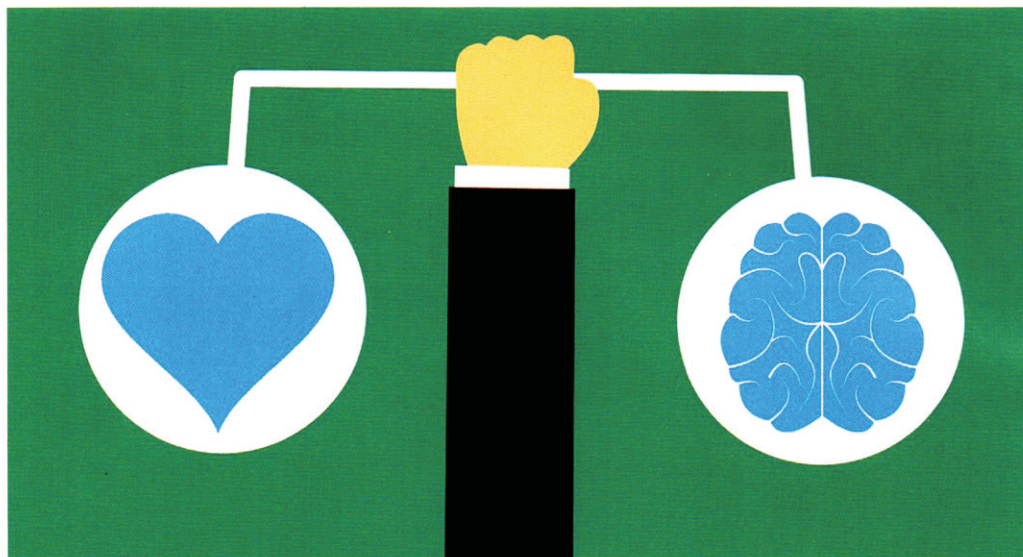


TEACHING EMPATHY

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Empathy - The Impetus for Creating Change

Most of the evils of society have often been attributed to the lack of compassion among people at large. Keeping that in mind should not there be an emphasis upon teaching compassion to people during their formative years? Should not schools then be the ideal locus to indoctrinate young minds in the notion of compassion?

Which brings us to the contentious issue as to whether 'compassion' could be taught in a classroom as a self-sustaining subject. There would be no argument that it ought to be, given its pertinence to make society function in a better way. But it would need to go through a tortuous procedure of experimentation with the content, structure and practicability before it was to become an integral part of the curriculum in the distant future.

In the meantime, the onus of expounding compassion rests upon the individual capacity of myriads of teachers that come to kindergarten schools every

morning to receive young exuberant kids yearning to learn new things all the time and the sincerity of the administration of the respective schools themselves to endeavour to inculcate compassion as a 'value'.

Taking a cue from our traditional methods of learning at 'Gurukuls', schools can initiate practices where students are encouraged to clean toilets and their classrooms. Unfortunately, such activities which were once a part of the learning process in a child's life were shunned in the name of child abuse. If conducted pragmatically such practices help kids to learn discipline and they do not grow with the underlying presumption that such jobs are menial in nature. It subliminally sets the tone of empathy amongst them for people belonging to economic backwardness.

Schools should organise sessions for parents, sensitising them to evolve a sense of respect for their domestic helpers and other such working class people they will come across. In the process, extreme care has to be taken to make sure that kids do not nurture an attitude of sympathy, considering it to be their obligation to behave in a certain way

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with people with lesser means as they could easily fall for the trap confusing sympathy with empathy.

It is only when kids learn to empathize that the class barriers fall and an egalitarian society evolves. Realisation that one's economic status is just a matter of chance and plays no role in positioning in society should be so deep rooted that it leaves no room for ambiguity and schools can play a premier role in this direction.

