

# How can I use the excellent values taught in the Roots of Empathy program to enhance the existing emotional literacy of my students?

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## Biography



Janice O'Neil is a graduate of York University (Bachelor of Arts: Honours English) and the University of Toronto (Bachelor of Education), with additional qualifications from Brock University (Library Specialist, Drama Specialist, Guidance, Special Education). She has been teaching with the Grand Erie District School Board for thirty years and is currently teaching at Greenbrier Public School in Brantford, Ontario. She teaches Grade 5 as well as being part time Librarian, Information Technology Key User, and Report Card Administrator for her school. This is her first action research project.

## Abstract

*The Roots of Empathy (ROE) program fell accidentally into my lap two years ago. It has been receiving good press lately - front page colour photo in The Toronto Star on Thursday June 2, 2005 with an article in the GTA section about bringing the program to native schools - and it feels great to be a part of such a worthwhile program. ROE is an international program that is gaining popularity as the issue of bullying and non-violence in schools comes to the forefront. I was interested in finding out if the program was actually doing what it claims to do. After following its progress since the fall of 2004, I believe that students in my class have proven the basic premise of ROE, that the program does foster empathy in children and create an inclusive society in the classroom.*

## School Background

Greenbrier Public School is a mid-sized elementary school consisting of 270 students ranging from Junior/Senior Kindergarten to Grade 8 with two special education classes (Mild Intellectual Disabilities and Autistic). Greenbrier is located in a very supportive middle-class neighbourhood. During the 2004-2005 school year, there was one classroom for each grade with two split classes (Grade 2/3 and 4/5) and two portables. The school was infused with new computers during the summer of 2004



which created a lab of 30 new computers and the staff places a great emphasis on information technology skills. Students are generally kind to one another, respectful of staff, well-behaved, and easily disciplined - all of which makes teaching in this environment a pleasure.

## History of Roots of Empathy Program In My Grade 5 Class

During the 2003-2004 school year, the ROE program was offered to me with very little supporting

information. ROE was piloting the program in the Grand Erie District School board and seven schools were involved, in conjunction with Kids Can Fly, a community organization designed to help pre-school children. As the program developed, it became a wonderful experience for my Grade 5 class. That year, we bonded with Baby Abby. Unfortunately, the family of “our” baby had their van stolen and they lost many things that belonged to Abby, one of which was a baby carrier. The class suggested that we fundraise and try to make enough money to replace the carrier. We not only raised enough money to replace it but had enough money left over to buy her new toys and have a good-bye celebration party for her in June. The class had their picture published in the Brantford Expositor along with Abby and the replacement baby carrier. That whole experience seemed to me to be the epitome of the essence of ROE. It was my first introduction to the program and in the spring of 2004, I attended a workshop where Mary Gordon, the founder of the program spoke very eloquently about the benefits of ROE. I was sold. I believed then, and I continue to believe, that this is definitely a valuable project to pursue.

Detailed information on ROE can be accessed on their website [www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org) however, their stated goals are:

- To foster the development of empathy.
- To develop emotional literacy.
- To prepare students for responsible and responsive parenting.
- To reduce levels of bullying, aggression, and violence in children’s lives and build peaceful societies.
- To increase knowledge of human development, learning, and infant safety.

### How the Roots of Empathy Program Works

The program is unique. Mothers (and some fathers) volunteer to become part of the program for a school year with their new babies. ROE instructors make an hour pre-visit to the classroom to discuss a theme; then there is an hour family visit with the instructor, the mother and the baby; and finally the ROE instructor comes again for a post-visit to tie it all up. This happens, ideally, for 8-10 months of the school year. It is hoped that from the bonding that occurs with the students and the baby, the level of empathy will increase.

In regards to emotional literacy, from the ROE website ([www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)): “What is unique about Roots of Empathy is that it does not target bullies or aggressive children; it does not target a narrow spectrum of ages. It takes a universal approach, raising the level of empathy in the entire classroom and across age groups without singling out any individual or group.”

The program also encourages the development of an inclusive society. Again, from the ROE



website ([www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)):

“In the ROE classroom children practise skills of social inclusion and learn to value different opinions and different pathways to competent parenting. Children go beyond identifying and valuing differences and pull together the common threads of shared and lived experience to arrive at a concept of human solidarity.”



