

Empathy as Understanding: The Role of Empathy in an Emergent Epistemology

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What role does empathy play within the context of an emergent curriculum and an ever-changing world? This paper explores how a focus on empathy, compassion, and wisdom are necessary to understand and address the complex problems we face inside and outside of the classroom. It starts with the premise that knowledge is not static but instead emerges when diverse people and cultures interact. Through a narrative approach, empathy is placed within lived contexts to highlight how opening ourselves up to the experience of others, at a cognitive and emotional level, allows us to add nuance and complexity to our understanding. This then, allows us to take action in a way that acts in the service of our shared humanity.

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They just didn't seem to care. Together a group of grade eight students were exploring the United Nations Sustainable Goals as a part of an interdisciplinary project. We were studying the problems of the world: inequality, injustice, and environmental crisis, and still they didn't care. Teenage voices spoke of the relevance of the topics, but their eyes told a different story. I screamed down at them about long-term consequences and global responsibilities, and yet, despite all my best efforts, they remained non-compliant in all the things that I told them they should feel. We then stopped to talk about apathy, about what matters, about what doesn't matter, and why. I asked them what they thought was the opposite of apathy. I expected answers like passion, interest, engagement, and excitement. Their answer struck me in its simplicity, its obviousness, and its power. The opposite of apathy is empathy. Of course, it is.

In an interview with Jenson (2004), Catharine Keller spoke of the fallacy of the "skin-encapsulated ego" (p. 274). She warned of the dangers of believing that we are separate from our surroundings and from each other. Was it in this separateness, the creation of them and us in all its forms, that my students found themselves? Set adrift from the universal ties, they found no choice but to see the topics of the world as simply one more lesson to be learned or another box to be checked. Somewhere along the line they were told that the knowledge of the world was housed out there and that it was their penance to learn the rules of Man, once and for all. Yet it is "not Man but men that inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth" (Arendt, 1978, p.19). What if they knew that the knowledge they sought does not exist as some external holy grail, but instead is created in their very midst (Osberg & Biesta, 2008)? Somewhere my students were told that they

were separate; separate from each other, from their world, and from the very knowledge they hoped to obtain. They could speak of the importance of empathy but lacked in the ability to live it. A world seen through one set of eyes became limited, and their understanding had become un-rooted, lost from the human condition. Was empathy the road home?

If the opposite of apathy is empathy what does that mean in the classroom? What does it mean about the topics we engage in and those that we engage with? What can we teach each other about what it means to “know?” Perhaps most importantly, how can the understanding of another inform meaningful action; can it inspire even the most apathetic heart? If we are in fact all connected, what is the potential of our collective understanding?

This paper explores how we as teachers can use empathy as a means to include multiple perspectives to develop a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the world around us.

My Journey

By starting with a question of what it means to know, I engaged the literature to better understand what an emergent epistemology meant as well as how it could be informed through the inclusion of diverse voices. I asked how empathy could be used as a tool within the classroom to help students and teachers alike, cultivate wisdom and compassion. Essential to this exploration was a focus on how diverse perspectives could inform understanding, inspire action, and empower our students to take meaningful action.

The paper is hermeneutic in that it uses individual situations and experience in order to hold the universal ideas of empathy and emergent understanding accountable (Jardine, 2014b). After defining the role and importance of empathy these understandings were held up against my personal experiences to provide context for the ideas. The concepts of empathy, compassion, and wisdom were used as a lens through which I was better able to understand my own experiences. I explored how empathy could be used as a tool to develop wisdom and compassion when dealing with two separate complex issues: the Syrian refugee crisis, and the challenges and opportunities that are posed by complex and challenging students.

Literature Review

An Emergent Epistemology

Linking empathy and understanding forced me to crack open my assumptions about discrete knowledge and about understanding as a purely cognitive endeavor. I realized that the type of knowledge that empathy demanded lay outside the boundaries of my own assumptions and experience of learning.

