TEACHING EMPATHY, UNCOVERING THE NEED FOR GREATER
EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

Through the use of supportive, dedicated formal schooling curriculum, empathy education has the potential to enhance academic achievement, teacher-student relationships, supportive classroom climates, and a child’s sense of social and emotional confidence. As students learn empathy, they also learn emotional literacy, consensus building, communication and negotiation skills, the value of prosocial behavior, and self-awareness. This powerful tool expands beyond more intuitive behaviors within the social and emotional skill set; mastering empathy requires greater cognitive control, stronger knowledge of behavioral processes, and more dedicated educational resources. Students who are provided comprehensive empathy education at critical developmental milestones are proven to benefit personally, socially, and academically throughout their formal schooling and beyond. Utilizing existing literature and research from multiple fields, this paper discusses the existing barriers to empathy education, examines the purpose of schooling systems from a sociology of education perspective, and argues for empathy to be given greater societal and educational priority within the context of social and emotional learning.

*Keywords*: empathy, sociology of education, purpose of schooling, social and emotional learning
In my years as a preschool teacher, I worked with my fellow educators and the provided curriculum to develop and reinforce students’ prosocial behaviors. Art projects, imagination games, picture books read aloud on the carpet, interventions over playground disputes – each lesson and interaction provided new opportunities to teach and reinforce social and emotional skills, norms, and expectations. The ways in which these young students interacted with others, fostered kindness and inclusion, shared toys, offered help, and sought to compassionately answer questions of social difference were all indicators that they were learning positive behaviors on track with their emotional and cognitive development. I was pleased and proud to see the children in my classroom respond to this kind of coaching; I felt hopeful that it would translate into their attitudes about friendship and citizenship as they navigated future relationships in school, at home, and in their communities. But recently I wondered, ‘were we teaching our students empathy?’ In fact, we were not.

The prosocial lessons which were incorporated into our daily activities at the preschool were full of language and understanding about sympathy, kindness, and inclusivity. But there was no existing literature or resources for teachers and parents to delineate between these simpler skills and the cognitive work that mastering empathy entails. Research shows that children reach particular, marked developmental milestones in their social and cognitive functionality (Hinnant & O’Brian, 2007). Greater understanding of these pivotal stages of behavioral development will
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help to provide educational professionals with opportunities for generating a long-lasting social and academic impact. As soon as children enter the formal schooling system, they are faced with vast and expansive opportunities for developmental growth from both a social and neurological standpoint. This is the time for facilitated, formal curriculum and empathy building techniques to be put in place by the entire learning community – all of the collaborative members who support a child’s learning and growth. It would be a mistake for policy makers, researchers, and curriculum analysts to disregard the benefits of committed, structured social and emotional teaching within schools at these moments of critical potential.

I was initially drawn to this topic to address with some clarity the great divisions which I saw and felt in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. At times of intense political and social conflict, the ability to empathize with someone of another perspective, lifestyle, or background becomes an increasingly valuable skill. Researchers of sociology, ethics, and morality have further defined social empathy as the ability to genuinely understand the experiences of people from different socioeconomic classes and racial/ethnic backgrounds (Segal, 2011). The expansion of social and interpersonal empathy takes root in the early stages of cognitive development, a time of learning at which children discover new things about the world exponentially. When viewing the schisms that exist in modern society along lines of political partisanship, gender, race, class, culture, and more, it becomes even more imperative to seek out, model, and nurture attitudes which value understanding the lived experiences of others. During this critical stage of a child’s development, knowledge about the world and its biases proliferate, but so does a child’s ability to build empathy.

While researching this topic, it became evident that certain barriers exist within schooling systems and policy discussions that inhibit a formal, institutional emphasis being placed on
social and emotional learning. A primary barrier is the lack of a concise and coherent definition of empathy, which leads to confusion amongst administrators, educators, parents, students, and social and behavioral psychologists. Another barrier is the long-standing expectation that empathy is an innate characteristic, and that some children are simply born more attuned to the feelings and experiences of others. This assumption is particularly damaging because it implies that empathy can’t be taught; that despite positive behavioral advancements and empathy interventions, people are either inherently capable or incapable of emotional intelligence. A third barrier places too much responsibility on the part of the educators. Many systems continue to believe that even without the needed social and emotional learning resources or ongoing professional training, all good or successful teachers will find ways to incorporate social learning into their academic lessons. This is not the case, and an overburdening of teachers leads to lower levels of empathy between all factions of a learning community. Finally, a lack of overall respect for a child’s emotions and experience serves as a significant barrier to prioritizing social and emotional learning within schools.

I believe that an inquiry such as this has far-reaching impacts within the world of education and sociology. Most policy makers, educators, and parents would agree that empathy is an important aspect of an individual’s social development and learning. Many research studies have attempted to understand how children learn the importance and discipline of empathic response, but few resources exist which aid teachers in providing comprehensive, foundational, developmentally-appropriate lessons. Empathy responses have been measured by gender (Christov-Moore et al., 2014), class and socioeconomic background (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010), age (Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987), and even by reading level as a measure of intelligence (Bryant, 1982). However, in shifting the focus from social psychology to teaching, learning,
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Curriculum development, and sociology of education, researchers will be able to create a more comprehensive and useful set of materials and guidelines for parents and early childhood educators. Classrooms and communities will greatly benefit from this kind of focused and deliberate instruction as students are taught the founding principles of other social and emotional milestones.

