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Teaching Empathy: A Precursor to Accepting Diversity

By

Karen L. Viers

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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University Honors Scholars Program
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of
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Abstract

Robert Kennedy once said, “The purpose of life is to contribute in some way to making things better.” This statement inspired the author to question how prosocial behavior and the acceptance of diversity can be encouraged and is the driving force behind the following undergraduate thesis. Research tells us that Theory of Mind (ToM) and Affective Perspective Taking (APT) are essential components in a stepwise progression to learning empathy and can be taught to children ages five to seven (Bensalah et al., 2019; Decety & Cowell, 2014; Wee et al., 2021). These elements are essential to developing an empathetic foundation that leads to healthier relationships, reduces bullying, and encourages the acceptance of diversity (Brown et al., 2019). As empathy begins to develop, children become aware of their own feelings and can then learn to recognize them in others. Teaching children about emotions helps expand their vocabulary and put a name on what they or someone else is feeling. This facilitation of language and literacy is another building block in the development of compassionate understanding and empathy (Bensalah et al., 2019; Decety & Cowell, 2014; Wee et al., 2021). Research shows that children benefit from being read to at an early age. Additionally, works of fiction can help children increase their ability to recognize emotions and encourages empathetic development through examination of a story character’s feelings (Baym, 1998).

The culmination of this undergraduate thesis project is a children’s book called *The Day Dot Ran Away*. The research-informed book is designed to teach perspective taking by encouraging the reader to pay special attention to the emotions on the faces of the characters. The author’s hope is that this book will sow the seeds of empathy in all who read it, and as a result, they will become empathetic adults who are more accepting of diversity.

Teaching Empathy: A Precursor to Accepting Diversity

The ability to understand and share the feelings of others is a quality that is found in people who have empathy. However, this key component in the development of prosocial behavior and a facilitator of positive social relations is a skill that is lacking in many people. The intent of my thesis project is to find a way to encourage the acceptance of difference in society. This task may seem too broad to address, however, creating the ability to accept these concepts in children as they mature would allow for an extensive social impact that could be applied in many different settings. To set the stage for the acceptance of these concepts, I propose to teach empathy through literature by developing a foundation in the reader which promotes healthier relationships, reduces bullying, and encourages acceptance of cultural diversity.

According to Jean Piaget's (2019) theory of cognitive development, the mental development of perspective taking begins to take shape in children ages five to seven. Studies of the preschool-to-school period have reported an increase in the ability for affective empathy which indicates this age group is primed for the development of emotional awareness in others (Bensalah et al., 2016). The choice of the five to seven-year-old age group allows exposure to subject matter involving the emotions of others at a time when their cognitive skills promote acceptance of these values. Reading allows young children to share the emotion of characters in an emotional scenario. This increases their empathic behavior repertoire and helps them engage in self-focused attribution (Bensalah et al., 2016).

My undergraduate research project is a children's book which is designed to engage the reader, stimulate emotional awareness, and teach children ages five to seven empathetic skills that promote acceptance. All components of the book will be research informed so that every

aspect will contribute to effectively developing emotional recognition and encouraging prosocial behavior in the reader. I want to be able to touch the lives of children on a larger scale in such a way that it also has a positive impact on society. With this thought in mind, I will create a work of literature that teaches empathy in children during their formative years so that as they develop into adults, their minds are primed towards acceptance of cultural diversity, anti-racism, and inclusion.

Social Problem

Acceptance of diversity, treating people equitably regardless of their race, and embracing an atmosphere of inclusion are all components of cultural competence and evidence of prosocial behavior. However, for many marginalized groups, the experience of discrimination and prejudice are a daily reality, and historically they have had to contend with oppression and institutional racism their entire lives (Sue et al., 2016). The pervasiveness of stereotyping, discrimination, and racial prejudice in our society affects how we relate to others and are “not only manifested through individual acts of overt racism against people of color, but also can be reflected in our governmental leadership, educational systems, places of employment, and the media” (Sue et al., 2016). Likewise, members of the LGBTQ+ community are subjected to negativity and bullying and consistently experience violence and verbal harassment in the school environment (Sue et al., 2016).

Chao et al. (2014) tells us that mounting evidence documents continued acts of racism and microaggression against people of color. As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, it is crucial that we promote social justice and seek out ways to promote equity and interdependence. Cultivating empathy can reduce prejudice and racism and increase the capacity

to understand the suffering of others (Gair, 2016). Studies show that there is an empathy deficit in high school and college students, and they consistently score lower than previous generations (Twenge, 2012). Empathy is crucial for the development of a compassionate response, expressions of concern, and prosocial behavior in the individual towards not only people, but also the world around them (Brown et al., 2019).