When I was a child, knowledge seemed like the contents of a box: defined, determined, and complete. The teachers had it and they passed it on to us. My schooling experience could be defined as a Cartesian industrial model of understanding in which information was static, defined, and unchanging. It was an approach demonstrated in the prioritization of scientific proofs, the memorization and repetition of predetermined algorithms, standardized literature analysis, and the presentation of history as a series of unquestioned truths. David Jardine (2014b) questioned the very heart of this form of knowledge. He called out its intentional removal of diversity and difference, and he questioned the reality of decontextualized truths. An exploration of the literature pointed to the multiple dangers that a fragmented and industrial approach to education presents. An unquestioning acceptance of static knowledge creates a militaristic view of education, based on control, domination, and colonization (Smith, 1998). Furthermore, a singular view of the world

compels teachers to promote the enculturation of students through the transmission of data (Osberg & Biesta, 2008). The acceptance of a singular understanding rejects the possibility of alternative stories. It “arrests inquiry and closes the channels that lead on to a deeper and wider insight” (Phenix, 1975, p. 335).

In contrast to a definition of knowledge as static and fixed is an emergent epistemology which suggests that knowledge is not an ‘object’ that can be transferred, but instead a process that occurs when people interact or “participate in the world” (Osberg & Biesta, 2008). From this perspective, things are not known; rather, they are negotiated within our ongoing conversations and interactions. An emergent epistemology postulates that knowing is less of a thing to be owned, and more of a conversation we continually get caught up in. This conversation is not one that occurs external to us, but instead one that occurs within the intimate spaces of human interactions (Arendt, 1958). Central to this view of knowledge is that difference or disagreement is not a problem, rather a requirement of knowledge (Biesta, 2004). It demands our participation in collaborative conversations that include the sharing of beliefs, the collective decoding of the texts that fill our world, and a perpetual openness to new ideas (Greene, 1993).

The Role of Diversity

As I began to develop a more robust definition of what it means to know, my focus shifted from what it is that we seek to know, to how we seek to know it. It was a shift from what Gadamer (1989) would classify as “amassed verified knowledge” (p. xxi), towards those structures and strategies that my students and I might use to engage in meaningful conversations, creating this knowledge together. Research on this topic strongly supported the idea that if knowledge is in fact participatory, the diversity of the participants is a key factor in creating a more holistic, nuanced, and multifaceted understanding (Biesta, 2004; Greene, 1993; Parekh 2008; Phenix, 1975). The incorporation of multiple perspectives and a willingness to accept every voice allows for decisions to be more valid (Arendt, 1993), and more moral (Parekh, 2008). According to the literature, diversity leads to a superior understanding (Tal, 2015) that leads to “an appreciation of the complexity of the truth” (McGlynn, 2009, p. 300). Diverse voices provide alternative perspectives, offer new insight, and a more nuanced understanding by creating a dissonance between what is accepted and what is possible (Greene, 1993). It is here in where the collective metaphorical voices of those never heard, those rejected and pushed aside, that I found the true beauty of an emergent understanding. The reason I take time to listen and understand the ideas of others is not for their benefit, but for ours.

Nixon (2007) suggested that inclusionary thinking is in fact “a defining feature of humanity” (p. 233). Moreover, holding the ideas of the diverse other in front of our own perspective acts to bind us together. It is the very presence of the other, whose frustrating dissention calls upon us to re-calibrate and start anew, that defines an emergent epistemology. It is only from the disruption of our current understanding that new understanding flows (Osberg & Biesta, 2008). The interconnectivity of interactions demands that my own perspective belongs not just to me. It becomes an essential cog in the understanding of another, and theirs in mine. The addition of new perspectives from raised hands or raised voices, acts not simply as a tool to further explore already predetermined truths, but instead acts to change the very nature of the concepts themselves. In this process of knowledge creation, an inclusionary view allows a space where it is possible to create understandings that act to nourish instead of destroy, raise the weak, protect the vulnerable, and hold the truth more justly (Greene, 1993).

