

Developing Empathy to Promote Equity in Early Childhood Settings

by Lea Ann Christenson, Leah S. Muccio, and Kevin McGowan

It was late October and Ms. Maja, who was in her second year of teaching pre-K at a private, nonprofit preschool, was not sure what to do. After many weeks of patiently and methodically teaching routines and procedures to her class of 16, most days ran like clockwork. The children moved from circle time to centers to snack time to outdoor play time with a minimum of direction, and much joy and excitement, as they engaged with the learning experiences Ms. Maja carefully crafted around their interests and levels of development.

However, Samantha, who had just turned 4, constantly sought attention,

mostly of the negative variety. During circle time, she darted under the table nearest where the children were sitting and screeched at the top of her lungs until the instructional assistant teacher, Ms. Williams, gently coaxed her to the back of the room so the lesson could continue in peace. At center time, Samantha loudly said mean things to her peers, to the point where they would cry. At snack time she would throw her food on the floor and exclaim at the top of her voice, “YUCK!” On her cot at rest time, she rustled around, unable to relax for a nap. Ms. Maja had tried various strategies to assist Samantha with adjusting to the classroom, including

several her director suggested, but nothing seemed to work. Notes and phone calls to Samantha’s mother went unanswered, and Samantha’s grandfather who dropped her off and picked her up was usually late and did not appear to speak English. Today was the worst. Samantha had tried to slap Ms. Maja when she asked her to quit hiding under the tables during a transition from snack to outdoor play time, Ms. Maja, exhausted, thought, “Why should I care, if Samantha’s mother cannot even get back to me!” Ms. Maja secretly hoped Samantha would move, or at least be absent for a day. She had run out of ideas and patience.



Lea Ann Christenson, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the department of early childhood education at Towson University. Her research interests include early literacy and STEM instruction for young dual language learners and professional development for in-service and pre-service teachers in urban and international settings (El Salvador, Nepal, Zimbabwe, China, Sweden and Denmark). Prior to earning her doctorate, at the University of Maryland, College Park in curriculum and instruction with a focus on early literacy, she taught kindergarten-second grade and ESOL, and was an assistant principal in California public schools.



Leah S. Muccio, Ph.D., is associate professor of early childhood education in the institute for teacher education, college of education, at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. A former classroom teacher, she teaches early childhood teacher education courses and supervises teacher candidates in the field. Her research focuses on equity pedagogy, early childhood curriculum, and teacher education and professional development. The aim of Muccio’s scholarship is to promote joyful learning in the early school experiences of culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse young children, their families, and their teachers.



Kevin McGowan, Ph.D., is associate professor of early childhood education in the department of elementary and early childhood education, college of education and health sciences located at Bridgewater State University. McGowan is also the faculty associate for the Martin Richard Institute for Social Justice located at BSU. He worked for the District of Columbia Public Schools Head Start Program as a pre-Kindergarten teacher, instructional coach, and early childhood administrator. His scholarship focuses on diversity and equity in early childhood education and empathy in early childhood education.

Empathy: The Roots of a Mighty Oak Tree

The concept of empathy is important when serving young children in early childhood settings. As the United States grows more diverse, the early childhood workforce has stayed pretty much unchanged; most teachers are white, middle class women (Warren, 2015). Potentially the dissimilarities between teacher and student could compromise the impact of lessons and the learning environment on young children. Empathy is a tool that can help teachers “step into the shoes” of their students and their families, in order for them to modify and differentiate the educational experience for each unique child. Simply stated, empathy is the ability to take the perspective of others and then act on how this perspective informs the work of an early childhood teacher. The ability to take the perspective of children and their families and respond to their perspectives should be at the heart of our work.

Empathy does not take root in a vacuum. It is also important to understand the “ecological system” in which children and their families live. In order to understand empathy in the context of early childhood we will use the analogy of an oak tree.

