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“Wonder” through the Eyes of Empathy: A Middle Grades Teacher’s Guide

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Abstract

This article provides brief definitions to the three main components of empathy (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) and outline the importance of incorporating empathy education into the classroom, specifically looking at the areas of diversity, social skills, and moral development. In addition, it provides teachers with discussion questions, prompts, and a “how to” guide to assist students in exploring each character through the eyes of that individual, while also helping to build empathy as they read and discuss *Wonder*. The objective of this article is to help teachers think more deeply about how to use literature to encourage empathy in their own classrooms. By connecting diversity, social skills, and moral development to empathy, middle grades teachers are not just teaching empathy but are also enhancing important life skills for their students and thereby helping to promote productive citizenship for the future.

Introduction

The book *Wonder*, written by R.J. Palacio, tells the story of a young adolescent boy, August Pullman, with a rare facial deformity. In this fictional story, August is enrolled in a middle school after years of having only been home-schooled by his mother. The novel describes the prejudice and bullying he encounters during this transitional time in his life. In addition to following August, the author tells many parts of the story from the perspective of other characters involved in August’s life and how this transition also impacts his mother, father, older sister, and new friends at school.

Since the book’s popularity, many teachers have gravitated toward the novel and are currently teaching it in their classrooms. And although it has many wonderful life lessons, the book has even more to offer through the lens of empathy and teaching empathy in our classrooms. This paper provides brief definitions to the three main components of empathy (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) and outline the importance of incorporating empathy education into the classroom, specifically looking at the areas of diversity, social skills, and moral development. In addition, the paper provides teachers with discussion questions, prompts, and a “how to” guide to assist students in exploring each character through the eyes of that individual, while also helping to build empathy as they read and discuss the book. The objective of this paper is to help teachers think more deeply about how to use literature to encourage empathy in their own classrooms. By connecting

diversity, social skills, and moral development to empathy, middle grades teachers are not just teaching empathy but are also enhancing important life skills for their students and thereby helping to promote productive citizenship for the future.

Importance of Empathy in the Classroom

After 10 years of research and observation, Borba (2018) defines nine competencies for teaching empathy. She describes *emotional literacy, moral identity, perspective taking, moral imagination, self-regulation, practicing kindness, collaboration, moral courage, and growing changemakers* as the nine competences that need to be present in classrooms in order for empathy levels to grow within children (Borba, 2018). In addition, to Borba’s (2018) nine competencies, there are three primary components of empathy: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. *Cognitive empathy* “refers to one’s ability to take the perspective of others, and see the world through his or her perspective”; *affective empathy* “involves experiencing the feelings of another person”; and *behavioral empathy* “involves verbal and non-verbal communication to indicate an understanding of an emotional resonance with the other person” (Lam, Kolomitro, & Alamparambil, 2011, p. 163). These three components are all vital to defining and understanding empathy. In connection to the nine competencies and the three components, empathy can also be directly related to the areas of diversity, social skills, and moral development. Each of these areas help define the

relevance to why empathy education is needed in our classrooms.

“Empathy – or the ability to understand others’ feelings and needs – is also the foundation of a safe, caring, and inclusive learning environment” (Borba, 2018, p. 23). Adolescents who possess more empathic tendencies exhibit more classroom engagement, higher academic achievement, and better communication skills (Jones, Weissbourd, Bouffard, Kahn, & Ross, 2014). Empathy has also been shown to lessen aggression (Batanova & Loukas, 2016; Eisenberg, Eggum, & DiGiunta, 2010). These rationales are what support the inclusion of empathy education in the classroom in our new electronic world where adolescents are up to 40% less empathic than they were 30 years ago (Konrath, 2010).

Empathy Competencies

According to Borba (2018), “before students can empathize they must be able to read emotions” (p. 24). This idea of *emotional literacy* then carries into *moral identity* by understanding that students need to see themselves as people who value others. Borba (2018) discusses *perspective taking*, a critical aspect of cognitive empathy, as a needed characteristic that teachers can incorporate in the classroom through different activities. Using *moral imagination*, “books can also help kids explore lives and beliefs different from their own” (Borba, 2018, p. 26). This idea is at the heart of this article in using literature to enhance empathy in students. *Self-regulation* and *practicing kindness* can be used to help students both remain calm in stressful/aggressive situations and be able to experience the importance of being kind to each other (Borba, 2018). *Collaboration* allows students to use teamwork to better experience empathy, and *moral courage* helps students understand the importance of standing up for others in times of injustice, which leads to *growing changemakers* by helping students learn the importance of taking action (Borba, 2018). Each of these nine competencies contribute to growing empathy in a current world where face-to-face interaction is decreasing as technology increases.

