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Emotions, empathy and social justice education

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to consider the role of emotions, especially those related to empathy, in promoting a more humane education that enables students to reach out across kinship chasms to promote the development of communities predicated on a shared value on mutual respect. This attention to empathy includes a review of the rational basis for much schooling, introduces skepticism about the façade of rational thinking, reviews the emotionally flat character of classrooms, attends to the emotional dimensions of literacy education, argues on behalf of taking emotions into account in developmental theories and links empathic connections with social justice efforts. The study's main thrust is that empathy is a key emotional quality that does not come naturally or easily to many, yet is important to cultivate if social justice is a goal of education.

Design/methodology/approach – The author clicked Essay and Conceptual Paper. Yet the author required to write the research design.

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Originality/value – The paper challenges the rational emphasis of schooling and argues for more attention to the ways in which emotions shape thinking.

Keywords Emotions, Social justice education, Empathic framing

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Introduction

As a white heterosexual cisgender male born in the USA in the early 1950s and raised in a post-World War II culture in the segregated and patriarchal South, I was socialized to understand that emotional responses to life and society are either for girls and women, or weak men. The USA had just won World War II (or so I was taught in school), communists were on the rise around the world and insinuating themselves into US institutions (or so I was told), and we needed tough-hided men to fight off foreign threats, dominate domestic malcontents and lead us into a future based on a selective memory of the past.

We did not need to understand anyone. We were entitled to and convinced of our superiority. We were characterized as "Ugly Americans" by Burdick and Lederer (1958), Pearson (1985), Sardar and Davies (2003), Runde (2018) and others, right up to the present. People in the USA remain convinced of American Exceptionalism's premise that we are a very special people, preeminent in the globe and convinced that other nations exist for our pleasure and exploitation.

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As a result of this stance, US people are viewed as lacking an understanding of people unlike themselves, and incapable of extending care and compassion to others (Sardar and Davies, 2003). US overseas diplomats need not learn the language and culture of the nations to which they are assigned (Wieand, 2023), travelers abroad assume that other nations exist as destinations for US tourists (Miller, 2018) and immigration across the southern US border has led to charges that the nation is being "invaded" by "vermin" (Kilgore, 2015; Kurtzleben, 2023) who are "poisoning the blood of our country" according to Donald J. Trump in late 2023. In schools, political leaders are convinced that while the sensibilities of white students from Christian denominations must always be protected from historical knowledge that exposes their advantages (Ravitch, 2023), students of color, Jewish people, Muslims and others who resist white supremacy are considered crybabies (Thornton, 2016). This stereotype, and others I have reviewed, overlook the many US citizens who do seek to know and respect people from other social groups and nations and to form emotional bonds that generate concern, sympathy and support. Yet, the large kernel of truth it entails has characterized US life and education for many years.

The formation of emotional relationships that are required to overcome ethnocentric arrogance have been actively discouraged by many US leaders (Obilo and Fullmer, 2023). Indeed, emotions themselves, consistent with a historical skepticism of their role in reason and logic and thus of women's stability and fitness to lead, have been viewed as a threat to the social order. I was in my teens when President Richard Nixon said, "I don't think a woman should be in any government job whatever. I mean, I really don't. The reason why I do is mainly because they are erratic. And emotional. Men are erratic and emotional, too, but the point is a woman is more likely to be." At about the same time, one of my favorite groups of the era, the Temptations, recorded "Ain't too Proud to Beg," featuring the line, "Now I've heard a crying man is half a man, with no sense of pride." (He cried anyhow).

I learned very young that boys do not cry. I was playing into the social value that girls and women do all the crying and caring about others, while tougher men tough it out. It was fine for me to express anger and pride, and often valued for me to do so (Brescoll, 2016). But, tears of happiness or sorrow, or even pain, especially on behalf of another? Fuhgettaboutit.

This assignment of emotions to women and rational thought for men did not anticipate the *androgynization* of how empathy is conceived in more recent feminist thought, in which *empathism* – the association of empathy with women and not men – has become an object of critique, leading to the assertion that empathy is "a human task and not a female one" (Lobb, 2013, p. 435; cf. Strauss, 2004). To Lobb, this relegation of empathy to one sex occupies women with a role in families and society that detracts from the time and energy they have available to develop in other ways valued by the mainstream and in the economy. This historical liberation of men from needing to care has led to "the unintended and unjust consequences that can ensue, especially for women, if we do not find a way to combine the celebration of empathy with some version of its post-patriarchal re-conceptualization" (Lobb, p. 439).

In this sense, my own masking of emotions during my formative years and beyond would be considered a matter of socialization rather than a biological disposition based on my male makeup, contra Baron-Cohen (2003, 2011) and many other psychologists who see men and women as fundamentally and genetically different in their emotive capabilities. Often overlooked in this debate about men's and women's relative emotional makeup has been the presence of people of nonbinary sexual orientation, a sort of person elided from the masculine/feminine dichotomy, even by astute observers like Lobb (2013) and Strauss (2004). Such "closeted" people were invisible to me, and everyone I knew through my first couple of decades of life. There were rumors of "queers," but mostly to give us a nasty name to call others. I imagine we caused a good deal of tears to fall in obliterating nonbinary people from sight and mind, and that I was as guilty of sustaining this historical problem as anyone, one that has re-emerged with a vengeance in 21st-century political discourse and policy (Gabriel, 2022), yet also finally getting greater attention in research (e.g. White *et al.*, 2018).

