**Abstract**

During the autumn term, 2015, nine 15 to 18 year old students from Blue Ridge School in St. George, Virginia took part in action research to determine the effects of repeated interaction between the students and the recipients of their community service.

Qualitative data collected during the action research indicated empathetic responses from the students of each type: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy and compassionate empathy. Not only did the boys come to understand the plight of the people they were serving, but they developed an emotional interest that compelled them to help.

**Introduction**

At Blue Ridge School we provide many opportunities for our boys to participate in service oriented projects that range from fund raising ventures to aid charitable organizations to direct participation in the community food pantry located on our campus, and most of our boys will cooperatively and even enthusiastically participate at the request and direction of the faculty. The boys possess cognitive empathy, understanding that poverty can have a detrimental effect on the poor, however there seems to be a lack of emotional and compassionate empathy toward the beneficiaries of their efforts. Once the job is done, the beneficiaries and their circumstances seem to be quickly forgotten. It is my contention that this occurs because the boys do not have the opportunity to spend time with the people they are helping.

It is this lack of emotional and compassionate empathy in our boys that I address in this action research. The literature supports the notion that the development of moral character can be influenced through education and experience, and that empathetic concern for others increases toward people who are known and whose needs are apparent. Directly associating our boys with the beneficiaries of their community service should have an effect on their emotional and compassionate empathy.

The question upon which this action research is based is: How can their repeated interaction with the beneficiaries of their community service affect the development of empathy in high school boys?

**Literature Review**

Like many schools for boys Blue Ridge School is committed to the development of young men of moral character who are willing to treat others as they would like to be treated even if it requires personal sacrifice.

A prerequisite to this commitment is the belief that moral character can be taught, and although some components of moral character are apparently innate (Szalavitz and Perry, 2010), character development can be influenced by certain factors. In Education for Values, David McClelland (1982) proposed the following as major factors in influencing character and moral development: heredity, early childhood experience, modeling by important adults and older youth, peer influence, the general physical and social environment, the communications media, the teaching of schools and other institutions, and specific situations and roles that elicit corresponding behavior. Boys’ schools are able to control some of these factors such as teaching and modeling by adults and, to some extent, the physical and social environment.

What then is moral character? Seligman and Peterson (2004) defined character “as a set of abilities or strengths that are very much changeable – entirely malleable, in fact. They are skills that you can learn; they are skills you can practice; and they are skills you can teach.” (Tough, 2003, page 59). Attributes often associated with moral character include virtues such as empathy, courage and honesty, and in *Empathy and Moral Development* (2000, page 3) Martin Hoffman writes that “empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible”. Frans De Waal (2009, page 43) states that “Empathy is an automated response over which we have limited control. We can suppress it, mentally block it or fail to act on it, but except for a tiny percentage of humans… no one is emotionally immune to another’s situation.”

According to psychologist Paul Ekman, a pioneer in the study of emotions, there are three main forms of empathy, cognitive, emotional, and compassionate. Cognitive empathy also known as perspective–taking allows someone to know how another is feeling or what another person might be thinking. Emotional or affective empathy allows someone to actually feel the way another feels. This depends to some extent on mirror neurons in the brain that tune us in to another’s emotional state (Iacoboni, 2009). Compassionate empathy compels us to help. Ekman believes that people “must have cognitive empathy to achieve either of the other forms, but we need not have emotional empathy in order to have compassionate empathy” (Ekman, 2003, page 180).

If compassionate empathy compels us to help, who then are the likely recipients of this help?

Roman Krznaric states “When we do not know people, when their lives are far away and unfamiliar, our capacity to care about them is more difficult to ignite.” (Krznaric, 2014, page 42)

Put another way, “We are more likely to feel empathetic concern for those for whom we especially care, and whose needs are salient.”(Snow and Trivigno, 2014, page 61).

Stereotypes indicate that girls and women tend to be more caring, more nurturing and more in tune with other people’s feelings than boys and men. These stereotypes are contested in the literature. “Empathy is not a gendered skill-it’s a human skill” (McLaren, 2013, page 19). Many studies have been done to determine differences in empathy between males and females, but the results have varied according to the age of the subjects, the methods of data collection, the interpretation of empathy, and to the degree of masculinity or femininity of the subjects. (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987; Eliot, 2009) Margaret Martin states that “the actual research shows substantial gender differences only when the results are based on self-reports.” (Martin, 2012, page 190) However, Michael Gurian (2006) believes that boys in particular will respond with empathy to a situation once they have determined that empathy is required.

