

How can we use the Roots of Empathy Program to develop the emotional intelligence of students in a Grade 1/2 Class as classroom teacher, Vice-Principal, and Community Partners in Education in addition to enhancing our own emotional intelligence in our professional practice?

Patty Bester, Sharon Brooks, Heather Knill-Griesser, and John Misener

Biographies

Patty Bester is a Child and Youth Worker who has been employed for the past eighteen years with Community Living Brant and is currently located at the Ontario Early Years Centre: Brant. She became a Roots of Empathy Instructor in October 2003. Patty found the program exciting and rewarding and is looking forward to participating in her first Action Research Project. She is a graduate of Mohawk College and has worked with families in Brant County for the past seventeen years.

Sharon Brooks is the Coordinator of Kids Can Fly, the initiative which brought Roots of Empathy to our community. She has over 30 years experience working in the field of early childhood education, including teaching at Mohawk College and working on the Ontario Government's Early Years Project. Her current position with Kids Can Fly seeks to build on the research of Dr. Fraser Mustard's Early Years Study 1999. Sharon has been selected by Dr. Mustard, to sit on the board of a newly formed Council on Early Child Development which will seek to share current research with communities and impact government policy re: education and health. This is her first Action Research experience.



Heather Knill-Griesser is Vice-Principal of F.C. Bodley - Central School in Brantford. Previously she was a Primary consultant and has extensive primary experience. Heather completed her Master of Education degree in October 2001 as part of the Grand Erie Cohort. Heather has engaged in action research projects for the past seven years. She has been co-leader of the Brant Action Research Network for three years and is Vice-President and Treasurer of The Ontario Educational Research Council. In 2003 Heather received the OERC/CORP Leadership in Action Research Award presented by the York Region District School Board. Previous projects have been published in the Ontario Action Researcher at www.nipissingu.ca/oar.



John Misener was born and raised in Brantford, Ontario and has twenty-five years of teaching experience. He taught one year in Alberta, one year in Saskatchewan, seven years in Northern Ontario and the remainder of his years with the former Brant County Board of Education, presently the Grand Erie District School Board. This is John's second action research project. John is a graduate of Laurentian University (Bachelor of Arts) and Nipissing University (Bachelor of Education). John has completed his ninth year of teaching at Central Public School in Brantford, Ontario.



Our baby: Aiden

Abstract

Central Public School is a Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6 school with a student population of 170. Central Public School participated in the Roots of Empathy Parenting Program for School Children that was founded by Mary Gordon in 1996 in inner-city schools in Toronto. The program was initiated by "Kids Can Fly" for the Grand Erie District School Board and the Brant Haldimand-Norfolk Catholic District School Board. The school staff worked in partnership with the Roots of Empathy trained instructors to deliver a classroom-based parenting program for children in a combined Grade 1 and 2 classroom. A neighborhood infant and parent visited the classroom once a month from October 2003 to June 2004. Certified Roots of Empathy Instructors delivered a program where students were coached to observe the growth and social development

of a baby, celebrate the milestones, and actively interact with the baby to learn about its needs in comparison to their own growth and development. The authors examine their educative influence as Community Partners in Education, administrator and classroom teacher as they answer the question, "How can we support Grade 1 / 2 students to develop their emotional intelligence as classroom teacher, Vice-Principal, and Community Partners in Education in addition to enhancing our own emotional intelligence in our professional practice?"

Situating Our Inquiry

Central Public School is a Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6 school with a student population of approximately 170 students. Issues at Central Public school that encouraged us to participate in the Roots of Empathy Program included the vision to reduce aggressive behavior in our school and increase prosocial behaviors (e.g, helping, sharing, cooperating, showing empathy and inclusion towards others). John Misener's Grade 1 / 2 class at Central

Public School was invited to participate in the Roots of Empathy Program with Baby Aiden Hunter and his Mom, Debbie. Baby Aiden is a special needs infant who has Down's Syndrome. The Roots of Empathy instructors who delivered the innovative classroom-based parenting program included Patty Bester and Sharon Brooks. Patty, Sharon, John and Heather documented and evaluated the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy Program by collaboratively completing an Action Research Project to determine the effectiveness of the program.