### Roots of Empathy in Grade 5 2004-2005

This year our instructor is Martha Hexamer, who works at the Teachers' Credit Union. She books her pre-visits, family visits, and post-visits around my schedule, her schedule, and Baby Claire's mother, Kathleen's schedule, which requires some skill!

On the “Today” schedule on the blackboard, every morning I list what the class will be doing that day. The first thing most kids do when they walk in at 8:55 a.m. is to check that board and if they see ROE - Martha, they know it is either a pre-visit or a post-visit but when they see ROE - Baby Claire they are delighted. They knew that just before recess we will move our desks into a semi circle and that when they come back in from morning recess, Baby Claire and Kathleen will be there with Martha, the green blanket will be on the floor in the middle of their desks and we will have a wonderful hour together.



program was implemented. Everyone in the class was able to contribute throughout the duration of the program.

### The Question

I had already decided that if offered to us, I would welcome the Roots of Empathy program again in my classroom and use it as the basis of an Action Research project. It was important, though, that the question I formulated relate directly to the effects of the program on the students in the class. Actually measuring that might be difficult because it would be very subjective. The results benefiting from

ROE are evident in both behaviour and attitude. Behaviour can be observed and noted but attitude is much harder to measure.

According to the ROE website, “empathy” is “the ability to identify with another person’s feelings. The ability to see and feel things as others see and feel them is central to competent parenting and successful social relationships in all stages of life.” ([www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)) I wanted to know if my students were developing that ability as a result of their experience with ROE.

This is the definition of Emotional Literacy according to the ROE website:

“Roots of Empathy students learn to identify, label and talk about feelings. As they become more aware and comfortable with their feelings, they are given the freedom to talk about their feelings and to know that they are respected. The children read stories that talk about fears, or about being patient, or about how it feels to give up a favorite blanket. The children’s ability to express their feelings helps to validate themselves as individuals. It also requires them to validate others as individuals, by identifying with another person’s feelings and thoughts. “

The best example of that occurred early on in the implementation of the program during a discussion the ROE instructor was having with the class about losing someone or something close to them and how it made them feel. She shared with the class the story of how her father died when she was a teenager and the resultant emotions she experienced. All of a sudden it was as if the floodgates had opened. Stories about deceased relatives and pets started coming fast and furious. Eventually, two of the girls were reduced to tears. And yet no one in the class made fun of them or giggled or nudged each other. In fact, in both cases, other girls left their desks and went to comfort the two who were crying. The fact that they felt comfortable enough with the rest of the class to break down like that showed me that they were already a very cohesive, emotionally literate group.

After a few false starts, I came up with the following as my question heading into this Action Research project: How can I use the excellent values taught in the Roots of Empathy program to enhance the existing emotional literacy of my students?

I deliberately chose the phrase “existing emotional literacy” because I believe the students in my class have come to me with a solid foundation of ethics taught to them by their parents and emphasized by the teachers in our school. Polite behaviour, for the most part (but with a few notable and surprising exceptions) is valued and rewarded both at school and at home. The fact that most parents support what the school is trying to impress upon their students in the area of acceptable behaviour, is paramount to the success of ROE. If we were being undermined at home, it would be extremely difficult to carry on with the program.

“Emotion” is defined by [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) as “A mental state that arises spontaneously rather than through conscious effort” and as “The part of the consciousness that involves feeling; sensibility”. “Emotional” would then relate to the emotions.

“Literacy” is defined as “The condition or quality of being knowledgeable in a particular subject or field” ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)) so “emotional literacy” would be the ability of my Grade 5 students to identify, and be aware of, the emotional condition of themselves and any other person in any given

situation.

What I would be observing and noting would be if, and to what extent, my students would be relating to others in the class and in the school, on a higher level of emotional involvement and empathy as a result of their involvement in ROE.

## Splitting the Class

In September 2004, there were 28 students in my Grade 5 class. After five weeks of establishing routines and bonding, we were told that there was some extra funding available and that the principal was creating a Grade 4/5 split class which would be housed in a portable. This meant that the Grade 4 teacher and I would each have to choose eight students from our classes who would then form the split class.

