

Explicitly Teaching Empathy in Social Studies Content to Support a Humanitarian Worldview

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Abstract: Empathy is the ability to view, feel, or understand what another person is or has experienced from their perspective or frame of reference. While this is not a new concept, the impact that teaching empathy, specifically in social studies content, has on a student's worldview may be underestimated. Utilizing empathy-based teaching strategies to learn social studies content can result in a more humanitarian worldview which benefits everyone in society. In a society with such divisive cultural and political issues, mutual understandings are few and far between. If our goal as social studies teachers is for our students to understand how these social issues affect people differently, explicitly teaching them how to use empathy is a critical component.

Introduction

As social studies teachers, we are in a unique position to positively influence our students to have a more humanitarian worldview by utilizing empathy-based teaching strategies. The content that is taught in social studies is currently under great scrutiny by our nation as it faces significant social issues including the Covid-19 pandemic, the War in Ukraine, political divides, systemic racism, debates on Critical Race Theory, mental health issues and the stigmatization of them, and gun violence that is unique to the United States. If we are to prepare students for engagement in a world filled with such highly charged social tensions, we need to utilize an empathy-based pedagogy that results in empathy and advocacy for all human beings. Explicit utilization of empathy while learning social studies content is necessary if we are to positively influence our students to engage in and think critically about these social issues that are likely already affecting them and to support a more humanitarian worldview.

Why Should We Utilize Empathy-Based Teaching Methods?

The utilization of empathy in social studies is not a new concept. In fact, the use of historical empathy to understand figures and events of the past has been well-researched and demonstrates many positive benefits. Endacott and Brooks (2013) suggest that students will benefit from being able to place themselves in the shoes of historical figures and events not just cognitively, but emotionally as well. By utilizing affective connections when considering the results or outcomes that occurred because of these historical figures and their actions, students can develop a better understanding of how and why the events unfolded as they did. The authors also suggest that to effectively utilize historical empathy, we must include historical context, perspective taking, and affective connection (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Additionally, Gehlbach (2004) argues that historical empathy, along with conflict resolution and social studies grades, is one of the three critical components of the

relationship between social perspective taking and student success. Social perspective taking requires the use of empathy as it relates to the inclusion of all people's perspectives. Gehlbach (2004) argues that social perspective-taking facilitates interpersonal interactions more than any other human capacity. Foster (1999) claims that using historical empathy can excite students to learn and increase engagement.

The use of historical empathy appears to be well-researched, however, utilizing empathy in general to learn content, including current events, and the positive social benefits that can be produced is less examined. Utilizing empathy in all social studies content, historical or not, can positively influence a student to cultivate a more humanitarian worldview. It is the connection that the student makes or idea that resonates with them that allows them to tap into their own perspective with which they view the world. To help students both learn the content and make personal connections, the use of empathy should be explicitly taught. According to Bulut and Asan (2019), empathy is a necessary social skill to view and understand the perspective of others. It is also a skill needed to communicate with others in a way that develops mutual understanding.

Whether it is including culturally responsive material, utilizing historical empathy, or using global or humanitarian perspective-taking, empathy-based pedagogy will have a positive impact on students and their ability to problem solve and think critically about society and the issues it faces. These empathy-based methods all require one to place themselves in the shoes of other people to make that human connection. The implementation of empathy-based pedagogy should be considered when developing social studies curriculum, instructional strategies, and classroom discussions.

Models & Methods

Research shows that there are already many instructional models and frameworks that can be used to facilitate empathy-based learning. One example of this is the use of historical empathy. Suggestions for the definition of, instructional models to use, and the benefits of historical empathy are evident (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). These benefits include making better sense of historical situations and decisions or actions by historical figures. The effectiveness of cultivating empathy by modeling the ability to place oneself in another person's shoes is also demonstrated in the use of cultural responsiveness in the classroom (Gay, 2018). The dynamics of teaching culturally responsive social studies content often involves personal stories that allow the learner to make critical human connections to people who share relatable hopes, dreams, struggles, and social issues. Teachers must model the use of empathy if students are to learn how to incorporate it into their thinking. Givens (2021) indicated that empathy isn't really something we are but rather it is something we do or practice.

