

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON THE *ROOTS OF EMPATHY* PROGRAM

by

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Bachelor of Education, University of Manitoba, 1994

Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Education, University of Manitoba, 2004

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Winnipeg, Manitoba

August 2005



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Teacher Perceptions on the *Roots of Empathy* Program

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Tricia L. Bailey

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore teachers' perspectives of the perceived benefits and challenges of the *Roots of Empathy* program.

Roots of Empathy is a classroom parenting program (grades K-8). A baby and parent visit a classroom nine times throughout the school year. A *Roots of Empathy* Instructor/Facilitator who is not the students' classroom teacher, works with them before, during, and after each visit.

As an instructor and facilitator, I am keenly interested in how classroom teachers make sense of the *Roots of Empathy* program. I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with five teachers who had the *Roots of Empathy* Program being implemented in their classrooms. There were three females and two males, all with varied years of experience in teaching (from 2-13 years) in elementary schools.

Findings suggest that the *Roots of Empathy* program has a positive effect on students. Each of the participants shared how the *Roots of Empathy* program enabled several positive relationships to begin to develop. The relationship between the students and the baby seemed to be the most significant one. In addition, some of the participants discussed several of the benefits that they perceived to be gained from taking part in the program. They felt there were benefits for the students when they came in contact with the baby and as they learned information and skills about child development and parenting, and that there were also personal benefits for them. The participants also expressed the challenges that they encountered regarding information about the program and their roles in its implementation.

Acknowledgements

I appreciate the encouragement, guidance, and professional dialogue provided by my thesis advisor, Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, who together with the members of my committee, Dr. John Wiens, Dr. Barbara McMillan and Mrs. Gisele Gregoire, directed and encouraged me during my study and thesis writing.

I admire and thank Mary Gordon, the founder and president of *Roots of Empathy*, for creating the program and inspiring me to take on this challenge.

I am most grateful to the teachers who generously gave of their time and shared their perspectives during the interviews.

I am indebted to my fellow Louis Riel Cohort members who were a continual support system and inspiration throughout this entire journey.

I pay tribute to my colleagues who work tirelessly each and every day to make a positive difference in the lives of children.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends for their patience, understanding and support throughout this endeavour. To my parents, Allan and Lyn Bailey, thank you for your constant love and encouragement. To Christopher, my partner and best friend, thank you for listening and for caring for me always.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Background

As I walk through the hallways of my school I admire the patience and the dedication of the staff that I work with on a daily basis. Our school serves students from Kindergarten to Grade 8, and it exists in an area of Winnipeg where the population is made up of the working poor and people on social assistance. Many of the students come to school hungry and with little food to eat. They live in families where they, as children, may not be a priority and, as a result, they live their lives in what might be called “survival” mode. These conditions seem to contribute to larger numbers of children with behaviour control issues. On a day-to-day basis it is a constant challenge just to keep some of these children in school since, in several instances, their behaviour can be so unacceptable that remaining in school, because of time-outs and suspensions, is not a possibility. I am continuously struggling with how children who face these circumstances can be helped. The last thing they seem to want to do is sit in a classroom and learn mathematics or social studies; they are focussed on meeting their basic needs.

Indeed, it is education beyond these basics – academic or survival - which concerns me. When I hear cruel words or see a lack of caring between students, it seems to me as though many of the children involved fail, or are unable, to exhibit empathy toward their schoolmates or teachers. I believe that parents and families are doing the best that they can, but I wonder about the lack of empathy that children in these circumstances display.

I find this alarming because I think that it is crucial for every human being to develop empathy in that it is a fundamental element of successful relationships.

Clark (1999) states,

One of our hopes for all children is that they learn to be good to one another. We hope that the children we are with in our lives will learn to respond with thought and to care for one another. In other words, we hope that through our teaching and being with children, they will learn to respond empathically to one another (p. 5).

Clark's perspective has been supported by Noddings (1995), Gilligan (1982), Denham (1998), Hoffman (2000), Feshbach & Fraczek (1979), Barrow (1975), Larrabee (1993), and Cohen (2001). Many schools in Manitoba are attempting to build social and emotional understanding in students through a variety of programs based on this perspective. One program that is being widely used for this purpose is called *Roots of Empathy*.