According to Thye and Lawler (2017), role-taking, perspective taking, and empathy results in prosocial effects. Their research suggests that these components can be cultivated and improved through intervention. Perspective taking has been shown to reduce stereotyping of the elderly, disabled, and those that speak a second language. Additionally, perspective taking as a stereotype reducing technique improved the explicit evaluations of racial and ethnic minorities by Whites (Thye & Lawler, 2017). Research findings indicate that individuals who operate with higher levels of perspective taking and empathy show strength in social cohesion and reduction in interpersonal conflict (Thye & Lawler, 2017; Wee et al., 2021).

Learning Empathy

Empathy is thought to be a catalyst for several prosocial behaviors essential for successful relationships, such as helping one another, sharing, and providing comfort to someone in need. Studies show that Theory of Mind (ToM) and Affective Perspective Taking (APT) are linked with learning empathy in children ages five to seven (Bensalah et al., 2016). The ability to determine the mental state of others such as intent, belief, or goals is a developmental aspect of ToM and a key component of empathy. Likewise, APT is an essential component in the development of empathy and is defined as the ability to imagine how someone else may feel and what their point of view is for a given situation (Bensalah et al., 2016; Wee et al., 2021).

Empathy can be divided into three categories. The first part involves experience sharing- being able to imagine the internal state and emotions of others (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). The second is mentalizing- explicitly considering and understanding why they are feeling that way, and what is the cause. The third aspect is the prosocial intent by the observer who shows concern and wants to alleviate any suffering. Studies have shown that empathy can be developed and taught to children during the formative stages of ToM and APT, this type of learning constitutes the critical indicator of a child's empathic process (Bensalah et al., 2016; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Wee et al., 2021).

These cognitive components of empathy begin to grow during ages five to seven when children become more capable of taking another person's perspective. They begin to take initiative by offering solutions when someone has a problem or helping out when someone is in distress. These are the formative years where their foundation for working through complex moral and ethical issues like bullying, inequality, and racism starts to form (Brown et al., 2019). The ability to understand the perspective of another is a critical ingredient in proper social functioning. The capacity to shift perspectives is a major developmental breakthrough in cognitive functioning and moral reasoning (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Empathy begins to develop when children become aware of their own feelings. Once they become aware of their own emotions, they can then recognize them in others. Teaching children about emotions helps expand their vocabulary and put a name on what they or someone else is feeling. This facilitation of language and literacy is another building block in the development of compassionate understanding and empathy (Bensalah et al., 2019; Decety & Cowell, 2014; Wee

et al., 2021). Decety and Cowell (2014) suggests that APT is gained through reading fiction as the reader is exposed to the thoughts and feelings of the characters in real time.

Impact of Reading on Child Development

Research shows that reading fiction increases the ability to identify and understand emotions and nourishes empathetic concern (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Wee et al., 2021). Children benefit from being read to at an early age, and this informal educational experience has important implications for early childhood development. Reading to young children promotes communication skills, reading skills, and social skills (Ostrosky et al., 2013). According to Browne (1996), key benefits associated with reading to young children are personal development through the consideration of the perspective of others, social development by exploring human relationships and cultural differences, and intellectual development through the exposure of new ideas. Literature has the capacity to change culture and expand empathy to humanity by encouraging readers to think about their society through the lens of the characters in the story (Baym, 1998). Through children's literature, young readers will empathize with the feelings of the story characters enabling the development of empathy and perspective taking abilities (Wee et al., 2021).

Themes

Stories that have characters who overcome the challenges that they face in life allow the reader the opportunity to relate to their situation and identify with their emotions (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2018). Encouraging empathy and emotional ties to the characters in a book can enhance awareness of inequities and enhance prosocial behavior in the reader.

According to Weisberg et al. (2015), literature with a realistic theme can potentially teach better because new words are situated in a familiar context. However, fantastical elements such as entities or events that do not occur in reality have the capacity to impact thinking abilities. Imaginative works of literature boost the capacity for reasoning, understanding of improbable events, and conceptualizing pretend actions (Weisberg et al., 2015). Previous studies have shown that imagination-based thinking has the ability to enhance reasoning, which Weisberg et al. (2015) tells us is due to a greater cognitive process required to assimilate fantastical elements. Research by Weisberg et al. (2015) informs us that while there is no observable difference in comprehension, fantastically themed books have the potential to boost learning over realistic themes. The reason behind this boost is that reading books with imaginative elements encourages the reader to engage more deeply, and as a result, they are more vested in the attempt to process the new words and understand their meaning (Weisberg et al., 2015).