Empathy as a Pathway

When seen through the lens of an emergent epistemology, empathy, the ability to take on the perspective of another, takes on a key role in the classroom. Warren (2014) showed that teachers who understood the perspective, history, and contexts of the students they were teaching were better armed to face the messy challenges of teaching in a more meaningful way. The understanding that these teachers had about their students could be described as an emergent one based on the ongoing interplay between their own perspectives, empathy for their students, and the council of their colleagues. This allowed the teachers to act and make decisions based on an awareness that was nuanced, mindful of context, holistic, and even at times contradictory. This led me to question whether the power of this type of understanding could be generalized beyond simply how we understand each other to include how we understand a multitude of topics, disciplines, and subjects. Is it fair to question whether the inclusion of multiple perspectives can inform our understanding of the complex topics of the world? Is our understanding of topics such as the plight of those without a home, the challenges of cultural interactions, or the balance of immediate suffering in the face of sustainability, enhanced by hearing and feeling the perspectives of those whose lives the topics actually run through? From the heart of an emergent view flows a belief that if students are given opportunities to explore a variety of perspectives and gain an understanding of how multiple stakeholders might think and feel about a topic, their understanding will become more nuanced and textured. As such this understanding could be applied in a more flexible and contextually appropriate way.

The Alberta Program of Studies (2007) for Social Studies clearly states a number of outcomes that can be directly related to empathy and emergent understanding. For example, the first three outcomes outlined in the Grade 8 Social Studies curriculum are:

- Value the diversity, respect the dignity and support the equality of all human beings
- Demonstrate social compassion, fairness and justice
- Appreciate and respect how multiple perspectives, including Aboriginal and Francophone, shape Canada's political, socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural

realities

The Calgary Board of Education (Policies & Regulations, n.d.) clearly defined the ability to “act morally with wisdom” and “respect and embrace diversity” as key outcomes that characterize student success. An exploration of the experience of others with a focus on their perspective and viewpoints has a dual impact. It works to meet our curricular and institutional requirements, while challenging ourselves and our students to act to meet our obligations as people, and global citizens, in the face of suffering.

Empathy as Understanding

As I began to see the power and importance of perspective taking, I found myself asking what an emergent approach to learning looks like in the messy reality of teaching and learning. If understanding truly is emergent, constantly changing, growing, and requiring living ideas as nourishment, what does this mean in the classroom? Osberg and Biesta (2008) asserted that classrooms may be one of the only real places where students can find themselves bumping up against the views of diverse others. In fact, the growing diversity that we see in contemporary classes is ripe to create conditions where students are able to emerge as their most unique selves through the interaction with others.

While it is clear that the presence of diversity in a class is essential to create this opportunity, it would seem that simply the presence of diversity in and of itself is insufficient to

fully cultivate this type of nuanced understanding. Students' ability to fully utilize the potential benefits that diverse perspectives may have on their understanding is dependent on the extent to which those students are able and willing to participate in the types of conversations necessary for these types of understandings to develop. It is in the cultivation of this willingness and ability that the role of the teacher becomes paramount.

It is here that I am reminded of my students' voices, "the opposite of apathy is empathy". A focus on empathy in the classroom can act as the bridge between individual and collective understanding. The tie between empathy and students' engagement in meaningful conversations was highlighted by Clark's (2010) assertion that to avoid empathy "is to choose not to be able to know." Empathy is defined as the ability to "recognize and understand the experience, thoughts, emotions, intentions and personal characteristics of others" (Horsthemke, 2015, p. 62). It is the path that connects isolated understandings and connected knowledge. From a purely epistemic perspective, empathy is a critical skill in an emergent classroom. If knowledge and understanding occur only in the spaces between us and others (Arendt, 1958), then students' ability to engage in an empathetic way provides them an avenue that they are no longer solely informed through the lens of a single perspective. An empathetic approach to topics ensures that students' understanding of the world and participation in the conversations carry the weight of multiple experiences.