With an established research consensus illustrating empathy’s many personal, classroom, and societal benefits, it would be understandable to assume that this subject has been examined thoroughly enough, that little more can be said to advance the discussion. However, barriers to teaching empathy continue to persist, and I plan to argue that without systemic intervention, they will continue to impede social and emotional curriculum advancements as well as school and community mindsets about empathy. In particular, I will discuss how a heightened focus on the benefits of emotional intelligence serves schools, communities, and society through the lens of sociology of education.

**Defining Empathy for Learning Communities**

To better understand how social and emotional learning will impact classroom climates, learning experiences, and society at large, it’s first necessary to define empathy and to define it well. Behavioral scientists, social psychologists, educational researchers, pediatricians, and philosophers have all offered suggested terms by which to navigate the concept. In promoting its use across educational settings, it is important to create as straightforward and comprehensive definition as possible for the adults’ benefit as well as the children’s. When assessing the field of empathy education, I quickly determined that this lack of a succinct definition served as a barrier to teaching empathy and its effective implementation in schools. The diversity of definitions and
tools of measurement makes the creation of learning resources and comparisons between empathy studies acutely challenging (Gerdes, 211; Gerdes, Segal, & Lietz, 2010). Without a clear and concise definition of social and emotional skills and learning objectives, members of a learning community – the teachers, administrators, parents, and students, too – all well-meaning, would focus attention to strategies and behaviors with varying levels of understanding and intentionality. Educator and social researcher Karen Gerdes (2011) writes,

> Although empathy is recognized as a very important part of education and practice, the profession lacks a well-articulated and driving strategy or conceptualization that we can apply reliably and utilize effectively… We need a comprehensive strategy to teach empathy that gives it the same importance as diversity, ethics, and other foundational concepts (p. 112).

To this end, empathy must be conclusively defined as “the attempt by one self-aware self to comprehend unjudgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self” (Wispé, 1986, p. 318). Put more simply, empathy is the ability to identify with the feelings and perspectives of others.

To embody the perspective of another person, to imagine their struggles and triumphs, to feel with them how they must be feeling; this experience requires greater cognitive competence than many other behaviors within the social and emotional skill set. Additionally, it has been established by social psychologists and behavioral researchers that the development of empathy impacts more than just the intellectual, perceived experiences of that individual. Instead, true empathy is linked to definitive action and social advocacy. Studies have proven that understanding, building, and supporting empathic response leads to the development of greater prosocial behavior amongst peers and towards stigmatized groups (Batson et al., 2002).
Therefore, an introduction of dedicated, foundational social and emotional curriculum at key stages of behavioral development will affect the many ways by which a child participates in the classroom, treats his family, supports his classmates, understands social inequality, and develops as a conscientious citizen.

Another reason why it is important to clearly define empathy is to distinguish its function from that of other social and emotional skills such as sharing, sympathy, and kindness. Since the term ‘social and emotional learning’ encompasses so many similar behaviors and processes, it is necessary for education researchers and teachers to establish empathy as its own singular social function and skill. Other forms of social and emotional learning are considered by behavioral researchers to be “simpler” to grasp by students and therefore more accessible without specific learning tools (Wispé, 1986). For this reason, social classroom skills like friendship, sharing, respecting others, being a good listener, being kind, thoughtful, etc. have been more readily understood and enacted by teachers and parents. But according to emotional development researchers J. Benjamin Hinnant and Marion O’Brien, empathy distinguishes itself from those more basic social skills due to its reliance on cognitive and emotional control. The ability to establish cognitive and emotional control requires a greater effort on the part of the subject exhibiting empathy and therefore involves more dedicated schooling, resources, and practice (Hinnant & O’Brien, 2007, p. 302).

Cognitive development experts have further identified three related but distinct behavioral subprocesses which classify empathy as unique: mentalizing, experience sharing, and empathic concern. Mentalizing is first necessary in order to determine what another individual is thinking or feeling. Experience sharing describes the process of vicariously experiencing another person’s emotional state. And lastly, empathic concern signifies the perceiver’s motivation to
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provide assistance or to engage prosocially (Weisz & Zaki, 2017). Experiencing and enacting all three subprocesses at once marks true empathic response, which distinguishes this behavior from other social and emotional skills which may only rely on one or two of the elements. For children being taught these skills and for teachers expected to impart them, a more explicit understanding is required of the cognitive operations and mental exertion that mastering this behavior will entail.

In her analysis of the nuances between different forms of social learning, empathy researcher and social psychologist Lauren Wispé (1986) stated, “In brief, empathy is a way of ‘knowing.’ Sympathy is a way of ‘relating.’ They are different processes, with different implications and consequences” (p. 318). All forms of social and emotional learning are valuable and serve distinct purposes. In schools and in society, it is undoubtedly necessary to be kind, compassionate, generous, a good listener, and a respectful neighbor. To experience sympathy is a positive and productive reaction; it signifies the ability to identify and appreciate compassionately the hardships of another.

But empathetic behavior differs most profoundly from sympathetic understanding in that it is linked to greater evidence of prosocial action – coming to the aid of a classmate in need, averting aggressive or bullying behavior, celebrating the success of another. Research also shows that individuals are more likely to react with empathy regardless of social, racial, or institutional barriers (Batson et al., 2002, p. 1657). This is opposed to feeling sympathetic, which more often necessitates a commonly shared viewpoint or experience (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p. 92). This significant difference between emotional reaction and prosocial action highlights empathy’s extensive potential effect when viewed from a societal lens. Despite the collective importance of other social and emotional behaviors, it becomes clear upon further investigation that empathy
serves as its own unique, valuable social skill from which children, schools, and communities will greatly benefit.