There is now considerable emotional energy invested in US communities and political arenas in fighting initiatives like diversity, equity and inclusion programs, which rest on a foundation of empathic connection across social groups (Bar-On *et al.*, 2007). It is fine to be angry about the consequences of making school a place where all feel accepted and validated, which may come as a threat to the sheltered feelings of dominant social groups whose cultural histories have produced the inequities that stifle the opportunities of others. To those with historical ownership of curriculum and instruction, the feelings of others are irrelevant, while the feelings of their own are paramount. Those in power – to Grant (2019), white people; to Dias (2022), conservative Christians; to Feagin and Ducey (2017), elite white men – cherish and assume their privilege, power and superiority, and will fight to maintain it. School board meetings have been overrun by angry white, often religiously driven parents who are opposed to a woke curriculum that includes racially equitable instruction and the affirmation of LGBTQ+ people. These crowds of protesters often have institutional support through such organizations as the Christian Broadcasting Network (2021) and its affiliate groups. Diversity, equity and inclusion? That would require some empathy for others, which might make my kids feel shame for their inherited privilege, rather than allowing them to believe that they are on top because they have earned it, and that they may feel mighty good about their achievements.

In this essay, I consider the role of emotions, especially empathy, in promoting a more humane education that encourages students to reach out across kinship chasms to promote the development of equitable communities. I review the rational basis for much schooling, expose the façade of rational thinking, consider the emotionally flat character of classrooms, attend to the emotional dimensions of literacy education, argue on behalf of attending to emotions in developmental theories and link empathic connections with social justice efforts.

The rational basis of conventional schooling

> "The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning" Sherlock Holmes, *Sign of Four* (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1890).

> "Rational thinking is privileged over emotional parts of life and experience, and men are associated with thinking, not feelings; women are seen to be not as rational but feeling creatures —often to the point of excessive feeling, emotion, and hysteria (womb pain/feeling)" (Sylvia Thorson-Smith, reported in Grant, 2019, p. 2).

The view that reason is warped by emotion has ancient roots. Plato (370 BCE) (2024) refashioned an old allegory in the *Phaedrus* in which reason and emotion are two horses pulling the charioteer of the soul in opposite directions, with reason providing the clearer path to knowledge of reality and with passions leading to a more beastly existence and distorted interpretations of the material world. Philosophers ever since have either viewed thinking as the master of the passions (e.g. Spinoza), or thinking as the servant of the passions (e.g. Hume). But largely, emotions are believed to be not only subservient, but untrustworthy and harmful: "In Western thought affect and emotion have been distrusted, denigrated or at least set aside in favor of reason. The tendency to distrust—even deplore—emotion has been aggravated by the rise of professions with their insistence on detachment, distance, cool appraisal and systematic procedures" (Noddings, 1996, p. 435).

During the Age of Reason and the Scientific Revolution in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries and beyond, the passions were viewed as antithetical to clear-minded thinking (Wilson, 1998). The architects of the James–Lange theory of emotions (named by John Dewey after the psychologists William James and Carl Lange) shared this view that emotions corrupt cognition. Vygotsky (1999), who early in the 20th century identified the powerful role of emotions in thinking – although ultimately disciplined by reason (1971) – described this theory as follows:

> James also is inclined to consider affects as pathological phenomena, harmful to the beings experiencing them. Lange gloomily tells of the fate of passions' dying breed. James is also forced to consider them as rudimentary vestiges that were initially useful, but deteriorated in the course of development and were converted into useless, meaningless adjuncts of our mental apparatus connected in no way with the rest of the activity (1999, p. 155).

This premise, still widely accepted although more recently subject to critique (e.g. Damasio, 2021), implies that rational men make better leaders than emotional women (Lopez-Zafra *et al.*, 2012), as asserted by Richard Nixon, and that educated white people, led by cold logic, are more reasonable than people from other cultures and ethnicities who engage in disagreements with passion (Kochman, 1981). Reason has also been pitted against religion and its reliance on faith (Flavell, 2022) and the emotional dimensions of belief (Roberts, 2021). Many continue to see emotion and reason to be related if ultimately hierarchically positioned, with some viewing emotions as subject to the control of reason in traditions grounded in the European Enlightenment (Wilson, 1998), and others (e.g. Haidt, 2012) arguing for the primacy of emotion, with logic serving to rationalize rather than to regulate emotional responses.

In the USA, schools rest on a foundation built during the European Age of Reason and its rational emphasis. Scientific rationality in this conception is more important than emotional expression, and indeed is undermined by it. Keltner *et al.* (2006) describe the ways in which emotions have historically been assumed to be a distraction from clear, rational thinking, rather than what they really are: the "wellspring of social-moral intuitions" guiding judgment and action (p. 125). As evolutionary psychologists, they find that emotions provide the ties that bind societies together over the course of generations and help sustain them against the forces of both nature and antagonistic social groups. Yet historically, this presumed corruption of clear thinking by the emotions – what Haidt (2012) has called the *rationalist delusion* – has especially been viewed as a condition affecting women; as expressed by the oafish male doctor in the fictional TV series *1899* (Friese and bo Odar, 2022), "It's a mistake for women to venture into medicine. They're too attached to their emotions to clearly perceive the facts at hand."