A critical step to employing empathy in the classroom is defining it and understanding its role in both intellectual and emotional connection. Warren (2014) defined empathy as being comprised of two components. The first of these is a cognitive one, described as perspective taking. This can be viewed as seeing the world through the eyes of another. The second component was described as an emotional one, referred to as empathetic concern or the ability to feel the way another might feel. As I explored the two forms of empathy it became clear that perspective taking and empathetic concern can be seen as two different ways of exploring the life of another; however, they are not mutually exclusive approaches to understanding. Our ideas, thoughts, and rationalizations are intricately intertwined with our feelings and emotional response. The key to a focus on empathy in the classroom is remaining cognizant that any separation between cognitive and affective understanding is false, and focusing on one over the other leads to the exclusion of an important avenue for understanding.

Teaching Empathy

If the cultivation of empathy can be pinpointed as an essential component of meaningful curriculum, the question remains, how can teachers engage students in this type of learning? Research on teaching empathy points to a few tangible avenues through which teachers can create both tasks and environments that might help students develop their ability to understand diverse perspectives and become more empathetic. Endacott and Pelekanos (2015) explored one teacher's attempt to engage students in taking on the perspective of others through deliberate task design. The students in the study were asked to contemplate key questions about topics such as gender roles, and the role of government in society, not based on their own values, but through the worldview of an Athenian citizen. To do this, students created personae based on their understanding of Athenian culture and engaged in ongoing dialogue about how different cultures and different value sets would impact an individual's views about concepts such as slavery and war. By purposefully creating activities that forced students to take on the perspective of another, the teacher was able to help them better understand how perspective taking was critical in understanding historical events, while having the added benefit of increasing student engagement

and understanding of curricular content. In this example, they studied democracy in Ancient Athens.

When exploring the development of empathy, Gair (2011) pointed to the usefulness of perspective taking through the use of poetry writing, narratives, and shared personal stories as powerful ways to explore empathy. Harwood (2010) also highlighted the importance of story telling as a means to allow students to explore various narratives and understand the importance of perspective. She also pointed out that the development of imagination was a critical component of students' ability to take on the perspective of another. Based on this, she stressed the importance of using a variety of arts-based activities, including drama, music, painting and literature, to cultivate students' imagination. She went on to stress that an increase in students' imagination based on engagement in the arts would increase those students' ability to understand others' perspectives and help students become more empathetic.

A final key understanding in exploring the teacher's role in developing empathy is the intentional creation of caring spaces where children feel safe, accepted, and able to see ongoing modeling of open mindedness and acceptance of differing views. Warren (2014) found a key component to creating classrooms where students listened to each other was the implementation of some form of classroom meeting where the teacher ensured all students' voices were respected. By creating spaces where students felt their ideas and thoughts were valued, students were more likely to engage in meaningful conversations. These meetings also offered an opportunity for teachers to model listening and being respectful of student voice. Horsthemke (2015) argued that the greatest influence that teachers can have on students' willingness to be open minded is the direct modeling, by their respect of each student's ideas, skills, and attitudes. From this perspective, the teacher's role in developing empathy in students begins with modeling of that empathy. A teacher's willingness to be empathetic, to develop meaningful relationships, and to be kind, may be the most effective tool that they have to teach empathy. This relationship building and ongoing modeling then cultivates soil from which empathy might grow, tended by care, the inclusion of the arts, and the intentional development of tasks and projects that allow students to explore others' perspectives.

Compassion and Wisdom in Lived Context

If you want others to be happy practice compassion. If you want to be happy practice compassion.
—Dalai Lama (2010).

From the perspective of an emergent epistemology, the educational benefits of an empathetic approach are clear. Providing students opportunities and support to explore complex issues from the diverse perspectives of others allows for more nuanced, subtle, and complex understandings (Arendt 1993; Biesta, 2004; Parekh 2008; Tal, 2015). An acceptance that knowledge is created and enhanced by the perspective of others leads to questions about whether work in the classroom should focus on the cognitive or the affective components of taking on the perspective of another. A purely cognitive approach would seem to provide insight into problems and offer a new lens to understand the priorities and values of another, but may not inspire action. On the other hand, an emotional connection to another may lead students to take up arms in a valiant attempt to save the world, but leave them lacking in insight to create meaningful change. It is clear that if students are asked to stand in the face of the complex and controversial challenges that our world presents, action without understanding is insufficient.