Aiden watching the students



Patti Bester facilitating a family session

Program Values and Identifying Areas of Focus

The focus of the Roots of Empathy Program was to build a caring classroom where students identified and labelled their own feelings and those of others, developing their "Literacy of Feelings." Students were taught what temperament looked like, sounded like and felt like. They then focussed on the baby's body language and behavior to recognize the unique temperament of their baby. Through developing the culture of care and respect it was the focus of the program to develop nurturing and responsible citizens in the classroom, at home, and in the community. Children used problem solving to measure, graph, and record the size and weight of their baby at each visit. These measurements were compared to the previous months records in addition to making a comparison to their own body size and weight. Problem solving also occurred during conflict resolution scenarios, as they were encouraged to use empathy to identify the feelings/emotions/temperament/opinions of others. Valuing diversity and social inclusion were messages delivered during each of the components.

Daniel Goleman (1998, p. 95) identifies five components of emotional intelligence that include; self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Self-awareness involves recognizing and understanding your personal moods and emotions and the effect that they have on others. Self-regulation is the ability to think before acting and control impulsive behaviour. Motivation is a passion to pursue goals with persistence and energy.

Empathy is the ability to identify with another person's feelings. Social skill is a culmination of the components involving understanding and controlling your own emotions and empathizing with the feelings of others.

Upon entering the classroom and introducing the program, Roots of Empathy, for the first time, Patty Bester found the students' responses very significant. Patty asked the children, "What are roots?", as she held up a picture of a tree. Their response was, "It helps a tree to grow, it needs roots." Patty shared that we are like trees and also have roots. Just like roots help a tree to grow, our families, friends, and teachers help us to grow. One child stated, "They help us have good roots" (P. Bester, Journal Reflection, October 17, 2003).

It was the authors' goal to be the "roots" supporting students as they developed their emotional intelligence reducing aggressive behavior and fostering emotional literacy, positive social skills and empathy.



Baby Aiden and Mom Debbie

Program Components and Support

The program components consisted of approximately three classroom visits per month, over a period of nine months, by a Roots of Empathy Instructor with the delivery of nine themes. For each theme, a Family Visit was made with the Roots of Empathy Instructor each month. The mother attended the Family Visit with the baby eight times, and the father attended the visit with the baby once. Primary

grade appropriate resources and infant toys were brought in, by the Roots of Empathy instructors, to compliment the curriculum. Infant development and infant safety were major components of the program. The students observed the milestones of their baby's development and compared this to their own growth and development. The safety challenges of the baby at different stages of his development were discussed and then related back to the personal safety of each of the students.

Data Collection

A variety of tools were used to collect data to document the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy Program. Photographs and videotape were used to visually record the visits with Baby Aiden. Student work samples and "Big Books" were used to reveal the Literacy of Feelings of the students. Students, parents, and Educational Assistants participated in surveys which were designed to measure the effectiveness of the program. Page 3 of the Ontario Provincial Report Card offered insight to the awareness of the changes observed by parents. Anecdotal Records and Journal Entries, completed by each of the authors, offered evidence of the program's success. The frequency of school-based REAL Student award winners and the use of KELSO Problem Solving strategies were documented to determine the success in the development of the emotional intelligence of our students.

REAL Kids is prosocial/academic skills program that recognized positive behavior/skills demonstrated by students that included respect, responsibility(R), excellence (E), academic achievement and attitude (A), and leadership qualities (L). When a child exhibited one of the above behaviors/skills (REAL) any staff member could recognize the student by completing a REAL Kids Slip (indicating the 'Letter', reason for recognition, name of student, and classroom teacher). Slips were handed in to the REAL Leader to be recorded on the master classroom list. Once the student received all four letters (REAL) their picture was taken and posted on the REAL student Wall of Fame. Students received a certificate at a weekly REAL student presentation at the office and could select a prize from the prize box (books, dollar store items, gift certificates). Students could become a REAL student a number of times.

