Abstract

During the autumn term, 2015, nine 15- to 18-year-old students from Blue Ridge School in St. George, Virginia took part in an action research project to determine the effects of repeated interaction between the students and the recipients of their community service. Qualitative data collected during the action research indicated empathetic responses from the students of each type: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy and compassionate empathy. Not only did the boys come to understand the plight of the people they were serving, but they also developed an emotional interest that compelled them to help.

Introduction

At Blue Ridge School we provide many opportunities for our boys to participate in service-oriented projects that range from fund raising ventures and aiding charitable organizations, to direct participation in the community food pantry located on our campus. Most of our boys will cooperatively, and even enthusiastically, participate at the request and direction of the faculty. While the boys possess cognitive empathy, however, and understand that poverty can have a detrimental effect on the poor, there seems to be a lack of emotional and compassionate empathy toward the beneficiaries of their efforts. Once the job is done, the beneficiaries and their circumstances seem quickly forgotten.

While community service projects tend to increase a student's awareness and understanding of another's situation, and thus have an effect on the development of cognitive empathy, my observations are that most projects without opportunity for personal interaction do little to affect the development of emotional or compassionate empathy.
It is this lack of emotional and compassionate empathy in our boys that was addressed in this action research. The literature supports the notion that the development of moral character may be influenced through education and experience, and that empathetic concern for others increases toward people who are known and whose needs are apparent. It was anticipated, therefore, that directly associating our boys with the beneficiaries of their community service would have an effect on their emotional and compassionate empathy.

The question upon which this action research was based is: *How may repeated interactions with the beneficiaries of community service affect the development of empathy in high school boys?*

**Literature Review**

Blue Ridge School is committed to the development of young men of moral character who are willing to treat others as they would like to be treated, even if it requires personal sacrifice. A prerequisite to this commitment is the belief that moral character can be taught, and, although some components of moral character are apparently innate (Szalavitz and Perry, 2010), character development may be influenced by certain factors. In *Education for Values*, David McClelland (1982) proposed the following as major factors in influencing character and moral development: heredity, early childhood experience, modeling by important adults and older youth, peer influence, the general physical and social environment, the communications media, the teaching of schools and other institutions, and specific situations and roles that elicit corresponding behavior. While some of these factors lie beyond a school’s control, it is able to control factors such as teaching and modeling by adults, and, to some extent, the physical and social environment.

What then is moral character? Seligman and Peterson (cited in Tough, 2003) define character “as a set of abilities or strengths that are very much changeable – entirely malleable, in fact. They are skills that you can learn; they are skills you can practice; and they are skills you can teach” (p. 59). Attributes often associated with moral character include virtues such as empathy, courage and honesty. In *Empathy and Moral Development* Martin Hoffman (2000) writes, “Empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible” (p. 3). Further, Frans De Waal (2009) states, “Empathy is an automated response over which we have limited control. We can suppress it, mentally block it or fail to act on it, but except for a tiny percentage of humans… no one is emotionally immune to another’s situation” (p. 3).
According to psychologist Paul Ekman (2003), a pioneer in the study of emotions, there are three main forms of empathy: cognitive, emotional and compassionate. Cognitive empathy (also known as perspective–taking) allows someone to know how another is feeling or what another person might be thinking. Emotional or affective empathy allows someone to actually feel the way another feels. This depends to some extent on mirror neurons in the brain that tune us in to another’s emotional state (Iacoboni, 2009). Compassionate empathy compels us to help. Ekman believes that people “must have cognitive empathy to achieve either of the other forms, but we need not have emotional empathy in order to have compassionate empathy” (p. 180).

If compassionate empathy compels us to help, who then are the likely recipients of this help? According to Roman Krznaric (2014), “When we do not know people, when their lives are far away and unfamiliar, our capacity to care about them is more difficult to ignite” (p. 42). Put another way, “We are more likely to feel empathetic concern for those for whom we especially care, and whose needs are salient” (Snow and Trivigno, 2014, p. 61).

Stereotypes suggests that girls and women tend to be more caring, more nurturing and more in tune with other people’s feelings than are boys and men. These stereotypes, however, are contested in the literature. “Empathy is not a gendered skill—it’s a human skill,” notes McLaren (2013, p. 19). Many studies have been done to determine differences in empathy between males and females, but the results have varied according to the age of the subjects, the methods of data collection, the interpretation of empathy, and the degree of masculinity or femininity of the subjects (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987; Eliot, 2009). Margaret Martin (2012) states that “the actual research shows substantial gender differences only when the results are based on self-reports” (p. 190). Michael Gurian (2006), however, believes that boys, in particular, will respond with empathy to a situation once they have determined that empathy is required.

The literature supports the notion that the development of moral character may be influenced through education and experience, and that empathetic concern for others increases toward people who are known and observed and whose needs are apparent.
Research Context

Blue Ridge School is a boarding school for boys in St. George, Virginia for Grades 9 to 12. It is a wonderfully diverse private school that serves young men who respond well to small class sizes, a structured environment, and a strong sense of community. Our faculty challenges each boy to reach beyond his current level of performance and expectation to discover his potential. We develop character by nurturing qualities such as integrity, courage, perseverance and empathy.