Empathy in Relation to Diversity

The importance of empathy in relation to cultural sensitivity and diversity issues in the school system is highlighted in an experiential

model in a school study conducted by Lu, Dane, and Gellman (2005). In this study, it is noted how important it is for teachers to put themselves “in the shoes” of their students in order to better understand each individual child and meet their educational needs. Teachers have the unique opportunity to be in a classroom where great diversity exists between race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, gender, and sexual orientation. By modeling empathy with their own students in the classroom, teachers are able to communicate its importance to their students. Diversity can also be explored through the lens of empathy from the student perspective by asking them, through literature or other curricula, to put themselves in the places of others that may look, act, or live differently than they do.

Empathy in Relation to Social Skills

Social skills is another area of connection to empathy for the classroom. In order for individuals to “navigate successfully through their world, they must know what is socially acceptable concerning behavioral responses” (Bouton, 2016, p. 20). According to Piaget (1950), “The ability to empathize increases with the cognitive development of the child and with increased social interaction”...which results “in reduced egocentrism and heightened social sensitivity” (p. 113). The development of social skills has a direct correlation back to the importance of the development of empathy as well. As adolescents’ cognitive development increases, their ability to take other’s perspectives also increases. What Piaget (1950) was referring to as “social sensitivity” can be described today as social skills. The middle grades classroom is a prime entry point to begin to teach social skills and how they connect to empathy.

Empathy in Relation to Moral Development

And finally, moral development is also an area linked to empathy that teachers can utilize in the classroom. “Kohlberg (1969) saw empathy and moral development as relational, and some studies have used the two ideas to support one another in claims of importance (Carlozzi, Gaa, & Liberman, 1983; Sezen-Balcikanli, 2009)” (Bouton, 2016, p. 20). Moral development as defined by Kohlberg (1969) in Stage 2 looks at the needs of others, and in Stage 3 “good behavior means having good motives and

interpersonal feelings such as love, empathy, trust, and concern for others" (Crain, 1985, p. 121). Often when we teach empathy, or any of the socio-behavioral components that surround empathy, we primarily look at the character(s) in a story or novel that is the one being bullied or who is deemed to be the one in need of something (i.e., support, encouragement, and/or friends). However, in order to fully comprehend empathy, we must also look through the eyes of the characters who are the bullies or who make poor decisions. This enables a more in-depth and comprehensive view of all characters and thus considers all aspects of moral development.

Empathy Connected Classroom Guide

Empathy Component Related Questions

Using the three primary components of empathy (cognitive, affective, and behavioral), questions have been created to assist students to deepen their understanding of the characters in the novel *Wonder*. Cognitive Empathy or "one's ability to take the perspective of others, and see the world through his or her perspective" asks students to think like different characters from the book (Lam et al., 2011, p. 163). The questions below allow students to explore the thinking of the different characters from an outsider's viewpoint.

How do you believe _____ thinks about this situation?

How do you think about or see this situation? Why?

Again, it is important to note that all characters should be analyzed using these questions and not the ones who students either sympathize with, but also the ones that they detest the most. Instead, it is important for the classroom teacher to take the stance as a neutral party and help students more fully explore each character's thinking and why that character might be thinking this way.

Affective Empathy or "experiencing the feelings of another person," helps to guide students into the feelings of the characters (Lam et al., 2011, p. 163). Questions like the following help students consider other's feelings and even more importantly why they might be feeling that way.

How do you think _____ feels right now?

How does this situation make you feel? Why?

By making connections from thinking (cognitive empathy) to feeling (affective empathy), students are able to separate out the two ideas and dive more deeply into trying to understand the characters from different perspectives.

Behavioral Empathy "involves verbal and non-verbal communication to indicate an understanding of an emotional resonance with the other person" (Lam et al., 2011, p. 163). Using the third component of empathy, teachers can use cognitive and affective empathy to help students better understand how to behave and act in situations where others are involved. Guiding questions for teachers surrounding behavioral empathy can include:

Why did _____ behave that way?

What could you do in this situation?

Why is how _____ acted in this situation important?

These questions focus on both character and student behavior and how behaviors may make other people think and/or feel.

All three components of empathy work together to help fully understand each character in the novel, but also help students explore the different components of empathy separately. For classroom teachers, understanding the importance of empathy and asking specific questions that help direct students to consider how others think, feel, and behave are at the core of connecting empathy to aspects of diversity, social skills, and moral development in the classroom.

Diversity, Social Skills, and Moral Development Related Questions

Empathy, as discussed above, is also closely connected to diversity, social skills, and moral development in a middle grades classroom. Using these three areas, the novel *Wonder* is also a constructive way to help students better understand each one. For the three areas, a series of questions can be used to explore and provide rich discussions in the classroom.

Diversity can be seen most clearly in *Wonder* pertaining to physical diversity. However,

aspects of socio-economic status, intellectual, and racial components of diversity are also present. The following questions could be used throughout to help discuss diversity issues, while also focusing on empathy, to help students “see” the characters in the novel more clearly.