I was appalled at how traumatic this process became. Who knew choosing eight students to go to another classroom would be the most difficult thing I had ever had to do as a classroom teacher? The criteria was clear as to who should be chosen to leave our class but the remaining students, the students chosen, their parents, and myself, were all surprisingly distraught by the process. One would think that having a class of 20 students, in my case, or becoming a member of a class with only 16 students in it, would be viewed as an educational bonus, but it was surprisingly difficult on everyone involved and it took some time for us to recover from the trauma of losing eight of our members. Emotional? Absolutely.

## The First Step

I needed to know if my students were operating with emotional literacy before the ROE program began. Choosing those eight students to leave the class in October and go to the split class was a difficult decision and process for me but it was devastating to the remaining members of the class and to the ones who had to leave. Their observed reactions (crying, hugging one another), and their reported reactions from their parents, clearly demonstrated that this class was operating on a very high level of emotional literacy before they even became involved in ROE.

The fact that the eight students leaving the classroom were only going out to a portable, and not to the moon, and that they would be seeing their friends during morning and afternoon recesses and the lunch hour, didn't seem to mollify them. One boy came to me on his own with a suggestion. He thought it might be a good idea for students in our class to write to the students in the portable and have a messenger deliver the letters on a daily basis. Evidence of highly developed emotional literacy? I think so. The most fascinating aspect of this small incident is the student who suggested this was MP, whose story will unfold.

## Case Studies

### Number One: MP

MP is a boy in my Grade 5 class who is a year older than the other 19 students in the class. His pre-school years were extremely difficult because his mother gave up custody and he lived with his physically

abusive, biological father who was eventually jailed on drug charges. MP was removed from this home situation and placed at that time with his transient, biological mother, an older brother and a younger sister. Over the course of the past four years, the mother married; the oldest brother, RO, was expelled from Tollgate Technical Skills Centre after a vicious fight with another student; and another older brother, TO, was returned to the home just last year and is currently still a ward of the Children's Aid. All three elementary-age siblings attend our school, in Grades 4, 5, and 8. These past four years are the longest the family has ever remained in one home and with three of the children enrolled in one school (although the daughter attended our school for Grade 2 but had so much difficulty with other students she transferred to another school for Grade 3 but returned to us for Grade 4). Before that time, the oldest boy, who came to our school in Grade 6, had been in thirteen elementary schools around the county.

When MP was placed in his mother's custody and enrolled in our school, he was in Grade 2 but he was retained for another year in Grade 2 because, according to his teacher at that time, he was completely unable to complete the most basic academic expectations, including printing or identifying his own name. (In Grade 5, he still cannot spell the long, formal version of his first name and will only print, in capital block letters, the short version of his first name.)

When he first came to our school, he had a great deal of difficulty behaving appropriately in class and with his peers on the yards during recesses and at the lunch hour. He was very physical and aggressive with the other students and was eventually diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). In Grade 3 his mother began a course of Ritalin for him on the pediatrician's advice and his behaviour changed dramatically. However, he is achieving very little academically in my Grade 5 classroom and recently underwent the psychological testing necessary to begin the process of special needs identification.

Unfortunately, MP stood out in the class because of his physical appearance: unwashed and uncombed hair, filthy hands and fingernails, shoes that were too big and falling apart, hand-me-down clothes that don't fit. In addition, he lived in a small, rented farmhouse on the outskirts of town which was decrepit and literally falling apart, according to him (the ceiling fell down in the kitchen). He and his siblings were bused to and from school which meant the socialization with his peers occurred only during school hours. The majority of the class lived in the immediate school community and could visit one another in the evenings or on weekends, which allowed them to bond with one another, something which MP was not able to enjoy due to the geographic location of his home.

Proof that our school community was somewhat rare in the year 2005 was evident in an examination of the living situations of the 20 students in my class. Seventeen of them lived with both biological parents and various siblings in a single family home. Only one student lived with no father in the home (I believe this was because the biological father was deceased) but he and his mother lived in a large, extended, Chinese family; one lived with a stepfather; and one lived with his mother and her fiancé (soon to become his stepfather) in a rented townhouse outside of our school catchment area.

