

DEVELOPING EMPATHY AS A CORE COMPETENCY AND LIFE SKILL IN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Empathy has been studied in accordance to its impact on professional skills and behavior in the fields of medicine, corporations, and educational institutions. As multiple incidents of brutal violence, killing of innocent people on the streets of Pakistan, and apathetic attitudes disseminated even towards young children in schools, the need arises to address the importance and impact of empathy on everyday lives of people in society. The dire need for empathy-building exercises from the grass root level is evident. There is hope if future generations are taught to think of others as well as themselves, giving equal importance to every member of society. This article highlights the importance of empathy and traces its development in the mind of children, as an important core competency and life skill. Prosocial skills are discussed as a precursor and complementary attribute of the essential empathic skill. Future implications of this research lead to the prospect of a national program for building empathic skills for children, in schools across the country, as has been done in the United States, Canada and countries across the world (e.g., by Dan Olweus and Mary Gordon).

Keywords: Empathy, Development of Empathy, Prosocial Behaviour, Bullying, Children

INTRODUCTION

Empathy, as one of the emotional components of human personality, is expressed in varying degrees through the days and years of our life. A person displays anger, sadness, anxiety, depressive tendencies, or excitement towards life and happiness at different times. We also react to such emotions and feelings when portrayed by others. It is the ability as well as innate power to walk in another's shoes, trying to experience the world from another person's point of view. The level of empathy displayed by a person is dependent on his life experiences (Harris and Foreman-Peck, 2004). People who foster this trait and hone it into a lifelong skill, are able to maintain better, healthier, happier long-lasting relationships, and are more likeable to others. Inculcating empathy within oneself means accepting the diversity around the globe, understanding and sharing in others triumphs, as well being there for them in unfortunate times. Empathy affects the behavior one explicates, as well as the quality of relationships (McDonald & Messinger, 2011).

Empathy when taught to children from a younger age, in homes and schools, develops prosocial behavior within them and helps them to have positive relations. Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development states that when a child is between five to seven years old, the development of the child's mind is taking place (Viers, 2022). Significant skills, concepts of optimism, caring, empathy and appreciating others, may be effectively placed. This in turn, may reduce bullying in

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schools and build a cooperative atmosphere, conducive to learning. Also, studies of preschool-to-school aged children show enhancement in empathic tendencies, showing that even these children may be susceptible to development greater empathic skills (Bensalah et al., 2016).

The significance of this article is its exploration of prosocial, positive personality development possibilities that lay within a child and his or her first decade of life. The incurred implications, once such exploration is finalized and scaled up to a level as to reach parents and teachers of children in a city, or nation, or globally, holds immense possibility of creating a world with more empathic, helpful, caring individuals. The objective of this paper is to establish the developmental milestones and causing factors contributing to the levels of empathy built and portrayed within a child; it may be a cause of their environment, the kind of parenting they received, or situations they faced in school. In this way, the researcher aims to find the factors influencing the development of empathy as a core competency and life skill in children.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The factors that facilitate the development of empathy include learning from the environment, socialization, genetics as well as innate temperaments and tendencies. Parenting as well the relationship a child has with his or her parents is one of the most significant influences upon the personality, and hence, the level of empathy building within a child. Researches indicate that the building of a child's personality that inculcated prosocial behavior is closely linked to moral development (Benish-Weismana, et al., 2019). It is a discussion of the use of inductive discipline by parents with their children in relation to children's empathy and prosocial behavior (Krevans and Gibbs, 1996). Children who have a higher empathetic ability are liked more, among friends and peers (Wang et al., 2019). On the other hand, working on eliminating negative behaviours can be accelerated when there is more inclination towards prosocial activities, and empathy plays a vital role in the process (Song, 2022).

Empathy further enhances the development of moral behavior and respect of, as well as adhering to social values among children (Sprinrad & Eisenberg, 2017; Eisenberg, 2007; Williams et al., 2014; Silke et al., 2020). In such way, rules become internal when a child gains more empathic development within his or her personality (McDonald and Messinger, 2011). When followed at home and in school, this adhering to rules helps to protect others from harmful actions or negative verbal influences to family, friends and peers. In most cases, as seen from the aforementioned researches, empathy enhances relationships and creates better opportunities for social inclusion and contribution. An analysis conducted by a child psychologist showed that empathetic ability increases from the stages of infancy upto adolescence (Damon and Lerner, 2007). An American psychologist establishing the stages of development for prosocial behaviours in children, found that children are susceptible and motivated to develop empathy as well as increase this skill (Rizkiyanti, 2019). Gender differences also play their role in the differing development of empathy. Girls are found to display more prosocial behaviours (Garaigordobil, 2009), although third to fourth grade students portray this difference more profoundly (Baillargeon et al., 2011).