As a teacher-researcher, I seek to further understand the phenomenon of empathy as experienced by children and teachers. The Assistant Superintendent of Student Services of my school division has recognized the need for a program like *Roots of Empathy* in my school division. As a result, I have been trained as a *Roots of Empathy* instructor/facilitator and so I have a vested and personal interest in finding what kind of effects this particular program is having on students, teachers, and school communities. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the terms instructor and facilitator interchangeably since the *Roots of Empathy* program also uses both terms to describe the role. In my role as a facilitator, I enjoy working with the students and I am excited about

what the program has to offer. Since I believe that we need to explicitly teach empathy, it is one of the ways that I feel I am meeting the responsibility of making the teaching of empathy a priority in my school. What I wonder about, however, is the perspective of classroom teachers. This journey for me is about gaining a deeper understanding of the program from a perspective other than my own as an instructor. As stated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, “The emphasis here is on professional education that is about posing, not just answering, questions, interrogating one’s own and others’ practices and assumptions, and making classroom sites for inquiry – this is, learning how to teach and improve one’s teaching by collecting and analyzing the “data” of daily life in schools” (1999, p. 17).

I have chosen to explore how classroom teachers in schools where *Roots of Empathy* has been implemented make sense of the *Roots of Empathy* program, with special attention to their perceptions of the effects, benefits and challenges with children participating in the program. I believe that gaining teachers’ insights from their own experiences is valuable because they can daily observe, appreciate, and comment on how the program may be affecting their students and themselves. I believe that their perspectives will help to determine the efficacy of the program and provide information that can help to make decisions about whether or not this program belongs in the public schools. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle state,

Teachers are uniquely situated to know about teaching and teacher researchers are both users and generators of knowledge. We suggest that the knowledge they generate is not only local – deeply embedded in an

immediate context – but at the same time often public – relevant and useful to the wider educational community (1998, p. 23).

In this chapter I will describe the *Roots of Empathy* program and present my research question. In chapter two, I will define empathy, discuss the purposes of education and public schools, address the topic of teaching empathy, and describe two programs that attempt to teach empathy. In chapter three, I will describe the research study by discussing its purpose and significance, the context, and methodology. In chapter four, I will introduce the five participants. In chapter five, I will present the results of the study. Finally, in chapter six, I will discuss the results and their implications.

The Roots of Empathy Program

What is the Roots of Empathy program? *Roots of Empathy* is a classroom-based program that aims over a period of 9 months, in one school year, to increase social and emotional competence in students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. It is a 639-page curriculum that is divided into nine themes with three classroom lessons for each theme (27 lessons in total). Each of the nine themes is further broken down into four developmentally appropriate modules: Kindergarten, Grades 1-3, Grades 4-6, and Grades 7-8. At the heart of the program is a monthly family visit by an infant and his/her parent(s) whom the class “adopts” at the beginning of the year (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait & Hertzman, 2003, p. 9).

How did the Roots of Empathy program start? Mary Gordon who currently administrates parenting and family literacy programs with the Toronto District School Board created the Roots of Empathy program. Gordon has been developing school-based

family literacy and parenting programs since the early 1980's (Gordon, 2000). *Roots of Empathy* was piloted in two Toronto classrooms in 1996. Since that time it has grown to serve thousands of children in seven Canadian provinces. During the 2002-2003 school year, the program was delivered to over 10,000 students and in over 400 classrooms, which was more than double the number of classes in the previous school year. In 2003-2004, the program was taught in 1000 classrooms across Canada. *Roots of Empathy* is also receiving worldwide attention. Teachers and administrators in Japan, Australia, South Africa, and England are learning about the program and planning its adoption and implementation (Gordon, 2003).

Why was the Roots of Empathy program created? Gordon strongly believes that parents are a child's first teachers, and that the development of positive parent-child relationships is fundamental. She stresses how crucial it is to work collaboratively with families,

School systems are frantically in repair mode because we haven't prepared children and families. We haven't recognized at a visceral level that it is the family who gives children a positive outlook and without that attitude they will have an uphill battle all their lives. We have to help our children feel that they can do it and want to do it. That doesn't come from teachers in classrooms, it comes from the loving relationships that exist in the home. Our role is to help those relationships. Families care, more than anybody else, about their children. The family is the absolute cell, the core building block of society, and significant change happens through them (2000, p. 8).

