ENCOURAGING EMPATHY THROUGH HOME ECONOMICS AND THE BUDDY PROJECT: AN ACTION RESEARCH INQUIRY

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This paper reports on action research in a project, titled the Buddy Project, that links secondary students and kindergarten children in a series of planned activities throughout one semester of a Human Services course. The research sought to understand the ways the project contributed to the development of empathy and caring in the students. It proceeded through three cycles of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and re-planning during the semester. Data were gathered through photos, field notes, students’ written reflections, questionnaires, and interviews at the end of the project. The research concluded that empathy and caring can be developed through explicit instruction that involves students in identifying caring characteristics in real life settings, and in practicing caregiving in authentic situations with others over time and within a supportive community.

In recent years empathy and caring have been recognized as valued character traits that curriculum and schools ought to foster in children (Alexander & Laster, 2003; Borba, 2001; Lickona, 1991; Noddings, 1995). Teaching these traits has been advocated by those who call for increased character education in schools (National Post, 2001), and the development of empathy and caring have become part of standards and outcome statements advocated by various school jurisdictions (for example, British Columbia Performance Standards, 2000). Sewell and Hall (2003) found that among the family and consumer science teachers in Georgia that they surveyed, the majority strongly agreed that character education was an important part of their teaching, but they were less certain about knowing how to teach for the development of certain character traits.

This paper reports on an action research project undertaken by the third author (Colleen) in a senior secondary Human Services course she taught (part of Family Studies curriculum in British Columbia) that places grade eleven and twelve students into a “buddy project” where they work with children in a kindergarten class during one school semester. The Buddy Project began as a project to help senior secondary students study child development through observation of and interaction with real children. As the project was repeated in successive years, it was noticed that the secondary students developed a meaningful bond with the kindergarten child they were partnered with and as the project progressed each term, they appeared to show increased care and concern for the young children. A goal in researching this project was to understand better the ways senior secondary students learn to show empathy and caring towards others. Specifically the initial questions were (a) How does the Buddy Project help encourage
Empathy and Caring

Empathy and caring are often used interchangeably in much of the literature and are considered integral parts of character development. The desire to be cared for or to feel connected to others is almost certainly a universal human characteristic (for example, see Heidegger, 1962). Caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors (Noddings, 1984).

From a philosophical perspective Heidegger (1962) described caring as the very being of human life. His use of the term is very broad, including an “attitude of solicitousness toward other living beings, a concern to do things meticulously, the deepest existential longings, fleeting moments of concern, and all the burdens and woes that belong to human life” (Noddings, 1992, p.15). From Heidegger’s perspective, people are immersed in care; it is the inherent nature of life. On the other hand, Noddings (1992) argues that a caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings: a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for. In order for the relation to be termed caring, the part of either carer or the cared-for must develop a connection, that is, a relationship.

While Noddings (1992) focused on the importance of one’s ability to care and one’s ability to receive caring acts, Mayeroff (1971) examined how an individual benefits from being the “carer.” Mayeroff stated that to care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help one grow and actualize oneself. Caring then, leads to individuals’ fulfillment. The meaning of caring is not to be confused with such meanings as wishing well, liking, comforting and maintaining, or simply having an interest in what happens to another. Furthermore, it is not an isolated feeling or a momentary relationship; nor is it simply a matter of wanting to care for a person. Caring, as helping another grow and transform, is a process, a way of relating to someone that involves development, in the same way that friendship can only emerge in time through mutual trust and a deepening and qualitative transformation of the relationship (Mayeroff, 1971).

Noddings (1984) emphasized caring or empathy as a “relation.” However, caring is often considered as a virtue, an individual attribute. Noddings challenged this view of caring as located in the individual, but acknowledges that people have different capacities for caring, that is, for entering into caring relations as well as for attending to objects and ideas. For Heidegger (1962), care is inevitable; all aware human beings care. It is the mark of being human. Noddings (1984, 1992) on the other hand, argues that caring is not a unitary capacity that transfers easily from one domain to another. Not everyone develops the capacity to care for others. How then do people develop the capacity of caring?

Caring can elicit and nurture certain qualities that, when combined with other valuable traits, makes a person more compassionate. Deep caring, whether about things or people, often draws upon our reserves of patience and persistence, and in testing our patience and persistence strengthens them (Blustein, 1991). Blustein stated that caring can also display and teach a sort of humility that enables us to recognize and appreciate the world and others for what they are. In other words, caring behavior develops one’s empathic nature.