In school, emotions are, in the Enlightenment tradition, often considered a weakness, a distraction, a corruption of analytic thinking. Even in the emotionally fraught area of literary reading, the task is largely analytic. My own literary education was grounded in cold-blooded formalism, first at Kenyon College. Kenyon was instituted as an Episcopalian college of the sort devoted to a rational Protestantism (Noll, 2016), which permeated academic life at the college well past its founding, even for those of us who were not religious. There, John Crowe Ransom introduced the rationalist New Criticism to the Department of English upon his arrival in 1937, a literary approach that was congenial to the college's overall orientation to knowledge, and that made claims to scientific approaches and thus status (Graff, 1974). This approach persisted through my own enrollment and beyond, even as Graff's essay – published the year of my college graduation – titularly positions New Criticism in the past. I then did my graduate work at the University of Chicago, where the formalist Chicago School dominated the faculty.

When I was a student, it did not matter how I felt about literature. What mattered was how insightfully I could analyze the structure of the story, poem or other work. I was not too astute about finding meaning through textual analysis, even as I majored in English, eventually became an English teacher and on my own read novels (my favorite medium then) that I found moving, both emotionally and in terms of how I understood the world.

That appreciation, however, was not part of my academic performance, which required me to explain how the elements of the story cohered to produce a unified whole, and it was best to keep my emotions out of it. I might read the Transcendentalists and feel a greater love for and commitment to nature, but if I could not parse the metaphors to a professor's satisfaction, my grade showed me to be a rather dim reader of the texts and their traditions. Yet, the reader's role as co-constructor of texts had been available for some time. Van der Veer (2015) reports that Vygotsky's master's thesis "was an analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Written in 1916, it was an entirely subjective analysis written from the viewpoint that readers are authors who are free to create their own interpretation of plays, novels and poems" (p. 106). Vygotsky's (1971) doctoral study, also focused on *Hamlet*, was far more formalist, with emotions subject to the intellect's recognition and management of textual structure.

More influential in US Colleges of Education, Rosenblatt (1938) argued for a reader-oriented conception of literary response, one that allowed for the emotions to direct readings while also being guided by the formal structure of the text. Her conception made little headway among the male-dominated literature faculties of universities, but in the 1970s, in conjunction with the British growth model (Dixon, 1977), it was revived and instituted in classrooms, if not always in textbooks and AP Literature courses that remained faithful to New Critical perspectives (Rejan, 2017). Nonetheless, such constructs as Bishop's (1994) outline of the metaphors of mirror, window and sliding glass door have become popular with many teachers who see the benefits of having readers enter into stories to elevate their reading experience and make it relevant to their developing senses of self. If I may interject a family anecdote, when my daughter was very young, I had her in my lap as I read her Judith Viorst's (1972) *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* and she literally tried to put her feet into the book as a way to enter the story. It was a physical "reader response" from a child living through the experience of a bad day.

Meanwhile, schools' effectiveness is measured by standardized tests, and only standardized tests, whose questions have a single correct answer determined by the authors of the tests, making subjectivity irrelevant in school assessments. As Applebee and Langer (2011) concluded in the teaching of writing, if it is not tested, it is not emphasized in instruction. When emotions are viewed as the enemy of reason, they are obliterated from teaching, learning and assessment as a corruption to clear thinking, even as life and school and literary reading remain highly emotional for them and their friends (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2015).

The façade of reason

The "scientific" value on dispassionate reading has been neatly encapsulated by the architect of the Common Core State Standards in the USA, David Coleman:

> As you grow up in this world you realize people don't really give a shit about what you feel or think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you're saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. It is a rare working environment that someone says, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood" (cited in Ohanian, 2011).

Nor, I am sure, would you begin a literary analysis of *Moby-Dick* with a compelling account of how much you paid for the book and the market analysis that produced such a value, and the changing cost of a pound of whale blubber.

It is a genre thing. But, I digress.

Coleman is right about one thing: I really do not give a shit what he thinks about anything. Arguing from evidence is one of many ways to respond to a work of literature, and one that is practiced, from what I can tell, only in school and university English classes. The rest of the time, they respond with laughter, excitement, sadness, grief and many other emotions, as Michael W. Smith found in a contrast between how adults (including English teachers) read and discuss literature for pleasure and how both teachers and students engage with literature in school (in Marshall *et al.*, 1995). Emotions are always there. Keltner *et al.*'s (2006) conclusion that emotions are the wellspring of all thinking is supported by other psychologists, e.g. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007), who argue that what appears to be strictly rational cognition is guided by "hidden emotional processes" (p. 5) that play a dynamic role in the ways in which people learn.

