



# “I Carry Your Story & You Carry Mine” Empathy Through Storytelling in Grade 8 Boys

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## Further Information

This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

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## Introduction

When we asked, “Do you think boys in boys’ schools can show their emotions freely?” to Eighth Grade boys, a large majority of participants responded without hesitation that they do not. As educators in an **all-boys school** we found this of huge concern.

**Why is it that our students are discouraged to share their emotions freely?**

**How can we as educators fill in the gaps in boys’ emotional literacy, a fundamental building block of empathy?**

Although connected superficially through social media, our boys are isolated and in search of connection as they navigate their way through this “All-About-Me” world. The problem is they don’t know how to access their emotions, engage in unguarded communication, and practice authenticity. With this in mind, our boys participated in a two-month, empathy-based storytelling unit created under the theme, #NoMoreBullying. We examined the degree to which the boys’ ability to empathize shifted after hearing tales of bullying from a range of people—both fictional and non-fictional—to writing their own personal narrative, and then finally by retelling a classmate’s personal narrative in the first person.

## Research Context and Participants

Participants included 18 Eighth Grade Spanish students from the Allen-Stevenson School in New York City. Founded in 1883, A-S is a K to Year 9 boys’ school in New York City. Its mission is to educate “gentleman and scholars...who will move through life strongly and rightly.” In its newest Vision Statement, the School’s pedagogical practices aspire to “building boys who make the world a better place.”

## The Research Question

How does sharing personal stories in a foreign language foster empathy in Grade 8 boys?

**Recognizing emotions**  
“I was questioning what I was thinking in that moment and I realized, actually after I wrote my story, how I immediately regret my decisions. Just even now, I’m kind of feeling shameful... I know not to be so impulsive.”

**Perspective taking**  
“What I learned is actually to see from the perspective of the bully. ‘Cause often people that are bullies are actually hurt inside.”

**KEY FINDINGS**  
“I feel I have learned it my whole time here but I never really understood what it actually was.”

**Staying out of judgement**  
“I could see that it wasn’t the bully who was the bad person, there was no bad person. It was just that this bully had things going on, had a lot of pent up anger.”

**Feeling with people**  
“It made me put myself in his shoes and see how he might have felt during that time, instead of me just saying, well it’s not going to affect me.”

What is empathy?

## Key Findings and Discussion

Data analysis evidenced the four attributes of empathy: perspective-taking, recognizing emotion in self and others, staying out of judgment, and feeling with others.

### RECOGNIZING EMOTIONS

When hearing stories of strangers who were mistreated by others, many boys initially said they felt sad. By the end, when boys were asked to assess their own emotions, they began using language, such as, “it felt really vulnerable to share.” The words “alone,” “weird,” “uncomfortable,” “relieved,” or “better” occurred often. They also became more readily able to read the emotions of their peers based off of facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice.

### PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Post-action interviews demonstrated that storytelling promoted perspective taking. The most authentic shifts occurred when students were introspective, writing, and sharing their own personal narratives, and even more so when they recast their peer’s narrative in the first person, and shared it as though it had happened to them.

### SAYING OUT OF JUDGMENT

By intentionally interweaving activities that illuminated the boys’ innate biases and preconceived notions, the boys came to see where and how they judged people, and also saw people more completely, understanding that no one is just one thing.

### FEELING WITH PEOPLE

For a truly empathic response, the boys needed to first be in touch with their own emotions and then connect it to those of someone else. At this developmental stage, the content needs to be deeply personal and “close to home,” that is to say that the boy must see himself reflected in the story he is empathizing with.

## The Research Action

**Our action was conducted in 5 phases ranging from distant stories to more personal and familiar stories of bullying.**

**Phase 1:** Exposure to stories of bullying through books, TV, and news stories.



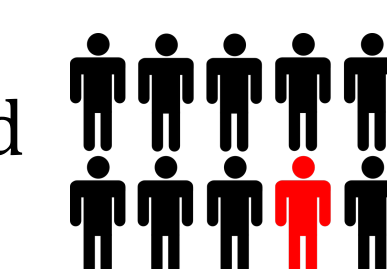
DISTANT STORIES

**Phase 2:** Exposure to a story of bullying to someone in our own community.

FAMILIAR STORIES



**Phase 3:** Writing of one’s own personal narrative of bullying through scaffolded drafts to facilitate *transportation*.



MY STORY

**Phase 4:** Sharing of personal narratives with a partner in three iterations.

SHARINGS



**Phase 5:** Students took time to process their partner’s story.

Then they made videos, retelling the partner’s story in the first person, as if it had happened to them.



## Data Collection

### Baseline Empathy Questionnaires

In order to avoid response burden, the baseline scale was only administered at the beginning and end of the project. It was a compilation of questions taken from the following validated measurement scales: *The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire*, *Interpersonal Reactivity Index*, and the *Emotion Specific Empathy Questionnaire*.

### Journal Reflections

Our action required students to engage in various discussions and journal writing, react to others’ experiences with bullying, and to share personal tales of bullying.

### Interviews

Interviews were conducted in pairs and in small groups. We found that the most honest and deepest reflection happened when boys were asked to reflect in a collaborative setting. The opportunity to see one boy share in a vulnerable way gave permission to others to do the same.

### Data Analysis

Meaning was extracted by transcribing interviews, recorded conversation classes, and looking at commonalities across student work samples and journals. Responses were categorized into themes aligning to the four attributes of empathy: perspective taking, staying out of judgment, recognizing others’ emotions, and feeling with people. The most honest and deepest reflection happened when boys reflected in a collaborative setting. Seeing another boy be vulnerable and share gave permission to others to do the same. Here, and through journal writing, changes in empathy became most evident.

## Conclusion

Almost all participants acknowledged in their post-action write ups and exit interviews that the last two phases, sharing their personal narrative and retelling their classmates’ in the first-person, allowed them to **connect** most with the other’s feelings. As educators we learned that social-emotional learning is central to creating global leaders of tomorrow and that storytelling is a powerful outlet to foster empathy. The closer the story is to the student, the more he is able to “exercise [his] empathy muscles” (Borba, 2017). For students to learn, they need to be healthy in their minds and bodies and happy in their hearts. They need to feel safely connected to be their authentic and ever-evolving selves.

## Key Readings

Borba, M. (2016). *UnSelfie: Why empathetic kids succeed in our all-about-me world*. Touchstone. Kindle Edition.

Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to lead: Brave work, tough conversations, whole hearts*. New York: Random House.



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