**Why is Empathy Important?**

**The Importance of Empathy in a Schooling Context**

With empathy properly defined and differentiated from more commonly understood forms of social learning, it’s next important to elaborate upon why empathy matters. The development and mastering of empathy has been established by researchers as highly important in both a classroom and societal context. First, I will discuss the benefits of empathy education within schooling systems. Research on the topic of social and emotional learning in schools has proliferated in the last forty years, leading to new advancements in curriculum writing, classroom expectations, and educational policy (Zins, 2004, p. 4). But developing teaching resources and practicing true empathic response building, with its greater reliance on cognitive competence and more involved learning systems, continues to require additional attention by both researchers and educators.

While the field of social and emotional learning has expanded to encourage educational research, the development of learning resources, and change in classroom policies and initiatives, empathy education specifically lags behind. This is partially due to a long-standing assumption regarding the nature of its subjects. A common myth persists which describes empathy as an innate characteristic only possessed by particular individuals. Capable teachers are expected to develop other social skills in the classroom like kindness, inclusivity, and sharing, but empathy is seen as something too obscure, too intuitive (Crowley & Saide, 2016). This philosophy impedes
empathy education by expecting nature to dictate over nurture with little opportunity for emotional growth or development.

Karen Gerdes and her team of empathy researchers reiterated these questions as late as 2011: “Is empathy innate or learned? What factors may augment or inhibit empathy? Why do some people have an empathy deficit or no empathy at all?” (p. 110). This misperception is upheld and reinforced through adult-child interactions in the classroom at every level. There are even early childhood educators who maintain the idea that some people are simply “born with empathetic natures” or are perhaps more attuned to empathy due to their gender, heritage, and family experiences (Gerdes et al., 2011).

Social and developmental psychologists at the end of the 20th century did a great disservice to this topic by centering the majority of empathy research on proving a link between gender-driven empathic responses, while ignoring possible strategies for developing empathy amongst all students (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987). However, modern research and scientific consensus clearly affirms that the ability to empathize is a learned social skill and fully able to be taught through deliberate, developmentally appropriate curriculum. Classrooms serve as sites of social as well as academic learning. It’s important for children to receive empathy-specific education from teachers who are familiar with their cognitive needs and the developmental milestones to be reached. This targeted focus would greatly enhance children’s learning experiences, academic performance, and the overall classroom climate.

Empathy is especially important in classroom environments because it has been strongly linked to the development of greater prosocial behavior in students. In a groundbreaking 1987 meta-analysis, developmental psychologists Nancy Eisenberg and Paul Miller effectively proved the association between empathy-inducing stimuli and an increase in a child’s sociability,
cooperation, and social competence. Across all measures of evaluation, children aged 4-9 years were more likely to react with a prosocial behavioral response after being first exposed to guided empathy-driven instruction (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). In structuring their research questions and methods, Eisenberg and Miller define prosocial behavior as “voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another” (1987, p. 92). Any parent, teacher, or educational researcher can see the benefits of a more altruistically-motivated classroom. Cooperative learning environments benefit all classroom participants; from teachers who are able to impart lessons more effectively to students who experience more meaningful social interactions. Empathy trains young minds to see the world through another’s perspective – and this insight aids in a child’s ability to maintain mindfulness, value interdependence, and be responsible to a group (Aronson, 2002).

The development of empathy has also been linked to lowered levels of classroom aggression and bullying. Empathy has often been touted as an “intervention tool” in order to mitigate or correct the negative behaviors of students exhibiting aggressive tendencies. Empathy education also empowers students in the role of ‘bystander’ to effectively advocate for the bullying victim. Supplemental programs and external curriculum such as the ‘Start Empathy,’ ‘Roots of Empathy,’ and ‘No Bullying’ models are available to schools with high rates of school-wide violence and a perceived lack of student empathy (Kennelly, 2012). When facing aggressive or bullying classrooms, Mary Gordon, the ‘Roots of Empathy’ creator, writes, “The difference lies in our capacity for empathy… Failure of empathy at best leads to complicity and apathy; at worst, it leads to cruelty and violence” (2005, p. 31).

One need not look too far into history to see this complicity at its most extreme: apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust, America’s history of slavery and racial discrimination, the
persistent demarginalization of vulnerable groups, and countless other examples provide ample
evidence of humans treating one another without empathy, without consideration of their lived
experience. In the classroom, we may not witness this degree of systemic violence or hatred, but
bullying does rely on the same cycles of victimization and the social acceptance of an unjust
status quo (Gordon, 2005, pp. 41-42). An increased focus by educators and parents to highlight
perspective taking and empathic response building in schools has been proven to lower rates of
peer-to-peer aggression and to boost overall emotional intelligence (Coie & Dodge, 1998).
Empathy researchers Miller and Eisenberg (1988) state conclusively, “It is therefore appropriate
for practitioners and researchers interested in the inhibition of individuals’ aggressive and
antisocial behavior toward others to pay greater attention to the construct of empathy in their
work” (p. 341).