Haidt (2012) has concluded that people engage primarily with the world through what he calls gut reactions, which are emotionally driven. People respond emotionally, and they then rationalize how they feel through whatever justifications they can come up with. They rely on all of the evidence that Coleman believes must be marshalled to support logical points, as if the reasoning itself has produced the perspective. Yet to Haidt, logic, also known as *cold cognition* (Wyatt *et al.*, 1993), serves to justify emotions, rather than being the means by which people arrive at their beliefs.

Emotional engagement and school

Goodlad (1984) described the relentlessly "flat" nature of US classrooms (p. 108). With the 21st century's emphasis on testing, testing and more testing, it is hard to imagine that the classroom has gotten a whole lot livelier. Teachers are thus faced with many students who walk through the door disengaged from school as an institution. "Meta-experience" characterizes how strong experiences in turn frame one's expectations for how new, similar experiences will unfold (Smagorinsky and Daigle, 2012). When school is experienced year after year as drab and dispassionate, students' expectation for new classes is that they will be dull and disengaging, often to the point where they refuse to engage with instruction no matter how thoughtfully the teacher has planned it for high interest (Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen, 1998).

This dismal outlook does not apply to all students, even as it applies to many. The degree to which students have developed a deeply rooted sense of connection with the institution of school itself will often set the stage for how they engage with any individual class or specific activity within a class (Eckert, 1989). Affiliation is often possible through sports, theater, student government and other activities that both are fulfilling and help build portfolios for advancement through the educational system. Some argue that a sense of affiliation is more possible through extracurricular activities than classroom learning and should be emphasized to provide students with a bridge to other learning potentials, especially those for whom school is an alienating place (Flores-González, 2002). Social groups who are an ill-fit with the individual, competitive, rationalistic values governing school are especially prone to disengagement (Majors, 2015; Moll, 2000; Smagorinsky, 2017). Classrooms might be flat, but school is a place of many emotions that contribute powerfully to the possibilities for engaging and disengaging with school. People have long said that "As long as there are math tests, there will be prayer in school." One might also propose that as long as there are sentient human beings in school, there will be emotions, if not always logic.

An emotional pathway in literacy education

In my teaching at the high-school level, I was increasingly attentive to students' emotional experiences with school and with schoolwork. Broadly speaking, it became clear to me that some students had an emotional affiliation with school that enabled them to persevere even when they hated the classes; others felt no connection, and thus little incentive to strive toward school's academic incentives, finding instead fulfillment outside school, a phenomenon described by Eckert (1989). Others were somewhere in between. Of course, documenting the emotional experiences of my students from the 1970s and 1980s is not possible, and making claims about my positive emotional and academic impact on others surely bears the appearance of unreflective self-aggrandizement.

On the other hand, when I was more active on social media, I connected with a number of former students who shared how my class affected them emotionally, e.g. a student whose mother had died and toward whom, according to him, I made a strong effort to support through his grief, often outside class (Smagorinsky, 2015). In that short essay, I quoted Maya Angelou, who famously said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." I can attest to the wisdom of that observation from the way I have been treated by others over time, and hope that this student was not an anomaly in my teaching in schools and universities.

Eckert (1989) and others helped me understand how these feelings of affiliation and disaffiliation were often a function of social class orientation and the degree to which school meets the needs of students from different socio-economic classes. Many other studies have found that white students are more likely to feel connected to school than students of color or from immigrant groups (e.g. Emdin, 2017; Flores-González, 2002; Petrone *et al.*, 2021). I increasingly understood that there was more to education than solving problems rationally. I began to understand how important it is to care about how students feel about being in school. If they did not feel cared for, why would they bother engaging with schoolwork?

In my classroom, I paid attention to my students' affect. I did not want to be another boring English teacher, so I tried to make class interesting enough to merit their attention while also being responsible to my department's standards for what students should learn. My pedagogical writing illustrates how I tried to do so (e.g. Skerrett and Smagorinsky, 2023). Although I was primarily concerned with preparing kids for college in the schools in which I taught, I was also familiar enough with the importance of relevance and engagement. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) describe how young people get into the "flow" of activity. A flow experience involves roughly equal degrees of challenge and capability such that time passes quickly. I used to experience this sensation playing basketball for several hours every day, absorbed in the games to the point of losing track of time.

Such deep engagement does not happen too often in the classroom, especially in required "core" academic course. If anything, time drags painfully for too many students as they are exposed to (but do not listen to) lectures, take tests and fill out worksheets (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi *et al.*, 1997). Yet, as a researcher, I observed a high-school sewing class in which the students made clothes they intended to wear, providing them with a real, material challenge that would ultimately help shape their appearance and identity (Smagorinsky, 1995). Whenever the teacher gave them a 5-min warning to clean up before the bell, many would be surprised and quite peeved at having to stop their work and head off to another class, possibly a very boring one. Sewing their own clothes, something they cared about deeply, produced a high degree of engagement and suitable challenge to make the hour seem to pass in moments. I found such occasions far more common in areas of the school like Home Economics than in the "core" academic classes in which formal, abstract knowledge was privileged, often in the form of repeating on tests what was in the book and what the teacher had said in a previous class.

