

Empathetic Community Philosophy

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Abstract

The objective of this unit is to provide the appropriate familiarity and resources to teach our students coping skills and positive behaviors through building a sense of community responsibility. The target audience for this unit is fifth grade students, however, it can be adapted to suit the needs of any grade level and includes texts and resources that pertain to students at any age. The primary themes of this curriculum unit are social-emotional awareness and empathy, and the overarching objective is to help students achieve the social and emotional awareness needed to develop empathetic responses thus inspiring the pursuit of greater community betterment. Students will be challenged to think critically about their values and how individual beliefs and philosophies aid in community problem solving.

Rationale

One of the biggest issues faced by teachers in Philadelphia's low-income, public schools is the lack of appropriate familiarity and resources to teach our students coping skills and emotional intelligence through building a sense of community responsibility. Most of our students experience trauma before birth and continue to experience trauma throughout their childhood, oftentimes moving from one affordable and, often consequently, blighted area to another. Throughout the United States of America half of the children who live in urban areas are considered part of low-income families. Additionally, 83% of low-income, urban youth report a traumatic, or multiple traumatic events to child welfare officials within those cities. As adults we know that stress and trauma can lead us to feel emotionally overwhelmed or even cognitive dissonance, so we can deduce that these experiences are harder for children during their developmental stages thus leading to distrust of family and community members. As teachers we witness the results of this trauma in our students who exhibit distrust of other students and staff, erratic and extreme emotional responses, and strong,

defensive behaviors. According to the National Child Stress Network, “trauma and contextual stress can negatively impact children and adults’ functioning, often undermines parenting efforts, family relationships, and family functioning, and can increase risk of family violence.” (FITT, NCSN) Studies conducted by the NCSN as well as other organizations have proven countless times that students’ aggressive or obstinate behaviors are usually a result of maladaptive coping skills are due to this stress and trauma, and the cycle of poverty.

I cite this data on trauma to provide a basis for the belief that trauma causes its victims to feel “other-ed” by individuals with whom they trusted within their communities. When considering community philosophy or philosophies of a community, one should consider basic individuals’ morals, or lack thereof, as well as the foundational principles of relativism and objectivism. As generally defined by philosophers – moral relativism is the view that moral “correctness” depends on that person’s perspective. As a subjective philosophy this is relative to individuals who are verifying what is right and wrong, and as a conventional theory it is dependent on societal stances. When considering the causation of children’s traumatic experiences and, consequently, distrust of others, education and social welfare professionals must also consider the values of the adults raising said children in low-income socioeconomic situations, and those individuals’ moral relativism. Education and social welfare professionals may wonder about the “correctness” of disciplining a child in a physical manner which is the preferred form of discipline for many cultures; thus, professionals may wonder why a community views physical child discipline as the “correct” response to a child’s wrongdoing? In this circumstance such professionals would be questioning moral objectivism which is the view that what is right or wrong is not dependent on any person’s viewpoint but, instead, that moral facts do not depend on what anyone thinks or feels. Understanding and developing morals are two of the most important steps toward abiding by personal and societal virtues or fighting against the ones that some individual feels are wrong. I’ve contemplated this when thinking about the cultural and community implications of child rearing by adults who have also experienced the effects of urban poverty such as abuse

or trauma. Both relativism and objectivism are crucial to understanding students' perceptions of relationship building and their sense of community.

Community building is a teacher's priority at the start of every school year. Students are entering another period of change as they move to a new classroom, grade level, teacher, and, sometimes, a new school. Many students in Philadelphia experience these changes more than once throughout the school year; for example, out of the four students who were assigned to my class at the start of the 2017 school year and moved, one student moved to a new school in the district in November, one student moved out of the country in October and came back to my class in December only to leave and go to another school in January, one student was taken from his mother and forced to live with his custodial guardian in a rural area in the state in February, and one student moved to a new state after the first two weeks in September. One could imagine the challenges faced by students who experience such changes as well as the challenges faced by teachers attempting to build a community within their classroom walls. Despite unforeseen fluctuations it is still possible to foster a strong sense of community while also developing students' coping skills and emotional intelligence, and ability to empathize with classmates' in order to deescalate negative emotional responses. Classroom models such as Responsive Classroom and Montessori are touted as they have consistently been the most successful evidence-based approaches to social-emotional learning and community building. The Responsive Classroom approach aims to "teach children to be responsible, contributing members of a democratic community [and] promote respectful, kind, and healthy teacher-student and student-student interactions." (Forton, p. 2) The Montessori approach is similar to building a community and fostering students' emotional intelligence as this method provides a "carefully planned, stimulating environment [and] excellent foundation for creative learning." (Montessori Connections) These are merely two of many techniques used by teachers to establish community, build empathetic responses to emotional altercations, and mitigate negative behaviors commonly displayed at the commencement of a new school year.