Empathy also matters in a schooling context because the practice of learning empathy
helps students gain greater understanding of their own emotions through the development of
emotional literacy. In 2016, education researcher Yukel Oksuz defined emotional literacy as the
“recognition of emotions in oneself, management of emotion in self and others, and appropriate
responses to others’ emotions” (p. 34). In early studies of childhood cognitive development, this
has often been referred to as emotional or moral intelligence, with an emphasis on a strong
ethical foundation and correcting perceived wrongs within society. The ability to emotionally
multitask, to face extensive stimuli, to manage the feelings and expressions of others, and to react
appropriately to peers are all markers of learned prosociality. Like the previously cited studies on
empathy in action, high emotional literacy is tied strongly to the development of cooperative,
altruistic behavior. Students who exhibit a thorough understanding of their own emotions and the
Empathy education has been proven to establish a more supportive, encouraging, and inclusive classroom climate for teachers as well as for students. Comprehensive knowledge of the ways by which students come to practice empathy benefits teachers specifically. Such cognizance aids in facilitating their own emotional responses in difficult or stressful classroom environments. The power of empathy in supporting teacher-student relationships has been widely documented, as has been the case in many other “helping professions” such as social work, nursing, and counseling (Katz, 1964). Like their students, elementary and secondary teachers who possess greater familiarity with social and emotional learning curricula are shown to create more caring relationships, communicate more effectively, and react to stressful situations with greater patience. In fact, in a 2002 qualitative study, interviewed teachers described how empathy-driven lessons led to “more positive interactions with culturally diverse students, more supportive classroom climates, and more student-centered practices” (McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 433). Education researcher Geneva Gay (2000) emphasized this classroom-wide impact by stating, “empathetic teachers usually have children who perform will perform well academically, socially, morally and culturally” (p. 54).

When students are aware of the needs of their peers and when teachers are responsive to the emotional cues of their students, classrooms become more effective in meeting both academic learning objectives and social development goals. The barriers which may have prohibited full attention or effective communication are eliminated. Students feel safer with lower rates of peer-to-peer aggression and bullying. As teachers better understand and model
empathy for their students, their personal classroom experiences improve. The ability by students and teachers to communicate needs, clarify problems, or celebrate successes is made accessible and afforded high value. Indeed, social psychologists Meirav Hen and Marina Goroshit affirmatively state that

“teachers’ social-emotional competence is crucial for promoting a positive learning environment to the students… These relationships are fundamental for the healthy development of students in schools and are positively associated with students’ academic performance, achievements, social functioning, school engagement, and learning motivation” (2016, p. 1).

In the field of empathy research, there is a strong proven link between social and emotional skill proficiency and higher rates of academic achievement. Developmental psychologists and education practitioners have reached a consensus on this topic: “It is becoming ever clearer that [social and emotional learning] must be given the attention required to maximize not only children’s success in social relations and personal well-being but also their broader school/classroom adjustment and academic success” (Denham & Brown, 2010, p. 652). The ultimate outcome of this research is not surprising: children with who display high levels of social and emotional engagement are more likely to participate at school, more readily accepted by classmates and teachers, more capable of clearly articulating needs, and are given more effective instruction and positive feedback. Therefore, it makes sense that academic learning, once considered the sole purpose of schooling, would inevitably improve alongside social skills.

Students within the American education system are immediately and inextricably involved in a social learning environment. At the entry point of this schooling experience, all types of learning are quickly established to be reliant upon social cooperation. In their earliest
classrooms, students are faced with new tasks and expectations on pace with their potential for social and cognitive development. Children are placed into groups, expected to cooperate fully and willingly with one another, and provided the language and tools for communicating issues effectively. It is therefore evident that a child’s ability to understand themselves and others, to make good decisions, to regulate emotion, attention, and behavior, and to engage in a range of prosocial behaviors contributes to a cohesive, supportive schooling experience where academic and social learning grow in tandem.

The Importance of Empathy in a Societal Context

Beyond its significance and merit within classrooms, empathy plays an important role in larger societal contexts as well. The social and emotional skills developed through formal schooling systems impact the many ways in which students see themselves, shape their environments, support others, and contextualize roles and norms within society. By highlighting emotional intelligence and praising prosocial responsiveness, values are communicated. Attitudes about vulnerability, advocacy, caring, cooperation, and social needs are made clear.

Patient, encouraging teachers demonstrate social competence for students at critical stages of behavioral development. Those children then internalize these displays of compassion and altruism and with them, adjust the norms and expectations which continually form society. To create a more empathetic society, to dissolve and remedy ingrained social divisions, we must first effectively teach and model empathy for our youngest citizens.

Interpersonal empathy describes the ability to understand and share the feelings of another individual. Meanwhile, social empathy is the ability to genuinely understand people from different socioeconomic classes and racial/ethnic backgrounds within the context of
institutionalized inequalities and disparities (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012, p. 541). When children are asked to “feel with someone,” they imagine their lives and experiences, the factors and forces which have shaped their decisions, the strong motivators which may empower or impede them. Just as a heightened classroom focus on interpersonal empathy corresponds to greater evidence of prosocial behavior, social empathy insights can inspire positive societal change and promote social well-being through greater use of democratic processes, social tolerance, and civic engagement (Morrell, 2010). Levels of aggression, prejudice, and stereotyped views decline, while understanding and social advocacy increases for members of stigmatized groups (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002). The primary lessons of interpersonal empathy have the potential to translate to a much larger stage. Social empathy is therefore necessary in order to foster the creation of a more inclusive and just society.