- ▶ Our School conducts seminars and workshops with people who do community service at the local level. It is not a difficult job to trace such people in our vicinity who engage themselves selflessly for the betterment of society in an understated manner. Introducing them to the children as role models and divulging their inspiring stories, is a subtle way of instilling compassion, encouraging them to organise programs with high profile distinguished personalities, creating a lot of awareness about them. The activities conducted with local do-gooders are cost effective and are conducted with higher frequency. There is no dearth of heroes if one were to ferret around seriously;
- ▶ Organizing tours to orphanages is another great option where sports sessions and night-outs with underprivileged kids help students to assimilate with them as equals. If gifts are accorded in such tours then the school ensures they are not of the inferior quality as it could create a sense of overbearing, thus undermining the very idea of empathy;
- ▶ Cinema is a strong audiovisual medium that can impart great wisdom if used pragmatically. There are umpteen movies and documentaries

that can inspire young minds to have a holistic understanding about the term 'compassion'. Post movie, discussions about the exemplary characters and what they learnt from them is a healthy exercise that we regularly follow. Poetry and theatre are other lucid mediums that are tapped to create a positive outlook towards compassion.

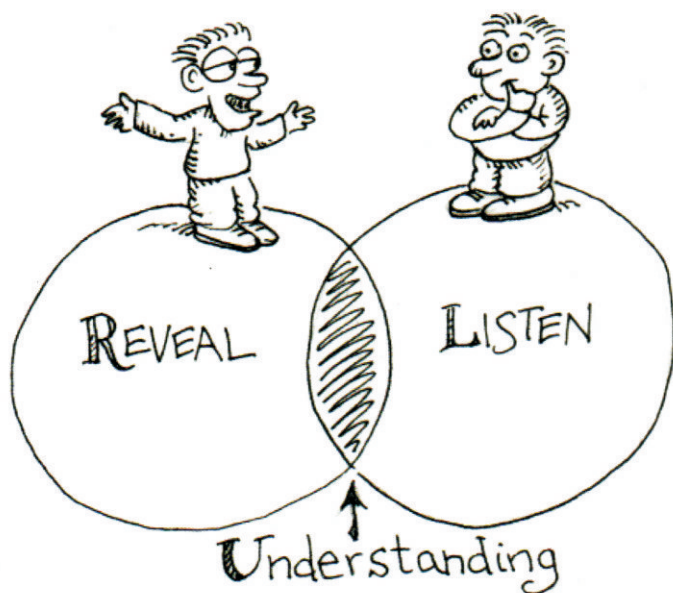
- ▶ As children grow, it has often been noticed that they tend to create fixed notions about the male gender, owing to the prevalence of certain regressive customs in society that seem to indulge them. While such customs can foster arrogance in the boys, they often create a sense of neglect and discontentment among the girls. It is here that our school plays a major role as an adjudicator by creating programs that bring forth the legitimate concerns of both genders to nip the battle of the sexes in its infancy.

“The benefits of empathy in education include, building a positive classroom culture, strengthening a feeling of community.”

- ▶ Identity is another sphere that is a cause for great animosity in society. For the sake of understanding, let us put the differences in race, caste, religion, ideology, etc. into this broad category. Generally, schools keep the

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Vol.12 | Issue 5 | October 2018 | ₹ 40



issue of identity out of their ambit. The probable justification is that, identity is a very complex subject that should not be introduced to young children with impressionable minds that could bamboozle them. It could also be attributed to the school's adherence to teaching idealism, where concepts of differences in identity and the violence it precipitates is brushed under the carpet assuming that one would learn about these things with experience. But once out of the cocoon of school premises in the real world where a person would be judged by his/her identity at every step, it is always advisable to introduce to students. Our school takes it as a responsibility to sensitise it's children about the complexity involved with identity and when imparted assiduously, perhaps helps prepare a bedrock for far more peaceful and compassionate world.

- ▶ At our school, the world is our classroom. We create a class of global literate students that have greater empathy and understanding by creating connections with other classrooms across the globe and listen to their stories. We have included a cultural diversity assembly/day at our school where we make our students read a book from another country that tells a story.

Summary

In our fast-paced, digital world, it can often feel like our students are more disconnected from one

another than ever before, they are de-humanized victims, which entraps them into thinking that people who are different from them do not feel and behave the same way they do. Empathy involves the ability to emotionally understand what another person is experiencing. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else's position and feeling what they must be feeling.

The benefits of empathy in education include, building a positive classroom culture, strengthening a feeling of community and preparing students to be leaders in their own community.



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