Important to understanding empathy is understanding empathy from both a cognitive and an emotional level. The process of using another's cognitive perspective while also attempting to understand their emotional state are inherently linked and dependent on the ongoing guidance and balance of one another. The delicate balance is summed up by Cindy Wigglesworth (2012) who draws upon wisdom traditions; "Love is a bird with two wings. One wing is compassion; the other wing is wisdom. If either wing is broken, the bird cannot fly."

Compassion is defined as the pairing of empathetic concern with a genuine desire to take action to alleviate the pain and suffering of another (Merriam Webster, n.d). The Cambridge Online dictionary (n.d) describes wisdom as the ability to use experience and knowledge to make good judgment. The etymology of the word is to judge rightly and act in a way that is discerning (Wise, n. d). In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wendell Berry stressed that it in order to care for each other, our world, and ourselves, it is our responsibility to ask what is the right thing to do and then simply do it (Berry & Moyers, 2013). While this seems straightforward, it requires both the willingness to do what is right in the face of sometimes overwhelming criticism, obstacles, and apathy, as well as the ability to define what is actually the right thing to do. It demands of us compassion and wisdom, the best of our heads, and the best of our hearts. It is here that a clear link between these critical human capacities and empathy can be seen. From an emergent perspective, cognitive perspective taking allows us to refine our own understanding, a vital step in developing wisdom. While by definition, empathetic concern is a necessary prerequisite for compassion.

In speaking of empathy, the Dalai Lama (2013) stressed the role and importance of compassion in all our interactions for the good of our communities and our individual souls. Essential to his definition of purposeful compassionate action is the necessity of kindness paired with intentionality. He spoke of a type of "trained compassion" one born out of wisdom, reflection, and practice. Here, acts of compassion do not occur separate from knowledge and understanding, but in fact are only possible when guided by them.

Holding the Findings Accountable

Armed with a more holistic definition of knowledge, an understanding of the importance of multiple perspectives, and the critical balance between wisdom and compassion, my journey demanded that I hold these ideas accountable to the practical realities of a complex world. I found myself wondering what good is a more nuanced theoretical understanding if I don't hold this knowledge up in the face of practical challenges both in and outside of the classroom. I asked how empathy could inform wisdom and compassion in faraway lands and classrooms down the hall. I attempted to locate my findings in essay form, using two distinct real world challenges as examples of the power and importance of both wisdom and compassion: 1) the Syrian refugee crisis and 2) a personal account of a complex student. These essays are meant to provide specific contexts for my findings and to demonstrate how empathy can powerfully inform an emergent curriculum.

Everybody's Child

On September 2nd 2015 a young Syrian refugee named Alan Kurdi died attempting to flee the war in Syria (Walsh, 2015). His body washed up on the shore, and a striking but simple photograph of his lifeless body in the sand helped him become the face of those seeking refuge. A simple picture shocked the world; an ignition of empathy.

One picture seemed to change the world, to grab privilege by the collar and shake it from its apathetic slumber. One boy's plight smashing the dams of our disinterest, forced us to awaken

to the reality of a war in faraway lands, and a feeling of loss and despair that seemed all too close. Our collective hearts broke, and almost in unison our initial response was one of love, compassion, and shared humanity. One boy caused an almost universal empathetic response, not one borne of study and logical deductions, but one drawn from the essence of our most human selves. Impossible to look away, one picture awakened in us our “responsibility as individuals in a changing and problematic world” (Greene, 1977, p.119), and for a time our better angels mourned for that boy, that family, that suffering.

For many the immediate response was one of compassion and it screamed for action. The picture touched on our most primal of needs; to care for our young and to protect those who cannot protect themselves. We were no longer able to see the plight of people halfway across the world as someone else's problem. There was no more us and them, only parents and children. The barriers of time, space, and culture were bridged by a shared love of the innocent. Our emotional connection reminded us that even they have children, all life is precious, and that any desecration of life is blasphemous, because as Wendell Berry states, “the whole thing is holy” (Berry & Moyers, 2013). This reminder called us to action to draw a line in the sand for the most vulnerable. Germany opened its borders, citizens clamored for their governments to act, and churches, community groups, and families the world over banded together to try and provide refuge.