Noddings (1992) writes that caring can be taught but for that to happen teachers must design opportunities for students to experience care giving and students need to experience being cared for in the relations we establish with them in schools. Noddings (1984) suggested that moral education from the perspective of an ethic of caring has four major components: modeling,
dialogue, practice, and confirmation. The modeling component is key as we make explicit the process of caring in our own relations with those being cared for. Dialogue and practice offer opportunities to discuss, try out, and analyze relations of caring and being cared for. Confirmation points to the importance of attending to the transformative qualities of caring and how it transforms relationships.

Opportunities to practice caregiving and care receiving are further supported by Lickona (1991) who suggests students need to be involved in face-to-face caring relationships with others in the community. Caring and empathy require continuity and are developmental. Therefore, for caring and empathy to develop in a relationship, individuals must be brought together over a period of some duration. Being exposed to good examples of adult behavior and having opportunities to practice in the context of real relationships can be a powerful combination in the development of caring. While the literature indicates that empathy and caring can be taught, there is a lack of specific examples of learning strategies shown to be effective in empathy development. This paper reports on a study providing opportunities for students to experience and develop care and empathy in school settings. As action research, the study examined how a Buddy Project that brings high school Home Economics students and kindergarten students together promotes empathy and caring. The study contributes both to our understanding of empathy in educational settings and promising instructional strategies that involve students in caring relationships.

**The Project and The Research Strategy**

For several years in my teaching, I (Colleen) had begun to combine activities of my senior secondary students with the children in a nearby kindergarten. Because these activities were very popular with my students, they became more frequent and then in recent years, I had begun to pair or partner my secondary students with one kindergarten child during approximately fifteen joint classes in one semester. This became the “Buddy Project.” On a typical day in the Buddy Project, the secondary students come to their class with me and we walk together to meet the kindergarten children in their elementary school, one block away. The kindergarten teacher usually gives instructions for the day, including goals, and activities. The activities for that day might be for example, patterns and sequencing using circles, rectangles and squares. Once directions are given, the paired buddies proceed to carry out the various activities at the designated stations or areas. When extra time permits, the buddies might read together or play a game together. After about one hour, the secondary students say goodbye and return to their classroom where they complete a response sheet that requires them to reflect on their experiences and learning on that day. The Buddy Project formed the context of this study.

**Participants**

This study involved 26 Grade 11 and 12 students (24 females, 2 males) attending a secondary high school. All were enrolled in a home economics Human Services 11 course for one semester from February to June of 2002. Human Services 11 is an elective course that introduces students to child development. It included topics such as: development from conception to age six, the importance of childhood, the influence of the family on a child’s development, responsibilities of those who care for children, and the challenges of teen parenting. Before the students began their work with the kindergarten children, they were taught the basic principles of observation and participation with young children. Permission to participate in the study was obtained from the parents of both the secondary and kindergarten students to participate in this research. As the teacher was also the researcher in this project it
was important that students felt their participation or non-participation was voluntary. In order to ensure participant consent was free and informed, students returned their consent forms to a teaching assistant in the school. The teaching assistant then informed the teacher that all students in the course agreed to participate. For the Buddy Project there more high school students than kindergarten students and so six kindergarten children had a “pair” of buddies. During the course two of the 26 participating students moved from the community or left the school. Thus partial data were collected from two of the 26 participants.

**Research Method**

Education action research seeks to implement solutions to practical problems in the classroom. It follows a pattern of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and re-planning that is known as a spiral cycle (Tripp, 1990). Action research involves gathering data about teaching practices in order to understand the consequences of our actions and thus provides opportunities to improve our practice. I conceptualized this research in three cycles of about six to eight weeks in length that extended across the five month long school semester. Each cycle included activities of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting with respect to the Buddy Project.

Data collected during these cycles included: a) my journal/field notes in which I document planning sessions and post-lesson reflections with the kindergarten teacher, observations of students during the Buddy visits and outside these visits, and comments and reflections on the response of both high school and kindergarten students and on the pedagogical decisions made during the visits; b) the high school students’ reflective journals in which they documented their thoughts after each Buddy visit; c) photographs (images) taken during the Buddy visits; d) interviews with six high school students conducted at the end of the course to elicit their thoughts, experiences, and reactions to photos collected during the Buddy visits.

Data analysis was on-going throughout the project. The data were analyzed to examine how the pedagogical practices encouraged empathy and caring in the high school students. Triangulation and collaboration were used to gain multiple perspectives of the events by high school students, the kindergarten teacher, and the teacher’s reflections and observations. From examining the data and reflecting on events and practices, questions and interventions emerged that shaped each successive research cycle. Thus data analysis of student journals and researcher field notes occurred within each of the 3 action research cycles. Analysis of student interviews as they examined photos of their work with the kindergarten Buddies occurred at the end of the project. The photos were used as a strategy to prompt or evoke students’ experiences in the project. The interviews were analyzed for evidence of care and empathy in student expressions, changes in buddy interaction over time and through research cycles, and how they spoke about their learning through the project. The interviews were also analyzed for the extent to which the activity was memorable, and if memorable the kind of events or activities that stood out for students.