This collaboration is encouraged through the *Roots of Empathy* program. In the *Roots of Empathy* program the focus is on babies, not a particular child or group of children in the classroom. The program was created to encourage relationships, promote family empowerment, and build community. It is a prevention program, not an intervention program. Gordon explains,

Our most vulnerable children are the children who live in poverty and those are the families most difficult to reach. If you push a vulnerable family too hard, you lose them and they don't come back. Children have to show up in schools; families don't have to do anything. If they are social-worked rather than empowered, they won't come back (2000, p. 8).

For this reason, the program was developed to build on the work that parents have already begun in the home, and to support those parents and children who may not have had the opportunity to share with others their positive experiences. Gordon states,

The program approaches parents without judging them. Rather than evaluate a parent as lazy or uncaring, they consider the parents' own first three years of life and what their starting points must have been. This is an approach of kindness and compassion and, of course, empathy. *Roots of Empathy* supports parenting capacity. Part of supporting that parenting capacity is to teach parents the things they need to know so they can maximize their children's opportunities to reach optimal development with literacy and life. Rather than approaching parents with a prepared agenda, you respond to their learning needs (2000, p. 15).

Gordon believes that the program provides a non-threatening outreach to vulnerable populations of children who may be suffering. She states,

The experiences and exposure from 0-3 have a greater influence on our development than anything else that happens to us. If we are subjected to a lot of stress we become 'hard-wired' which means we are extremely alert to stresses in our environment. These are the children who lash out at the world. When a child witnesses a fight between parents, that child is in emotional pain. We know sick children don't learn, but neither do children who are in emotional pain. Until somebody addresses that child's reality, as far as teaching is concerned, the rest of the day is wasted. Children are exposed to stress outside the home too. In larger urban centres, children may grow up without a community and not feel a belonging to something bigger than themselves. The levels of volunteerism are shrinking globally and people are becoming individualists rather than caring community members. This is not good for our children who are 100% of the future. The landscape of childhood has changed and teachers often see a "sea of suffering" before them (2000, p. 15).

Gordon believes that teachers need to take advantage of the opportunity that they have to positively influence children. She explains,

We have, in classrooms, the unique opportunity to make the world right for children, five hours a day for five days a week. That's a bigger chance than anyone else gets. Psychotherapy doesn't happen like that and we

mightn't need psychotherapy if there were compassionate classrooms where children learned ways of being respectful and caring of one another, where it wasn't an embarrassment to admit that you had a feeling, and where you felt comfortable challenging cruelty. A good society builds the ways and means to solidarity and empathy. We don't have a good society unless we have solidarity and empathy and you can do that classroom by classroom (2000, p. 17).

What are the mission and goals of the program? The mission of *the Roots of Empathy* program is to build caring, civil and peaceful societies through the development of empathetic children and adults. The focus of *Roots of Empathy* in the long term is to build the parenting capacity of the next generation of mothers and fathers. In the short term, *Roots of Empathy* focuses on raising levels of empathy, which result in more respectful and caring relationships and reduced levels of bullying and aggression. The goals of the program are as follows: a) to foster the development of empathy and caring (i.e., the awareness of one's own emotions, the ability to discern and understand others' emotions, the ability to use the vocabulary of emotion and expression, the capacity for empathic involvement); b) to prepare students for responsible and responsive parenting; c) to reduce levels of bullying, aggression and violence in children's lives and build peaceful societies; d) to increase knowledge of human development, learning, and infant safety; and e) to teach emotional literacy (i.e., the ability to understand the names and meanings of emotions and the ability to express them) (Gordon, 2000, p. 1).

What does the program look like? A certified *Roots of Empathy* Instructor facilitates the annual 9-month program. Many certified instructors have backgrounds in teaching,

health care, social work, guidance counselling, early childhood education, speech therapy and recreation. To obtain certification, individuals receive four days of intensive training from qualified *Roots of Empathy* trainers and successfully complete a written test. They are then supervised as they implement the program and participate in a year-end program evaluation. *Roots of Empathy* (Toronto) provides ongoing mentoring and assistance. Instructors deliver all aspects of the program in the classroom and work closely with the participating volunteer family and the classroom teacher.