MP was the student living with the stepfather. Since this boy came to our school, in his family, his mother's last name has changed from "Green" to "Black" when she married, MP's oldest two siblings' last name is "White", while he and his sister's last names are "Pink". I only mention this because all

the other students in the class had the same last names as their parents and their siblings, which only separated MP even more from the rest of the class.

During the winter, a ski trip was organized to Chicopee for the Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8 classes. MP did not bring in his permission form or the \$35.00 for the trip. I finally asked him if he was choosing not to go on the trip or if there was some other reason why he wasn't coming with us. He said he really wanted to go but that there wasn't enough money at home for him to go. I checked with the Grade 8 teacher who said that the older brother, in his room, had already had his trip paid for by CAS so he was going on the trip. I called MP's mother who confirmed the difficulty financially with MP's trip and we were able to work something out with the school so MP and his brother were both able to go.

One day at lunch, I noticed that MP wasn't eating anything. When I asked him if he wasn't hungry, he told me that he was usually so hungry by the end of the day, when the bus came, that he tried to save his lunch until then so he would have something to eat on the way home. I suggested that he pack more food in his lunch bag so he would have enough to eat at noon and at the end of the day but he told me there wasn't enough money for more food at home.

Of the 20 students in the class, four of them were boys who were receiving help from an Educational Assistant (EA) on a daily basis and regular assistance from the Learning Resource Teacher throughout the week, and two of them were on Ritalin or Concerta. Of the four, MP was achieving the least academically. He was disorganized, unfocused on school work, never completed his homework, accepted no responsibility for his actions, and blamed all his troubles on his mother and her inability to help him at home (which she freely admitted to me several times, stating that she did not understand the homework and so was unable to assist him with it).

Half of the class had been together since kindergarten and eighteen of the 20 students had been with MP since he came to the school in Grade 2 so they all knew one another very well. They have seen him at his worst and lately, saw him at what I believe was his best. He was not disruptive in class, he was included in different groups every time students were asked to chose groups themselves, and we discovered this year that in addition to a streak of perfectionism when creating things, MP has a remarkable talent for making things, putting things together, and fixing broken things. Whenever anything mechanical went wrong, we called in MP to fix it and if it is fixable, he has been able to do it. For example, I had a little plastic battery-operated fan beside my desk that I dropped and it fell apart into several pieces. I put all the pieces in a basket and gave them to MP and in ten minutes the fan was back together. MP has also put together an Electricity Kit, a Robo Bug, and a Pirate Ship in a bottle - all kits that I purchased from Scholastic and let him work on. And he has become the expert on unwobbling wobbly desks using an Allen key.

I have a ticket reward system in place in my classroom. In September I bought \$100.00 worth of Blockbuster gift cards - ten \$10.00 cards. Each student was given an envelope for ticket storage - the presumption being that every student will get a ticket at some point. Students earned a ticket by doing something nice for someone else or by following class rules independently. The giving and receiving of a ticket was very public so everyone in the class knew who was getting one and why. At the end of each month, we had a draw and the one lucky winner whose ticket was drawn, got the Blockbuster gift card for that month.

What I began hearing was students themselves suggesting that other students did something ticket-worthy and that I should give them a ticket for whatever behaviour I missed that they had witnessed. They all knew that the more tickets in the box at the end of the month (a Math probability teaching moment relating to their reality) the less chance they had of their ticket being drawn, yet they continued to “nominate” each other when they had done something notable. Several times I heard different students recommend that MP should get a ticket for this or that helpful behaviour in the class. Emotional literacy in action?

In addition to that, there was a Tim Bits Chart in operation in my classroom. The class was divided evenly into two groups of ten each. These groups changed each month and the goal was to have the most points on the chart at the end of the month because that meant they would win multiple Tim Bits. The groups got to name themselves, based on whatever monthly theme is appropriate. For example, May’s theme was plants or flowers - they chose the names “Poison Oaks” and “Poison Ivies” for themselves. Each side started the month off with 100 points. Points were gained and lost throughout the month based on exhibits of good or bad behaviour.

Again, students themselves suggested that So-And-So should get points for doing something even if the other student was not on the same side of the chart. And interestingly enough, when given a choice of taking a ticket for him/herself for something well done, a student just as often asked for points for his/her side, thereby improving his/her group’s chances of winning the Tim Bits at the end of the month rather than choosing to improve his/her own chances of winning the Blockbuster gift certificate.

