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The Trouble With Empathy.

Author: Molly Worthen

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Can we really be taught to feel each other's pain?

When my daughter started remote kindergarten last month, the schedule sent to parents included more than reading, math, art and other traditional subjects. She'll also have sessions devoted to "social and emotional learning." Themes range from listening skills and reading nonverbal cues to how to spot and defuse bullying.

As millions of students start the school year at home, staring at glowing tablets, families worry that they will miss out on the intangible lessons in mutual understanding that come with spending hours a day with kids and adults outside their own household. We want children to grasp perspectives of people different from themselves. Yet in recent years, empathy -- whether we can achieve it; whether it does the good we think -- has become a vexed topic.

While teachers attempt to teach empathy through screens, the national context has become complicated in the months since the police killing of George Floyd. "Because our white leaders lack compassion and empathy, Black people continue to die," wrote a columnist in The Chicago Sun-Times. When Joe Biden posted a video declaring that "the pain is too intense for one community to bear alone," journalists called the message an effort to "project empathy" -- while activists said empathy was not enough.

At the Republican National Convention, Ja'Ron Smith, a deputy assistant to President Trump, assured the audience that the president is empathizer in chief. "I just wish everyone would see the deep empathy he shows the families whose loved ones were killed due to senseless violence," Mr. Smith said.

Few would quarrel with a kindergarten teacher's noble efforts to teach listening skills to 5-year-olds. But as my daughter and her classmates get older, they will run into thornier dilemmas, our era's version of old questions: Are some divides too great for common humanity to bridge? When we attempt to step into the shoes of those very different from us, do we do more harm than good? At the same time, trends in American education have worked at cross-purposes, nurturing social and emotional learning in some ways, hampering it in others.

Our capacity to see one another as fellow humans, to connect across differences, is the foundation of a liberal pluralist society. Yet skeptics say that what seems like empathy often may be another form of presumption, condescension or domination. In his 2016 book "Against Empathy," the psychologist Paul Bloom argued that empathy can cloud rational judgment and skews toward people "who are close to us, those who are similar to us and those we see as more attractive or vulnerable and less scary." The scholar and activist Bell Hooks put the matter more starkly. White desire to feel Black experience is predatory, exploitative, "eating the Other," she wrote.

It's impossible to perfectly inhabit another person's experience. The important question is the value of the effort, and whether it leaves us separated by an asymptote or a chasm. Can a straight TV writer create an authentic gay sitcom character? If an author of European descent writes a novel from the perspective of Indigenous people, is it an empathic journey, or an imperialist incursion? "I don't want to throw out what empathy is trying to do," Alisha Gaines, a professor of African-American literature at Florida State University, told me. "I'm very critical of it though. Empathy has to be considered in the context of institutions and power."

Ms. Gaines has devoted much of her scholarship to interrogating well-meaning white attempts at empathy for the Black experience, from the white journalist John Howard Griffin's 1961 book "Black Like Me," an account of his project to pass as a Black man on a trip through the Deep South, to a modern re-enactment of the Underground Railroad -- whose organizers promised "empathy to the extreme,." Ms. Gaines said: "If for 90 minutes I run around and look for the lantern in the window, what do I take from this into my everyday life? This is playing a slave, not an enslaved person. The humanity gets evacuated out of it."

Yet, as a literature professor, she wants students to see books as passageways to experiences unlike their own. "I love books because I'm learning something about people I didn't understand. I'm connecting," Ms. Gaines told me. "I wasn't reflected in books I read as a kid. I understood myself through 'Anne of Green Gables' and 'Little Women' -- little Black kids often have to understand themselves through white protagonists. At the same time, for me as a little girl reading 'Anne of Green Gables,' as much as I saw myself in her precociousness and her deep feeling, I also knew there wasn't something speaking exactly to me. It was not a perfect mirror. We want to connect to the material on an emotional register and make space for the fact that each story tells a particular story."

The impulse to participate in the feelings of another may be biological, rooted in our neurology. In the 19th-century German philosophers wrote of *Einfühlung*, or "in-feeling" -- first translated in 1909 as the new English word "empathy." They did not mean simulating someone else's feelings, but projecting your own sentiments and memories in the course of an aesthetic or emotional experience, mingling your consciousness with the thing you are contemplating -- whether it is a crying child, Picasso's "Guernica" or a howling mountain landscape.

In the hands of the social scientists who rule our own time, empathy has become one piece of "emotional intelligence," a term coined in the 1960s and developed by the psychologists Peter Salovey and John Mayer in 1990. The journalist Daniel Goleman popularized that phrase in his 1995 best seller "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ," which argued that focusing on emotional skills would reduce school violence and equip students for greater success in life. Research has shown that these capacities are at least as important for long-term happiness and economic security as "hard" skills like reading and math.