As described earlier, the highlight and basis of the program is the monthly family visit by the pre-selected infant and his/her parent(s). Students observe the baby's development, celebrate milestones, interact with the baby and learn about an infant's needs and temperament. Before and after these family visits, the instructor conducts lessons based on a monthly theme. The nine themes are: Meeting the Baby, Crying, Caring and Planning for the Baby, Emotions, Sleep, Safety, Communicating, Who Am I?, and Goodbye and Good Wishes. Lessons capitalize on the shared observations of the baby and, by design, foster empathy, emotional understanding and problem-solving skills through discussion and activities. With the "textbook" being the parent and the baby, the program is very unique (Gordon, 2000). In addition to the three classroom lessons per month by the instructor, the classroom teacher is an active participant in the program. Classroom teachers are strongly encouraged to discuss and integrate, on a regular basis, the ideas presented during the specific *Roots of Empathy* lessons.

Statement of the Research Question(s):

With the teachers as active participants in the *Roots of Empathy* program, I wondered about the extent to which they were actually able to implement some of these elements in their lessons. I wondered about the extent to which they felt that the program was having an effect on their students, and, if so, what some of these effects were. I also wondered about what they perceived to be the benefits and challenges of having the program in their classroom. Significant dollars have been spent on the implementation of this program and thousands of children have taken part in it. Preliminary research studies that have been conducted by researchers in Western Canada (to be discussed in the next chapter) indicate that the program is making a positive difference in the lives of children. This program is currently being implemented in the school division where I work, and I wonder if the program and my work as a facilitator have a similar effect. This is something that is difficult for me to determine because I do not work with these children on a daily basis. It has been argued that teachers are in a unique position, one that enables them to reflect on their own practice and one that leads to the production of knowledge for teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1998, 1999; Hiebert et al., 2002). As a consequence, I intend to consider the perspective of classroom teachers, in schools other than the school I work in, by listening to what they have to say about the program's effect on the children they work with each school day.

Research Question(s). What are some of the effects of the *Roots of Empathy* program from the perspective of classroom teachers? Specifically, what are some of the perceived benefits for students and what are some of the challenges that teachers face?

Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature

Every day he would clutch his lunch tighter as he neared the pathway skirting the school ground. “Maybe he won’t be there today,” the little boy thought. “Maybe he’ll leave me alone.” Still, his breathing quickened as he rounded the corner. But this day, like almost every day, Joey felt a hand gripping his shoulder and knew it was happening again. “Give it up, loser,” a harsh, hissing voice like a snake whispered in his ear (American Association of School Administrators, 1995, p. 4).

On a daily basis we hear students, parents, educators and others voice their concerns about the hostility and violence in contemporary society. While schools remain a safe place for many children, adolescents and teens, the threat of violence can weigh heavily on students and distract them from getting the best education possible (AASA, 1995). What are educators teaching or doing in schools to address this situation? Do students need to be taught how to be empathetic? In this chapter I will offer an operational definition of empathy and discuss the purposes of education and public schools. I will then provide evidence that suggests that educators should be making the teaching of empathy in schools a priority. I will conclude by outlining programs and curricula that educators have used in their approach to the teaching of empathy.

Definition of Empathy

In the past four decades, empathy has been defined in several ways. A few scholars have defined it in cognitive terms, namely, as the ability to comprehend the affective or

cognitive status of another (e.g. Borke, 1971; Deutsch & Madle, 1975; Hogan, 1969; Kohut, 1971). It has also been defined in more affective terms, namely, as the ability to feel the same emotion as another or at least a similar emotion (e.g. Feshbach & *Roots of Empathy*, 1968; Stotland, 1969, Clark, 1999). Others believe that empathy is a combination of both the affective and cognitive terms (Rogers, 1975; Hoffman, 1984; Davis, 1983). For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the definition of empathy offered by Davis as it is this definition that is at the basis of the *Roots of Empathy* program.

Davis refers to empathy as having both a cognitive and affective component. He describes the cognitive component as the observer's ability to imagine another person's perspective, and the affective as the emotional reaction to the person, people or situation observed (Davis, 1983). Based on his Interpersonal Reactivity Index (1980), he describes four components of empathy: perspective taking - the tendency to spontaneously take the perspective of others; fantasy - the tendency to spontaneously transpose oneself into the role of fictitious characters; empathic concern - the tendency to respond to the plight of others with feelings of concern and compassion, while keeping in mind that a person can be concerned about someone without being personally distressed; and personal distress - the tendency to respond to the plight of others with self-oriented feelings of distress or anxiety (Gordon, 2000).