Nine students, ranging in age from 15 to 18 years old and in Grades 10, 11, and 12, participated in this action research project. All were members of my environmental science class. We offer environmental science as an upper level elective, and it is an interdisciplinary course devoted to achieving a sustainable world, i.e. a world that provides a respectable standard of living for all of its inhabitants. It is a class that addresses the concept of boys as global citizens.

During orientation prior to the start of school, each student enrolled in the environmental science class and a parent were asked to read a document that provided information about the research project. They were informed of the project objective and methods of data collection, and were given assurances that all information collected would remain confidential. They were also told that participation in the research would be voluntary, and that non-participation would not be detrimental to the student. The parent and their son were then required to sign a document indicating that they had read and understood the information, and that the parent had given permission for their son to participate.

The Action

The Blue Ridge School Food Pantry functions as a secondary food distribution point associated with a local Episcopalian church. We provide food for residents of Greene County, Virginia who are not desperately impoverished, but who are in need of assistance. Anyone is welcomed. There are no discriminating qualifications regarding who will receive assistance.

The Pantry operates out of our chapel on Saturday mornings between 9:30 and 11:00. There are about ten regular visitors who vary in age, gender, and education. They receive food for themselves and their families, and on occasion, for other families who may not be able to attend for various
reasons that are usually health related. We provide enough food to feed an average of forty children
and adults each Saturday.

The boys’ participation in the action research project involved working in our chapel on Saturday
mornings packing food into bags and carrying the bags to the recipients’ vehicles. There were
about four boys working each Saturday during the fall months. During that time they interacted
with our visitors, gained a more personal understanding of their plight, and began to recognize
them as people rather than remote statistics.

Through the same Episcopalian church, the boys were introduced to a local family whose members
were suffering from serious physical disabilities and economic constraints. The father of this
family spoke to the boys to raise awareness regarding his rare, debilitating and life-threatening
condition. The boys responded by organizing a fund-raiser to prevent the eviction of his family
from their mobile home.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Prior to the start of the action, each of the participants wrote an essay that explained their
understanding of hunger and poverty in the United States and the world, and what they believed
to be the conditions that allow hunger and poverty to exist. They also described their image of poor
and undernourished people. Once the action was completed, the boys re-read their essays and then
discussed how their perceptions had changed, if at all, and why.

Immediately following the participants’ interaction with the people they met through their
community service, each wrote a brief summary of their impressions, feelings and reactions. The
summaries were read and analyzed for recurring themes relevant to this research. I also recorded
my observations throughout the action and compared them to the records of the participants.

I collected statements from the participants’ records that directly reflected their thoughts, opinions,
and experiences. Phrases were categorized and then analyzed to determine how each boy’s
exposure to the beneficiaries of their community service may have affected empathy.
**Discussion of Results**

The boys were always willing to participate in the activities at our food pantry, despite the early start on a Saturday morning. One boy stated, “Work like this to me is incredibly fulfilling,” while another noted, “I like helping the needy and catching a glimpse of their lives….” Yet another said, “I find the whole idea of the food pantry to be quite beneficial both to those giving and to those receiving. The experience is humbling.”

*Indications of Empathetic Response (cognitive)*

Although the boys were of different nationalities, ethnicities and color, there was no apparent resentment or animosity from the white, rural visitors. On the contrary, our visitors tended to be friendly, social people despite their present situation. The boys noticed this and the underlying concern on the visitors’ faces. “People have a pre-image of hillbillies in a trailer with three teeth and a pit bull, but that’s not always the case.” The boys were surprised and impressed by our visitors’ apparent resilience and their lack of self-pity. “Some of them are very optimistic,” said one, while another boy stated, “I was impressed by some of the people and how much they give up to take care of themselves and their families.” “Overall, seeing these people makes me think about how petty my problems are.” One of my foreign students said, “I can know [learned] from [their] conversations that some of them [are] trapped by any [all] kinds of physically [physical] issue[s].”

*Indications of Empathetic Response (emotional)*

Except for some particularly gregarious boys, most participants’ tendencies were to focus on packing the food into containers rather than interacting with the visitors. However, there were occasions when the boys sat in pews toward the back of the chapel with our visitors, quietly observing and listening to their conversations. The boys were disturbed by stories of marital abuse and other personal tragedies that have contributed to our visitors’ current state of affairs. One boy remarked that “A woman who I saw at the food pantry, who my heart really leapt out to, was a woman who was beaten by her husband, and now had a patch over her eye. I was so sad the moment I saw her I almost wanted to leap out and hug her, and tell her it was going to be all right.”
**Indications of Empathetic Response (compassionate)**

Through the same church that organized the food pantry, we met a young family with two small children who live in a nearby trailer. The father of the family was thirty years old and suffered from a degenerative neurological disorder that resulted from a work-related injury. His wife suffered from back injuries caused by a physically abusive ex-husband. The boys were eager to help them. One student said, “I can feel how much he loves his family. I think we should keep supporting him,” and another shared, “I hope we can help them with more than just the rent.” Despite his disability, the father visited my class and spoke to the boys. His message was to appreciate the things you have because they can be quickly lost. The boys listened with rapt attention to the man’s story, and were moved by his physical appearance and medical condition. One boy said, “I felt like the speech he gave us was interesting, but it was sad,” while another remarked, “They are a very kind people who have just run into some hard times. I hope we can help them,” and “[The family] had a profound effect on me about people who don’t have as much as we do.”