In 2004, Illinois became the first state to adopt standards from preschool through high school for social and emotional learning, or SEL. Since then, anti-bullying workshops, classroom rules stressing compassion and wall charts of "feeling words" and "emoji meters" have become more common in schools nationally. "The overwhelming majority of educators and parents acknowledge that teaching children SEL skills is critical," Marc Brackett, director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, told me. "At the other end, in corporate America, employers are looking for people who have these skills."

But the colorful classroom posters and the drive for data through "social-emotional competencies" student assessments -- not necessarily bad things in themselves -- risk reducing our idea of empathy to yet another job skill. The mania for standardized testing that followed the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act has further hampered teachers' best and oldest tool for developing emotional understanding: the study of literature.

"I really do believe literature is an empathy tool, and reading literature widely can actually make you an empathetic person," Sarah Levine, a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, told me. In many classrooms, the structure of standardized tests, especially multiple-choice questions and narrow essay rubrics, pushes teachers to drill students on finding arguments and literary devices rather than encouraging them to reflect on their own emotional response. "The standardized testing movement reduces literary reading to fact-finding," Ms. Levine said.

She recently completed a study of a century of New York Regents exams and found that from the 2000s onward, "the reader disappeared from the questions that these tests are asking students. The reader is being asked to figure out what the central idea of the text is, as opposed to being asked to talk about how a text made them see something differently, or sympathize with someone," she told me.

"We have to ask: Is this the kind of reading we want kids to do? It makes kids really dislike reading. That doesn't mean we don't read critically, but we should be using some of that critical and interpretive firepower on political speeches, political tweets, things that demand attention to the way people are using language because they have immediate impact on us as citizens of the world. We should use fiction for empathy, aesthetic pleasure, examining ethical dilemmas and just the experience of escaping."

Ms. Levine taught high school English on the South Side of Chicago before Stanford. She said that despite the life of privilege she sees around her now, "the danger we're exposing students to in English classrooms is just as bad for kids in Palo Alto as for kids in Chicago with many fewer resources. We're teaching them that literature is not for them, because they aren't a part of what they read. I don't mean because they feel, 'I don't see Black and brown faces in my literature,' but 'I'm supposed to write an argument about a motif,' and not do what kids do outside of the classroom: read and enjoy the experience."

Emerson Holloway, an English major at Oberlin College in Ohio, read a lot on her own to make up for the fact that in high school, she didn't always have "the opportunity to connect and empathize with characters," she told me.

At Oberlin, she helps facilitate a student group called Barefoot Dialogues, which invites students to discuss a text or work of art over a home-cooked meal in order to "engage in trust and vulnerability to make connections across differences," she said.

She acknowledged that in academia, empathy across identity lines has become controversial, and it's crucial to "know your own boundaries," she said. "You can ask, 'What's the point if we're all so different? I'll never be able to truly understand,' and that's true to an extent."

Yet the effort to understand feels more important now than ever, she said. When Covid-19 hit in March, Barefoot Dialogues switched to Zoom meetings; its leaders are hoping for a hybrid of in-person and remote conversation this fall.

The college students I interviewed for this story stressed the role of empathy in firing up their curiosity, critical thinking and self-interrogation. "People often dismiss emotion as a weakness," Andie Horowitz, a political science major at the University of Michigan, told me. "But a certain level of emotion makes you interested in something, wanting to find the truth."

She explained how her professor in a course on gender and the law led students in a deep dive into the lives of the individuals in cases they studied. "When you understand the people behind the movement, it becomes so much more personal," she said. "That's where empathy comes into critical thinking and being motivated to learn more."

This fall, the sight of students of all ages squirming in front of iPads -- struggling to learn about themselves and each other through apps and spotty Wi-Fi -- drives home the urgency of social and emotional learning. But empathetic education was under attack long before Covid-19 hit. The desiccation of great books in the hands of testing bureaucrats and the politicization of literature in university classrooms is not a neatly left-wing or right-wing assault. It is a collective failure of confidence in our teachers and students. "When we think our students can't do something, we're done. Pack it up," Ms. Gaines, the professor at Florida State, told me. "Given the opportunity, and the space to be vulnerable and space to say they don't understand and don't know, lots of growth can happen."

This is the gift of liberal education: the invitation to read a book and think about both the variety and the common threads of human experience across time, space and culture. "Empathy extends beyond trying to put yourself in other people's shoes," said Ms. Holloway, the student at Oberlin. "Success is not part of that definition, really. The act of listening is a form of that empathy. You're willing to attempt to understand." Only by constantly making that attempt -- however imperfect -- can we learn empathy's hazards, and its power.

Molly Worthen is the author, most recently, of "Charismatic Leaders Who Remade America," an associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a contributing opinion writer.

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