Although I was mostly interested at that time in how the students thought as they worked, I also understood through this research program how important it is for students to engage emotionally with their schoolwork. I observed a Social Studies teacher who had the absurd assignment of teaching World History in one semester. His way of reducing this immeasurably large subject to something teachable and testable was to lecture in what he called a "shotgun" approach of scattering information and hoping that some of it landed. I do not say this critically; I am not sure how I would teach the entire history of the entire world in 18 weeks on a block schedule in which each class met every other day, and do it in an interesting way. But, I can say with confidence that the students were tuned out, sleeping, staring into space and otherwise disengaged from the lectures, with the long block class sessions greatly extending the length of the teacher's discourse. Meanwhile, students designing horse ranches in the school's Agriculture department were all-in: discussing their plans, working out their drawings, consulting sources and having what I interpreted to be flow experiences far more often than did students in most of what I saw in classes designed to prepare them for college (Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2004).

I began to see the emotional investment that is part of a flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues argued that flow experiences, no matter what the setting, lead to increased positive affect, enhanced performance and a deeper commitment to long-term, meaningful goals. In other words, having flow experiences is important in the short term, where deep engagement produces a positive immediate experience; and in the long term, given that such a rich sense of involvement can carry over to future investments of time in an activity. Promoting student engagement thus does much more than get a teacher and students through the day without tedium. It contributes to the overall feeling of affiliation a person has with school itself, and to the greater life trajectory of which any incident is a part.

Enriching developmental theories with attention to emotions

I have been very attentive to how students experience college classes I teach as well. I did not want to be another boring education professor. I have hoped to teach classes that my students have wanted to attend and have not wanted to leave at the end of the session. I want my classes to be as engaging as the high-school sewing and ranch design courses I observed. My approach was not too different from what I had done in high-school classes: to use as much inductive, student-driven discussion and activity as possible and to limit the time I spent at the center of the classroom in an authoritative position, with the understanding that my role as a teacher was inherently authoritative, if not authoritarian.

Meanwhile, my reading of Vygotsky helped me to formulate my research on how English teachers learn to teach, which I have studied through a lens of cultural-historical human development (Smagorinsky, 2020). Vygotsky's (1987) central focus in human development was socio-culturally mediated concept development, with attention to both the individual's development of concepts appropriated from culture, and on the evolution of the culture itself based on specific values and goals. In one university class I taught, Service-Learning in English Education (Smagorinsky, 2014), I was able to record and analyze how students in a book club setting discussed diversity issues affecting education, a topic that my mostly white, mostly female, often-affluent students knew about in the abstract but had had little personal engagement with. Their academic reading, in conjunction with tutoring and mentoring students enrolled in the local alternative high school, provided them an opportunity to put into dialogue two conceptual planes described by Vygotsky: academic (scientific) concepts learned in their reading and campus discussions and everyday (spontaneous) concept learned through daily life.

In our analysis of the discussions, we noticed how the students' emotions at times led to conceptual realizations through a process we called *empathic framing* (Smagorinsky and Johnson, 2021). I had become interested in empathy in relation to my study of character education programs and classroom teaching (Smagorinsky and Taxel, 2004, 2005). Character education tends to focus on obedience that adherents claim improves "academic performance, social and emotional skills, school climate and character development" through the emphasis on the "6 Pillars of Character": trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship (Character Counts!, 2021, n.p.).

Although the most recent listing of these traits includes "Show empathy" as a subset of "caring," the documents we studied from states' applications for federal funding typically showed little. They pathologized people of color, people in poverty and others who fall outside the mainstream of middle-class white society, positioning them as people of low character in need of elevation. The white Christian mainstream [in many cases, patriarchal and hierarchical sects representing the cultures of Catholicism (Lickona, 1999) and Southern Baptists (Smagorinsky and Taxel, 2005)] was considered to be a model toward which they should aspire. By contrast, we argued that empathy ought to be a major thrust of any effort to shift students' moral behavior toward inclusiveness and compassion.

I say this as someone on the autism spectrum who has little, perhaps no natural capacity for empathy (Smagorinsky, 2011), yet who believes that acting empathically may be learned through conscious efforts to take another person's perspective (Skerrett and Smagorinsky, 2023; Zaki, 2019). To Strauss (2004), who is not concerned so much with autism as she is with feminized conceptions of empathy, this capacity illustrates how:

> Empathy comes in different flavors. Psychologists have particularly distinguished cognitive from affective components of empathy. The cognitive aspect of empathy is awareness of another person's feelings; the affective aspect is an emotional reaction to another's feelings, in particular, "an affective response more appropriate to [their] situation than to one's own" (Hoffman, 1993:648). Although awareness of another person's feelings is a necessary prerequisite for a sympathetic affective response, it is not sufficient (p. 434).

Empathy refers to how people feel in relation to others, their ability to put themselves in another's shoes, the "imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the sufferer" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 327), "our ability to switch perspectives with a person in undeserved pain. We put ourselves in such a person's position, and are therefore in a position to address the system that made the pain possible" (Eze, 2015, p. 318). I will reference Brown (2013) for a basic understanding of empathy, while acknowledging problematic aspects of her conception, inconsistencies between what she preaches and what she practices, and ultimately, a way out of the conundrum her work on the emotions provides. To Eze (2015), Brown might illustrate the problem that historically, "Western feminism had been particularly concerned with the issues of white middle-class women" (p. 312) such as Brown.