KELSO is a conflict management program used by students to solve problems. According to KELSO, there are three kinds of big problems. There are problems that are dangerous (someone could get hurt), there are problems that are against the law and then there are scary problems. If the child is faced with a big problem they should always go for help and tell an adult. If the problem isn't one of the above then the child knows that they can use one, or two, or three of KELSO's Choices to work out the problem.

KELSO's Choices are:

- Go to another game
- Share and take turns
- Talk it out
- Walk away
- Ignore it
- Tell them to stop
- Apologize
- Make a deal
- Wait and cool off

The program had a green frog known as "KELSO" who served as the program mascot. Parents and families were encouraged to use the KELSO Choices Wheel at home too. Each child was given a KELSO booklet, a wheel for their desk and a wheel to take home. Teachers used the 'KELSO's Choices' in their classrooms and outside at recess.

Coping With the Issues

There were a few challenges that were encountered in the delivery of the program. These included health issues with the original facilitator, Patty Bester, and the baby. A second facilitator, Sharon Brooks, then stepped in to deliver the program to the students and the students reconnected with the new facilitator. Aiden was hospitalized for a short period of time and the program curriculum continued in the absence of family visits.



Sharon Brooks facilitating the Program

Sharon Brooks shared that when she entered the classroom mid-year through the program she had concerns regarding developing a rapport with the students who had previously bonded with Patty. Since this program is built on the formation of trusting relationships, Sharon had concerns about continuing with the momentum that had been established. Efforts were made to duplicate the routines and the children adapted quickly. However, the children continued to express their concerns and demonstrated empathy asking about Patty's recovery and creating "get well" cards for her. When Patty was able to attend the final celebration ceremony, the children openly demonstrated their affection, kindness and compassion towards her (S. Brooks, Journal Reflection, February 2004).

Analyzing the Results

All students indicated that they used some KELSO problem solving strategies when dealing with conflict resolution (Student Surveys, March 2004). In the KELSO conflict management program students received "frog tickets" for using problem solving strategies. The classroom that received the most tickets each week received the mascot "Lily the frog" in their classroom. The Grade 1 / 2 class were the most frequent winners of "Lily the frog", when compared to other primary and junior classes in the school. Lily made her home in the Grade 1 / 2 class four times throughout the school year, even though the program was not initiated until January 2004.

Anecdotal records and observations documented by John Misener attested to the success of the program. These included:

- when one student was putting down another student, a classmate defended the victim.
- students reached out to tell others that they had friends when they were feeling "friendless".
- students consistently demonstrated concern and compassion towards others.
- students shared snacks with others without being prompted.
- students displayed cohesiveness during small group activities and work jobs.
- students were concerned about the health of their facilitator and wanted to make cards to cheer her up.
- students returned items taken from others when asked to consider how the other person felt.
- students dealt with difficult situations displaying less aggression and anger.
- there were numerous occasions when students tried to comfort others who were feeling sad.
- students could identify a number of feelings and were confident in recognizing body language and facial expressions.

- students recognized that a person's temperament does not make them a bad person; Mary Gordon's statement (March 29th Presentation at St. Gabriel's School, Brantford, Ontario) that, "Feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are..." were echoed by the students.
- students became adept at recognizing their own temperament and that of others.
- students celebrated the milestones of their baby's growth and development with excitement and pleasure. They often thanked the Mom for bringing the baby in to the classroom.
- students visually shared their emotions in the form of pictures and oral communication giving them the language and ability to express their emotions.
(J. Misener, Journal Reflections, June 2004).