In the fall, MP brought a large kit to school that he had bought at a garage sale. It was an electronic circuit panel with all kinds of electrical wires and a book of instructions that showed the operator how to wire different things based on a complicated schematic. There were at least 100 different things that could be wired together and run on batteries. MP was a reluctant reader but he persevered with the instructions and showed the class about half a dozen different things he wired up using this kit, like a blood pressure gauge and a lie detector. The class was amazed and appreciative. They were very vocal about cheering each other on and MP was clearly admired and respected for his ability to create things with his kit. Although it was big, he kept it at his desk and took it out during recesses and at lunch and spent hours working on it.

At Christmas, the students suggested that we have a gift exchange. The conditions were that the gift be something they already had at home, not something they had to go out and buy. The gifts were labelled for a boy or for a girl and it was strictly a voluntary endeavour. Everyone in the class brought something and everyone got something in return. MP brought and gave away his electrical kit. The entire class was amazed and made it clear to MP that they understood how impressive this gift was. This was a boy who had very little in the way of material possessions and the whole class knew it. This kit was clearly important to him yet he was willing to give it away as a Christmas gift. It almost broke my heart. The boy who got it was delighted and offered to share it any time with MP. Emotional literacy in action?

MP was medicated at the beginning of the school year. It was painful to see him try to fight through



the medication to put a simple sentence together. It was like a curtain was dropped down in front of him and he had to move it aside every time he spoke. One day about a month ago he came to school and seemed much clearer, bright-eyed, and quick to reply when asked a question. I talked with the EA and we both agreed there was a huge difference in his whole demeanor. I asked him, privately, if he had taken his pill that morning and he said no, that he had something good in his lunch bag that he wanted to eat that day and so he had not taken his pill (the medication affected his appetite and he ate very little or nothing at all).

I monitored his behaviour and we decided not to give him his noon hour pill and see what happened. Nothing happened so I wrote a note in his planner and told his mother not to give him his pill the next day and we would see how it went. MP himself said he did not like the pills because they made him “not want to do anything but sit on the wall”. As each day went by and he did not take the medication, a very interesting personality emerged. This was a boy with a great sense of humour. In the time that we tried without medication, I saw a new and different MP. He was making friends in the class, joked with me and the other children, was animated, helpful and creative .

Despite his reluctance to read, MP volunteered to be Poetry Reader for a week. This involved the student finding five poems, one for each day of the week, standing at the front of the room and reading the poem to the class during our In-Class Opening Exercises. The fact that he had felt comfortable enough, as an oral reader, to volunteer for this very public job, in front of the whole class, was a testament to the inclusive atmosphere of my class.

Because it was his behaviour towards other students during the unstructured times outside at recesses and at lunch that caused so many problems, I carefully monitored those times since MP had not been on the medication. There have only been three minor incidents on the yards - nothing like the chaos I was prepared for. As we entered our sixth week without Ritalin, things continued to go well.

What I watched develop in the class since September, was a definite positive and inclusive attitude, always, to MP. Despite his obvious family, intellectual, academic, physical, and behaviour differences that set him apart on so many levels from the rest of the class, they went out of their way to include him, to support him, to share with him, to talk to him, to invite him into their small groups or pairs when working in the class. The other students, mostly the boys in the class, were finding that MP was not the big, aggressive boy they remembered from Grade 2 or the passive sit-on-the-wall guy they remembered from earlier this school year. They were coming around to see the MP my EA and I were seeing, and he was welcomed into their basketball games and their soccer games at break times. Emotional literacy in action?

## **MP & Baby Claire**

Initially, MP was very reluctant to get involved in the whole ROE program. When the program began, he was on Ritalin and was not getting involved in too much of anything. He would move his desk and chair into the semi-circle we needed and then observe what occurred on the green blanket without ever really getting close.



When Martha, our ROE instructor, came for her pre-visits, she brought George, a doll roughly the same size as Baby Claire. Each student was asked to hold George for a short period of time, as if he were a real baby, then pass him on to the next student, until George had travelled through the class. MP always refused to hold George.