Building Empathy as a Core Competency and Life Skill in Children

The building blocks of empathy within a child, first and foremostly, are formed during early interactions with their parents; moral development is also shaped in this way (Thompson & Newton, 2010). Children with higher cognition and moral acquiesce are those whose mothers who highlight other's feelings instead of focusing on rules as well as consequences, and relational development based on positive incentives than a disciplined-based approach (Laible, 2004; Laible & Thompson, 2002; Thompson & Newton, 2010). A multitude of studies have found that parents who exert a positive influence on their children, or caregivers who impart warmth and care, nurturing positive emotions within a child, have greater success in allowing empathic personality development of those children (Clark & Ladd, 2000; McGrath, Zook, & Weber-Roehl, 2003; Koestner, Franz, & Weinberger, 1990; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). Children also mirror the behavior of mothers, as well as both parents; hence parents who are available to solve distressful situations and assist children to imitate them while displaying empathy, also enhance building empathy as core competency in children (Hoffman, 1984; Robinson et al., 2001; Eisenberg, 2003; Kochanska, 1995; Kochanska, Forman, & Coy, 1999; Kochanska & Murray, 2000; Laible & Thompson, 2000).

Other studies have found that children's own intrinsic empathy increases with parent's or caregiver's practices of empathic, warm care-giving, rather than parents or caregivers being solely responsible for inculcating empathy within children (Krevans and Gibbs, 1996; Farrant, Devine, Maybery, & Fletcher, 2012). The disparity in personalities of individuals also plays a role in varying degree of prosocial behavior seen within children, while in the company of family or at school. Parenting of the authoritative kind breeds lower empathic levels within children; and those children who are more resilient to punishments or disciplining techniques also show a lower level of empathy (Dadds & Salmon, 2003; Frick & Morris, 2004; Cornelius, 2018). It is also imperative to note that empathy development within children is fostered by multiple outside influences, alongwith their intrinsic empathic state. During interactions with other students at school, peers, teachers, as well as media. Violence existent in cartoons, video games, or other programs shown on television, or in the news if children watch alongside parents; all these may influence building empathy as a life skill in children, as well as core competency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following theories have laid the foundation of empathic research and empathy-based studies. They provide plausible explanations for the development of empathy in an individual, as based on theories of perception-action, social learning, and multiple intelligences.

Theories of Empathy

Mirror Neurons and the Perception-Action Model

Since the 2000s, empathy research has mostly revolved around brain research. It is argued that organisms get help in understanding and imitating others' actions by mirror neurons (Gallese, 2003; Gallese, Keysers, & Rizzolatti, 2004; Rizzolatti et al., 1996; Rizzolatti, Fogassi, & Gallese, 2001). Researches have shown that mirror neurons are responsible for vicarious experiences of action, sensation and emotion (Gallese, 2003; Gallese et al., 2004; Iacoboni, 2009; Keysers & Gazzola, 2009).

Lev Vygotsky's Social Learning Theory

Learning takes place in a cultural context between the learner and more knowledgeable others, who may be parents, older siblings, friends or teachers. From Vygotsky's perspective, learning takes place in a social setting making it a cooperative and social function. Empathy is important for the more knowledgeable other to listen and teach the learner – a must for them to be able to empathize with the learner, otherwise learning will not take place. Empathy may be categorized as higher order thinking skills, requiring analysis of another's emotions and learning to react accordingly (Dahm, 2008).

Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory

Howard Gardner identifies seven intelligences, the linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. Interpersonal intelligence is the "*capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people*" (Gardner, 2003, p. 43). He gives the idea that empathy is an integral part of intelligence, which like other intelligences is present in some individuals, more than others. Empathy may be developed by teaching and practice. Empathic dealing engages necessary skills such as listening, noticing and interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues which are important components.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected from students of Classes 6 and 7 of two schools (N=384). The age range of students was from 11 – 16 years. The names of both schools were Islah-e-Moashara for Boys and Muhammadiyah Girls School, of Lahore, Pakistan. It was an experimental study consisting of a control group and an experimental group. The intervention program focused on developing empathy as it is one of the core competency and an important life skill. The focus was on developing abilities to recognize and understand empathy and in an attempt to include it in the lives of children. Statistical tests of Pearson's Correlation were carried out to determine the correlation between variables.

FINDINGS

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship among Gender of the student, Age of the student, Father's Education, Mother's Education, Father's Profession, Mother's Profession, Result of the Previous Class, Sharing his/her feelings with family members, Responses

after using the first intervention on Experimental Group of the selected students in Phase I. There was a positive correlation between gender and speaking in a pleasant tone of voice ($r=.317$, $n=199$, $p=.000$), class performance and speaking in a pleasant tone of voice ($r=.140$, $n=199$, $p=.049$), class performance and reaction over nasty voice ($r=.192$, $n=199$, $p=.007$), Phase I Total Post Bullying and thinking of a character on TV or in the movies who uses a nasty tone of voice ($r=.249$, $n=199$, $p=.000$), Phase I Total Post Bullying and use of a nasty or unpleasant tone of voice ($r=.313$, $n=199$, $p=.000$), and thinking of a character on TV or in the movies who uses a nasty tone of voice and use of a nasty or unpleasant tone of voice ($r=.192$, $n=199$, $p=.007$). The table reports that girls preferred to speak in a pleasant way even though someone got angry with them. The students who were better in class performance mostly spoke in pleasant tone of voice but they reacted on nasty tone of voice. The table also reports that there was a positive association between post bullying behavior and the watching a character who used nasty tone of voice, usage of nasty tone of voice during conversation.

