

BUILDING GLOBAL CITIZENS THROUGH ENCOUNTERS WITH DIFFERENCE

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Abstract

This action research concerns itself with the development of boys as global citizens. It looks closely at new actions aimed at improving attributes of global citizenship; specifically empathy and respect for diversity. In terms of how educators develop empathy and respect for diversity in boys, there is growing consensus that human-centred approaches are considered best practice. When boys are placed in direct contact with differing groups or cultures, there is opportunity for them to develop attributes of global citizenship. During the 2015-2016 academic year, one Grade 8 class connected with a group of younger Developmentally Delayed (DD) students from inner-city schools within the city of Toronto. There were 3 scheduled visits and the boys spent time with younger DD students in conversation and cooperative group activities. Through multiple interactions with DD students, Grade 8 boys developed important attributes of global citizenship and recognized that despite their individual differences, humans share similar experiences and emotions. Grade 8 boys also recognized that despite their differences, humans are entitled to individual rights and freedoms. This action research validates contact theory and encourages personal interaction between differing groups of students as a pedagogical tool that effectively develops boys as global citizens.

Introduction

In January 2015, Bill and Melinda Gates (2015) shared their 2015 Annual Letter “*Our Big Bet for the Future*” with the world. Their letter described how breakthroughs in healthcare, farming, banking and education would help make the world a better place. To deliver such breakthroughs, however, two important factors are required: innovation in technology and informed, passionate global citizens. According to the letter, “the more

global citizens there are, and the more active and effective they are, the more progress the world will make” (last paragraph). While there are many theoretical approaches to increasing global awareness and developing attributes of global citizenship, there continues to be concern around what approaches work most effectively, in practice.

In *Understanding the Global Experience*, Thomas Arcaro (2010) provides a preliminary thought on what it means to be, and become, a global citizen. He writes, “Global Citizens understand, at a fundamental level, that all humans are born with basic rights; they share one planet, and thus one fate” (p. 4). This prelude points to a major thread woven throughout all definitions of global citizenship, which references our common humanity and the need to become more tolerant of, respectful towards and interconnected with others (Nussbaum 2002; Betts, 2003; UNESCO, 2015). As educators interested in the development of boys’ as global citizens, we believe that boys require two important attributes to become more respectful and interconnected: empathy and respect for diversity. In order to begin our investigation into the development of boys as global citizens, we chose to investigate the following research question:

How can personal interaction with developmentally delayed individuals impact Grade 8 boys’ empathy and respect for diversity?

Developmentally delayed individuals typically function at least 2 to 3 years behind their chronological cohort for a variety of reasons, including diagnoses of Down’s Syndrome, Autism and severe brain injuries. We used the descriptors DD and Special Needs’ interchangeably.

Literature Review

According to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (UN News Centre, 2015), empathy represents one of the most important attributes an individual must have in order to reduce hatred and injustice in the world. Empathy refers to one’s ability to recognize another’s perspective and feel genuine emotion with regard to another’s experiences (Gerdes, Lietz & Segal, 2011). In what he declares an alarming “empathy gap,” Ban Ki-moon is critical of an apparent process of desensitization, “I am worried that a certain numbness and helplessness may be setting in as people witness atrocity after atrocity”

(para. 4). Building empathy in our youth is one way to reverse such numbness to violence, injustice and brutality, and enable humans to live together in peace and harmony. Bachen, Hernandez-Ramos and Raphael (2012) cite empathy as an important attribute of global citizenship because it allows people to understand and share the feelings of others across national borders and cultural divides. The generally agreed upon definition of empathy includes two aspects: (i) the similar emotional feeling as another is experiencing it and (ii) the cognitive recognition of the factors or context that led to the feeling. If either of these aspects is missing, empathy is not experienced (Davis, 1980). In recent years, the notion of empathy has been reviewed in neuroscience suggesting that affective sharing and cognitive processing can be empirically measured (Gerdes, Lietz & Segal, 2011). If boys can develop the attribute of empathy at an early stage, we believe they will be in a position to advocate for a world that promotes and values tolerance, respect and justice between people in the future.

