

The importance of teaching and learning empathy skills in the school curriculum

Paul Thompson, Head of Geography | Sevenoaks School

"You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)

Character Education

According to education author Thomas Lickona (2018), the purpose of education is "to help people become smart, and to help them become good." As educators, we spend most of our time making students smarter. We also need to spend time making them better. Educating the character of our students is something that we are doing to a much greater level at Sevenoaks School. As a teacher of Geography we hold some very important topics/issues of our world in our classrooms such as The Climate Crisis, Migration issues and Global Poverty. We realise that we sit on some issues that are really 'more than issues'. This article proceeds from practices that Sevenoaks School Geography department have put in place over the past few years to teach using empathy, perspective and reflection to deepen the understanding of our students and help prepare the future generation to respond to the challenges of our day with not only awareness but also compassion and character.

The importance of Empathy

Empathy is a quality that is integral to most people's lives and yet the modern world makes it easy to lose sight of the feelings of others. Roman Krznaric (2014) has become a leading voice on Empathy. In his book 'Empathy: Why It Matters and How to Get It' (2014) he calls for 'Outrespection' and defines it as "the need to step outside yourself and discover the lives of other people." He argues that the ultimate art form for the age of 'outrespection' is empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings and perspectives of others, and to use that understanding to guide one's actions. It is critical both to individual human development and to our collective ability to solve problems and build a stronger society. Krznaric (2014) argues that empathy "is the most important and vital skill for personal (and professional) development in this ever-changing and increasingly connected world." A good education is about preparing students of all ages for a future that no one can yet predict. As our world becomes more interconnected, navigating it becomes more complex, empathy underpins the other traits and skills we need to develop in order to face society's biggest challenges. There are pressures on teachers and students to achieve grade-focused targets but at Sevenoaks School we are fully aware that there is a greater need to develop students in more ways, and unlock their potential as unique individuals. At Sevenoaks School we want to try to make sure that students leave school as global citizens, equipped with the

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emotional skills to help themselves, and those around them. As Kirwan (2022) puts it "Empathy is a core 21st century skill."

Leading with Empathy: Sevenoaks School Geography Department

For the last few years, Sevenoaks School Geography department has worked with Ben Solanky and Matt Gurney, Co-Founders and Directors of EmpathyAction. Empathy Action is a group of volunteers working together "to inspire and empower people to take part in building a fairer, safer, more equal world." (<https://www.empathyaction.org/>). Their motto is to 'Build empathy and Inspire action: Walk in someone else's shoes and be moved to act for others'. They are specialists in creating immersive empathy workshops on the world's biggest issues – from the refugee crisis to climate change, to global poverty. In 2016 they helped curate a refugee role-play workshop for world leaders at the Davos Summit which created an emotional connection with the refugee crisis "far more lasting than data and rhetoric." (Crossroads Foundation spokesman). Using a combination of theatrical, audio visual and educational techniques these workshops create powerful backdrops for learning for young people and adults alike. Their mission is "to inspire and empower people to live as global neighbours, each doing all we can to help those living on the front line of the refugee crisis, global poverty and the climate emergency". Their vision is to see an end to poverty, brought about by concerted, compassionate community action. Their core values, conviction (head), compassion (heart) and community (hands) run through everything they do. Empathy Action and Sevenoaks School Geography department have annually coordinated three immersive workshops for Sevenoaks School students, local primary school students and members of the local community. Each workshop covers one of the world's biggest issues: Global Poverty, The Refugee Crisis and Climate Justice and is adapted to suit the participants. 'The High Life' which is an interactive film-based climate justice workshop. It tells the story of two countries - Opuland and Ardosland, offering participants the chance to see for themselves how the everyday decisions made in one part of the world have global consequences, both good and bad, for people living on the frontline of the climate emergency; 'Desperate Journeys' is an immersive refugee crisis workshop. It explores the global refugee crisis by tracking the journey of a family forced from their home in a war torn country. It is a challenging piece based firmly on facts, first-hand accounts and case studies to bring home to those taking part in the human stories behind the headlines. The workshop is delivered within a maze-like set and runs for 90 minutes including briefing and a reflective feedback and discussion session; 'The Poverty Trap' is an immersive workshop developed around real lives and testimonies, allowing participants to experience something of what it feels like to live in extreme poverty. It tells the story of a number of families living in a slum in a large city, where living conditions are extremely tough.

