the class and demonstrate care about the students' viewpoint. It is important that students be given equal opportunity to contribute to class dialogue. From www.invitationaleducation.net >Programs & Services> Member Resources> many dialogue-building activities are available, including: *Puzzle Talk, Attack Thoughts, Barriers to Communication, Be Positive, I Heard What You Said, but What Did You Say?, and Words I Wish I Had Heard*.

Understanding. The result of empowering students' voices within the classroom is increased teacher empathy for the students' diverse situations and particular perspectives which allows students to better understand each other. Understanding different viewpoints raises collective consciousness of previously unknown perspectives. This can lead to increased tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance of opposing perspectives. To be truly transformational, an intentionally inviting stance must be willing to see things from multiple perspectives. From www.invitationaleducation.net> Programs & Services> Member Resources> several activities are available that help to promote increased understanding of multiple perspectives including: *Blue and Orange Card Activity, Draw a Student, From the Other Side of the Desk, and Changing "You" messages to "I" messages*.

Conclusions

While human empathy appears to occur naturally, there is no assurance that higher-level empathy will develop in all humans (Davis, 1996; Emde, 1989). Normal-functioning human brains contain mirror-neurons, which allow humans to perceive the emotions of others. However, developing higher-level empathy further requires cognitive learning, social learning as well as experiential learning. Teachers are responsible for the effective education of their students. However, that education involves more than just cognitive conveyance of knowledge. Learning involves the affective domain. Beyond cognitive knowledge, students need to learn social interactions, interpersonal skills, a sense of belonging, the value of interdependence, as well as the expression and sharing of emotions. This requires an emotional investment on the part of the teacher, which in effect requires effective utilization of higher-levels of empathy.

Awareness of developmental empathy may help educators seeking to utilize an intentionally inviting stance to plan lessons and activities that include opportunities for students to reach their fullest potential by collaborating, sharing, observing others, participating in discussions, and expressing their opinions, feelings, or perspectives. This intentionally inviting framework potentially helps students develop socially, emotionally, as well as cognitively. The high-level empathic teacher utilizing an intentionally inviting stance not only helps students achieve but also fosters the students' development of higher-level empathy. While intentionality is considered to be the central aspect of the inviting stance, empathy may arguably be its connective

lattice. Empathy, as exhibited through intentional care, trust, respect, and optimism deepens and strengthens the inviting stance; which in turn has the potential to be an ideal situation for practicing, promoting, and nurturing higher-level empathy.

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