**Indications of a Skeptical Response**

The boys had difficulty reconciling the fact that our visitors were not obviously destitute. They were not homeless. They drove cars. They had large families. Yet the boys remained willing to help. “I think [the] food pantry is really necessary for these poor people around us [but] most of them aren’t that poor.” The boys were concerned that some might have been taking advantage of an opportunity to receive free food and could have been supplying friends and neighbors. “At times I felt like they could have been lying to get extra food. However, I believe we are doing a good thing.” One boy struggled with the fact that there were not certain conditions or qualifications required to visit the pantry. “Should there be some kind of etiquette or even a documented code of conduct…?”
Conclusion

As we interacted with our less fortunate visitors, I took note of the boys’ acknowledgement of our visitors’ poverty relative to their own economic status, the concern that the boys had for our visitors’ well being, and of their willingness to help. Their responses indicated a clear understanding of, and in some cases a feeling for, the stress and discomfort suffered by our visitors, as well as a desire to help them to alleviate their discomfort, even when there was some doubt in the boys’ minds.

It was evident that the interaction of the boys in this project with the recipients of their community service elicited an empathetic response. I did not observe a case in which a boy was completely unaffected by his experience, although the boys’ responses varied in intensity, and included representations of different types of empathy. Responses also varied from boy to boy. Some boys were profoundly affected; others less so. One stated, “I have gone to the food pantry a lot these last two months, and I feel like every time I go I can make a difference, an impact on these people’s lives. It makes me feel better helping the underprivileged. These people have changed my perspective on life, that we need to help others, and giving is the best gift.” Another said, “It serves its purpose. I really don’t think it makes a massive difference for these people, but it’s certainly a welcome thought to know that we can contribute to their wellbeing.”

Implications for Future Practice

If it is our intent to encourage a comprehensive development of character in our students, I believe that it is important to include empathy in each of its forms as part of that effort. Toward that end, it is necessary to establish community service projects that allow the student participants to interact with the recipients of their service. Packing food into plastic bags to be sent to impoverished countries or ladling food into bowls at a soup kitchen are certainly worthwhile endeavors. They provide an opportunity for adults to encourage and to model altruistic behavior, but effective character education requires the same students to frequent the soup kitchen often enough to become acquainted with the visitors. For example, the use of social media or Skype to communicate with students in a sister school located in an impoverished country would allow for the development of personal relationships. Encouraging students to visit an impoverished country for an extended
period of time would also provide the opportunity for them to recognize the humanity of their beneficiaries. This is necessary not only for our students to understand poverty, but to be able to respond emotionally and to feel compelled to offer assistance.

**Implications for Future Study**

I would be interested in conducting similar research project over the course of an entire school year. At the start, each student would be required to complete a questionnaire designed to determine levels of cognitive, emotional, and compassionate empathy. Then all of students would participate in a community service program that provided the opportunity for them to develop a relationship with the beneficiaries of their service, and they would complete a journal that highlighted their experiences. The journals would be read and analyzed for recurring themes relevant to the research. Finally, each student would complete the questionnaire again, and the participants mean pre-test and post-test scores would be subjected to a comparative analysis including a t-test to assess whether the differences between pre-test and post-test scores were statistically significant. A statistical analysis would lend support to the observations and qualitative data determined through this action research.

**Reflection**

My journey into action research began at Bishops Diocesan College in South Africa with an introduction to the IBSC Annual Conference by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. What an extraordinary beginning! Over the course of the next few days, I discovered that my good fortune continued and included a group of dedicated, fun-loving teachers, and an admirably competent action research team leader. The conference was especially informative, and the action research training was productive. I returned to Virginia adequately informed, confident and amazed.

Finding the time to complete my assignments before the designated deadlines while attending to my responsibilities as a teacher and coach was challenging and occasionally stressful, but the research was interesting, and the work was not overwhelming.

Action research is an approach to problem solving with which I was unfamiliar, and frustration came with the discovery that I did not have what I considered to be sufficient control over the
factors and variables associated with the action. I needed to embrace the fact that action research is conducted by and for those initiating the action. Total control was unnecessary.

I was pleased to find that my initial supposition was supported by the literature and, in the end, by the results of the action. The results of this action research should affect the way we approach character education and community service at Blue Ridge School, and could suggest a direction for additional research concerning the development of empathy in high school boys.

References


