building empathy through the creative use of words

“To be a successful human being, you need to be in touch with other people’s feelings. How do we teach our children to do this? I’m delighted that EmpathyLab is exploring new ways of using words and stories to build empathy skills. I’m fascinated by its ideas, and by the way it’s seeking new solutions and approaches, drawing together the world of words with the fields of neuroscience and well-being.” Jacqueline Wilson

Who?
EmpathyLab is a small new start-up, passionate about the creative power of words to build empathy, and the power of empathy to make the world a better place. We have experience of writing, teaching, librarianship, social entrepreneurship, national campaigns, reader development and digital innovation.

Why?
The rising generation faces big challenges, at home and globally. They need strong emotional and social skills. Yet so many are struggling, lacking the resilience and emotional literacy they need, or the ability to relate well to others.

- 45% of young people experience bullying before they are 18 and 69% have been victims of cyberbullying
- 2013 saw a 33% rise in children needing help with suicidal feelings
- The UK has one of Europe’s highest self harming rates

Young people’s ability to understand and care about each other will be vital in diverse Britain. Demographic projections suggest that by 2050 Britain could be one of the most ethnically mixed countries in the western world.

Meanwhile headteachers are trying to balance raising academic standards with the development of character and pro-social behaviour, and parents often feel they lack the skills to prepare children emotionally for a changing world.

Empathy skills are vital. We need to wake up and act on exciting new thinking and neuroscience research showing that humans have a strong empathic, co-operative side to our natures. And seize the opportunity of politicians’ new openness to the importance of happiness and well-being.

Neuroscientists and therapists are finding that words and stories have a unique role to play in building empathy skills. Story reading and writing involves empathising with characters; this helps children work through emotions at a safe distance and explore how they might behave in different situations. Reading fiction enhances our ability to understand other people’s emotions.

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1 University of Michigan Institute for Social Research; Ditch the label bullying report 2014; Childline 2012/13; Mental Health Foundation
2 Professor David Coleman, Oxford University, 2013
5 Sutherland M, Using storytelling as a therapeutic tool. Speechmark 2012; Waters T, Therapeutic storywriting, 2004
But there is no systematic drive to exploit the integrated power of reading, writing and storymaking to build empathy skills, or to exploit the power of empathy to improve literacy.

EmpathyLab aims to develop new resources and practical programmes by bringing together the worlds of language and stories with those of neuroscience, well-being and emotional intelligence.

The new National Curriculum offers opportunities to use words and stories to build empathy skills through schools’ work on literacy, attitudes to learning, personal development and pupil voice. Empathy Lab aims to collaborate with schools and many other partners from libraries to digital innovators, businesses to universities. We will explore with partners which tools will be most useful, and how we can build on and support others’ work.

Consultation

We are currently consulting on what EmpathyLab will do. We are keen to have a very open dialogue about the shape of our 2015/17 research and development programme. Our first event is a South Bank Centre Think-In on 3 October 2014. There will be expert contributions from Roman Krznaric, author of Empathy, a handbook for revolution and Sue Palmer, literacy expert and author of Toxic Childhood.

Skills

We will test new approaches to using words and stories to build key empathy skills, such as:

- good communication: active listening and deep conversation
- a strong imagination in order to enter into other people’s feelings
- having the language to recognise and discuss your own and other people’s emotions
- the ability to value, understand and respect another person’s views

We will use empathy skills to improve reading for pleasure and literacy skills, such as:

- the ability to analyse the writer’s craft in creating characters’ feelings and motivations
- expressive writing able to describe people’s feelings vividly
- enhanced motivation to read widely for pleasure and information
- wide knowledge and enjoyment of writing from a range of cultures, and with global themes

What EmpathyLab might do

An action research programme in four local communities

- whole community programme, running for two years 2015-17, designed with children and young people and evaluated by a partner university
- using reading, writing and storymaking as the springboard for empathy education through: deep conversation, new experiences and global exploration (as recommended in Roman Krznaric’s framework)
- author-led group storymaking, creative writing sessions and Rethinks to open children’s minds and explore themes like cyberbullying and living in diverse Britain
- run as a whole school programme with four hub primary and secondary schools, working with a range of community organisations including libraries
- empathy training for all involved – e.g. techniques for using book talking sessions in ways which develop emotional understanding


Nationally available events, training and resources (informed by the action research learning)

- a “build empathy through words and stories” community of interest, supported by a resources website with research, case studies and sharing of ideas and practice
- debates and networking events bringing together the worlds of reading, writing and stories with those of neuroscience, emotional intelligence and well being
- a national Empathy Day, with a national library book promotion
- words and stories-based empathy training for teachers, parents, community workers.
- guidance on selecting empathy-boosting books and book talking techniques for sharing them in ways that open up empathetic conversations
- creative digital and social platforms to build empathy – e.g.: games to deepen a reading experience; a mobile app where children share fun pictures of their faces modelling different emotions; social media platforms to support deep conversations, story writing and story making.

Get involved
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