



Empathy to Empower the Difference: Diversity and Inclusion in a Multicultural Classroom

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Abstract

The author of this article aims at exploring the role that Emotional Intelligence and in particular, Empathy, play in enhancing diversity and inclusion in a multicultural classroom; multicultural classrooms present a unique setting for the development of empathy because of the great diversity of language, social class, ethnicity, and culture that exists within them. The fields of study around empathy research have often been multi-disciplined, reaching a deeper complexity when researching empathetic behaviour in intercultural settings.

There is an ongoing effort to attain a deeper understanding of the many intertwined factors that contribute to the complex process of empathy development and subsequently fostering diversity and inclusion. The article is based on research and data collected in interventions by the author among students from different countries in multidisciplinary and multicultural settings, and explores how these three concepts are somehow connected with each other; being empathy an essential skill that should be included, not as individual subject matter, but threaded throughout the educational curricula. Research shows that fostering the power of the difference is beneficial for all stakeholders in a more and more globalised society

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Empathy, diversity, inclusion, multicultural classroom

1. Introduction

The development of empathetic behaviour is a vital for human development. The ongoing research argues that empathy is a critical skill that undergoes rapid development in childhood [4] (Coelho,1998). In an educational environment, the practice and development of empathetic skills are especially crucial for not only students but teachers as well. Teachers have a powerful role in facilitating and demonstrating empathy within the classroom [1] (Banks et al, 2000) where students begin to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they will need to interact positively with people from diverse backgrounds in their present and future civic life (Banks et al, 2001)

Empathy is often confused with other social skills such as sympathy and compassion. Empathy is uniquely defined as having the important distinction of feeling 'with' another as opposed to feeling 'for' another [2] (Gerdes, 2011). In our increasingly diverse modern world, the need to understand and support the development of empathy is greater than ever. Effective citizenship in a multicultural society, requires individuals to practice values that promote social inclusion among culturally diverse groups (Banks et al, 2001). From a societal point of view, empathy development is vital, as it is part of the process of developing self-regulation skills that are necessary in making the transition from being externally regulated to being able to internally regulate themselves in accordance with a society norms and values [3] (Willis, 2015)

2. Methodology



The Research was based on a Design Based Research approach [5] (McKenney and Reeves, 2018). This approach consists of different phases, namely: 1. Analysis and exploration; 2. Design and construction; 3. Implementation and, 4. Evaluation and reflection. Steps within a DBR approach are used to design different phases in the process of research. This particular research focused on the analysis and exploration phase to determine the predictors that trigger certain empathetic behaviours. Further studies will continue to develop the next phases in DBR in order to prototype interventions and activities to foster empathy within multidisciplinary Curricula of Higher Education Institutions.

Data collection was carried out by documented observations in the group dynamics of the participating groups to identify emerging patterns of empathic behaviour and the aspects that triggered such behaviour. As well as documented observations and individual interviews, data was gathered in two key instances in the sample groups dynamics by means of a questionnaire; one prior to an intensive group interaction and the second one afterwards. The aim of this primary data collection method was to detect changes in behaviour before and after the intensive group activity regarding perspectives in diversity, inclusion through empathic behaviour.

The data collected is currently being used to design and prototype interventions which will consist of a series of activities regarding fostering empathy co-created by different actors involved in the educational process. The method to measure the effect of the various intervention instances will be reflected in a questionnaire and signaling system to measure empathy, which will be adapted to the sample group being analysed. Some of the expected results of such interventions is to obtain comparable data of the degree of inclusion and sustainable diversity in groups exposed to empathy trainings and interventions in comparison to zero exposure sample groups.

3. Discussion and Results

Every research sample multicultural group was in essence unique in its composition, and disposition, therefore a compare-and-contrast methodology was very beneficial to further identify some of the factors that influenced variations in the groups dynamics and the effect of empathetic skills development.

One of the outcomes the research was that a relevant factor in development of empathic behaviour in a multicultural group is the degree of development of English as *Lingua Franca*. This factor is especially relevant since empathy is a complicated skill to learn, and the practice of two complex and mentally-challenging skills, language expression processing as well as empathy, could lead to miscommunication and frustration within the group. Furthermore, the limited verbal competency in English among some of the group members would make these individuals rely on action based empathetic behaviours, these group members were more likely to demonstrate empathy via direct actions, gestures, and body language rather than verbal language exchange.

Another important outcome regarding cultural and gender diversity in the sample groups, shows that the groups with more diversity looked at solving a challenge from different perspectives and came up with more innovative thinking on problem solving. However, the initial interaction in this varied groups demanded a higher level of adaptation and flexibility to acknowledge different points of views when tackling a group activity, which in a way deterred effective communication in early stages of the group interactions. However, the development of adaptation skills resulted in deeper understanding of the added value of diversity and inclusion in the overall successful performance of the sample group.

According to Vygotsky, who is considered to be the founder of social constructivism, knowledge is constructed in a social environment through dialogues and in interaction with others. Communication and language are important in the process of giving meaning. Where knowledge construction takes place in the interaction with others, learning is a process that takes place within a person.[6] (Vygotsky, 1978). Taking into consideration Vygotsky's social constructivism and empathic social development, sample groups studied showed a higher degree of empathic behaviour when actively interacting with each other to solve a problem successfully with minimum instruction in comparison to



other groups that received longer instruction on how to solve a certain situation. The need to communicate effectively within the last group was regarded as not crucial to perform appropriately. As a consequence interaction was fragmented into subgroups within the main sample group, which deterred proper exchange of communication and therefore a limited degree of commitment to finalise the task given. It showed as well that the group developed a lesser degree of flexibility when being out of their comfort zone since they were not as empowered to take ownership of the task as the ones with shorter instruction periods.

A worth mentioning of outcome of the research is that the degree of empathetic behaviour depends on the role that an individual plays in a group. The more responsibility given to an individual when leading a group the more the individual deviated from empathetic behaviour. This outcome aligns with prior research by Datcher Kertner, an author and social psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, whose empirical studies showed that individuals who have power suffer deficits in empathy, the ability to read emotions, and the ability to adapt behaviours to other people. The most common failure in leadership is to lack of self-management, driven by at times by self-interest and ego. Students that became project managers showed signs of isolated decision making and poor decision making often linked to self-interest and very low degree of self-awareness. Whereas the same student in a different role showed higher degree of self-reflection and awareness and could relate easier to other group members. Research suggests that this change in personal traits has to do with the fact that power changes the way the brain functions, influenced by stress and time pressure.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

As research shows it seems vital for today's students to have a high degree of development in the ability to communicate, verbally and non-verbally, and connect with others to be successful in the future. Developing these skills is challenging since there is still little knowledge around empathy development in connection to multicultural demographics.

Taking into consideration Daniel Goleman's research, there is a direct connection between empathy, employability and development of sustainable leadership skills. It is primordial that we ensure that the next generations develop empathetic skills in our evolving society. It is our responsibility to prepare our students to become global citizens.

Future research around this area should include other actors' voices fostering co-creation in the educational process; from teachers to the community, from governmental institutions to the industry. The involvement of this stakeholders could provide a way to gain a deeper understanding of empathy in a multicultural context. The data-gathered could provide crucial insights into the most sustainable way to include empathetic activities and interventions explicitly and/or implicitly incorporated into the curricula of higher institutions.

The development of empathetic skills could help to understand the very essence of diversity as an interaction between a variation of life experiences, perspectives, cultures, origins and identities that only when being and combined and recognised as differences, can potentially produce results that could not be possible otherwise, It can empower the difference as such.

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