The literature supports the notion that the development of moral character can be influenced through education and experience, and that empathetic concern for others increases toward people who are known and observed, and whose needs are apparent.

**Research Context**

Blue Ridge School is a boarding school for boys in St. George, Virginia that includes grades nine through twelve. We are a wonderfully diverse private school that serves young men who respond well to small class sizes, a structured environment and a strong sense of community. Our faculty challenges each boy to reach beyond his current level of performance and expectation to discover his potential. We develop character by nurturing qualities such as integrity, courage, perseverance and empathy.

The participants in this action research are nine students ranging in age from 15 to 18 in grades ten, eleven and twelve, and who are enrolled in my environmental science class. We offer environmental science as an upper level elective, and for our purposes it is an interdisciplinary course devoted to achieving a sustainable world, i.e. a world that provides a respectable standard of living for all of its inhabitants. It is a class that addresses the concept of boys as global citizens.

During orientation prior to the start of school each student enrolled in the environmental science class and his parent were asked to read a document that provided information about the research including the objective, methods of data collection and assurances that all information collected would remain confidential, participation in the research would be voluntary and that non-participation would not be detrimental to the student. The parent and their son were then required to sign a document indicating that they had read and understood the information, and that the parent had given permission for their son to participate.

**The Action**

The Blue Ridge School Food Pantry functions as a secondary food distribution point associated with a local Episcopalian church. We provide food for residents of Greene County, Virginia who are not desperately impoverished, but who are in need of assistance. Anyone is welcome. There are no discriminating qualifications.

The Pantry operates out of our chapel on Saturday mornings between 9:30 and 11:00. There about 10 regular visitors who vary in age, gender and education. They receive food for themselves and their families and on occasion for other families who may not be able to attend for various reasons that are usually health related. We provide enough food to feed an average of forty children and adults each Saturday.

Through the same Episcopalian church the boys were introduced to a local family whose members were suffering from serious physical disabilities and economic constraints.

The boys participated in the action research by working in our chapel on Saturday mornings packing food into bags and carrying them to the recipients’ vehicles. There were about 4 boys working each Saturday during the months of fall. During that time they would interact with our visitors, and begin more personally to understand their plight, and to recognize them as people rather than remote statistics.

In addition, the father of the local family spoke to the boys to raise awareness regarding his rare, debilitating and life threatening condition. The boys responded by organizing a fund-raiser to prevent the eviction of his family from their mobile home.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Prior to the start of the action each participant wrote an essay that explained their understanding of hunger and poverty in the US and the world, what they believed to be the conditions that allow hunger and poverty to exist, and described their image of poor under nourished people. Once the action was completed they reread their essay, and then discussed how their perceptions have changed, if at all, and why.

Immediately following each participants interaction with the people they met through their community service they recorded on paper a brief summary of their impressions, feelings and reactions. The papers were read and analyzed for recurring themes relevant to this research.

I took into consideration a summary of my observations as the researcher that I recorded on paper and compared to the records of the participants.

I also collected statements from the participant’s records that directly reflected the participants’ thoughts, opinions and experiences. The phrases were categorized and then analyzed to determine how the boy’s exposure to the recipients of their community service may have affected empathy.

**Discussion of Results**

The boys were always willing to participate in the activities at our food pantry despite the early hour on a Saturday morning. “Work like this to me is incredibly fulfilling.” Another boy noted, “I like helping the needy and catching a glimpse of their lives…,” and another said “I find the whole idea of the food pantry to be quite beneficial, both to those giving and to those receiving. The experience is humbling.”

*Indications of Empathetic Response* *(emotional)*

Except for some particularly gregarious boys, their tendency was to focus on packing the food into containers rather than interacting with the visitors. However, there were occasions when the boys sat in pews toward the back of the chapel with our visitors quietly observing and listening to their conversations. The boys were disturbed by stories of marital abuse and other personal tragedies that have contributed to our visitors’ current state of affairs. “A woman who I saw at the food pantry who my heart really leapt out to was a woman who was beaten by her husband, and now had a patch over her eye. I was so sad the moment I saw her I almost wanted to leap out and hug her, and tell her it was going to be all right.”