Respect for diversity is another important value and attribute of global citizenship. In 2000, the United Nations (UN) adopted the *Millennium Declaration*, which cited tolerance and respect as one of the fundamental features of living in the twenty-first century. The Declaration states:

Human beings must respect one other, in all their diversity of belief, culture and language. Difference within and between societies should be neither feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity. A culture of peace and dialogue among all civilizations should be actively promoted. (UN General Assembly, 2000; chapter. 1)

The objective of respect for diversity is reinforced in the framework of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which supports the right of all children to grow up in surroundings characterized by equality, free from any form of discrimination due to their “race, color, sex language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status” (UN General Assembly, 1989; Article 2).

In terms of how educators facilitate the development of empathy and respect for diversity, there is growing consensus that a human-centred approach is considered best practice. Research shows that a person's brain activity will mimic another's, through "mirror neurons," when individuals are observing or involved in an activity with another person (Beilock, 2015; Gerdes, Lietz & Segal, 2011). In essence, our brains are capable of giving us a tantamount, genuine empathic experience simply by spending time with others. Likewise, in addressing the question, "how can education effectively promote respect for diversity and tolerance," Scherto Gill argues:

...a learning community is a place of encounter and there must be formal and informal spaces for encountering differences at many levels – race, gender, religion, culture, social class, physical and intellectual abilities... Encounters are ideal for developing respect for each other and for cultivating a sense of belonging (Gill, 2015; pg. 3).

Gordon Allport (1954) found that prejudice is reduced in direct relationship to the amount and type of contact that occurs between differing groups or cultures. If boys could thus be placed in places of encounter where they can make contact with people that are different, then they might begin to develop the building blocks of empathy and respect for diversity. While Allport's *contact theory* originally posed a solution to resolving ethnic differences and prejudices, our project focuses on differences in physical and intellectual ability. Accordingly, it is important to determine whether or not attributes of empathy and respect for diversity can be developed during encounters with people of different physical or intellectual abilities.

Research suggests that Allport's contact theory has been increasingly validated in the context of disabilities. Diamond, Hestenes and O'Connor (1994) found that "daily opportunities that normally developing children have to observe and interact with classmates who have disabilities provide them with a better understanding of disability" (p. 70). Slininger, Sherrill, and Jankowski (2000) came to a similar conclusion when they compared attitudes of children toward peers with severe developmental delays who used

wheelchairs. In their work, they concluded that there was improvement in attitudes of students towards peers in wheelchairs after they were integrated into the contact class.

For boys to fully embrace their encounters with developmentally delayed students, we also felt that they needed to find purpose in these encounters. Adam Cox (2011) conveys, in *Locating Significance in the Lives of Boys*, that for adolescent boys, “finding significance is also at the heart of a boy’s capacity for empathy” (p. 5). Boys often find their significance in being of service to others and “giving back” to the community.

The enhancement of empathy within the context of a community service program is reinforced by Gerdes, Lietz and Segal (2011), who suggest that to build empathy in people, a community service program should be operationalized in the area of social justice to heighten participants’ understanding of others’ experiences or experience the full extent of empathy. Our research project created a service-based context for boys, which included a number of opportunities for boys to help others. For example, boys helped students with disabilities prepare lunch, play sports, dance and sing. Considering this compelling research, we were convinced that creating spaces and opportunities for encounters and contact with others who are different, within the context of a community service program, would be the most effective pedagogical approach to building boys as global citizens.

Research Context

Upper Canada College is an independent, academically competitive school (K to 12) for boys in the culturally and economically diverse city of Toronto, Canada. Though the cost of tuition is high, financial assistance is available to eligible families, which helps diversify the socio-economic milieu of the school populace. In addition, Upper Canada College offers a boarding program, which brings a global mix of cultures to the school community. As a school that specializes in boys’ education, our mission statement asserts: we have the expertise, resources, faculty and facilities to develop the potential and awaken the ambition in each and every boy.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, a community service program was piloted in which all Grade 8 civics classes connected to a group of younger, special needs' students from schools in primarily inner-city areas in the city. There were 3 scheduled visits for each class and the intent was to spend time with younger students in conversation and cooperative group activities.

