

# Empathy as a Classroom Value: A key to social and emotional growth in early Childhood Education

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## **Abstract**

**‘Empathy’**- understanding another's feelings, helps children in deepening relationship with their classmates as well as with people they know outside of their school. It is beneficial to develop a strong sense of empathy in young children as it not only helps in building a sense of security and stronger inter-personal relationship with other children and educators but also encourages tolerance and acceptance of others making them socially and emotionally strong. Empathy is not a choice but a necessity.

In this study I look at Empathy as a key element in fostering social and emotional growth in children and as a strategic response to the growing and competitive world. This is a qualitative research study wherein I have used semi-structured interviews with educators, key educationist, relevant literature review and Denmark education system as a case study.

Throughout my research, I found that success in life depends a lot on one's emotional and social skills, specially empathy. It is the most important component of emotional intelligence, if taught correctly and at right age, it can go a long way in reducing school bullying. Children who are empathetic are not only understanding but tolerant and caring individuals who will be responsible citizens of our interconnected world. Empathy is the most important lesson for our lives and times.

The research study will be significant in terms of putting the importance of the skills (Empathy) to all the thinking educators and all those who believe that an equitable and profound educational experience is founded in the future educational set up of Education 4.0.

**Index Terms:** Empathy, Social Growth, Emotional growth, education, early childhood.

## **1 Introduction**

Empathy – which is not just a feeling but is understanding and to appreciate the perspectives of others which comes from listening and learning. Empathy can play a crucial role in changemaking if harnessed properly. Simple meaning of Empathy is “the ability to understand what others are feeling”, but practicing empathy can enable systematic decision making, ethical action, ability to understand the many sides of today's complex issues and much more.

### **1.1 Background**

Imagine a world where children are reading, writing, arithmetic and Empathy! [10]

How do think society might be affected if empathy was taught in schools?

Imagine a world in which everyone, children & adults, knew how to care about others feel and what they need, want and think.!

In the recent decade the process of globalization has accelerated, so has the diversity of children in a classroom which has made it more necessary than ever to have a positive classroom culture. Empathy which is the human connection can be the heart of any classroom culture helping children build a relationship based on positive trust and faith. It could be the key to encourage prosocial behaviour, limiting aggression, and diminishing social prejudice in our world. [3]

## 1.2 Need for Empathy – A Global Perspective

### 1. Visualizing a bigger picture:

Imagine a world where every child will be the master of the secret power and magic of Being EMPATHETIC.

### 2. Empathy in mainstream learning-A Global Perspective:

- It will not only build a strong sense of security which will result in a strong relationship with other children and educators but also position them well for learning.
- It can help build strong relationship as Empathy makes you connect with others and share enough of yourself adding to happiness to relations which is crucial for mental health.
- Empathy makes you accept others for who they are and having a right to their own thoughts, feelings and opinions.
- It can promote social harmony and can reduce the likelihood of bullying

## 1.3 Purpose and Aim of the Study

- The purpose of this exploratory study was to add to the available body of work regarding how emotional literacy can impact learning process in children and reduce social issues like bullying using Empathy teaching as a tool.
- The result of this exploratory study can provide a new dimension to education sector by putting Empathy in the mainstream learning. This study will also look at ways to view emotional and social literacy, specially focussing on Empathy lessons and its role in building a strong school culture.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

**Proposition 1:** Empathy should be taught to children from a very young age.

Early childhood which is a critical period for the development of emotional understanding and empathy in children due to the continuous advancements in their cognitive skills. Empathy is not a trait or innate but can be cultivated and fostered in young children. Empathy education can benefit the whole school atmosphere.[9] There have been many researches on the topic and the results proves children who are empathetic are happy and kind and it also links to their academic success. The research has also found a strong connection between SEL (Social Emotional Learning) and Empathy. Empathy which is an integral part of SEL. [8] [12]

As a part of school improvement research, Kathleen Cotton in her research 'Developing Empathy in Children and Youth – concluded that implementation of empathy development in school can help to lay the groundwork for the growth of other positive traits including skill in reasoning and communication.[2]

**Proposition 2:** Empathy education as a key for Rerouting Bullying Behavior in Children

Bullying doesn't not happen because the child is mean, but it could be due to deficits of emotional control in them. In short when social and emotional skills in children have gone wrong or it is lacking. Empathy is the cornerstone and central component of emotional intelligence. Early empathy education in children can go a long

way in preventing bullying. When empathy improves in you, you become a good human. It has been scientifically proved that having empathetic skills can prevent bullying amongst peers. Children who are empathetic are less likely to bully others or be bystanders who watch someone else being bullied. [4]