The authors concurred that the children were eager to learn the program and were "magical" in their response to the baby's visit. "The children enjoyed singing to Aiden, and greeted him with enthusiasm and smiles. It was amazing to see how Aiden captivated them" (P. Bester, Journal Reflection, October 20, 2003).

Voices of the Community of Learners

How do we know that the Roots of Empathy Program has shown significant positive changes in the emotional and social understandings and behaviors at Central Public School? We think that the best way for us to share our success is for you to hear from the voices of others at Central Public School.

Tracy Torti, an Educational Assistant who works daily in the Grade 1 / 2 class has shared her observations in a survey she completed:

Since September there seems to be less conflict among the students (The noise level has also improved as a result). Stronger bonds have formed. This group, on the most part, show strong friendship qualities and compassion for each other. They are in tune with the feelings of others (T. Torti, Survey, February 2004).

The Roots of Empathy program has encouraged the children to learn the language necessary to identify and label their own feelings, in addition to understanding the feelings of others. They are comfortable with talking about temperament and feelings. Patty discussed the ways you could find out about a baby's temperament with the children. She used the analogy that it was like being a detective. The children were eager to answer. They needed to know about temperament, so they could understand what problems students were experiencing by reading their facial expressions and body language. Patty led the discussion that everyone has a temperament. Students were amazed and couldn't wait to tell her their own temperament (P. Bester, Reflective Journal, November 3, 2003). It was stressed with the children that temperaments are neither good or bad, they just are. We asked students how do they know if their friend is upset and one student commented, I know " If he is crying. When(if) his face droops. If his smile is not up. When his head and face points down. My friend does this sometimes" (Student Survey, February 2004).

Parents have given input to us regarding the Roots of Empathy Program. One parent commented, "My daughter has changed. She's more caring when it comes to other people. I am very proud of her. She is doing very well. Thank you" (Parent Survey, January 2004).

A second parent commented, " I believe my son is really trying to get along and consider how other people feel. We have been trying to discuss these matters as situations arise on TV or in stories and when he tells me about his daily activities. He has mentioned the Baby Aiden." (Parent Survey, January 2004).

Sharon Brooks commented that inclusion and care were evident when a new student joined the classroom. During the new student's first family visit experience, several other students explained the routine and helped her to



Recognizing temperament

understand the program (S. Brooks, Journal Reflection, March 2004). John Misener noted that at the end of the year a special bond developed between the new student and a friend, who was very supportive during difficult social situations (J. Misener, Journal Reflection, June 2004).

Inclusion was also evident when Sharon explained to the children that Aiden had Down's Syndrome. Sharon explained that Aiden would be slower at reaching milestones, compared to other children. This opened the discussion on acceptance of differences in other children. The students in the class were attentive to the discussion, yet embraced Aiden with enduring love and acceptance. He was "our" baby and special in every way (S. Brooks, Journal Reflection, June 2004).

Patty Bester revealed how the students used problem solving to work through conflict situations.

"During sharing time of feelings a student commented that she felt scared when she was bullied. Another student shared that he was scared when someone was mean to him. We problem solved what we could do and the students' responses were compassionate and supportive of each other" (P. Bester, October 27, 2003).

Watering the Roots: How The Roots of Empathy Program Has Affected the Authors

John Misener indicated how the Roots of Empathy program has influenced his professional practice.

The Roots of Empathy program has caused me to be more reflective. It has taught me that through their behavior students are giving their teachers and the adults in their life a message. Rather than focusing on the act, sometimes it is more prudent to help students deal with the cause.



Student sharing a special moment with Aiden



By dealing with behaviors in a less confrontational manner, students are less likely to become aggressive. The program teaches the students to understand behaviors and express feelings. By using terminology from the program, I am able to facilitate conflict resolution in a much more effective and satisfactory way.

The Roots of Empathy Program has caused me to have a greater understanding of student behavior and to choose my words more carefully when dealing with student issues.