This emotion seemed to strike like a tidal wave leaving us feeling vulnerable and disorientated. The impact on our souls was overwhelming. The challenges to our communities were daunting. In response, many of us closed our hearts and pure cognition took over. Cries about inhumanity and injustice were quickly replaced with rationalizations for inaction. Talk of media bias, the challenges of cultural interactions, and the fear of the unknown quickly gained steam and redirected the conversation. As soon as our heads overrode our hearts, we allowed barriers and imperfections to become excuses to dismiss the preciousness of life. For many, once the ties of emotional connection were cut, it became possible to at the same time understand the perspective of a refugee and justify inaction on their behalf. The power of cognitive rationalization led us to succumb to the challenges and act in ways that made us forget that every boy is someone's son.

Reflection on the varied responses to this powerful moment of empathy emphasizes the importance of both compassion and wisdom. It is estimated that since the outbreak of war in Syria in March 2011, more than nine million Syrians have left the country seeking refuge (Syrian Refugee, n.d). This has led to a huge demand on the international community to provide both immediate and long-term solutions, thereby creating problems that are both significant and complex. The now famous picture of the toddler, Alan Kurdi, found dead on the beach, thrust these issues into the public's perception, causing what can be described as a wide scale empathetic response. Examining this response, the dangers of ignoring either compassion or wisdom are clear. Those who were able to disconnect from the emotional ties that the picture created between themselves and refugees were able to provide a purely logical response. This emotional disconnection allowed people to provide rationalizations that minimized the problem, dismissed any solutions as non-viable, and even blamed and vilified the victims. In contrast, responses based entirely on emotion risked ignoring the intricacies and complexities that caring for nine million people presented. A solution of simply accepting all refugees lacked the nuance necessary to deal with the challenges that the integration of nine million people may have on existing cultural, social, and political structures while neglecting to address the root causes of the migration.

It would seem that an approach to this complex situation is one of shared wisdom and compassion, an ongoing conversation about the challenges and issues that arise when diverse people interact. This conversation could utilize our shared wisdom to discuss key questions such

as how do we deal with the complex differences between cultures? How do we balance the needs of all stakeholders? How can we create long-term stability in all nations to minimize the need for forced migration? It is in these conversations that we can find the overlap between our obligation as teachers as defined by the Social Studies Program of Studies and as caring responsible citizens of the world. Reflection on these questions, and the types of conversations, tasks, and activities that they may inspire leads to strong ties to essential components of the Social Studies curriculum. These are conversations that demand children learn about concepts such as fairness, diversity, and justice clearly highlighted by the program of studies as critical (Alberta Education, 2007) in an authentic way. It is here in the spaces of these conversations that demand diversity, complexity, and dissention that the need for empathy emerges. Osberg and Biesta (2008) admitted that the very spaces that create the types of frustrations necessary for learning to occur are not only challenging but also often violent. These conversations whether they occur in our classrooms or our communities need to remain grounded in an understanding of our shared humanity that remembers despite our difference, we are all human and we all love our children.

Empathy For Our Students

An exploration of empathy shows its benefits to help students develop compassion and wisdom in the face of a complex topic like refugee resettlement. The benefits of empathy however, are not limited to how students engage with topics, but can be seen as a key to how we engage with each other. While supporting children to take on an empathetic perspective to the world around them is an important step towards utilizing empathy, the true power of empathy can be felt when we, as teachers, emphasize with our students, even those we find hard to love.