Writing Styles

According to research by Ozsezer & Canbazoglu (2018), the layout in children's books is important, and it should contain 14-point font or larger with wide margins. Illustrations should be both familiar and challenge the child's imagination. There should be a connection between the illustrations and text, such that the illustrations shed light on the written script (Ozsezer & Canbazoglu, 2018). Print features should be considered as an aid to promote literacy in the reader. Books should exhibit clear language, upper- and lower-case alphabet usage for letter knowledge, and bold, unique font changes as a means to developing print awareness in children (Cetin & Bay, 2015).

Breen (2018) tells us that exposure to rhythmic, rhyming books provides cognitive benefits to young children and promotes literacy development. Simplicity of syllabic syntactic structure when combined with a rhythmic structure creates literature that is more salient to the reader. Breen (2018) posits that a regular metric structure enhances speech segmentation and word learning through acoustic envelope patterns. Additionally, metrically regular rhyming texts phonologically directs a listener's temporal attention towards important sentence material increasing the facilitation of comprehension (Breen, 2018) (Fitzroy & Breen, 2020). According to Read et al. (2014), experiments which compared rhymed and non-rhymed versions of the same story showed that children consistently preferred the rhyming versions of the story. The song-like quality that comes from rhyme, rhythm, and repetition fosters language development by making the words more memorable. Additionally, this same quality helped children remember the details of the story and sequence of events.

Visual

The illustrations in a book provide meaningful visual information to children, and when their attention was drawn to the named illustrations, there was a significant relation to the children's learning from the book (Kaefer, 2018). These studies indicate that there is a correlation between the text of a book which draws the attention of the reader to specific sections of the illustration and what is being learned. Additionally, studies have shown that illustrated books promote parental talk with their children, and parents commented twice as much on highly illustrated books over those with minimal illustrations (Penfold & Bacharach, 1988). An important aspect surrounding the components of text and illustrations is that when text is manipulated to

emphasize specific elements of the illustrations, children pay more attention to the highlighted sections (Kaefer, 2018).

Young children gravitate towards books with bright colors and subject matter that includes animals and children (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky 2011). Likewise, children will pick up a book with a cover that depicts images that the children find interesting. Pictures should exhibit familiar experiences so that children are more likely to identify with the images (Brookshire et al., 2002). Most importantly, the use of illustrations in books can provide mental images that are conducive to understanding the text and help the reader remember it. Children prefer colored, realistic book illustrations significantly more than any other book illustration style (Ozsezer & Canbazoglu, 2018). However, as evidence in the study by Weisberg et al. (2015) suggests, the injection of fantastical elements has the capacity to engage the reader more deeply.

According to Yu (2012), children who are developing language and concepts require the use of real objects to assist them in identifying and classifying information. The illustrations become part of the child's visual perception which integrates into their construct and view of the world. This mental mode helps guide the individual's actions and provides a mental map of connectedness to the associations made through the realness of the depicted objects. Picture books are useful in providing competency in the processing, organizing, and interpreting of visual information. Illustrations which show realism help children learn how to categorize and attach meaning to the characters in the story (Yu, 2012),

Faces, Characters

Facial emotional expression is a distinctive quality during social interaction and communication in humans. According to Williams et al. (2013), imitation plays an important role

in the development of facial actions across cultures. The ability to imitate is “characterized by the capacity to enact an action from seeing someone else do it, requiring a cognitive representation of how an action is performed” (Williams et al., 2013). In this respect, imitation is akin to learning empathy, where the communication of emotion and understanding of that emotion facilitates the capacity to imagine the perspective of someone else (Williams et al., 2013).

According to Garrett (2008), researcher Masaki Yuki suggests that cultures differ when looking for emotion on the faces of others and has “sought to show that in Japan, people tend to look to the eyes for emotional cue, whereas Americans tend to look to the mouth.” There are universal expressions throughout cultures that allow children’s books to be easily understood, but it is important to consider the nuances of each and how those affect understanding.

