

From the Superintendent's Desk
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In my last article, I shared that I have been reading Thomas R. Hoerr's book- The Formative Five: Fostering Grit, Empathy, and Other Success Skills Every Student Needs. This article is going to address the first of those five skills that Hoerr believes everyone must have if he/she wishes to achieve success in life- "empathy."

In the book To Kill A Mockingbird, written by Harper Lee, Scout Finch (the narrator and protagonist) comments, "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk in them." There is a lot of truth in that statement!

The Collins English Dictionary defines **empathy** as "the psychological identification or vicarious experiencing of feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another." I don't know if that's a very clear definition; but, Jessica Lahey (2014) writes, "In order to be truly **empathetic**, children need to learn how to value, respect, and understand another person's views—even when they don't agree with them." I like how she puts that—we need to **value, respect, and understand** another's views even when we don't agree with them. If people were to do this, there would be better relationships between people; and, perhaps, the chances of resolving differences would be greater.

So, how do we move closer to valuing, respecting, and understanding others? True empathy begins with **listening**. Listening requires one to take time to hear what the other person is saying and to comprehend what that person is thinking and feeling. If people were to practice developing good eye contact with another, face the person who's talking, not be distracted by electronic devices or other work during that time, nodding one's head on occasion, and asking clarifying questions at some point during the conversation, you'd come closer to better understanding that individual. Giving that other person this kind of undivided attention also demonstrates **kindness** and shows you **care**.

Have you wondered **why** we need empathy? Here are two reasons. If you have no ability to empathize, then it's difficult to give people feedback and it's difficult to help them improve. The other reason is without empathy we tend to divide people up into "us" and "them" which leads to suspicion, miscommunication, and conflict. This reminds me what we are seeing in politics these days at both the state and national levels. Instead of taking sides and trying to assert one viewpoint is better than another, we should work on trying to understand so that there is a chance both sides feel good and that by working together we can resolve anything we put our minds to.

Hoerr says there are six basic steps to develop empathy:

1. Listening
2. Understanding (the first two have to do with developing “awareness”)
3. Internalizing (to place one’s self in another’s shoes and actually experience their feelings)
4. Projecting (imagining how you would react in the same situation)
5. Planning (always start with a common understanding and respect)
6. Intervening (planning should be inclusive and collaborative)

In the school setting, students need to understand that we all are on the same journey though we may be at different places on that journey and progressing at different speeds. But, we all aspire to the same goals (e.g., success, contentment, satisfaction,...).

What I found most interesting in this chapter of the book was ways Hoerr says teachers can help to teach students how to become **empathetic**. One way is through discussions of current events, history, and literature. This has to do with trying to understand. Another way to develop empathy is through service learning. Collecting blankets for the local animal shelter, planting and tending to crops for a food bank, or preparing meals at a homeless shelter are examples of service learning. To help students to appreciate their own backgrounds and biases, ask “Why are you the way that you are?” We need to create safe spaces for students to feel comfortable in sharing their stories. Another way to teach students about empathy is to teach them about “stereotypes” and “discrimination.” Educators must always encourage students to consider situations from a variety of perspectives. Asking the question, “How might someone see that differently?” is a great starter question for discussion. Assigning books to read that feature a diversity of humanity (i.e., featuring ethnic or other groups under-represented in the school) is another way to teach about empathy. Inviting in speakers who can give “the story behind the headlines” is a way they can tell their unique stories to help students develop empathy.

Next time, I will write about “self-control”—**what** that is, **why** it is an important skill to develop, and **how** to develop it.