How do you think _____ feels in this situation because of how he/she looks/behaves?

What makes _____ different?

How can different be good from the perspective of _____?

What can we learn from _____?

How is _____ different from you?

How is _____ similar to you?

Each of these questions is designed to help connect the students in the classroom to one or more characters in the book. Simply by making this connection, teachers can provide students the opportunity to view diversity from the viewpoint of the character who is different and how that may feel for that character.

As young adolescents mature, social skills are increasingly important to incorporate into the classroom in order to better prepare students to be productive citizens. In *Wonder*, both positive and negative social skills are evident in adolescents and adults. Classroom teachers can use these examples from the novel to have discussions around the importance of social skills and its connection to empathy. They can also use the below questions to guide students toward a discussion that focuses on social skills.

Why do you think _____ did that/behaved that way?

What could you do in _____’s situation?

How would you want others to act in this situation? Why?

Each of these questions focus on behaviors that are socially appropriate and also connect with behavioral empathy. These skills must be both modeled and discussed in the classroom so that our young adolescents have the opportunity to talk about and practice valuable social skills.

Finally, the third skill set that *Wonder* can provide is the connection of empathy to Moral Development. In the novel, many of the characters explore their own personal moral development and as the story progresses many also show moral growth. Using these fictional characters to discuss moral values and development are at the core of the following guiding questions.

How would you feel in this situation? Why?

How would you have reacted in elementary school to this situation?

How do you think you would react now?

How do you think you will react when you are an adult?

How does _____ learn more about kindness/respect/caring/empathy)?

These questions allow students to use the lens of empathy through the novel’s characters to better understand moral values. In addition, students can begin thinking about changes that may have already taken place in their own lives, along with other changes that may take place in the future.

“How to Use” Guide

The above questions can be used in multiple ways throughout the reading of *Wonder*. It is, however, suggested that teachers begin using the questions to address characters in the book and then progress to more intrapersonal questions. This allows students to process the information on fictional characters before being asked to be more introspective, especially if they are sharing out loud. Each of the questions provided is a higher order/critical thinking question. This is intentional. These questions provide individual thought and consideration. It is important to avoid questions that allow students to only answer with yes/no or agree/disagree answers. Utilizing questions that require students to think about the different characters or scenarios and then give thoughtful answers to each question can also enhance empathy growth within each student.

These questions can be used in whole class or small-group/pairs discussion after in-class or out-of-class reading has occurred. It is also encouraged that teachers give their own opinions to the questions in a whole-class setting

to begin discussion in order to model vulnerability and expectations. Depending on the class and the students, teachers can also use the questions in a small-group or pair setting as prompts to help explore the characters' emotions in combination with more plot or literacy based prompts. Interspersing the empathy discussion with academic questions that students are more familiar with allows teachers to integrate empathy more naturally within small group conversations.

The questions can also be used as essay assignments. This often allows students to express themselves in a less exposed context and often teachers can get to know their students better in this format. By allowing students to write out their answers to the question prompts as a homework or in-class assignment, students are able to think more deeply about their answers and use the text to cite evidence where needed. This format also allows teachers to respond to students individually through written feedback and ask even more probing questions. Using the questions as an essay prompt can occur throughout the duration of the book and address many different characters and situations.

The question prompts can also be used in debate activities and group-solving projects. Having students debate an issue from both sides increases empathy by seeing the same situation from multiple perspectives and enhances *moral courage* by helping students practice speaking out loud and offering their voice to the rest of the class (Borba, 2018). Group-solving projects can be used for in-class activities by selecting a "problem" from the book and having students work in small groups to come up with solutions. For example, using the question prompt, "Why do you think _____ did that/behaved that way?", students can then work together to find other ways the particular character could have behaved that might have different consequences. Borba (2018) explains that "teamwork projects can strengthen students' abilities to encourage others, resolve conflicts, and disagree respectfully – important aspects of empathy" (p. 27).

It is important to provide students with multiple ways to express empathy using whole-class, small groups, individual writing, debates, and group activities. This gives many opportunities for students to practice all aspects of empathy in the safe environment of the classroom. Each

teacher must know her/his students and their emotional capabilities and differentiate the activities accordingly. Through each activity, something new and different can be explored pertaining to empathy education.

Conclusion

Classroom teachers are in a unique position to help meet young adolescent needs around discussions of empathy, diversity, social skills, and moral development. By using fictional characters from the book *Wonder*, students are able to explore these difficult, yet important issues. Each of the discussion questions presented above helps to explore empathy at a deeper, richer level for young adolescents. Providing these guiding questions for classroom teachers that connects empathy to diversity, social skills, and moral development is the primary focus of this article. By exploring and better understanding the need for empathy instruction and guidance in our middle grades classrooms, it is with optimism that our young adolescents will grow to be adults with a more empathic stance for others.

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