This program, already structured, seemed ideal as a framework to facilitate the development of empathy and respect for diversity in adolescents. The logistical kinks had been worked out and a relationship with the partner schools had already been established. By reorienting the program to facilitate the development of empathy and respect for diversity, however, we felt we could capture any changes in the boys as the relationships with the younger, special needs' students developed over time.

The participants were 23, Grade 8 boys from the same civics' class. We presented parents with the outline of the project (purpose, process and ethical considerations) at curriculum night. Permission forms signed by a parent and the boy were then collected. As part of the "informed consent" process, we assured participants and their parents/guardians that any information or personal details gathered during our research is confidential and that no identifying information would be published or made public.

The Action

To investigate our research question, we employed an action research methodology. Action research is used in real situations, rather than experimental studies, since its primary focus is on solving real problems. It is chosen when circumstances require flexibility and the involvement of the people in the research design.

In our action research, boys and their parents were introduced to the project as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the diversity of individuals in our society, in this case individuals with developmental delays. Boys were asked to complete a pre-action survey and participate in three meetings/activities with developmentally delayed students. The visits included table activities such as drawing, playing cards and reading stories, lunch together and time in the gym or outside for physical play. Each visit was

one and a half hours in duration, and expenses were covered by our school. There was a large group debrief following the initial visit in which students were asked about their first impressions, what they felt the younger students may have been feeling and if they had ever experienced the same feeling. This direct questioning was used to encourage boys to connect to their own experiences and feelings – to give boys a chance to reflect and practice emotional awareness prior to the focus group interviews at the end.

Following the 3 visits, boys completed a post-action survey and participated in a group interview to share their experiences. Data from the results of the intervention were collected and analyzed, and the findings were interpreted to determine how successful the action was.

Data Collection

Unlike positivist research designs that utilize quantitative methods, this action research employed qualitative data collection strategies to understand the social phenomenon under review by entering the participants' world and obtaining their perspectives and meanings. Accordingly, the data collection techniques used in this research included; (i) group interviews, (ii) online survey/student reflection, and (iii) field notes.

Group Interviews

The principle source of data in this action research was qualitative group interviews. We assembled students into small groups of five and asked structured and semi-structured interview questions. Structured interviews were undertaken to seek specific points of information that were directly related to empathy and respect for diversity. Each structured interview was followed by a semi-structured interview. This enabled a degree of flexibility in regard to the remainder of the interview process.

Online survey/student reflections

To supplement group interviews, qualitative online surveys and student reflections were carried out. One pre-project and one post-project online survey were carried out to measure each student's level of empathy and respect for diversity at the different stages

of the action research. These online surveys ranked students' thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations (empathy), and their perceptions and experiences with disabilities (respect for diversity) on a five-point, Likert rating scale. During the action research, students also completed one post-project reflection to convey their thoughts about the experience through writing, visual display, comic strip, short video, song or other medium of their choice.

Field Notes

Our field notes provided personalized detail on the circumstance and settings of the other data collection techniques, as well as an opportunity to verify and supplement data. Field notes were taken in two ways. First, personal notes were taken throughout the action research project to provide a repository, whereby certain descriptions about, or actions and decisions that affected the direction and focus of data collection, were articulated. Second, observational videos were recorded during each group visit, which were later used to review, and measure, levels of interaction and engagement between boys and the children with special needs.

Data Analysis

In an effort to bring meaning and structure to the data collected, we followed an "interpretational analysis" approach by first identifying patterns and themes in our data, before identifying any significance from the action research project itself. To this end, we recorded and transcribed each group interview so that we could develop a thematic coding system and organize our data into categories or themes. We developed a similar coding technique for the observational videos we recorded. As part of our analysis, a code-based protocol was developed for the videos to categorize student interaction and engagement between boys and the children with special needs.

Finally, we undertook a statistical analysis of the pre-project and post-project online survey results. In particular, student responses were quantified based on the five-point rating scale to calculate group averages. We then compared averages between the pre- and post-surveys to identify trends or changes in the student responses recorded. The

post-project reflection was analyzed in conjunction with each student's individual online survey results to confirm the trends or changes observed in the surveys.