*Indications of Empathetic response (cognitive)*

Although the boys are of different nationalities, ethnicities and color there is no apparent resentment or animosity from the white, rural visitors. On the contrary our visitors tend to be friendly, social people, despite their present situation. The boys noticed this and the underlying concern on their faces. “People have a pre-image of hillbillies in a trailer with three teeth and a pit bull, but that’s not always the case.” They were surprised and impressed by our visitor’s apparent resilience and their lack of self-pity. “Some of them are very optimistic.” Another boy stated “I was impressed by some of the people, and how much they give up to take care of themselves and their families.” “Overall seeing these people makes me think about how petty my problems are.” One of my students from China said, “I can know [learned] from [their] conversations that some of them [are] trapped by any [all] kinds of physically [physical] issue [s].”

*Indications of Empathetic response (compassionate)*

Through the same church that organized the food pantry we met a young family with two small children who live in a trailer nearby. The father of the family is 30 years old and suffers from a degenerative neurological disorder that resulted from a work related injury. His wife suffers from back injuries caused by a physically abusive ex-husband. The boys were eager to help them. “I can feel how much he loves his family. I think we should keep supporting him,” and “I hope we can help them with more than just the rent.” Despite his disability the father visited my class and spoke to the boys. His message was to appreciate the things you have because they can be quickly lost. The boys listened with rapt attention to the man’s story, and were moved by his physical appearance and medical condition. “I felt like the speech he gave us was interesting, but it was sad,” and others said, “They are a very kind people who have just run into some hard times. I hope we can help them,” and “[The family] had a profound effect on me about people who don’t have as much as we do.”

*Indications of a Skeptical Response*

The boys do have difficulty reconciling the fact that our visitors are not obviously destitute. They are not homeless. They drive cars. They have large families. Yet the boys remained willing to help. ”I think [the] food pantry is really necessary for these “poor people” around us [but] most of them aren’t that poor.” The boys were concerned that some may be taking advantage of an opportunity to receive free food, and could have been supplying friends and neighbors. “At times I felt like they could have been lying to get extra food. However, I believe we are doing a good thing… .” One boy struggled with the fact that there are not certain conditions or qualifications required to visit the Pantry. “Should there be some kind of etiquette or even a documented code of conduct…?”

**Conclusion**

As we interacted with our less fortunate visitors, I took note of the boys’ acknowledgement of our visitor’s poverty relative to their own economic status, the concern that the boys had for our visitor’s well being, and of their willingness to help. Their responses indicate a clear understanding of and in some cases a feeling for the stress and discomfort suffered by our visitors, as well a desire to help them to alleviate their pain even when there was some doubt in their minds.

As one boy put it, “I have gone to the food pantry a lot these last two months, and I feel like every time I go I can make a difference, an impact on these people’s lives. It makes me feel better helping the under privileged. These people have changed my perspective on life, that we need to help others, and giving is the best gift.”

**Implications for Future Practice**

While community service projects tend to increase a student’s awareness and understanding of another’s situation, and thus have an effect on the development of cognitive empathy, my observations are that most projects do little to affect the development of emotional or compassionate empathy.

If it is our intent to encourage a comprehensive development of character in our students, I believe that it is important to include empathy in each of its forms as part of that effort. Toward that end it will be necessary to establish community service projects that allow the student participants to interact with the recipients of their service.

Packing food into plastic bags to be sent to impoverished countries or ladling food into bowls at a soup kitchen are certainly worthwhile endeavors. They provide an opportunity for adults to encourage and to model altruistic behavior, but effective character education would require the same students to frequent the soup kitchen often enough to become acquainted with the visitors. This is necessary for the students to have the opportunity to form a relationship with the recipients of their service in order to develop the ability to recognize their humanity, to respond emotionally, and to feel compelled to offer assistance.

**Implications for Future Study**

I would be interested in conducting similar research over the course of an entire school year including a statistically valid sample of participants. At the start, each student would be required to complete a questionnaire designed to determine their levels of cognitive, emotional and compassionate empathy.

Each student would participate in a community service program that provided the opportunity for them to develop a relationship with the recipients of their service, and would complete a journal that highlighted their experience.

At the conclusion the journals would be read and analyzed for recurring themes relevant to this the research.

In addition each student would complete the same questionnaire again, and the participants mean pre-test and post-test scores would be subjected to a comparative analysis including a t-test to assess whether the differences between pre-test and post-test scores were statistically significant.

A statistical analysis could lend support to the observations and qualitative data determined through this action research.

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