The principles of social empathy are taught and take effect in the classroom, in family relationships, in communities, in theoretical exercises, and through practice. It has been established that interpersonal empathy is not an innate characteristic, but a learned social skill with continuing opportunities for development and growth (Gerdes et al., 2011). So too does social empathy enhance with more deliberate instruction and with greater overall emotional proficiency. Social empathy requires an individual to recognize themselves in relation to the outside world: as an enforcer or enabler of social norms, as a member of different systems and institutions, and as an inextricable part of a larger societal and historical context. Early acknowledgement of this immense connectivity and social responsibility lays a foundation for more advanced conversations surrounding ethics, diversity, and social engagement in schooling and in life.
Social empathy, like interpersonal empathy, differs greatly from an expression of sympathy – though the two are frequently confused when discussing social issues and contexts. While the feeling of sympathy appropriately addresses the hardships of another individual or group, its usefulness in promoting social engagement and prosocial action is limited (Gerdes, 2011). Sympathy more accurately describes the observation and appreciation of another’s problems and needs from a distance. Feelings of sympathy or pity are also more readily described when faced with the hardships of an ingroup member compared to an individual from a different race, culture, class, or social background (Brewer, 1999). True social empathy, however, is felt across institutional and systemic barriers and often specifically incorporates opportunities and advocacy for change. A team of social researchers tasked with developing a measurement index for social empathy affirmatively concluded, “With socially empathic feelings and knowledge, people are more inclined to work to promote social and economic justice and social well-being… Engaging in social empathy may increase [an individual’s] sense of efficacy or impact on the outside world, and ultimately gain a sense of empowerment” (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012, p. 544).

Social advocacy, civic engagement, and higher rates of participation in democratic processes may not apply directly to the experiences of children in early education settings. But those early lessons and models lay a foundational knowledge for students to better understand themselves and to cultivate a sense of social responsibility. As Mary Gordon writes, “Understanding how other people feel is the first step to building caring relationships in the classroom, in the community, and in the world at large” (2005, p. 35). In order to shape a more empathetic society and to instill a greater sense of social advocacy, teachers, parents, and education researchers must first create the tools by which children can learn empathy and see its
value. Empathy education benefits societal contexts beyond classrooms; social empathy and its resulting effects contribute to the creation of a more just and equal society.

Sociology of Education

The Role of Schools within Society

In debating an education initiative’s potential impact and scale, when facing long-held assumptions and expectations about behavior, and in determining the means by which interpersonal and social empathy can be taught most efficiently, it is also necessary to critically examine the purpose of schools within society. In the field of sociology of education, this is often a principal topic of discussion. Functionalists, critical theorists, and social reproduction researchers all offer differing opinions and points of view. Sociologists are essentially tasked with the study of society’s structures, functions, and institutions – as well as the problems which inhibit progressive thinking and the development of social equity. Such contexts and conversations are easily set within schools and educational systems. As sites of social learning and instruction, these institutions often serve as the primary points of access for students, educators, staff, and parents to form cooperative learning communities. Each member’s participation aids in a child’s understanding and shaping of their social world. It is therefore relevant and necessary for education researchers and social theorists to critically examine the many roles and responsibilities served by schools. Without this foundational and contextual knowledge, it is impossible to know whether skills such as empathy have a place in the classroom – and to what extent their instruction must be prioritized.
Historically, social researchers have viewed schooling systems through a functionalist perspective. Functional theory describes education’s purpose as a vital instrument of social policy, social integration, and in shaping behavior. Founding father of sociology Emile Durkheim famously contributed to this topic by suggesting that education systems were responsible for more than merely teaching individuals marketable skills. Such skills are certainly necessary to fully participate in an economy that is based on the division of specialized labor. But Durkheim also noted that schools must impart the shared values of society in order to maintain solidarity and social cohesion (Sever, 2012). These “social facts” transcend individualistic impulses and dictate the values, norms, and characteristics upon which social behavior, including the collective behavior of social institutions like schools, is molded (Durkheim, 2013).

This understanding of shared social knowledge is mirrored in Durkheim’s definition of collective representation: the belief that social and cultural symbols convey widespread, agreed-upon ideas, values, and ideologies (Durkheim, 2013). In the context of race, this constitutes a socially constructed hierarchy of ranging ‘difference’ and subsequent systemic oppression. According to this theory, individuals behave as implicit actors within society and instead of being valued for their contribution as an individual, are instead perceived symbolically by others to represent their assigned group as a whole. In other words, collective representations reflect the history of the group that is the collective experience of that group over time (Durkheim, 1912).

As children in schooling settings begin to conceive of the collective representations of social and systemic categories, and without a strong understanding of social empathy, they will continue to enact and perpetuate the power of those classifications through their own experiences and interactions.
With these early sociological developments, it was established that schools are responsible for providing students with the necessary perspectives and tools to understand, contribute to, and function within society. In the 1950s, sociologist Talcott Parsons expanded upon Durkheim’s functionalist view by suggesting that schools also serve “as venues that pave the way to equal opportunity… and facilitate the promotion of students’ standing in the social hierarchy” (Sever, 2012, p. 653). With schools serving as key sites of socialization, students are exposed to pivotal lessons regarding collective representations, societal roles, norms, and hierarchies. It therefore follows that active participation in schooling systems helps to provide students of all backgrounds with opportunities for social advancement. Although future sociologists would veer away from this concept of “education as the great equalizer” (Growe & Montgomery, 2003), it is important to note that Durkheim’s “social facts” can continue to be edited, viewed, and supported with the goal of attaining greater educational equality. For example, national, institutional and schoolwide ethos can (and should) be adjusted in order to strongly factor social empathy and inclusivity as chief tenets of instruction. Education systems offer this opportunity to reteach social facts in accordance with new and changing ideologies. Utilizing Parsons’ input and perspective, a society which values social advocacy begins with conversations of equality in social institutions like schools.

Unequal Outcomes: Critical Theory

In addressing opportunities for social and economic advancement, it is also necessary to describe the entrenched systemic inequalities which profoundly impact social and schooling trajectories. A critical theory of education focuses upon social inequities replicated in schools, and consequently links schooling to larger sociological views of social classification and social
reproduction (Anyon, 2011). Injustices in society can often be found mapped through correspondingly unequal academic experiences. A critical theorist of education argues that schools serve the social purpose of reconciling new generations to the social norms and issues of the past. Such assimilation serves to maintain the status quo and prepares young people for a lifetime of participation in social systems which are based on foundational inequalities (Sever, 2012, p. 655).