Kevin¹

though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness
—Galaway Kinnell (2002)

Kevin was broken,
I don't know if I can say that
But I don't know what else to say

Kevin was broken
Broken by chemicals rewiring his brain before he could raise a cry of defense
Broken by chaos, anger, hate and neglect,
Broken by a system designed to reject him
Broken in mind, body, and soul
I used to think that he was broken and couldn't be fixed

Kevin is lovely
Not in the ordinary way
Not even in any unordinary way

¹ Pseudonym

But Kevin is alive, a part of the human condition
His polished, clever wit, contrasted by his outbreaks of senseless hatred
An unquestioned love and loyalty to a family despite the betrayals
A gentle touch hidden beneath the chaos
How did we all end up so beautiful and so broken?
Maybe fixing was never the point

Kevin as Teacher

Kevin was loud. He was aggressive, angry, and so very disruptive. He had a vocabulary so much older than his eleven years should have accommodated. He stormed into our grade 6 class with a swirl of vulgarity and violence. He was sexually explicit with teachers and peers alike, quick to violence, and always seeking chaos. He threw chairs, and then desks. He fought with everyone, in every way, spit at the principal, and urinated on the school during recess. His very presence seemed to send our assumptions into disarray; a slap in the face of what I thought it meant to be a teacher and what it meant to live in the presence of children. He hid his vulnerability under a cloak of anger and vulgarity; his human soul behind a shield of all that we deemed uncivil, unmanageable, unlike anything we could possibly understand, control or fix. Try as we might, we could never figure out how to fit his multisided, awkward, angled peg into the round hole. We were left with two choices; to reject the peg or the hole. The wake of his anger and suffering left us at a tipping point; reject Kevin and write him off as unsalvageable, another lost cause, or accept him in all his angry destructive glory.

A step outside of the immediate reaction to his external behavior revealed the tragedy of his experience. He was the definition of vulnerability, marginalization and the exploitation of the innocent. In theory, empathy for Kevin was easy, but reality was a very different story. His rough edges and false bravado created a barrier that blocked human connection. It blurred our ability to see the traumatized child behind the carefully constructed mask. Empathy for Kevin meant having to share the burden of his suffering, a heavy load to carry. Many chose to reject him, label him as destructive, and look for ways to blame him for his circumstance, remove him from our midst, and ignore what his story could teach us about the human condition.

Empathy for Kevin did not come without its own set of consequences. Once the door to his experience was open it was hard to look away. Even a passing glimpse of the emotional turmoil of his existence could break the strongest heart. In Kevin's world there was no thought unguided by emotion. Kevin did not think. He simply felt. Any foray into his experience meant that you felt along with him. Slowly I broke down the walls of my own resistance, made myself vulnerable to what seeing the world through Kevin's eyes would entail. I started with small gestures, a smile, a kind word, and then eventually a joke. Then I listened, listened to his stories about hopes and dreams, his experiences in all their destructive detail, and I saw in him what I felt in myself, a desperate desire to fit in, a love of family, and a need to connect and be heard. By listening, and seeing the nuance, complexity, and humanity of Kevin's story I was able to break down the gates that separated him from me. Once these gates were open, I found myself lost and overwhelmed by a need to assuage the suffering. My emotional response to Kevin's experience left me desperate to save him, to gather him in my arms and shield him from the horrors of an unkind world; to reteach him his beauty and to make everything okay once and for all.

My principal scoffed and made comments about "do gooders who aren't doing anyone any good." I was scolded for enabling unsustainable behaviors, lectured about the importance of accountability of discipline, and reminded that I wouldn't always be there—he needed to learn to

take care of himself. How then to love with purpose, protect, and empower at the same time? A purely emotional response left me helpless at the feet of the overwhelming challenges that lay siege to the walls of Kevin's very existence. In this case, compassion in the absence of wisdom left me unable to do anything more for Kevin than provide temporary shelter from an unending storm.