Brown (2013) sees empathy as encompassing four dimensions: the ability to take the perspective of another person, the capacity to be nonjudgmental about other people, a recognition of other people's emotions and the act of communicating emotionally. She later updated her conception to include what I (2002) have described as *compathy*: the ability to feel *with* someone, a state that is very difficult to achieve. Brown (2013) has been dismissed for her writing on the courage to be vulnerable and the role of shame in human relationships, which critics of color (Yazeed, 2021) assert is more available to people born into privilege than to those who have faced lifelong discrimination and the denial of opportunity. Yazeed, like Cohen-Roggenberg (2015), finds that Brown overlooks the critical variable of social contexts, allowing her to assume that all people may manage their emotions in similar ways, presumably facing the same degree of challenge and same sorts of obstacles. Yazeed sees discrimination and vulnerability – to her, largely via racial bigotry – as a fact of the lives of people of color, more than as a feeling requiring courage to embrace.

For a good example from outside the literacy classroom, Hoffman *et al.* (2016) confirm the well-documented fact that many highly educated white medical professionals believe that black people do not feel pain the way white people do, leading to misdiagnoses. Markowitz (2022) corroborates this finding and further reports that "Consistent with nonlinguistic evidence of bias in medicine, physicians focused more on the emotions of women compared to men and focused more on the scientific and bodily diagnoses of men compared to women," who are often believed to be exaggerating their pain (p. 1). Such concerns have moved Grant (2019) to ask: "Is this line of inquiry [about emotions] another form of White privilege? Or, is studying emotions and teaching without centering race a continuation in American myth making that keeps Black life experiences and identity invisible/negative, and White life experience and identity visible/positive?" (p. 1).

In this sense, Brown (2013) has been viewed as lacking empathy for those who are denied, by racism, the privilege of setting aside their advantageous positioning and courageously allowing themselves to feel vulnerable. From a social justice perspective, assuming that one's own social position is shared by all can lead to the sort of insensitivity that Brown otherwise argues is highly problematic, and to ignorance of and obliviousness to the structural inequalities that have produced the longstanding problem of systemic, institutional racism (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Knowles and Prewitt, 1970).

Brown's (2013) own difficulty in doing what she recommends for others – understanding their social positions and the barriers to the privilege of courageously exhibiting vulnerability – is illuminating and allows a way out of her paradox. Yazeed (2021) notes that Brown's research samples are white, allowing her to generalize inappropriately from people like herself to all people. This problem has characterized much research in human psychology [see, e.g. Gilligan's (1983)] critique of Kohlberg's (1958) study of moral reasoning, which he conducted with white men at Harvard, then generalized to all people such that women were judged to be morally stunted) and has resulted in sampling errors that in turn produce misconceptions and inequities in society (Auspurg *et al.*, 2020).

Brown's reliance on research samples that resemble herself reveals how even generally thoughtful researchers may gravitate to people similar to themselves to conduct their studies, in the process generalizing inappropriately to people who are unlike them. Wilson (1998) describes this sampling process as one in which "white Americans [are] typically chosen for convenience and in order to increase statistical reliability by making the sample more uniform" (p. 153)[1]. Those recognizing the pitfalls of sampling errors have resisted, leading to such developments as the insistence within the disabled population that there should be "nothing about us, without us" (National Democratic Institute, 2022). This inclusion of broad perspectives to inform policies and conceptions is an important social justice issue, one overlooked by Brown and many others in this case, even as she may have generated useful generalizable understandings of empathy, the construct that made her famous.

To Pedwell (2012), "The very fact that empathy is so widely linked with visions of social justice and transformation signals a need to examine the nature of this intertwinement in further critical depth [. . .]. empathy is differentially felt, constructed, and mobilised across a range of key sites where issues of social justice and affective politics are at stake" (p. 281). Acting more as a social justice advocate, Brown (2013) has outlined dispositions that she argues have the capacity to disrupt power and create more humane relationships across people from social groups of different social status. People tend to be "selective in who[m] they empathize with [. . .]. individuals empathize more with people who are similar to them" (p. 249). If empathy may disrupt the power that accrues to people who support people like themselves at the expense of others, it is an important facet of good character, and of social justice education. Extending empathy to people quite different from oneself is required for people to take on the perspectives and be gracious and respectful – yet neither patronizing nor driven by *noblesse oblige* – in relation to those of less-advantaged social circumstances than they have, so as to produce greater equity.

This empathic disruption of power across social-status lines has potential for cultivation in educational settings. Power and privilege based on social status can reduce a person's ability to understand and care about other people, making it hard for people with social and financial power to read other people's emotions accurately. They further have little need to care about people of lower status, who are then blamed for being the agents of their own challenges (Dietze and Knowles, 2020). Shweder (1991) reports that "Empathy links members of one's own kind" because of their shared socialization (p. 247) but is not as spontaneously extended to people who are non-kin. Haidt (2012) associates people's tendency to extend empathy to those from outside their social or ethnic group with broader liberal political perspectives, and the tendency to extend compassion to whose with kinship bonds with conservative political understandings; he even finds evidence that there may be biological differences that help account for these different orientations.