**Results**

In order to fully examine my teaching practices within the Buddy Project I (Colleen) divided the time frame into three cycles that ranged from 4 weeks to 6 weeks long. Each cycle had a plan (the goals for the Buddy Project), an action (how I carried out the plan), observations (what I observed and what my students observed and reflected in their journals), and reflections (what I learned) based upon what occurred during that cycle. The results of the first cycle helped shape my plan for the second cycle, and the results from the second cycle shaped the plan for the third and final cycle. The cycles document how students experienced the Buddy Project, the
ways the project encouraged empathy and care in some students, and the pedagogical questions that arise in providing this kind of experience for students.

**Research Cycle 1: Getting to Know Each Other**

The kindergarten teacher and I met to plan the five classes that made up the first research cycle in the Buddy Project. Our goal in the first cycle was to provide opportunities for the buddies to get to know each other. My observations focused on watching for changes in attitudes and behaviors of the secondary students towards the children. I also watched for indicators that the secondary students were aware of being role models and for signs of their demonstrating empathy with the young children. On each day when the buddies met, the secondary students helped the kindergarten buddies with mathematics or reading activities, cooking activities, and specifically made efforts to get to know each other. I observed and noted any changes that took place between the buddies. Some of the kindergarten children were very shy. Some of the secondary students were not very communicative. I focused on Bill, one of the secondary students who did not show any noticeable empathy in our first visit. He was very complacent and disinterested. He expressed to me and to a few other classmates around him that he was “not that interested in working with little kids” (Photo 1). As three or four more visits occurred I noticed that Bill was taking an active interest in his little buddy, talking to him more often, and sitting in a more cooperative positive manner with him (Photo 2).

Unfortunately after two months, Bill moved to a different city to live with a different parent and I was unable to talk with him about the changes I noticed early in the project.

After each visit with the kindergarten children, my students wrote in their journals about what they learned about their little buddies that day. I used these responses to understand their experiences. In the classroom, I taught lessons on child development that related to their activities and helped them to understand child development and behavior.

In a short time, I could see that the buddies were relaxing with each other and beginning to bond. Maria, for example shared that her little buddy, while shy at first, opened up after a few visits and said to her several times “I love you, you’re my best friend.” She said he always wanted to sit on her lap and be close.

At the end of the first cycle, the kindergarten teacher and I met to discuss our observations and to plan the next cycle. We agreed the buddies needed activities that would encourage more interaction. My questions as I began cycle two were whether the less involved students would become more involved as time passed, and whether my students would become more caring towards others?
Research Cycle 2: Praise and Encouragement

In the second cycle of the research project, we had five buddy days. I wanted my students to observe the kindergarten teacher’s attitude and mannerisms with the kindergarten children as a way of learning how to give praise and encouragement to their buddies. The activities required the secondary students to listen carefully to their buddies as they practiced simple mathematics concepts, language and reading skills. This provided opportunities for them to give praise and show kindness toward their buddy.

On numerous occasions during the second cycle, I observed students expressing kindness and caring to their buddies. On one occasion Karen, a secondary student reached out to Kathleen, a kindergarten buddy who was visibly upset and crying softly because her big buddy was absent that day. Karen immediately responded to Kathleen by going to her, crouching down to her level, gently and enthusiastically saying to her, “I’ll be your big buddy today!” (Photo 3) Kathleen slowly opened up and by the end of the class was smiling (Photo 4).

In this cycle there were other specific examples. Jason, a senior buddy became very involved in performing paper puppet stories, shrieking in a high pitched voice that caused a series of giggles from his kindergarten buddy. She told the kindergarten teacher that she loved her buddy and that he was so crazy and funny. For Jason who was usually self-absorbed and associated with the macho males at school this was evidence of empathy on his part.

In this cycle the students became very involved with each other. After reflecting on the students’ responses and my observations, the questions that emerged for me in this cycle were whether the secondary students understand that they are learning empathy through working with the kindergarten children and whether I should design more specific activities that would help reinforce my students in showing care and empathy.

Research Cycle 3: Identifying Empathy Through Literature

In the third cycle I wanted to try a new activity that would reinforce the concept of empathy and possibly help all the buddies to show empathy. The kindergarten teacher agreed and so together we selected some examples of children’s literature that demonstrates empathy.

In this third cycle we had six classes together. The secondary students and their buddies selected one of the books to read together and were asked to identify where in the story empathy and caring were being shown. The secondary students helped the kindergarten buddies describe
the caring and empathy in the stories. While empathy was a difficult concept for the young children, all could site examples of caring and kindness in the stories.