After he had been without his medication, and his interest in what was happening in the classroom became more obvious, his interest in the ROE program perked up as well. He would sometimes offer answers to Martha's questions. But the breakthrough day came when Martha asked him if he would like to take a turn on the blanket with Baby Claire. He refused. SM had just been on the blanket so it wasn't a negative stigma that was keeping him away. I rarely interfere when Martha, Baby Claire or Kathleen are in the class unless there's too much noise or someone isn't paying attention. But that morning I cajoled MP onto the blanket with Baby Claire by saying, "Oh come on, MP, give it a shot." He took off his shoes and knelt on the blanket and the pictures tell the rest of the story.

### Case Study Number Two: MM

MM came to our school in January 2005 after being out of the school system for four months. He suffered from, among many other things, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). He was "heavily sedated" (a quote from Bob Radoja, Special Education Consultant) at school on an anti-psychotic medication: Risperidone (an antipsychotic for schizophrenia) and Concerta for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

His history was very disturbing. In Hamilton, he had a previous placement in a Section 20 class which is a branch of the Ministry of Correctional Services providing Care, Treatment, Custodial, and Correctional Services to children in crisis (social, emotional and/or medical). Following a traumatic incident in Hamilton, he was placed in, and then subsequently discharged from, Woodview in the Grand Erie District School Board because his needs were so "critical" and "severe" (from their discharge report) they felt they could no longer serve him effectively.

Because there was no room anywhere else in our system for him; because he was on a waiting list for the Children's Psychiatric Research Institute in London, Ontario; and because he currently lived in Brantford with his father, maternal grandmother and younger sister, he was placed in our Mild

Intellectual Disabilities (MID) Special Education class. On his discharge papers from Woodview it states: "MM and his family have exhausted the resources of this program. His behaviours and the amount of time and resources required to deal with him is detrimental to the treatment of other clients and has compromised our ability to meet their needs." and "The levels of services provided by this program are inadequate in meeting the extremely high needs of this client and his family."

Yet, despite those ominous words, it was decided to place him in our MID class in the morning (despite the fact that all the other children in the class are primary age and size while he is eleven years old and very large for his age). The plan was to integrate him into my Grade 5 class for Music, Visual Arts, Physical Education, and Computer Lab.

MM had the support of an EA every morning and a Child/Youth Worker (CYW) every afternoon, when he came to my class. He required shadowing by an adult at all times because of his violent, aggressive, destructive history and because he was a "runner", frustration could cause him to chose to leave school property at any time. When he left the school property, the police were called to pick him up and this did happen.

He also soiled his pants ("daily and sometimes several times during the day" from the Woodview report) and needed to be cleaned up and changed at school or sent home. There was a conflict of opinion here as to whether this was a legitimate physical problem or a method he had found to be very effective for getting out of doing something he did not want to do.

He screamed out one day on the yards that "the devil was in" him and that he was going to "kill someone". In March, he jumped into a drainage ditch at the edge of the school field and immersed himself to his chest in the cold, dirty water and started drinking it. Another time, he ran into the empty kindergarten room and hid under the tables barking like a dog and refused to come out. One day he came to school with his head shaved and the next day he came with huge gashes on top of his head because the night before he'd taken a razor to his head to get rid of the invisible bit of peach fuzz he didn't like but only succeeded in slicing off a layer or two of skin from the top of his scalp. Another incident had him diving into the recycling dumpster beside the teachers' parking lot and refusing to come out because he'd found a recycled magazine in there that he wanted.

The above incidents have been sited here to demonstrate how extreme his behaviour was and how severely different he was from the rest of the school in general, and the rest of my class in particular.

So it was with serious misgivings that I tried to figure out how to approach his integration with the rest of my class. They are smart and intuitive. The first time MM showed up with the CYW, as well as with the knowledge that he was in the Special Education class in Room 3, would cue them to the fact that he was very different from them. Upon meeting him and attempting to carry on a conversation with him, 100% of the students in my class would know he was nothing like they are.

I explained his presence to them as matter of factly as possible leaving out any details that would label him or prejudice them against him. I merely explained that he would be joining us for certain subjects and that a helper would be coming with him. (They are very used to having an EA in the room because another boy in the class has one assigned to him.)