Those who view outsiders as "the other," as "barbarians" (originally referring in Greece to those who did not speak Greek, and thus to outsiders), and as hostile threats to their own stability thus may dehumanize and assign blame to those who suffer, rather than the systems that deny them agency and opportunity. The current rhetoric surrounding immigration across the southern US border illustrates this demonization well (Haynes, 2023). Yet, a number of the character education programs we studied (Smagorinsky and Taxel, 2004, 2005) targeted the people most in need of empathy for improvements in character by creating a system that requires them to gravitate to the established social norms of white, upper-middle class, heterosexual Christians.

What makes people feel a sense of belonging is not a rational analysis of the qualities of their social groups. They feel they belong because they experience an emotional connection that makes them want to stick together and survive as a community. Although "survival of the fittest" – Spencer's (1864) rephrasing of Darwin's (1859) "natural selection" principle – has come to refer to the strongest and most adaptable individuals in capitalist economic theory, to Darwin the main unit of survival for humans was the community, one tied together by shared emotional bonds and needs. These bonds are far more likely to be present *among people with feelings of kinship* than they are to be extended to those from outside the group, a problem for social justice educators.

Students at my university often meet the profile of those who, according to these sources, are insulated from the need to extend empathy toward people who are disadvantaged in a structurally inequitable society. Yet, they all have the capacity to draw on emotions to produce "commitment-based analyses of emotion and relationships [. . .]. Compassion no doubt plays an important role in promoting cooperative relations among nonkin" (Keltner *et al.*, 2006, p. 119). Because students at state namesake universities are likely to have been enrolled in exclusive school tracks that limit their contact with students from outside their kinship groups, I developed the service-learning course to bring them in closer contact with the sort of student that they rarely engaged with in their own education: alternative school students who had left the system because they despised the sort of academic schooling that our students embraced enough to want to return as teachers. In addition to spending time tutoring and mentoring students at the alternative school and in turn learning about life from a wholly different perspective, on campus they met in weekly book clubs to discuss books they chose from a large menu on diversity-oriented topics. This pairing allowed them to discuss social science research in light of a personal relationship they developed with disaffected youth at the alternative school. My development of this course predated by a decade Grant's (2019) publication, yet was committed to his contention that "Society's only hope for change is through those individuals who question power, privilege, and oppression" (p. 10).

We found in analyzing these discussions that the students often engaged in *empathic framing* when, through making an emotional connection with someone from a different means of socialization, they view and talk about them with demonstrable understanding and efforts to feel or simulate their emotional and experiential perspective. Their shifts in perspective, rather than being strictly cognitive and rational, follow from their feelings of connection with people from different experiential backgrounds from their own, leading to relational thinking that helps redirect concept development toward inclusivity.

This shift enables an emotionally motivated form of *repositioning*. Harré *et al.* (2009) describe positioning theory as:

> A contribution to the cognitive psychology of social action. It is concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realized in the ways that people act towards others [...]. Positioning theory adds a previously neglected dimension to the processes of cognition—namely concepts and principles from the local moral domain, usually appearing as beliefs and practices involving rights and duties (pp. 5–6).

Repositioning occurs when, in a relationship predicated on a power differential, a person's status is shifted by others to account for new information and perspectives and to view the person in a different way. Harré *et al.* (2009) view repositioning as a cognitive move; we understand it as *founded in an emotional connection*. Empathic framing involves such positioning or repositioning of others – and thus a shift in conception and conceptual direction – yet via an emotional connection rather than a cognitive act of reasoning.

Empathic framing potentially leads to changes in how people conceptualize one another and position them in society. The following discussion excerpt comes from one book club's exploration of LeCompte and Dworkin's (1991) *Giving up on School: Student Dropouts and Teacher Burnouts*, a book that details how students and teachers mutually burn one another out and contribute to each other's emotional exhaustion in school. Smagorinsky and Johnson (2021) report many more examples; this excerpt is designed to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. One student related the book's themes to her tutoring experience with a teenaged male at the alternative school who was the father of three children. She [2] said:

> The student that I'm tutoring, he has three kids, and he's younger than I am. I couldn't imagine dealing with that. And he's trying to go to school. They were taking up a donation for Haiti, and he's like, "I've got three kids. I can't give you money." I thought of that, and it's really kind of sad.

Interpreting this quote, especially the last line concerning the "sad" state of the student's situation, has proven to be a contested task. One external reviewer found her statement to indicate privilege and pity, calling to mind Ahmed's (2004) point that "empathy sustains that very difference that it may seek to overcome" (p. 29) when, as Pedwell (2012) puts it, "subjects assume that they can feel what another feels in ways that fail to take account of differences in history, power, and experience" (p. 283). Strauss (2004) similarly argues that "pity could be taken as condescension if the other does not wish to be pitied" (Koehn, 1998:57), a point made emphatically by Vygotsky (1993) in his critique of Christian charity. The reviewer took this perspective, saying:

> I need more explanation and meta-commentary to help me understand how this is, indeed, an indication of empathy? Or is it yet another expression of sympathetic superiority, a form of othering? A kind of distancing [. . .] that person's life is so sad compared to my wonderful privileged life, etc. And I'm the one authorized to determine what is normatively sad or what is happy with respect to their life.