There was a negative correlation gender and thinking of a character on TV or in the movies who uses a nasty tone of voice ($r=-.459$, $n=199$, $p=.000$), gender and use of a nasty or unpleasant tone of voice ($r=-.314$, $n=199$, $p=.000$), student's mother education and thinking of a character on TV or in the movies who uses a nasty tone of voice ($r=-.159$, $n=199$, $p=.025$), class performance and thinking of a character on TV or in the movies who uses a nasty tone of voice ($r=-.176$, $n=199$, $p=.013$), class performance and use of a nasty or unpleasant tone of voice ($r=-.249$, $n=199$, $p=.000$), sharing and thinking of a character on TV or in the movies who uses a nasty tone of voice ($r=-.160$, $n=199$, $p=.024$), Phase I Total Post Empathy and speaking in a pleasant tone of voice ($r=-.196$, $n=199$, $p=.006$), Phase I Total Post Bullying and speaking in a nasty voice to you ($r=-.146$, $n=199$, $p=.040$), and speaking in a pleasant tone of voice and use of a nasty tone of voice ($r=-.192$, $n=199$, $p=.001$). The table further reports that as compared to boys, girls had negative association with the thinking of the character who uses nasty tone of voice. The students who had better performance in class, higher mother education, and much sharing with family members also had negative association with the thinking of the character on TV or in movies who uses nasty tone of voice. The students who had higher Empathetic score preferred to use pleasant tone on happy times as compared to sad moments. The table further reports that after the usage of intervention the negative association was observed between Total Post Bullying and reaction over nasty voice.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Empathy, Bullying and Interpersonal Skills in School Children

In the phase 1 of the study, the study explores that the students who have higher empathy score prefer to use pleasant tone of voice on happy times as compared to sad moments, and there is a negative association between post bullying and reaction over nasty tone of voice. The students who have greater empathetic score have almost all feelings but those who have greater bullying tendencies have more angry feelings. The students who have higher empathy score think that police officer beat them or sent them behind bars if they misbehave with him. The students who got higher bullying score consider that they would get angry, feel bad or ill if someone tells their secrets to others. The students who have higher bullying score look at speaker, and understand the speaker's feelings more, but do not accurately recognize the definition of empathy. They can tell other's feelings by the look on their face. After the application of interventions, the students who have higher empathy score are happy by recreation and studies. The students who have higher bullying score talk about their feelings with their teacher, friend and other family members rather than talk with their mother, father, brother and sister.

In the phase 2 of the study, the study further explores that the students who have higher empathetic score and bullying score do not accurately recognize the words of happiness, but the negative association is stronger with bullying score but less stronger with empathy score. The students having higher bullying score have stronger negative association with the words of distress, anger, and sadness. The students who have higher bullying tendencies fail to describe how a person's face and body language might look if he is afraid. The students who have higher empathy scores mostly ask questions to make sure that they completely understand what the speaker is saying, and they try to understand the speaker's feelings. The students who have higher bullying score in phase 2 have less association with the empathetic statements of set 2, and less accurately recognize the empathetic statements of set 3. The study explores that the overall score of empathy is increased in phase 1 post

empathy, and phase 2, whereas the overall score of bullying is decreased in phase 1 and phase 2 post bullying.

The present research predicted that parents and teachers are the most significant elements to monitor the change in the personalities of the students after the usage of interventions program. The relationship between attitude of empathy and feelings is very strong in boys. Although the intervention program increases more empathy level in girl students but thread is thin when we compare it to the range of attitude of empathy and feelings and even within the feelings as compared to boy students.

Empathy as a bridge between people

There is a need to highlight the importance of empathy, and to further empathic goals in school curriculum, which provide another dimension of safety and security measures to school children. Negative experiences can dampen the child's outlook of life if they continue for a considerable amount of time. The feeling of being alienated and lonely and a sense of loss that no one cares can be extremely painful, discouraging, and even counterproductive for children. In a child's life, school occupies a major chunk of his time and energy. School experiences may compensate for the moral and character education which the home environment has not been able to provide. The changes in attitude, lack of time for children's guidance, materialism, individualism, intolerance and impatience have an effect on adults and children in undeniable ways. Children need help to develop positive attitudes otherwise they may develop a view that the world is a place of tensions, turmoil, hardship and miseries. If children are helped to develop the strength to face the challenges ahead, they are more likely to build meaningful relationships, improve theirs and other's lives.

When talking of conflicts within and amongst human beings, it is essential to draw back the roots of early childhood where the seeds of personality formation are laid. Whereas, early socialization relies most on parents or guardians, school environments and relationships whether teacher-student, or student-student, prove to be effective strongholds in a child's early life. Furthermore, experiences early on may have significant impacts on the assumptions people make for the decisions in their lives, once they leave school and actively participate in the functioning of society. Children tend to reciprocate and help one another in situations they perceive requiring display and use of empathic skills. Empathy serves as a basis for building a secure and long lasting relationship, therefore it may serve as a core competency and life skill.

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