Sociology of education researchers and critical theorists rely upon the theory of social representation to frame this discussion. An understanding of social representation is needed in order to understand the hierarchy of societal categories which are defined and delineated through the schooling process. Social representation theory follows many of the same distinctions as Pierre Bourdieu’s critical theory of social reproduction, in which all social institutions perpetuate existing structural inequalities (Bourdieu, 1973). Social representation, however, relies upon a collective group identity and societal classification. According to Wolfgang Wagner’s definition of this theory, “Communities are characterized by their name, which reflects their self-attributed identity, and by the fact that their members communicate among themselves by virtue of a shared meanings system” (2011, p. 1041). A critical theory of education relies on the concept of individual experience being founded upon this group identity and the resultant hedged opportunities. Within classrooms and educational settings, lessons void of social empathy build these social classifications without context or deeper understanding. But sociologists of education proffer more than examples of broken systems; even critical theorists use their insight to suggest opportunities for change. With a critical theory of education in mind, empathy-driven instruction can serve a distinct purpose: to disrupt systems of inequality and to utilize schools as a site of social change as well as social instruction (Karabel & Halsey, 1977).
From its inception, sociology of education has offered different and evolving opinions on the purpose of schooling. Emile Durkheim was the first to suggest that schools deserve to be seen as social institutions where individuals receive more than the skills needed to function in the labor market. Through schooling, students come to understand how to appropriately participate in society’s many systems and structures. Building upon this theory in the middle of the 20th century, Talcott Parsons suggested that these learning systems offer opportunities for greater social equity and progressive thinking. Critical theorists have illustrated the ways by which schooling systems serve and replicate larger systems of social inequality, reproducing social outcomes through fundamentally unequal academic and social trajectories. These perspectives, along with countless others throughout the history of sociology as a discipline, provide insight to schooling’s true purpose and role within society.

Despite their differences, there is a commonality between each sociological lens and point of view: that schooling systems are a cornerstone upon which society and social structure is built, taught, and upheld. Students are socialized, through their experiences with curriculum, peers, teachers, administrators, and parents, to understand the norms and values of society and to see those ethics in action. Like the lessons and outcomes of social empathy, this approach to the purpose of schooling offers a gateway for greater social competence, confidence, and civic engagement. In 2004, education researcher John Goodlad addressed a collective vision of education at its essence: “the public mission of schooling… educating the young for responsible, satisfying citizenship in our associational and political democracy” (p. 1). With this key definition in mind, it is evident that students who develop and exhibit both social and interpersonal empathy will most effectively be able to uphold these ideals. Empathic
understanding is linked to greater social action and prosocial behavior, which is vital for the efficacy of any democratic and cooperative society.

As children begin to perceive the collective representations and inequalities which exist in contemporary society, particularly surrounding those entrenched social categories of race, gender, class, and sex, the teaching of empathy becomes even more important for cognitive development and for social cohesion. According to educational philosopher Maxine Greene, a democratic community is always a community in the making. “[I]t is energized and radiated by an awareness of possibility. To develop a vision of such possibility of what ought to be, is very often to be made aware of present deficiencies and present flaws” (1995, p. 166). The responsibility then of a thorough and empathetically-driven education lies in the hands of the educational community – policy makers, researchers, curriculum writers, parents, teachers, school faculty and staff – to adopt progressive learning objectives and an unwavering expectation of both interpersonal and social empathy. Classrooms and communities with a comprehensive understanding of empathy education will then benefit from more advanced, deliberate conversations about diversity, inclusivity, equality, and social contexts.

**Theory of Social Cohesion**

A long tradition of research demonstrates that people willingly adjust their beliefs and behaviors to match others around them (Asch, 1956). Sociologists and social psychologists have posited that much of human behavior lies not in self-interest, but in the reactions and interactions with members of a collective community (Aronson, 2004, p. 19). In short, humans are enormously motivated by their desire for a sense of belonging. This effect is amplified in a group context; if a group confidently displays a particular viewpoint or motivation, individuals will be
more likely to adapt to that demonstrated value or action. So, if the group is perceived as decisively valuing empathy, members will behave more empathetically in order to build or preserve a sense of group membership and belongingness.

Through this social education and social pressure, individuals are taught and modeled ways to appropriately communicate with others, form relationships, and demonstrate their prioritized values. The theory of social cohesion appears “to be based on the willingness of people in a society to cooperate with each other in the diversity of collective enterprises that members of a society must do in order to survive and prosper” (Stanley, 2003, p. 8). This stated willingness, this conformity to higher ideals of sociability, this dedication to fostering commonalities rather than differences – such a philosophy underlies the foundation upon which all social and emotional learning is built.

Society as a whole benefits from more empathetic, prosocial children and citizens by providing cooperative tools to encourage greater social competence and cooperation. When a team of social scientists in the mid 20th century began to research the primary roots of social conflicts, one of their most basic discoveries was “the importance and centrality of empathy in sustaining the social contract” (Gerdes et al., 2011, p. 109). This social contract is in effect at schools between teachers and students, between students and their peers, and in all levels of society and the learning community. Social cohesion theory and social interdependence theory “provide the structure on which cooperative learning is built” (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 365). The theories behind these social networks supply a contextual foundation for better understanding empathy’s potential impact and importance. Empathy researchers, happiness experts, and sociologists of education share a common understanding and a common belief: that
individuals and societies are fully capable of being guided by altruistic motivation and that educational experiences ought to be shaped by principles of empathy.

