

Letter to Dr. Lamia:

Our local K-8 school district (WPS D39, 3500 children) has begun an initiative of creating a culture of empathy within our schools. We are a predominately white population (approximately 85%), and understandably, learning to understand those of differing backgrounds and cultures is beneficial for everyone both in and out of community.

In support of this initiative, our teacher training and parent education/seminar night have been lead by those are apart of the National SEED Project. (I assume that this will also be apart of the empathy curriculum taught to children.) This group is supportive of creating conversations of understanding by "acknowledging systems of power, oppression and privilege." (<https://nationalseedproject.org/about-us/about-seed>)

The founder, Peggy McIntosh, wrote a couple of articles on white privilege. You may be familiar with her writings. (<https://nationalseedproject.org/about-us/whiteprivilege>)

My concern is that teaching children empathy in the context of power and oppression may have detrimental effects, either in the near or long terms. Telling a child that they are inherently oppressive because of the color of their skin, their gender or their sexual orientation seems like a circuitous and confusing route toward empathy. While I can see how this would be beneficial for adults and mature adolescents, for children this seems like it could produce harmful side effects of shame and resentment.

So, is it possible that teaching children empathy in this context could lead to greater social divisiveness as it may create strong emotions of shame and resentment?

Additionally, I think there may be more straight forward ways and curricula to teach empathy. Do you know of any?

I know you are an expert in this area, and any suggestions, thoughts or guidance you can provide would be much appreciated.

In my opinion you are absolutely correct that "teaching children empathy in the context of power and oppression may have detrimental effects, either in the near or long terms." I have seen the same detrimental effects in using this approach with adolescents, young adults, and even with psychology graduate students. While the goal of the approach is to teach empathy, the empathy of those who are "on the upside of power and privilege" leads them to take on the shame of those in the target group. Ultimately, the recipients respond defensively to this shame or with coping responses (much like the target group has done in the first place) that involve: 1) attacking themselves; 2) attacking others; 3) withdrawal; or 4) avoidance.

The adaptive response to internalized shame, both for the target group and those on the upside, must involve learning with interest; to be curious about, and interested in, the experience of the other while owning what one feels. Nobody makes another person feel a certain way. But it is important to understand that another person's behavior, demeanor, etc. can be a stimulus that triggers emotional memories and a particular emotional response in us. In addition, our beliefs are a composite of our emotional memories that have been linked by our cognitions to an ideology. Thus, people have varying beliefs about many things, and learning about them without judgement is important.

I hope this helps to guide your teaching and parent education. I wish I could offer resources, however the programs you mention have been the mode, regardless of their negative impact.

All best to you,
Mary Lamia

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