Discussion of Results

Pre- and Post-Action Survey

To generate a baseline for each student's level of empathy and respect for diversity, and to identify any changes that occurred, we asked each boy to complete a pre- and post-action survey. The survey consisted of 27 statements; each rated on a five-point Likert scale from 'Never' to 'Always'. We quantified the response categories using a generic response continuum (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, and 5=Always) for statements favourable to the construct of empathy and respect for diversity. For statements unfavourable to the construct of empathy and respect for diversity, the continuum was reversed.

Results of the pre- and post-action surveys were compared to determine if any impact, or changes, occurred. Figure 1 illustrates the change in results between pre- and post-action surveys for the class as a whole. We identified an observable trend favourable to the construct of empathy and respect for diversity in students after the interaction with Developmentally Delayed (DD) students took place.

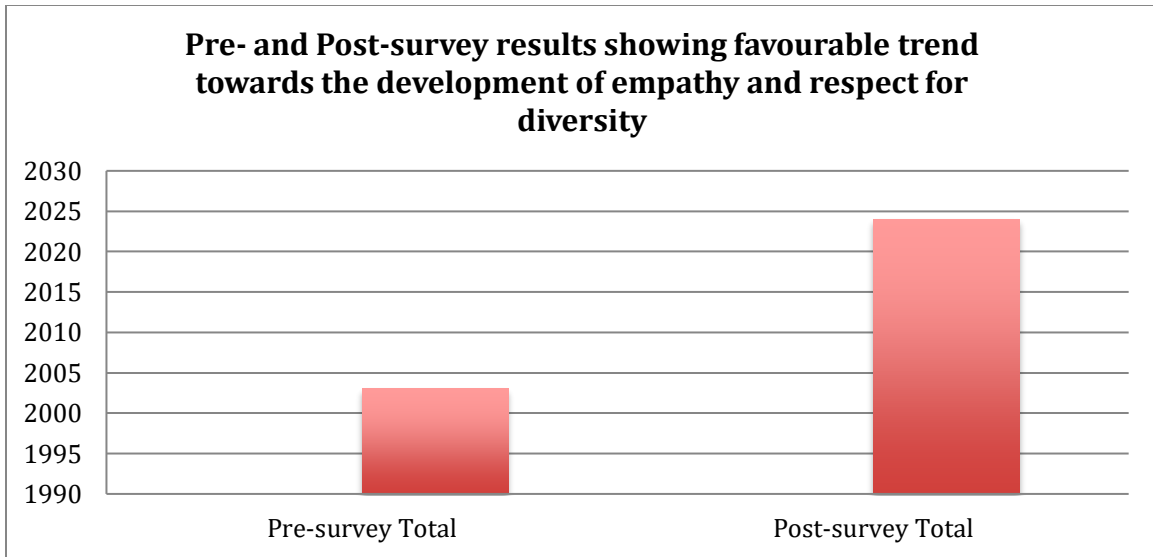


Figure 1: Change in result between pre- and post-action research surveys

Though survey results provided us with a general impression of how the interactions with DD students impacted the Grade 8 boys, they did not provide any voice or insight into boys’ perspectives, opinions or attitudes. Accordingly, it was important to complement the pre- and post-action survey results with focus group interviews.

Focus group interviews

Our focus group interviews affirmed many of the results in our pre- and post-action survey analysis. In particular, we observed that boys not only experienced empathy for others during their interactions, they also developed respect and adoration for the special needs students they spent time with as the program progressed.

(i) Empathy, how boys shared similar feelings:

In the context of empathy, we identified that Grade 8 boys were able to demonstrate how they shared similar feelings and were able to recognize and relate to the emotions that their special needs’ buddy was experiencing. Student I said: “When I saw how happy she was, it gave me joy and I was just really happy for her.” Another student stated:

When we went in the gym and we started to run around, I could really tell he was excited and that made me really excited too...I was happy just because he was happy (Student P).

We also identified boys who were able to recognize, and contextualize, the emotions that their buddy was experiencing:

He was kind of scared and I kind of know what he was feeling because being around kids who are a lot bigger than you is sometimes harder so I know what he was feeling (Student D).