My class was also used to the students in our Autistic Special Education class, with their individual noises and behaviours, and their gang of Educational Assistants who accompany them everywhere they go. Although MM was not autistic and exhibited no such autistic behaviours, my class knew immediately that something was “wrong” with him “mentally”. One boy questioned, “Does he have mental problems?” without any judgement but simply in an effort to gather information.

Because our classroom was so crowded at lunch with the students from the portable coming in to eat with my class, it was decided that MM would stay in the Special Education class, where he was in the morning anyway, for the lunch period. We asked for volunteers to eat with MM and three boys in the class volunteered to spend their lunch time, on a rotating basis, with him. Interestingly enough, the one boy in the class, SM, who routinely goes down to his room to eat lunch with him, was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Delay. This had the potential of being a very volatile relationship, as neither boy had particularly good coping or social skills that would allow him to interact well with someone who has the problems each one of them individually exhibit. At the time of writing, there had been no problems so I kept my fingers crossed. One of the three other boys had opted out because he realized that MM was not someone who could become a potential friend, although he continued to invite MM to play basketball, wall ball, and soccer with them.

What I observed was that the class seemed to have accepted him but could not socialize with him because he lied to them, telling them his bizarre fantasies and expecting them to accept them as real. For example, during an assembly, he told one of the boys in my class that he bought a backpack at Wal-Mart and it cost him \$1000 or that he gets free shoes from his brother and he would be bringing them to school and giving them to the boys in my class. They could not fathom any of these stories and had a hard time relating to him on his level.

At the time of writing, he had soiled his pants three times in my classroom - during Visual Arts lessons when he was expected to actually do something - and had to leave the room. I did not know if the other students in the class were aware of this or not. Finally, he simply refused to come in for Visual Arts at all. The students were aware that he refused to stay in the classroom during Visual Arts classes, although he would stay for Music and enjoyed Physical Education and the computer lab time even though he was not doing what the rest of the class was during lab time.

According to MM’s EA, one girl in my class made a point of trying to include MM in a game the class was playing outside at recess. The same EA noted that one day MM was having difficulties outside at lunch time and SM tried to help him out by reasoning with him and suggesting an alternative solution for him. This was remarkable on more than one level. The fact that SM, with his own set of problem-solving weaknesses, had evolved his strategies enough to help someone else to overcome a problem, was very encouraging!

The latest major incident, which occurred a few weeks ago, put an end to the integration of MM into my class in the afternoons. At the end of a morning recess, he refused to come back into the school and ran around overturning nine, big, metal, garbage drums owned by Parks and Rec, and placed all over the soccer field and baseball diamond beside our school yard. An empty whisky bottle fell out of one of the drums and MM grabbed it, broke off the neck, and while waving the jagged, broken glass

bottle neck at the EA who was shadowing him at the time, threatened to kill her.

He was suspended for a two-week period and was only allowed back to school in the mornings. He could no longer travel to and from school on the bus or stay at school during the lunch hour so his CYW drove him to school and home again at noon. He constantly ran to the recycling bin, climbed in, refused to come out, and had to be sent home. My students no longer saw him, except outside for fifteen minutes during morning recesses, and so the interaction between them virtually ceased.



### Case Study Number Three: RS

During parent interviews in November following the first report card, one mother was discussing where her son's desk was with respect to other students. She mentioned that her son, was sitting beside MP and that he was being distracted because MP sniffs constantly. He was quick to tell his mom that he did not want to ask me to move him because he did not want to hurt MP's feelings by asking to be

moved away from him because MP was a "special" student and since I, as the teacher, was always nice to him, he, RS, should be nice to him, too. Is adult modeling of emotional literacy effective? It seems to be if this is an example of that.

### Case Study Number Four: SM

SM is a boy who has been with the same sixteen students in progressive classes since he began school at Greenbrier in Grade 1. He was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) and has been assigned an EA for 80% of his school day.

The class wrote a fairly long, difficult Math test and the Level 4 test results were few and far between. SM's test was one of those and when I handed out the tests, I mentioned his achievement of an A to the rest of the class. He was extremely excited and pleased with himself, and I heard voices in the class saying, "Good job, SM" and "Yeah, SM!" - some of them even clapped. That kind of support was essential and, in my opinion, indicative of a high level of emotional literacy. Jealousy, if it was felt at all, was not shown or expressed. Individuals in my class did an excellent job of accepting responsibility for their actions - they knew if they get poor test results, it was their own fault and they rarely missed an opportunity to congratulate one another if they perceived a job well done. Emotional literacy in action?