Finally, the program has taught me that sometimes a few kind words will tell students that their teacher cares. You may be surprised how some students reciprocate. (J. Misener, Journal Reflection, June 2004)

Heather Knill-Griesser shared how she has changed as a new administrator participating in the Roots of Empathy program. "The Roots of Empathy program has helped me with managing disciplinary issues and building a positive rapport with students, staff, and parents at Central Public School. Specifically, in the Grade 1 / 2 class, it has given me a common language to use when confronting conflict resolution issues with the students" (H. Knill-Griesser, Journal Entry, March 2004).

Heather shared her personal observations of the Roots of Empathy program when facilitating conflict resolution issues between two students:

I was asked to come to the Grade 1 / 2 class after recess because of an incident that occurred during the afternoon recess. Five students were named as being involved in a conflict incident during the afternoon recess and these names were recorded on the recess Problem Sheet. I called the boys names and directed them to join me in the hallway. We sat in a circle and crocodile tears rolled down C's face. I asked the boys what had been the problem during the afternoon recess. A student responded, "We were playing a game and C fell and we all laughed at him". Reminding students about our discussion in the morning about temperament and feelings. I questioned the boys, "How do you think C is feeling?" "Sad, unhappy, hurt, angry", were voiced by the participants. "What could we have done to help C feel better?" I questioned. A student suggested, "We could have asked C if he was okay rather than laughing at him". All four boys sincerely apologized to C and before we went back to class a student wrapped his arms around C and Said, "I'm sorry C, I'll be a better friend next time." (H. Knill-Griesser, Journal Entry, January 2004)

Patty Bester commented that participation in this program has been a very rewarding experience. She enjoyed watching the bond that formed between the students and Aiden and was impressed with the bond she experienced



Magical moments with students



facilitating the program. Patty would recommend having this program in every school. She has seen the rewards that this program can bring and believes in it strongly.

Sharon Brooks shared that she was already aware and convinced of the success and positive influence of the Roots of Empathy program when establishing it within the two local Boards of Education. She was amazed, however, at how quickly the impact was evident within each of the classrooms and schools. The opportunity to actually present the program in the classroom gave her the privilege of experiencing it first hand. Sharon found that what she gave to the children, was given back to her in emotional support and encouragement. She has observed that participation in this program has been a rewarding experience for teachers, administrators, parents, facilitators, and children.

What conclusions can we draw from our evidence?

Patty observed that the majority of students were more comfortable sharing feelings and expressing their thoughts during each visit. Children expanded their emotional literacy vocabulary orally, pictorially and in written form. They also shared real situations of incidents that occurred in their daily lives. Situations were problem solved as they arose, and Patty observed an increase in the confidence of their responses. She noted that there was increased empathy and acceptance in their answers and in their desire to help others (P. Bester, Reflective Journal, January 6, 2004).

Decreased behavior incidents, success stories from students, parents, and staff, and students recognizing the temperament of others, creating a caring community of learners are how we know that The Roots of Empathy Program is making a difference at Central Public School.

Final Thoughts and Next Steps

John Misener's Grade 2 Class at Central Public School will be continuing with the Roots of Empathy Program in the 2004-2005 school year. Students were able to focus on their classmate's temperament and perspective, developing their ability to empathize and problem solve during conflict resolution situations. The following were wishes that were given to Baby Aiden on his final day in the Grade 1 /2 classroom:

- I hope that you will be a GOOD boy!
- That you will have a happy birthday.
- That you will have a wonderful time.
- That you will grow to be big and strong.
- That you have the Gift of Love!
- That you grow to be strong and very wise.
- That you learn to write.
- I hope that you won't be a bully!
- I wish that you would come back to see us.
- I wish that you have good Dreams and Friends.
- That you will be good at video games.
- That you always have good wishes.



- That you will be very healthy and have lots of money.
- That you learn to spell.
- That you grow as tall as us.
- Mr. Misener wishes that all of your experiences are good and that you have a healthy, happy life.

References



Our wishes for Aiden

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