Student K stated: "I've experienced something like that...I can relate to how he felt."

(ii) Empathy, how boys recognized the context leading to the feelings:

In line with the constructs of empathy, boys spoke of experiencing similar feelings and "cognitive perspective taking" while spending time with their younger, special needs buddy. In our focus group interviews, students demonstrated that this was, in fact, enhanced as a result of their interactions. "This experience opened my eyes to how they must feel or how they would see the world...it really helped me connect with them." (Student G) Through cognitive perspective taking, Student C was able to relate and empathize with his buddy's behaviour:

He was more off to the sidelines...he was kind of playing by himself, humming to himself and I could kind of relate to that because when I was about his age, I didn't really want to fit in with everyone else. I kind of just wanted to be by myself, you know just draw on a piece of paper or something like that.

While it is difficult to determine whether or not Grade 8 boys 'developed' empathy during their interactions with DD students, it is apparent that they "experienced" empathy during the program. In our opinion, this experience helped Grade 8 boys understand that despite their differences, they share similar feelings and concerns with many different people. We believe this appreciation is what helps develop boys into global citizens.

(iii) Respect for Diversity, how boys discovered common humanity:

In the context of respect for diversity, we identified that Grade 8 boys enhanced their recognition of common humanity and developed tolerance for the rights and freedoms of others. In terms of common humanity, Student U explained his experience in the following way:

For me (the experience) was significant because I learned that just because you have trouble communicating, go through pain or just have any kind of disability, it doesn't mean that you're not like everybody else. My buddy was a normal kid, just like any other.

Student M recognized his common humanity and was able to surmount a stereotype that he had prior to the interactions:

It changed my understanding about how people with special needs feel or see the world because, I had a stereotype about them, I thought that they functioned completely differently, but what I found out is they're just different in some small way and for the most part they're the same as us.

This ability to overcome previous stereotypes and prejudices through contact and interaction was further articulated by Student D:

I thought before that they couldn't do stuff that people without disabilities could do, but I've changed because they can do as much as any regular person – they are the exact same, it just might take a little longer.

Student F said:

The experience changed my view on how special needs students feel and see the world. Before I thought that they weren't capable of all the stuff mentally and physically, but when I actually saw the little kids playing and doing all the stuff that I would have done in grade 1, 2 and 3, it brought a light to the fact that we're actually the same.

(iv) Respect for Diversity, how boys developed tolerance:

In addition to the recognition of common humanity, a second theme of tolerance emerged as students were asked about issues of equality and diversity. In the words of Student T:

This experience has really changed my opinion. I feel like they should be given the same rights that “normal” people would. They act fine with other people and they seem fine.

According to student O, DD people deserve equal pay for equal work:

I definitely don't think they should be paid less, I think equal is probably the best way because they're putting in the same amount of work as everybody else and they can get the same amount of work done as everybody else they should be paid the same amount.

Further examples of tolerance emerged in the context of rights to marry and vote. Student G put it this way:

I think people with special needs should be able to vote and get married. Inside they're not all that different from us. They have an opinion on who they would want to vote for. They can always have someone they love, so they should be able to marry. So we get to vote, so they should be able to vote too, because they could have an opinion. And also, if they're able to vote their views might get more represented in the elections and the government.

Despite such favourable results, a number of students continue to believe that students with special needs require specialized assistance and should not be wholly integrated into regular classrooms. Based on their interactions, Grade 8 boys appreciated the value that specialized, and separated, programs for DD students might offer in terms of helping them grow and develop into adulthood. As Student A concluded:

Like anyone else they shouldn't be discriminated against, but they should definitely be treated a little differently because they have different needs and that results in things that they have to have in order to live, such as specialized schools...because it will help them learn better.

We believe the data from our focus group interviews affirm the favourable trend identified in our pre- and post-action surveys. Through multiple interactions with DD students, Grade 8 boys were able to develop important attributes of global citizenship and recognize that despite their individual differences, humans share similar experiences and emotions. Grade 8 boys were also able to recognize that despite their differences, humans are entitled to individual rights and freedoms. While it is difficult to determine a causal relationship between the interactions with DD students and the development of global citizenship, our program certainly allowed boys to experience people who are different and enhance their ability to interact with difference in a positive and respectful manner.