This interpretation surely has possibilities and is aligned with the tendency to critique social advantage in academia. I lack the ability to state with certainty what she found "sad." My orientation to cultural-historical developmental psychology leads me to infer that people's conceptual pathways follow a *twisting path* (Vygotsky, 1987) rather than starting with a firm, conceptually mature understanding. From a developmental standpoint, one should not pin down a person's personality and social orientation at the beginning of a conceptual process, but may instead view the person as a work in progress, often with a difficult road to understanding. In that sense, her reference to the "sad" situation could be seen as her initial exposure to a life beyond her prior comprehension in which she used the word "sad" to refer to her bewilderment at being a teenager with three children being urged to make sacrifices to provide relief to people experiencing tragedy in another land. It is entirely possible that she was reflecting the privilege that she entered the course with, in line with what my reviewer suggested, and that she was also beginning the process of shifting toward a more sophisticated conceptual understanding of lives she had never imagined before. But, I can only speculate about what she meant, why she said it and how her comment fit within her broader developmental path in becoming an inclusive educator.

In any case, as Warren (2015) observes, "Whether or not a teacher is an empathetic person is subjective" (p. 155), especially when making inferences about people from other races than one's own, [3] and my subjectivity is at work when I offer something of an interpretation, which I will acknowledge is sympathetic to her developmental stage and my personal knowledge of her compassion for others as a former student of mine and for her recorded comments throughout these transcripts. In developing a relationship with the teen parent whom she tutored, and in discussing diversity-oriented scholarship with her peers, she positioned him as a hardworking father succeeding against the odds, in contrast with the tendency to depict sexually active teens as being deficient in character (e.g. Lickona, 1999). Her beliefs were not altered through a rational recognition of inequity and discrimination. Rather, we infer that she felt empathy for the student, which served to shift her orientation to him and those like him who might otherwise be constructed as irresponsible according to conventional character education measures.

In contrast with how teacher candidates like her are assumed to lack empathy for racialized others, she made an effort to see the world from his perspective. Emotions in this sense serve as the "wellspring of social-moral intuitions" guiding judgment and action (Keltner *et al.*, 2006, p. 125), rather than as a distraction to good judgment, as David Coleman would say occurs when readers go beyond the four corners of the text and into their own souls to find meaning in their reading, when they, like my daughter, step into the text to personalize its narrative.

Empathy and social justice

A socially just society is one in which people feel connected enough with one another to invest in their development and provide them avenues for inclusion and affirmation. The current climate is Balkanized into warring factions that view another group's ascendance as threat to their personal security (Maitra, 2021). My purpose with this essay is not to provide another idealistic look at how all these lions, lambs, hyenas, cockroaches and snakes can all lie together in peace. World history suggests that there will always be conflict and competition for goods and status. People tend to align with kinship groups against others, in contrast with the social justice potential of *thick solidarity* that is "based on a radical belief in the inherent value of each other's lives despite never being able to fully understand or fully share in the experience of those lives. Exploring the role that empathy plays in forming solidarities is an attempt to understand the 'personal and affective dimension to [. . .] political commitments'" (Lee, 2015; Liu and Shange, 2018, p. 190). Some blame capitalism for its competitive nature, but my reading of European history, especially that of the Soviet Union, suggests that any economic system can produce inequity, corruption and unempathetic views of others (Smagorinsky, 2024).

The motto of the USA is "*E Pluribus Unum*": Out of Many, One. But achieving it has been easier said than done, and many throughout the English-speaking world are more socialized to colonial attitudes in which "the other" is to be conquered and assimilated, not valued and respected, and ultimately welcomed, for divergent ways and views. Resistance to the possibilities for social-emotional learning (e.g. Eden, 2022) suggest that many people view empathy as a threat that undermines the stability of one's home community. I argue instead that it holds the key to creating a new form of stability, one in which the human tendency toward tribalism is broken down by increased understanding across kinship groups. Given the resistance, I am not confident that we will ever see a society in which *E Pluribus Unum* is possible. But, like any other developmental path, it has got to start somewhere.

Notes

1. It appears that Wilson approves of this sampling method, although I wish he made this point critically, given that sampling errors have historically produced inequitable judgments about those from outside the population chosen for study. Wilson's *Consilience* has been described as either the visionary work of a great scientist (Elshtain, 1999), or a misguided scientific effort to understand human society (Jung, 2002), or a bourgeois effort to impose fascism on the working class (Rosenthal, 1998) and more.
2. The gender assignment here follows from what we interpreted to be the identity she performed in class; the class did not require testimonials of gendered identities. I am illustrating the points with the speech of a woman because the class only included two males, neither of whom was in this group; again, I am inferring sexuality based on the students' classroom presentations.
3. She did not identify the student's race. The school's students were from multiracial homes.

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