Illustrations that depict characters who belong to different races, ethnicities, and abilities in picture books for children are psychologically linked to the acquisition of values based on moral commitment to others and human rights (Tomé-Fernández et al., 2019). Books that promote difference, cohesion, and equality encourage the reader to examine the characters point of view in the story, which facilitates perspective taking.

A central component and the fundamental basis for empathy is the recognition of emotion in others. The ability to interpret face-to-face reactions is of utmost importance for social interaction and relationships (Banziger et al., 2009). Prototypical sets of expressive configurations are displayed by individuals having an emotional response. These expressions are widely shared on a cultural level, and it is necessary to competently interpret these emotions for optimal function in society (Banziger et al., 2009).

Research on Children’s Books that Promote Cultural Diversity, Anti-racism, and Inclusion

To answer the question of what kind of books are out there, I have included a brief summary of some children's books that contain subject matter about diversity and inclusion. As I was reading these books, I found that while many of them talk about the importance of accepting difference, none of them attempted to teach the reader how to be cognizant of the emotions in the characters themselves. This key element in the facilitation of empathy towards others was not found in any of the books that I reviewed.

We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls Around the World is a book written by a Malala Yousafzai. In 2008, as a young girl she began writing a blog for BBC Urdu about Taliban activity in her home in Swat Valley. Her attempt to bring awareness to the attack on girl's education in Pakistan and speaking up in support of the rights of women to an education made her a target of the Taliban. She was shot in the head as she was riding the school bus on October 9, 2012. Her book gives us not only her story but also those of other young people who are forced to leave their homes. They must endure many hardships in their search for a refuge from the horrors and violence brought about by war. This book gives us a glimpse into their lives as they share their stories about this difficult time.

We Are Here to Stay: Voices of Undocumented Young Adults by Susan Kuklin tells the stories of young people who come to America for a better life. They live in fear of being arrested and deported. Despite coming to a land where all men are created equal, they are faced with discrimination every day of their lives simply because they aren't U.S. citizens. Kuklin (2019) tells us about one person's memory of reading a book that changed their life.

"One time I went to the library and asked the librarian to recommend a book. She gave me *The Kite Runner*. I loved it. That book changed everything for me. Suddenly the

world was bigger than my family and me; it was bigger than Queens and Colombia. I connected to people on the other side of the world in our common vulnerability to suffering. It opened up historical, geographical, and political perspectives and sparked my social consciousness in a deep way.”

The Skin You Live In is written for children ages 4-8. The story starts by telling the reader to look at their skin and to think about all the wonderful things that we can do in life. This transitions into the author pointing out the many color variations of skin describing them in playful ways such as, “chocolate chip, double dip sundae supreme skin” (Tyler, 2005). The book ends noting that even though we are all different in appearance, we are all the same too.

Whoever You Are is a beautifully illustrated children’s book which depicts a myriad of ethnicities from around the world. The author points out that we all have differences, from our skin color to the words that we speak, but more importantly, we all love, laugh, and cry. Our “joys are the same, and love is the same. Pain is the same and blood is the same. Smiles are the same, and hearts are just the same-wherever they are, wherever you are, wherever we are, all over the world (Fox, 1997).

We All Look Different is one of a series of books which celebrates all things that make us special. The author used photographs of smiling children having fun in day-to-day activities. One thing that made this book unique from the others is that it depicted a child in leg braces playing soccer. While I am sure there are more inclusive books on the market, there was only one other book that had images of children with disabilities in the samples of books that I read.

The Colors of the Rainbow by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos does a good job telling the reader about how we are different physically from our hair to our skin. It also points out that we have

many commonalities that are not only similar, but unique to our culture as well. The book encourages accepting people for who they are while at the same time appreciating our differences. The author hopes that when parents read this book to their children that it will encourage cultural diversity. Each page contains about a paragraph of non-rhyming sentences and is brightly illustrated. Children of all skin hues are depicted doing various activities that pertain to what the words on that page are about.

Let's Talk About Race by Julius Lester points out to the reader that we all have our own special story about where we are from, what we like to do, and who we are. This story includes a story about race- white, black, Asian, and Hispanic. The author points out that many times we think we are better than others due to race or economic status. The main them of the book is to let the reader know that if you look at what is under our skin you will find our bones, and these bones all look the same. The book is brightly illustrated with odd-looking people who are oriented on the page with a side view and one eye. The word content doesn't rhyme and varies from paragraphs to words and phrases interspersed on the pages. The font size is varied.