Conclusion

The results of our action research affirm that interaction with DD students is an effective approach to developing boys as global citizens. By creating formal and informal spaces for encountering differences, the boys developed a better understanding of our shared humanity and improved their attitudes towards peers with special needs. Our survey results and focus group interviews confirmed that boys not only experienced empathy and care during their interactions, but they also developed respect for diversity as the program progressed. We observed an increase in the measures of empathy and respect for diversity increase after boys spent time with students who have special needs. Their words supported our observations, providing insight into their empathic feelings, understanding of another's perspective, and respect for diversity. Inspired by the work of Bachen, Hernandez-Ramos and Raphael (2012) on empathy and global citizenship, Student P came to realize: "He was happy about stuff and I was happy because he was happy."

Implications for future practice

While there are many approaches to teaching citizenship or global education, the results of our action research bolster Allport's (1954) contact theory, and prove that interaction is key to authentically and deeply developing empathy and respect for diversity in boys. The real-life interaction, though requiring some logistical attention, is one that engages students on many levels and is a meaningful pedagogical technique in developing boys as global citizens. As we develop our future practice around boys as global citizens, we will continue to develop spaces of encounter wherein our students can experience difference. While the differences highlighted in this action research were based around intellectual abilities, our future practice will begin to broaden such differences and facilitate interactions with students who differ in race, gender, religion, ethnicity and physical abilities. By broadening our practice to incorporate more differences and more spaces for interaction, we widen the opportunities to develop boys as global citizens in a number of different contexts.

As we begin to formally adopt contact with differences as one pillar of our teaching practice, we will also consider expanding the duration of contact and facilitating more meaningful contact. We discovered through our research that creating a space for interaction is not enough. In some instances, students clustered together and did not fully interact with their DD student partners. It was necessary to encourage our students to engage with their buddies and not "shy away" from the interaction. While a number of variables exist that may prevent students from experiencing a meaningful connection (i.e. personality, communication issues, gender differences, etc.), we believe that a well-structured and interactive program can help engage students more meaningfully. As well, more time together helps facilitated deeper connections.

Implications for future research

As educators focused on helping boys make a positive difference in the world, we were inspired to see the favourable results of our action research. Nevertheless, we would be interested in investigating differences at many levels, such as race, gender, religion, or ethnicity. We would also consider facilitating contact with students from a similar

demographic, though having one fundamental difference (i.e. gender or nationality). We feel that this may yield even greater development of empathy and respect for diversity as they may be able to better concentrate on their commonalities instead of their multi-faceted differences. From here, we might consider escalating the levels of differences and reflecting on the results in a staged manner.

Additional research might focus on different aspects of empathy (i.e. emotion contagion, empathic accuracy, emotion regulation) or the multiple strands of respect (i.e. abilities, qualities, achievements). Ideally, a more expansive experiential model of creating circumstances to build and develop empathy and respect for diversity in adolescents could be replicated and the global traits of empathy and respect in these students would become entrenched, lifelong character traits that could be transferred to other vulnerable groups, and indeed all other humans.

Reflection Statement

Throughout the experience, from inception to conclusion, we recognized the importance of a model of action research that allowed for continual support, both for/from each other and from the broader community of educators. Knowing that the action undertaken would (and did) present questions (of method, process, deadlines, our own interpretations, and, even, if we were on the right track), working as a team allowed us to engage in the research, explore the topic and share the journey together.

We are thankful to the IBSC, Di Laycock and Laura Sabo for the structure and support to feel reinvigorated professionally through the action research; delve more deeply into an area of interest, construct a way to analyze our observations and, with pleasant surprise, note the impact it had on our students. Their voices gave meaning and depth to the inquiry.

Similar to the boys in the study who experienced empathy and developed respect for special needs' students, we experienced empathy and gained renewed respect for the process of learning. As educators, this has led to a reminder of what students face over

the course of a year and to a recommitment to creating experiences for boys to develop into their best selves.

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