**Empathy as a Factor in Larger Societal Contexts**

While learning systems remain the point of focus, sociologists of education also seek answers and theories to help explain larger social phenomena. These conversations are often supported by insight from related fields: psychology, anthropology, behavioral science, education, and others. With this great collective in mind, debates surrounding schooling purpose and education systems begin to reflect and embody larger social forces and changes. One such example is the societal shift from a predominately collectivist mindset in American society prior to the turn of the 20th century to an individualistic mindset, in which independence is prized over interdependence (Putnam, 2000). This relatively modern American perspective idealizes an individual’s capacity to persevere and succeed, with decreased focus on the community which guides them towards that resulting success. As noted by Stanford University social researchers MarYam Hamedani, Hazel Markus, and Alyssa Fu (2013), “According to this independent schema, ‘good’ behavior is characterized by acting autonomously, feeling in control, and determining one’s own outcomes free from others’ influence” (p. 189). Such motivations are not conducive to fostering a sense of responsibility within communities, let alone forming supportive relationships which prioritize emotional intelligence.

Research in the last decade has illustrated this trend in dramatic ways. In reflecting upon society’s “narcissism epidemic,” social theorists Twenge and Campbell (2009) state that “A focus on individual achievement that leaves out feelings, love, and caring is a recipe for narcissism. The missing piece of caring for others cascades into many of narcissism’s negative
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outcomes, such as lack of empathy, incivility, entitlement, and aggression” (p. 85). In 2010, social psychologist Sara Konrath offered the next startling pronouncement: empathy itself is on the decline. Her research illustrated how young adults’ self-reported empathic responses have been at a steady descent since the 1980s with a markedly steep drop in the last ten years (Konrath, 2010). These examples and others provide a pessimistic view of America’s hyper-focused society; one built upon individual achievements, financial wealth, beauty, ‘specialness,’ and selfish attitudes rather than community, emotional relationships, and supportive social systems.

In ‘Treating the Narcissism Epidemic: Changing Social Practices,’ Twenge and Campbell offer relatively simple advice: “Focus on teaching your children empathy and compassion” (2009, p. 294). Social and emotional learning tools reemphasize needed acknowledgement of an individual’s relationship and responsibility to larger social communities. Empathy-targeted instruction as a concept gains greater importance within this societal context. Because American society has become even more independently minded since the 1980s, a teaching curriculum which focuses on perspective-taking, consideration, communication, and strong social cohesion has a greater social need and potential impact. Beyond its proven usefulness in classrooms, interdependent societies are shown to have higher rates of social unity, personal satisfaction, and overall happiness (Helliwell, Huang, & Wang, 2014). Social researcher Mary Gordon writes, “Studies of cultures that place a high value on independence show that the success of the individual is prized more than collaborative achievements. By contrast, in cultures where there is an interdependence of roles and responsibilities, … where children have a contribution to make to the subsistence of their family, a high value is placed on altruistic behavior and working for the common good” (2005, p. 39).
Sociological research has been conducted in partnership with every field in order to explain social situations and contexts, its many nuances, trends, and shifting attitudes. As social researchers discover and elaborate upon the current progression towards individualism, education specialists can provide their unique insight to the field. By supporting and modeling empathy as an essential value, schools and society teach children that connectivity, interdependence, community engagement, and social responsibility remain vital parts of the human experience.

**Empathy Instruction: Suggestions for Future Research**

Much of the existing research about the development of empathy has been conducted in the field of behavioral development and social psychology, rather than in educational philosophy or in teaching and learning departments. This is because historically, empathy has been understood as a primarily affective behavioral skill which develops throughout childhood like many other social and cognitive milestones without the need dedicated curriculum. Prior investigations of empathy have focused on the behavioral and demonstrable components of social skill building – not on the emotional and cognitive processes that underlie empathic responses or the ways by which those processes can be taught (Hinnant & O’Brien, 2007, p. 315). Psychologists and social researchers have linked rates of empathy to gender, socioeconomic status, family background, and cultural dynamics. Unfortunately, this research’s focus remains more dedicated to explaining empathy’s intuitive nature rather than in developing tools for teaching empathy as an incorporated component of formal schooling systems. This is a definitive area which I have identified to be lacking within the empathy research field.

Social psychological research spans a wide range of affective development and skill building – from mapping cognitive and neurological functionality to establishing the use of
empathy as a collaborative social asset. Such research has identified the neural processes of emotional growth, the peaks and opportunities for intervention, and the key components for building lasting empathic responses. This foundational knowledge is necessary in understanding how children can develop and express empathy. Building upon this deeper understanding, education specialists and curriculum writers would be able to create classroom resources which are more effective and more lasting. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach also supports proponents of social and emotional learning from other fields. With a strong cognitive and behavioral foundation, empathy instruction will be more successful, its impacts more obvious, and therefore more readily considered to be a necessary element of social and emotional learning curriculum.