During the *Roots of Empathy* lessons, children are given the opportunity to experience all four components of empathy. Perspective taking is crucial to *Roots of Empathy* as students put themselves in the baby's role, often getting down on the floor to see what the view of life is like from that perspective. Literature is used to foster empathy through imagination and fantasy. Empathic concern is fostered as the children develop a

relationship with the child and the parent, and personal distress may be fostered as the children learn and witness the variety of positive and negative experiences that the baby has. In *Roots of Empathy* classrooms, students often demonstrate prosocial behaviours, such as spontaneous comforting, co-operating and sharing (Gordon, 2000). In keeping with Davis' operational definition of empathy, I will now explore the purposes of education and discuss whether or not the teaching of empathy belongs in schools.

The Purposes of Education

Many people may question whether or not it is the responsibility of teachers to develop empathy in students. In order to appropriately address this issue, we need to first ask ourselves, "What are the purposes of education, particularly of young children?" This question is often discussed and debated in the literature and several responses have emerged (e.g. Arendt, 1958; Peters, 1973; Martin, 1981; Garrison, 2003; Glickman, 2001; Franklin, 1998; Greene, 1978; Egan, 1992; Noddings, 1995). Peters' description of the purposes of education has an emphasis on the cognitive realm as presented in an article by Coulter and Wiens (1999). They state, "Peters describes how education involves depth and breadth of both understanding and knowledge. To be educated is not to be narrowly specialized, but it does entail substantial expertise in some worthwhile area...he describes education as 'the initiation of people into a worthwhile form of life', that is, what a particular society values and what it considers to be good and right (p. 5). In more recent years, several scholars have challenged Peters and argued that his idea of education is quite limiting (Martin, 1981; Noddings, 1995; Greene, 1995). As stated by Martin (1981), "Peter's ideal of the educated person is far too narrow to guide the

educational enterprise. It presupposes a divorce of mind from body, thought from action, and reason from feeling and emotion. It provides at best an ideal of an educated mind, not an educated person” (p. 104). With an emphasis on cognitive development and intellectual training, students’ emotional development tends to be de-emphasized. As a result, scholars have voiced a renewed concern for students’ development in this area. As stated by Stone (1993), “We have undermined the whole child philosophy by making social and moral learning subservient to academics. Isn’t it time we readjusted our focus back to the child by committing our time to guiding and nurturing social and moral development?” (p. 194)

Garrison (2003) proposes that the purposes of education are to promote a continued capacity for growth through the freedom to make choices and take action. He argues that such growth can only occur within a democratic environment. Glickman (2001) supports this idea with his claim that the purpose of education is the preparation of students for citizenship in a democratic society that has as its goals “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Franklin (1998) believes that the purpose of education is to equip the young to cope with the future and to provide them with attitudes and skills so that they may meet the demands and the needs of their society. She states, “When parents send their children to school, they hope that, in the end, the young people will be personally happy and publicly useful” (p. 96).

Egan (1988) proposed a theory of educational development that characterizes the educational process as a sequence of progressively more sophisticated layers of understanding or stages which he has categorized or labeled as: the mythical stage (entry to school until age eight, nine or 10), the romantic stage (age eight, nine or ten until about

14, 15, or 16), the philosophic stage (mid – late –teen years) and the ironic stage (adulthood). According to Egan, each child recapitulates, in the development of his or her own sense-making capacities, the achievements of the culture (Buckley, 1994). He argues that the child must develop each of the layers as fully as possible in an effort to arrive finally at a form of understanding befitting our current cultural perspective (Buckley, 1994). Egan argues that our modern concept of education encompasses at least three very important ideas. He states,

We recognize the need, first, to socialize students to prevailing social norms and values; second, to ensure that students accumulate significant knowledge to attain a truer view of the world and experience; and third, to fulfill the potential of each stage of life in accord with our natural development (1992, p. 4).

If the purposes of education include socializing students to the prevailing conventions and developing commitment to those conventions, then empathy and caring, which are included in social norms and values, have a place in formal education.

Greene (1978) proposes that the purposes of education are to encourage “wide-awakeness and the moral life” (p. 42). In congruence with Greene, Noddings (1995) argues that the main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people. This particular wording and purpose for education really resonates with me. Noddings states,

The popular response today is that students need more academic training, that the country needs more people with greater mathematical and scientific competence, that a more adequate academic preparation will