"I am going out into the world with new eyes. I'd recommend it to anybody" OS Parent

"An amazing day. Honestly one of the best days of school I've ever experienced" Y10 Sevenoaks Student

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Photos here

Poverty Trap 2019 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sevenoaksschool/albums/72157711069618862>

Desperate Journeys 2019

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/sevenoaksschool/albums/72157709261057112/page2>

<https://www.empathyaction.org/workshops>

Potential future plans and areas of action research

Character Education and developing student empathy is part of a larger Sevenoaks School initiative which is increasingly integrated into the curriculum, for example through the PSHE and tutor group pastoral programme, through the established Year 7 and Year 8 Society and Change course and the Year 9 and Year 10 Core Critical Thinking programme. Developing empathy is part of the key profile aims of the IB to develop inquiring, knowledgeable, thoughtful, principled, open-minded, caring, balanced and reflective learners. Sevenoaks School Geography department will continue to work with EmpathyAction on the importance of calling out the vital importance of empathy but also the *practicing of empathy* in the curriculum and community and look to normalize and curate exercises at a regular frequency to develop the acts of practicing empathy. There is the potential of a whole school approach to empathy development perhaps through an 'Empathy Week', where students could embark on a learning adventure packed with real-life cinematic stories and workshops with empathy at the core. Students could participate in active discussions around social issues and have the chance to take on their own Empathy Action Project. A mantra of "Building the #EmpathyGeneration" (Kirwan 2022): There are many empathy experiments which can be adapted for meaningful action-based research projects. These include:

['The Experiment in Gratitude'](#) which involves asking people who was/is their hero a person of huge influence to them. Then ask them to write a letter expressing that to them. Then asking them to contact that person to read this out (as part of the experiment). Their levels of happiness are measured at the beginning and end.

['The Square'](#) is a social experiment to bring people together. Using a starting point of categorizing you and demonstrating the things that you share with others in different groups. Realizing that the common bond of humanity is something shared.

'Guns with History': An empathy experiment captured on video about Gun Crime. A Gun shop is opened in New York using actual guns that were used in crime. The Shopkeeper is the story teller who tells the back story to each customer when they are looking to buy a gun.

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The tags on the guns have the story. Their experience is captured at the end.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nAfWfF4TjM>

Summary

Ultimately, the place to start creating a more empathic civilisation is in the education system. We need to teach empathy skills to young people so that they develop a deep sense of social and ecological justice that will motivate them to be active citizens. “Empathy, especially its cognitive form, is one of the most powerful ways we have of escaping the boundaries of our egoistic concerns, changing our values, and inspiring social action.” (Krznaric 2014). Empathy will most likely flower on a collective scale if its seeds are planted in our children. To truly change the world, you first have to understand the people in it.

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Roman Krznaric Six habits of highly empathic people (2012)

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_habits_of_highly_empathic_people1

<https://uk-podcasts.co.uk/podcast/the-teachers-podcast/the-importance-of-teaching-empathy-ed-kirwan-creat> (Kirwan 2022)

RSA Animate: The Power of Outrospection, a 10 min animated video with over 750,000 views (see also the original talk on which it is based)

Building the #EmpathyGeneration": <https://www.empathy-week.com/>

Empathy Action <https://www.empathyaction.org/>

World leaders take part in 'refugee role play'.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/davos-delegates-experience-refugee-life-for-75-minutes-a6828886.html> (2016)

Michelle Borba, Ed.D UnSelfie - Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in our All-About-Me-World,

The High Life is produced in partnership with The Pickwell Foundation, Le Cornu Trust, Tearfund, UCL Social Hackathon, The Environmental Funders Network and The Monksgate Fund.

[BBC News Magazine](#): Can You Teach People to Have Empathy?

The Experiment in Gratitude: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHv6vTKD6lg&feature=emb_title

The Square: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc>

The Privilege Experiment <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K5fbQ1-zps> [What Is Privilege?](#) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD5f8GuNuGQ>