### **Proposition 3: Empathy education as a part of Mainstream Learning – A Global Perspective**

In a book titled 'Unselfie: why Empathetic Kids succeed in Our All-About -Me-World by education expert Dr Michele Borba feels that, "Empathy needs to be woven in curriculum, not tacked on." [1]

Empathy as a mainstream learning will not only benefit classroom and school community but also help students achieve success and happiness in their life ultimately resulting in fostering a better world for them. Danish education system or Klassens Tid of Denmark is the real example of these possibility at a global level. In Denmark 'Klassens Tid' is a compulsory subject a part of their mainstream learning where the children learn to help their classmates and are encouraged to compete only with themselves. [7]

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research questions**

1. To study and compare the relationship between empathy and social emotional growth in children.
2. To study and introspect whether empathy can be part of mainstream learning in early school education.

### **3.2 Sample**

1. The sample design was based on non- probability purposive sampling strategy.
2. The samples were as follows:

#### **a. Focus Group**

- 5 focus group
- 6 participants each
- Moderator (Me)

#### **b. Pre-structured Questionnaire**

- 120 participants
- Even number of Male and Female Participants
- Google Form (online) was used

#### **Sample Selection Criteria:**

1. Respondents were retired/working school educators, school administrators and others (counsellor/Therapist/Psychologist).

2. Respondents were from different board of schools.

### 3.3 Data Collection Tools:

Multi-Method approach For Data Collection:

- Focus Group
- Pre-structured Questionnaire

### 3.4 Data Analysis

- Data gained from focus group and questionnaire will be analyzed to explore research questions
- Analysis of data to assess whether the propositions outlined in theoretical framework can be supported

## 4 Results and Findings

### 4.1 Propositions from Theoretical Framework

#### **Proposition 1:** Empathy should be taught to children from a very young age

It has been researched and proved that affective empathy or emotional contagion is evident in babies within the first few days of their birth. Fostering and cultivating Empathy is vital and necessary in a child's life for building the ability to regulate their emotions and to succeed in an ever-changing world. Empathy learning could build a sense of security and having a strong relationship with other children and educators which could position them well for learning.

These findings suggest that the study supports Proposition 1. as children are born with the capacity for empathy, understanding and love.

#### **Proposition 2:** Empathy education as a key for Rerouting Bullying Behavior in Children

In a Time's magazine article on bullying called "How Not to Raise a Bully", [10] it stated, "Increasingly, neuroscientists, psychologists, and educators believe that bullying can be reduced by cultivating empathy in children from an early age." Cultivating Empathy from a young age can enable a child to look at a situation from another's perspective and understanding the importance of caring about others and how others will feel in an adverse situation.

These findings suggest the study supports Proposition 2 as it is proved empathy is the central component of emotional intelligence. And if cultivated and fostered at a

right age, it can go a long way in preventing bullying.

#### **Proposition 3:** Empathy education as a part of Mainstream Learning – A Global Perspective

According to the UN's World Happiness Report, an important survey (since 2012) [5] which classifies the happiness of around 155 countries of the world, as per these report Denmark is in the top three happiest countries at a global level for the last seven years. Danish education where Empathy learning is a mandatory subject since

1993 in schools which they contribute to the happiness of their country. [5]

These suggest that the study supports Propositions 3 As Denmark has made Empathy a compulsory subject with a belief that those who can empathise would be less likely to bully others or base their own successes on the failures of others.

#### **4.2 Summary of Questionnaire**

1. Strongly Agree % (Total Participants: 120)
2. I believe students need to have a strong Self Identity to achieve in school and in the classroom (62%)
3. Empathy encourages tolerance and acceptance of others. (69%)
4. Empathy helps in Emotional & Social growth in children (77%)
5. I believe Empathy teaching can have a positive effect on bullying in school (80%)
6. Empathy helps in building a strong emotional relationship with other children. (68%)
7. I believe Empathy learning is as important as any other subject (95%)
9. Empathy as a Classroom Value: A key to social and emotional growth in early Childhood Education. Do you agree with it? (97%)

### **5 Conclusions**

Changing the Course....

Let's create a world, a society in which everyone can drive change. A world in which every child is a master of Empathy as they are of maths or language. Teaching Empathy is of global importance as it not only enhances lives of individual students but the society in the whole.

Empathy will have a crucial and important role in this new world. Developing and creating this new world is not possible without the help of educators, parents and a 360-degree shift in the mindset across the society.

**Let the Empathy Revolution begin...**

Let these words get saved in the dictionary:

Empathy Lab

Empathy Library

Empathy Gym....

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