The Skin I'm In describes what it means to be a racist. It details different kinds of racist behavior and why someone might be a racist and engage in negative acts against other races. It also explores what it may feel like to be on the receiving end of racism. The book encourages the reader to be sure and let an adult know if it happens to them. There are colorful illustrations that coordinate with the message of each page. Text is approximately one paragraph with no rhyming.

It is OK to be Me is a story about a boy named Adrian who is in a wheelchair. The story is told from Adrian's point of view. He talks about how he depends on the wheelchair for

mobility and how other children sometimes avoid him because of his chair. He tells the reader he just wants to be like everyone else and participate in activities. One day he sees some other kids playing basketball and decides he wants to become really good at moving around in his wheelchair so that he can play too. The book does a good job of describing Adrian's feelings and encourages the reader to work hard to overcome any obstacle in their life. The book contains 30 pages with one non-rhyming paragraph every other page, opposite a colorful depiction of Adrian participating in a related activity.

Same, Same but Different is a story about the correspondence between two boys who live in different parts of the world. The boys write to one another about things they like to do, their families, where they live, and various aspects of their lives. During their discourse, they realize that while they have many similarities, there are also some differences between them. In the end of the story, they realize that despite these differences, they are just the same.

Antiracist Baby is a book that details steps that each child can take so that they can be antiracist. The author outlines the nine ways in which someone can make equity a reality. The beginning of the book emphasizes that racism is something that we are taught and not born with. What we learn by the end of the book is that by being antiracist, we have the power to overcome racism. While this book has a wonderful message and makes an attempt to rhyme words, the text on each page is minimal and there is no rhythm or flow in the story line.

I am Human: A Book of Empathy touches on feelings and ways to express or suppress those feelings depending on what it may be. It lets the reader know it is okay to have emotions. The minimal amount of text does not rhyme, and as with *Antiracist Baby*, the narration does not flow.

Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Pena is a story about a boy and his Nana going to church and then to a soup kitchen. Along the way, there are many observations made by the boy about the inequalities that he sees. Often, he feels sorry for himself and wonders why he doesn't have something. His Nana points out the positives of what he does have. This is a good read but does not point out how the other characters may feel.

Elements of the Book

The book that I intend to write will have characters who overcome the challenges that they face in life; this will allow the reader the opportunity to relate to their situation and identify with their emotions (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2018). The overall theme will be realistic in nature with elements of fantasy interspersed to engage the reader (Weisberg et al., 2015). The text will be 14-point font or larger, use upper- and lower-case letters, and utilize font changes to emphasize key words (Ozsezer & Canbazoglu, 2018). Text will rhyme, have a rhythmic nature, and a regular metric structure that enhances speech segmentation (Breen, 2018). Word learning and memory will be enhanced through acoustic envelope patterns (Breen (2018). There will be a connection between the written script and the illustration, such that reading the text inspires the reader to examine the illustrations more closely (Kaefer, 2018). Text will be used to emphasize specific aspects of the illustrations. Illustrations will be brightly colored and display subject matter that young readers tend to gravitate towards such as animals and children (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky2011). Specific attention will be given to the faces of the characters so that their emotions are clearly illustrated (Williams et al., 2013). Text will be used to draw attention to the emotions depicted on the faces of the characters. To ensure universality both the eyes and mouth of the characters will be used to exhibit their inner emotion (Garrett, 2008). Illustrations will depict characters that belong to different races, ethnicities, and abilities to facilitate

perspective taking and promote difference and equality (Tomé-Fernández et al., 2019). The book will ask questions of the reader and encourage them to examine the characters in the illustrations so that they may ascertain what they feel and why they may feel that way (Banziger et al., 2009). Elements of the text will encourage the reader to engage in perspective taking throughout the book to facilitate empathy and prosocial behavior (Thye & Lawler, 2017).

This book is intended as a read aloud book, and it will contain a letter to the reader that encourages dialogue between the reader and listener. Research tells us that this read aloud practice on student learning demonstrates positive effects on early childhood development (Baker et al., 2020). An important component of a read aloud strategy is the dialogic interaction between the child and the reader. During dialogue between the reader and the child, discourse should focus on encouraging the child to note the face of the characters with the intent to decipher emotion and mood. This method of teaching children how to recognize the emotions of others will develop the child's perspective taking ability, which is the first step towards creating a foundation for empathy, a key component in healthy relationships and acceptance of diversity.

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The Day Dot Ran Away

Written and Illustrated by Karen Viers



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