While completing student teaching amid the social tensions of 2021-2022, I was preparing a lesson to teach my fourth-grade social studies class this year about civic participation in our government unit. Rather than using traditional teaching methods such as guided readings from a textbook, I gave the students a diagnostic assessment asking them if they thought that their voices mattered and if, as elementary school children, they were able to make real changes in the world. Many

students responded that they were just kids and could not have any type of impact because they could not vote, and adults made all the decisions. I showed them a video where they learned about students their age from Oklahoma who in 1958 took a trip to New York and saw an integrated city, returned home to the segregated south, and wondered why they had to live this way. They felt their community was set up wrong. They felt it was unfair that white Americans had more rights than black Americans. The students thought that it was unfair that they could not eat at the same restaurants. So, when they returned home, 7-year-old Ayanna decided to join other students to participate in peaceful sit-ins at locally segregated restaurants to demonstrate that they felt it was unfair to not allow them to eat there simply because of their skin color. We discussed how it must have taken great courage to engage in a sit-in, despite how important it was, knowing that the students would be scared, some people would be angry and disagree, and the students may possibly face physical violence. The students that participated in these sit-ins were met with much resistance but ultimately, they were successful in their efforts. They were eventually served and allowed to eat there and the changes in segregation laws ultimately followed suit. I asked my students after the video if they would have been afraid. What would they have done? I then asked them if there were issues in their communities that they felt were unfair or needed to be changed and what actions they could take to make an impact. Students shared some of the concerns that they felt were unfair such as bullying, dress codes, and freedom of expression for the LGBTQ community, to name a few.

The use of this video and our discussions before and after, is an example of empathy-based learning that will have many positive benefits and provide an empathy-based perspective to learn about civic participation. It allowed the students in my class to put themselves in the shoes of Ayanna and ask themselves how they would feel if they were in that situation. I wanted my students to understand that it was possible to take action and make their voices heard despite being elementary school students. This type of empathy-based teaching is necessary to effectively teach social studies content as well as prepare our students to engage in and cultivate a more empathetic society. Rather than teaching our students to memorize facts and obtain a passing grade, we should be teaching our students how to be more empathetic and view society with a more humanitarian perspective and to do this, empathy-based learning is required. My students learned about civic participation, but this lesson demonstrated how to use empathy to critically think about how things affect all people differently. They were able to use empathy to relate to the struggles of another person and ask themselves what concerns they feel are important to them.

Positive impacts of Utilizing Empathy

There are many indications that support the claim that positive benefits occur as a result of utilizing empathy in education. Increased engagement and participation in learning social studies content has been demonstrated while using historical empathy (Foster, 1999). The students relate on a personal level, so engagement is increased. Utilizing empathy-based teaching methods promotes prosocial behavior and reduces the propensity for school violence. (Kwon, 2013). The use of global perspective-taking is required in higher learning development of preservice teach-

ers. If we are to prepare our students for a more humanitarian worldview, we must prepare their teachers (Rock et al., 2016). Teacher candidates' capacity to develop higher levels of global content into their planning is recommended and plans of action have been researched to assist in this preparation. If the teacher is not prepared to demonstrate these skills, the students cannot reap these positive benefits. In the social studies classroom, each of these empathy-based strategies would positively enhance and support deeper learning of the topics that are covered.

General Empathetic Results

According to Sohrevadi et al. (2015), explicitly teaching empathy using training programs, had a positive effect on promoting prosocial behavior and social competence. Sohrevadi et al., (2015) evaluated the effect of empathy teaching on aggression and compatibility in sixth-grade students. The empathy training in this study included 15 sessions that focused on topics such as cognitive learning of physiological feelings, recognition of self-knowledge, awareness of situations that lead to negative and positive feelings, identifying personal goals, defining empathy, and what skills are required to engage in it. They concluded that using the training programs to develop empathy had a positive effect on the increase in empathy, reduction of aggression, and social adjustment (Sohrevadi et al., 2015). If we want the students in all our content areas to be more empathetic in general and to be socially competent to handle the types of aggression being seen in society today, we need to seriously consider this a priority in our classrooms, particularly social studies classrooms.

Conclusion

The collective outcomes of the evidence demonstrated in this argument imply the benefits to our society would be immense if we include empathy-based pedagogy in our social studies content. The implications are, it could help decrease cultural division, reduce bullying, school violence, and encourage students to understand society from a human, global, and personal perspective (Lee et al., 2018). Engaging in the practice of empathy positively influences the students' view of the world as a whole. Social studies teachers need to be prepared to model this practice for their students. All the methods discussed are important components to include in this instruction. Utilizing empathy in our curriculum, instructional strategies, and discourse is critical for teachers to prepare our students to better understand each other. In the words of Neil deGrasse Tyson, "Part of our formal education should be training in empathy. Imagine how different the world would be if, in fact, it were 'reading, writing, arithmetic, empathy'" (The Chalkboard, n.d. para. 1).

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About the Author

Andrea Rodriguez received her associate degree as an RN from Owens Community College in 1996, and BSN from Spring Arbor University in 2008. Her passion to teach science led her to the University of Toledo and obtained her Master of Education in Middle Grades science and social studies in 2022.