Keeping this foundation in mind, it’s important to further determine what empathy instruction currently exists in schools and where that education is lacking. In 2012, Elizabeth Segal, a noted empathy researcher, and her team at Arizona State University published an exploratory analysis of the Social Empathy Index Model. This tool is meant to serve as a conceptual learning framework and to establish the foundational social and emotional skills upon which greater empathy context and instruction may be built (see Appendix). This model identifies three primary components to empathy education: interpersonal empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility. Each element relies on students’ perspective-taking as the primary vehicle of instruction. Segal writes, “Perspective-taking is key to contextual understanding… Such perspective-taking can improve social relations by decreasing prejudice and stereotyping as well improving social coordination” (p. 545). The introduction and reinforcement of these three empathy components work to solidify an individual’s sense of purpose and belonging to a greater whole.
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As empathy becomes seen and understood as a more “teachable skill,” education researchers have begun to debate how it can be most efficiently engrained in the learning experiences of young children. For students to develop a consciousness of another individual’s experience, to ‘know with someone’ rather than to observe and sympathize, children must be offered opportunities to practice authentic perspective-taking. As was emphasized in Segal’s Social Empathy Index Model, perspective-taking is a vital skill and necessary to build empathy. It affords the student an opportunity to “vicariously explore areas of experience that are not available to them in their real lives… to discuss the causes, the pros and cons, and even the dangers and the advantages of lifestyles unlike their own” (Fischer & Vander Laan, 2002, p. 25). Preliminary research proves that this can be done through classroom role playing, through guided lessons built on children’s literature, and through situational interventions as directed by a teacher or trained peer.

Specifically, one way that educators have supported such lessons utilizing existing early childhood curricula is through children’s literature. As explained by education researcher Susan Cress (1998),

“Realistic children's literature is ideally suited to provide a means to assist students in discussing empathy through the use of story. The use of story becomes critical in the process of social development… Through stories, children are able to bring meaning to their lives and make sense of their world” (p. 5).

Guided reading exercises support empathic response building through children’s literature by helping children better understand the perspectives of another person. With the proper training, this can be done with almost any children’s book or existing lesson.
Before an educator is capable of enacting guided empathy modeling and instruction, it is first necessary for the school community to adopt and support the values of social and emotional learning. This must be enacted by principals, administrators, district leaders, and parents. With a school-wide ethos valuing empathy’s potential benefits, teachers will be more able and willing to incorporate these lessons into their academic responsibilities. It is also important for a teacher to be afforded opportunities for professional development in coordination with new discoveries and resources. Without a thorough knowledge of the behavioral components upon which true empathic responses are built, even a well-meaning educator will be unaware of the signs of growth, the possible pitfalls, and the peak opportunities for intervention. Following a teacher’s understanding of the cognitive and behavioral functions which classify social and emotional skills, empathy lessons through perspective-taking could be easily incorporated into existing materials, schoolwide trainings, and classroom resources.

Within the field of teaching and learning, a greater cooperation between disciplines is needed to create and maintain successful empathy curriculum. Building upon the foundational research provided by behavioral experts, cognitive development teams, social psychologists, and sociologists of education, curriculum writers and education analysts can create professional development trainings for teachers and additional supportive resources for classrooms. The need for greater social and emotional learning in early childhood education has been thoroughly discussed. Within this conversation, a more precise and comprehensive understanding of the specific requirements and benefits of empathy in classrooms and society is missing. It’s necessary to further establish the potential impact on teachers’ experiences, on peer-to-peer communication and relationships, on school-wide conduct, and in supporting the many purposes of schooling. Members of learning communities – themselves a collective working towards a set
of social ideals – should be provided the resources to effectively teach and model empathy for their children. With this heightened research focus and practical implication, school systems will be able to more effectively serve their greatest responsibility: to prepare students for participation in society with a strong, integral emphasis on advocacy, understanding, and social empathy.

Conclusion

Schools in the United States are sites of learning, of progress, and of intentional and guided exploration about the world. Besides the opportunities for developmental growth and impact, elementary school classrooms may be the first time a child interacts at length beyond the comforts and assumptions of their own insular family life. This increased exposure leads to a greater awareness of individuals and communities from different backgrounds, and it aids in providing effective learning contexts from which teachers may explore the fundamentals of empathy and perspective-taking.

Empathy education has the potential to enhance academic achievement, teacher-student relationships, supportive classroom climates, and a child’s sense of empowerment both socially and emotionally. As students learn empathy, they also learn emotional literacy, consensus building, communication and negotiation skills, the value of prosocial behavior, and self-awareness. This powerful tool expands beyond more intuitive behaviors within the social and emotional skill set; mastering empathy requires greater cognitive control, stronger knowledge of behavioral processes, and more dedicated educational resources. Students who are provided comprehensive empathy education at critical developmental milestones are proven to benefit personally, socially, and academically throughout their formal schooling and beyond.
The establishment of these social lessons and proficiencies aid larger social conversations of equality and inclusion. Acknowledging the many purposes of school systems within society helps to argue for the needed social understanding which both interpersonal and social empathy provide. Empathy education works to curb the perils of narcissism and selfishness; social and emotional learning continually reemphasize the importance of interdependence, prosociality, and community responsibility. This philosophy is absolutely imperative, now more than ever, as we face serious examples of social division and conflict. An educational philosophy which values teachers, which supports the emotional contributions of children, and which instills a foundational sense of understanding and compassion will greatly impact schooling experiences and social perceptions.

Within the world of theory, research, sociology, and education, empathy building has taken many names and meanings, with correspondingly diverse suggestions for implementation. Within these fields, further collaboration is needed to develop classroom tools and to promote the evolution of school and community mindsets. In the midst of all this, it is necessary to remember the words of social theorist Jeremy Rifkin in *The Empathetic Civilization*, “Empathetic extension is the awareness of the vulnerability we all share, and when expressed it becomes a celebration of our common yearning to live” (2009, p. 24). By instituting the principles of empathy, by practicing genuine perspective-taking, and by valuing social understanding, schooling systems and society as a whole acknowledge that vulnerability, that yearning to belong. Above all, this kind of language and instruction supports our social connection and commonality rather than our divisions and differences. It celebrates diversity of circumstances and opinions. It affords value to a deeper acknowledgment of shared humanity.

References