Trunk: Building Blocks of Empathy

Lam, Kolomiro, and Alamparabil (2011) identified three building blocks related to empathy development. These building blocks are cognitive, affective, and behavioral. From a cognitive perspective, teachers begin to focus their thinking on slipping into the shoes of students and their families. The affective component of empathy is when a teacher can imagine what a child and her family are going

through and how they feel from a physiological perspective. The behavioral component involves a teacher’s verbal and nonverbal cues, which signal her understanding of what children and their families are going through and possible actions to mitigate negative experiences.

Branches: Support Empathetic Classroom Practice

Continuing with the metaphor of the oak tree, the branches support empathetic classroom practices, providing guiding principles for how teachers and caregivers interact with children and families. The branches are the fundamental theoretical supports for what empathetic early childhood settings look like, and what teachers do in those settings. The branches in the intentional empathy model include: 1) developmentally appropriate practices; 2) anti-bias education; 3) family and community-centered practices; and, 4) brain-based learning.

Early childhood educators use the research-based stance of developmentally appropriate practice to engage children’s interests and adapt to children’s ages, experiences, and abilities, based on how children learn and develop (Bredenkamp, 2017). In developmentally appropriate settings, teachers and caregivers engage in a process through which they learn about children’s needs and experiences through perspective-taking, and use that knowledge in their professional decision-making (Warren, 2018). With their new knowledge of the children and their individual contexts, teachers can engage in perspective-taking with all children, particularly with culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse children.

Another branch of the tree is anti-bias education, which supports all

children to reach their full potential in a culturally rich society and guards against expressions of bias (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Using these teaching strategies, early childhood educators can foster inclusive practices supportive of diversity (Peck, Maude, & Brotherson, 2014) and advocate for equity to address bias and discrimination. To accompany the ideas and strategies in developmentally appropriate practice and anti-bias education, the third branch is family and community-centered practices. These approaches honor the importance of families and communities in the lives of young children, and focus on building partnerships using a bi-directional approach (Iruka, 2013). Instead of didactic top-down communication, early childhood educators seek out and create opportunities for a multidirectional communication. Teachers learn from and teach families and families learn from and teach teachers. These approaches in empathetic classrooms support compassionate interactions with families, place-based learning opportunities, and shared decision making.

Although it may seem unexpected to see brain-based learning as the fourth branch within an empathy oak tree model, current research within the field of social cognitive neuroscience underscores how positive learning environments and social interactions impact brain chemistry, which, in turn, influences learning and development (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). With a foundation in brain-based learning, teachers and caregivers know the value of empathy as the basis of their relationships, and can better meet children’s and families’ needs. The early childhood field has embraced these frameworks, and their combination highlights new knowledge to elaborate on the essential elements of all high-quality early childhood programs (NAEYC, 2019).

Within the intentional empathy model, the branches elaborate on the characteristics of empathetic behavior based on the current literature for early childhood educators in all areas of service to young children (i.e., teachers, administrators/directors, policy advocates, teacher educators, etc.).

Leaves: Empathy in Action

As the leaves on an oak tree are where the tree receives its energy, the leaves of empathy are where the action is. The leaves are the actions a teacher can undertake in order to become more empathetic and, equally importantly, to foster empathy and empathetic behavior in her students.

For teachers:

- Learn as much as you can about the community in which you teach. Before judging a certain behavior, find out why it is happening. If you do not understand the way a child or family does something, seek out “insider information” to find out more. Usually, there is a logical explanation for why a child or family acts a certain way, or undertakes a task in a certain way. A teacher’s way of doing something is not the only way to effectively complete a task.
- Reflect on your own journey toward empathy with students, families and colleagues. Continuing the analogy of an oak tree, the leaves are behavioral empathy. Once a teacher can step into the shoes of her young children and their families, she can move past sympathy to action through empathy.

For students:

- Bathe your classroom in a culture of empathy. Model empathetic behavior

towards children and their families, as well as toward other adults in your classroom and school. It is impossible for children to develop empathy if they do not see it or experience it in their own environment. Point out when children are demonstrating empathy toward one another. Routinely name, support and celebrate empathetic behaviors.