Central to any exploration of how to deal with Kevin was that compassion alone was insufficient to address these problems. However, any response that was ungrounded from a human connection that did not begin with recognition of the ways in which Kevin was inherently human, and hence sacred, were incapable of addressing the "savagery, the brutal marginalizations, the structured silences, the imposed invisibility so present all around" (Greene, 1993, p. 211). The complexity of working with Kevin, or any child, requires an ongoing conversation. It is a conversation of diverse ideas, dissenting voices, and ongoing reflection and recalibration, yet in order for this conversation to have the potential to act in service of any child, it needs to be grounded in compassion and an assertion of the inherent value of that child. Central to the inclusion of Kevin as a valued member of the community, seeing Kevin as worthy depends on connecting to the aspects that make him human, and finding his inner beauty, however deep it is hidden.

Reflection on how we as teachers choose to engage with all the Kevins of this world is an understanding of how an empathetic response impacts our ability to deal with their messy presence, and more importantly how this response opens up a space where it is possible to see them not as a problem needing to be fixed, but a voice that needs to be heard. Kevin's experience, his very presence screamed at the flaws, false logic, and ungrounded goals and assumptions of our institutions. It raised questions about what it means to live together, the role of authority, and questions of why we educate. Any approach to Kevin that rejected his experience as unworthy also rejected the opportunities his presence provided. Kevin's perspective, like the rock in our shoe, raised questions about the institution of schooling. Acceptance of Kevin, forces us to ask questions about the role of power in education, about learning as transmission, as preparation for industry, about right and wrong with no space in between. Only by allowing ourselves to be open to Kevin's or any child's experience, can we allow their perspective to add nuance, complexity, and weight to our own understanding.

Tying it all Together

What is possible when we accept that every soul deserves a voice and each voice shines a new light? What is possible when we approach the topics of a world from a holistic human based approach? The stories of refugees, the marginalized, and the misunderstood open a door of possibility in a classroom. They offer a new perspective; create a space where it becomes possible to have our understanding enhanced by the views of another. Empathy allows us to understand the world as another would, not just for their sake but for our own. The cultivation of empathy in our students, whether through explicit modeling (Warren, 2014), task design (Endacott & Pelekanos, 2015), or whatever possibilities our imaginations provide (Harwood, 2010), offers students a chance to see even the most contradictory of voices as a form of wisdom. This allows us to see the challenges of the world as opportunities. What are the possibilities when educators and students alike are able to utilize the multitude of teachers the world provides them? What can an understanding of a Syrian refugee's humanity teach all of us about being global citizens?

About cultural interaction,
Differences
And conflict in all its form?

What could the inclusion of Kevin have taught us, students and teachers alike?
 About what it means to care for one another,
 About love,
 About kindness,
 About forgiveness and the beauty of the human soul?

Parting Words

The world and our life in it are conditional gifts. The condition being that we need to take care of it. To take care of it we have to know it and know how to take care of it. To know it and be willing to take care of it we have to love it.
 —Wendell Berry, interview with Bill Moyers (2013)

If the opposite of apathy is truly empathy what does that mean in the walls of the classroom? What does it teach us about solving the complex problems brought to bear in “a world that is or is becoming out of joint” (Arendt 1968, p. 11)? The roots of apathy are not difficult to pinpoint, a segregated curriculum taught in separated classrooms to children awash in messages of individualism. Kind hearts buried under stories of right and wrong, easy answers and all the things that separate and divide. The responsibility lies on us to dig past the immediate to pull out the potential of each individual by drawing on the most human of qualities; our ability to relate, to love, and to act in the service of that which we are connected to. Instead of taking the easy route of simply telling our students why they should care, we need to carry the burden of showing them. Apathy cannot be cured through lectures, nor should it be ignored as a natural consequence of education. The topics of the world require the full engagement of all its participants. Therefore, as educators, we have a responsibility to cultivate spaces, communities, and experiences where students see and feel the human impact of the topics we hand down to them.

An emergent epistemology demands of us the ability to open ourselves up, to create spaces where love of the very topics we teach is possible. It demands of us the creativity and vulnerability to see the world from every angle, to feel the heart of our enemy, to hear the dissenting voice not as an attack, but as a reinforcement. The challenge is daunting, but the reward self revealing. If nothing else, true empathy, informed by wisdom and compassion, teaches us that in every way imaginable care for another is akin to care for ourselves.

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