During this cycle an incident between Natalie and Brian came to my attention. Brian was a shy little kindergarten boy who could easily go unnoticed in a group and appeared to have little attention given to him at home. Natalie knew his birthday was coming and on her own decided he needed some attention on the occasion. She bought a gift for him and on the next buddy day quietly took him aside in the coat room to present him with the gift. He carefully unwrapped it, gave the small stuffed toy a hug and grinned with sheer delight (Photo 5). He then gave Natalie a gentle hug (Photo 6). She was very touched by his reaction and they have become good friends, with hellos and hugs whenever they meet. The previous year Natalie had lived on the streets in a large western city and said she could empathize with him because at times she had experienced similar feelings.

Not a strong academic student, Natalie continued to blossom in her own way. She became the main organizer of the final party with the children and excelled at managing the games with the children. This buddy experience truly brought out the best qualities in Natalie.

Other similar observations were made of bonds between students. Jeremy who was not a particularly good student became a valued buddy for Darren. They shared stories and the bonds were rewarding for the secondary student and the kindergarten buddy.

At the end of the project, I asked my students to describe for me the ways they had shown empathy to their kindergarten buddies, and asked them how the project had encouraged them to show empathy and caring. Eleven of the 24 students who completed the course said that the project had helped them to be more loving and willing to make an effort to show empathy. Ten said that it made them more caring and giving towards others. Seven expressed that it made them aware that they are role models for children. Seven said that it helped them learn about themselves and be a better person. Six said they learned more about how children think and feel. Four said that it made them more understanding by causing them to reflect on the child they once were.

Conclusions

As the project progressed, it became more apparent that if we want students to develop empathy, we need to openly and explicitly discuss it with them and provide them opportunities to identify and enact the concept. Alexander and Laster (2003) who studied empathy development in students enrolled in Ohio family and consumer science courses would concur with this point.
They attribute the lack of evidence that students developed empathy after enrolling in a family and consumer science course to empathy being more an implicit than explicit goal in the Ohio curriculum. We all agreed that it would be helpful in the future to do more examining of the concept of empathy through the reading and analyzing of children’s literature.

Analysis of the data point to the pedagogical power of the Buddy Project for high school students in developing empathy and caring relationships. Through reflecting on the data gathered in each cycle of research and on the students’ final comments, three central insights became clear. First, direct explicit instruction about empathy and caring by way of structured task design is effective in helping students to understand caring and empathy and in supporting their demonstration of these behaviors. Secondary students are able to recognize and identify the development of empathy and caring in their selves, and think of themselves as becoming better people and better role models.

Secondly, this inquiry reinforces the importance of experiential learning. It is in the doing of something that the embedded abstract concept (empathy) takes hold, becomes internalized, and understood in a way that the students can become metacognitively aware of and capable of reflection. By requiring each buddy to consider the “other” through the task design, each is forced to de-center and focus on the development of the relationship. This point is also supported by Alexander and Laster (2003) who found that the only students that showed empathy gains were enrolled in a Nutrition and Wellness course that had laboratory experiences. These were associated with empathy gains whereas students enrolled in the other courses they investigated (Parenting, Personal Development, Life Planning) showed decreases in empathy scores at the end of the courses. This suggests a crucial important link between experiential learning and empathy development.

Finally, a durable and stable relationship is central to the development of empathy and caring. For the secondary students, this kind of relationship has often eluded them for a variety of reasons: lack of opportunity, lack of success in previous attempts, lack of attributes of caring and empathy that nurtures and cultivates these relationships, lack of ability to act on an abstraction like “empathy” and hence to enjoy its benefits. Partnering secondary students with kindergarten students was a strategy designed to mitigate the effects of previous failures, and it appears to have been successful.

If family and consumer sciences education is to contribute to the development of caring, empathy, and other dimensions of character education, it appears that projects like this that are authentic, that is, projects that call on students to participate in social settings, in ways that have immediate and visible consequence are essential components of our courses. We need to think of ways that we can strategically make connections between our students and “others” – perhaps young children, but also older adults, people with developmental delays, pets, and other living things in authentic settings and around tasks where they can come to understand the dimensions of good character and demonstrate their new understandings.

Engaging in action research, as a teacher, has deepened my understanding of teaching practice. I have become more critically aware of the impact I can have upon the lives of the students I teach. It has caused me to be more reflective of my teaching practices and to reach out and encourage my students to be more reflective. Action research has given me a deeper and richer understanding of how teenagers think and feel, and a fresh appreciation for them. It has helped me as an educator and a member in the community to be more empathetic and caring.
References


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