### The Rest of the School

Observing what went on in my classroom only gave me a glimpse into the microcosm that was each student's life, although it was the largest portion (six and a half hours) of their life where they have to

deal with people other than those in their immediate family. But behaviour in the classroom was so often NOT indicative of behaviour elsewhere. I wanted a bigger picture of the dealings my students were having with other students in the school. So I surveyed other adults who work in the school, both teaching staff and educational assistants, and asked them if they would share with me any incidents they had witnessed that would indicate that the Grade 5 students in my classroom were exhibiting empathy for others.

### **Example One**

The teacher of the Autistic Special Education class wrote, "I have had a couple of students in your room come and ask me if they can help out with our students in some way. Recess buddies was a suggestion. I thought this was great as it was completely voluntary and they realized there were some difficult behaviours in the room and yet they still wanted to help out. These were students who had not previously been involved with our Autistic kids and didn't know me that well and yet they volunteered anyway. I think that's great and I'm looking into a way to include them in a buddy program."

### **Example Two**

The Grade 1 teacher told me that the three lunch time helpers in her room, TS, RS, and GR (all boys) were excellent workers and very patient with the younger students. They stayed behind and cleaned up the classroom, and continued to do this even as the weather was improving and going outside to play was a huge draw for ten and eleven year old boys.

### **Example Three**

The Grade 7 teacher mentioned that the overall tone at lunch time was far more positive and the students in my class were much more responsive. (Unfortunately, the students coming in from the portable were not as receptive to rules and requests from student monitors in the lunch room but we worked on that!) One of the teachers doing hall lunch duty who walked up and down and monitored the classroom during their 20 minute eating period, was physically disabled and the students were always respectful of, and responsive to her.

### **Example Four**

My class was paired up with both JK/SK classes for Reading Buddies. This meant they worked with 3 to 5 year olds, reading to them, showing them pictures in books, helping them colour and complete work sheets, helping them dress and getting boots on in winter for morning recess, and anything else the kindergarten teachers asked them to do. They did an excellent job, even with the most difficult students (and there were at least three).

### **Conclusions**

Most of the students in my class came to me from previous grades and from their homes, with excellent behaviour, good self-discipline, polite manners, strong work ethics, motivation to achieve, and a



solid sense of the value of education. With all that already in place, the ROE program was an outside (of the regular classroom curriculum) method of cementing the good things and trying to weed out any bad. Identifying bullying behaviour is essential - especially those students who don't believe they ARE bullying.

Looking back at my original question and using it as the criteria for evaluation, I would say the emotional literacy of my students,

although pre-existing and observable when they arrived in my classroom in September 2004, was definitely honed by the ROE program. Their empathic skills were sharpened and they became much more aware of how their individual behaviour was affecting others in the class.

Referring back to the definition of Emotional Literacy according to the ROE website:

“Roots of Empathy students learn to identify, label and talk about feelings. As they become more aware and comfortable with their feelings, they are given the freedom to talk about their feelings and to know that they are respected. The children read stories that talk about fears, or about being patient, or about how it feels to give up a favourite blanket. The children's ability to express their feelings helps to validate themselves as individuals. It also requires them to validate others as individuals, by identifying with another person's feelings and thoughts. “

The fact that students felt safe enough with their peers to share their emotional stories and tears about losing loved ones and pets - demonstrating raw emotion - was a testament to the ROE's ability to put them in touch with their emotions and to express them.

The program also encourages the development of an inclusive society:

“In the ROE classroom children practise skills of social inclusion and learn to value different opinions and different pathways to competent parenting. Children go beyond identifying and valuing differences and pull together the common threads of shared and lived experience to arrive at a concept of human solidarity.”

The students' overall inclusion of MP and SM (with his PDD), and their reaction to the introduction of MM (with his extreme behaviours and ODD) into the classroom proved to me that the students had clearly and demonstrably benefited from experiencing the Roots Of Empathy program.