- Use your insider information to create and use strengths-based labels to describe the children’s actions, instead of focusing on what they cannot do. For example, instead of focusing on the fact the child speaks limited English, focus instead on the fact that the child is fluent in one language and learning a second.
- Use strengths-based labels to differentiate instruction for your young learners and frame instruction with the strengths you are building on.
- Set up lessons that are designed to explicitly teach empathetic behavior. One means of doing this is to select quality literature and informational books strategically, to promote children’s understanding of diversity. Lead the children through discussions, in order to allow them to take on multiple perspectives in any given situation. For example, read different books on the same topic, such as “The Three Little Pigs” and then “The True Story of the Three Little Pigs,” which provides the wolf’s perspective on the events.

A Journey, Not a Destination

Just as the oak tree is a living, growing organism that changes over time, so is an early childhood teacher’s journey toward empathy a dynamic, ever-changing journey. That is one great joy of our work.

In mid-November, as Ms. Maja was making her way to her car, she saw Samantha, her grandfather and a woman she had never met at the public bus stop across the street from the school. Ms. Maja’s initial reaction was to get in her car without being seen. She had already had a long day with Samantha. Instead, Ms. Maja walked up to the bus stop and said hello to Samantha. Samantha turned away from her and did not react. The woman smiled warily and said hello. Ms. Maja chatted with the woman for a bit, and found out that she was Samantha’s mother’s cousin. She speaks English fluently, and explained that Samantha’s mother is holding down two jobs to support herself, her three children and her father. The family lives in the basement of a home nearby, and the landlord pays Samantha’s tuition to the school.

The cousin explains they have also been concerned about Samantha’s behavior at home, ever since she fell ill late last summer. Ms. Maja asked if Samantha had been to a doctor, and the answer was no.

After this conversation Ms. Maja could step into Samantha’s shoes. She first had cognitive empathy for Samantha, now that she knew the difficult circumstances in which she was living. Ms. Maja gained affective empathy, as she could palpably feel how stressful the situation was. Finally, Ms. Maja exhibited behavioral empathy as she sought out free health services for the family. A physical exam revealed that Samantha suffered from chronic ear infections, which caused her pain and a hearing loss that was mostly reversible with antibiotics. In early December, Samantha still had a few episodes of acting out, but feeling pain free, and with her hearing mostly restored, she was making progress behaviorally, socially and academically. Empathy for Samantha and her

family moved Ms. Maja from a place of passive judgment to being understanding and acting on Samantha's behalf.

References

Bredenkamp, S. (2017). *Effective practices in early childhood education (3rd ed.)*. Boston: Pearson.

Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J.O. (2010). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Ikura, I.U. (2013). *The Black family: Re-Imagining family support and engagement for children*. In National Black Child Development Institute, *Being Black is not a risk factor: A strengths-based look at the state of the Black child*. Washington, DC: National Black Child Development Institute. nbcidi.org

Lam, T., Kolomitro, K., & Alamparambil, F. (2011). Empathy training: Methods, evaluation practices, and validity. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation*, 7(16), 162-200.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). NAEYC early childhood program standards and accreditation criteria and guidance for assessment. Washington, DC: naeyc.org

Peck, N.F., Maude, S.P., & Brotherson, M.J. (2015). Understanding preschool teachers' perspectives on empathy: A qualitative inquiry. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43, 169-179. doi.org/10.1007/s10643-014-0648-3

Sousa, D.A., & Tomlinson, C.A. (2011). *Differentiation and the brain: How neuroscience supports*

the learner-friendly classroom. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Warren, C.A. (2015). Conflicts and contradictions: Conceptions of empathy and the work of good-intentioned early career white female teachers. *Urban Education*, 50(5), 572-600. doi.org/10.1177/0042085914525790

Warren, C.A. (2018). Empathy, teacher dispositions, and preparation for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(2), 169-183. doi.org/10.1177/0022487117712487