Educators in schools with a demographic like the one where I teach overwhelmingly consider their biggest challenge to be behavior management of their students and ability to deescalate emotionally-driven altercations between students. While this is a general statement, my focus-group research (Google survey of 27 Philadelphia public school teachers) reveals that 81% of respondents consider their “area of need” to be behavior management. I have been lucky to teach my students for the last three years and over those three years I’ve witnessed my students and their family members fall victim to trauma-related incidents, from sexual abuse and assault to homelessness. My first year with my students was filled with anxiety, violence, assault, and erratic emotions. My students’ lack of emotional awareness and empathy toward each other made the community building process one of extreme difficulty. It was my belief that my students could cope with the effects of their trauma, develop emotional awareness, and empathize with one another if they felt cared for by their community members including their classmates and teachers (as we are most representative of siblings and guardians during a school day). I can affirm, three years later, that looping with my students resulted in their abilities to cope with their trauma, develop empathy, and rebuild their trust in child and adult relationships.

The goal of this unit is to provide the appropriate familiarity and resources to teach our students coping skills and positive behaviors through building a sense of community responsibility.

Background

Teaching empathy, self-awareness, and fostering social and emotional intelligence are not new ideas or new solutions to the behavioral difficulties of students. I’d argue that most, if not all, teachers attempt to help students understand the actions of healthy relationships and their effects on communities. (Piotrowicz, p. 3) One of the most imperative first steps to ensuring students’ social and academic success is fostering a peaceful classroom and building the community. Community is both physical and

metaphysical and can be represented in a variety of ways, but the way in which we emphasize “community” in the classroom is by fostering likeness amongst our students. Teachers often take the bystander role in the beginning of a school year, allowing students to communicate with each other about their commonalities. In a well-resourced primary school this might look like students talking in a cozy reading corner or chatting at a small-group table while reading a book. The way in which we define as community in our society – people coming together to achieve a common goal – is how we define community in our schools.

The classroom setting is a small-scale representation of a larger social eco-system. I started teaching in 2015 as a 3rd grade teacher at a public school in the North section of Philadelphia. My class was 22 students large, about 18 of whom were reading on a Kindergarten or 1st grade reading level and regularly expressing erratic and extreme emotional distress. On my first day of teaching one of my male students violently slammed a female student’s head into the brick wall for no reason other than what expressed as her “mean face.” I cite this incident as it epitomizes what my students and me experienced almost daily. I knew that I was to be building a community of individuals who respected each other but I was struggling to do that as I abided by the principles and activities shared by Responsive Classrooms (Kriete & Davis); and while some Morning Meetings (Kriete & Davis) were genuinely effective at building our community, others were a complete flop – perhaps because they were poorly executed by my half-hearted teaching. By December 2015, I had written up 17 students for aggressive behavior and regularly insisted on suspension or detention of three students who destroyed my property on a daily basis. It was obvious that my attempts were failing.

In January 2016, after we returned from our winter holiday break, I sat my students down for a morning meeting but this time I insisted on being honest and forthright with them. I showed them the behavioral data I was tracking, and we openly talked about what wasn’t working, how we felt uncomfortable, and started brainstorming solutions to

our issues. Following this meeting I saw immediate results and while nothing was perfect, it was improved.

Once I engaged my students as community members who solved problems *together* and I allowed them to be the leaders who I wanted them to be we started to make great strides toward academic and community excellence. By the end of the 2016 school year my students increased their benchmark scores by 30%, 15 students were on a 4th grade reading and math level, only one student received a suspension, and we successfully completed two major community service projects.

Over the last three years of teaching this group of students I've seen them achieve the most academic and social success when they're working toward a community service project. This unit will help students become socially and emotionally aware individuals who are working toward a greater understanding of their community.

Objectives and Strategies

The primary themes of this curriculum unit are social-emotional awareness and empathy, and the overarching objective is to help students achieve the social and emotional awareness needed to develop empathetic responses thus inspiring the pursuit of greater community betterment. The approach to teaching this unit aligns with similar investigations of Community Philosophy conducted by phenomenologist, Edith Stein, who died a victim of the Holocaust in 1942. Stein was interested in the possibility of "mutual communication among human beings [and] the subject of empathy." (Baseheart, p. 163) She believed that empathy was invaluable in developing relationships and that in order for a community group to exist, the members of the group must share both mutual knowledge of, and appropriate relations to, one another. I've loosely demarcated Stein's phenomenological studies as such: members of a group must be intentional about their relationships in order to develop the interpersonal skills necessary to foster a well-meaning community.

This unit threads together the themes of Community Philosophy, social-emotional awareness, and empathy while also touching on the foundational philosophical principles of relativism and objectivism. My decisions about the timing and content of each lesson are based on my teaching and reteaching of such lessons for the last three years with the same group of students; every year I've attempted to achieve, and successfully achieved, the same goals with my students while intensifying the rigor of the content and expectations.

<i>Theme/Objective</i>	<i>Timing</i>
Social-Emotional Awareness	September
Empathy	October
Relativism vs. Objectivism; Community Philosophy	November
Community Issue Problem Solving	December

I've carefully crafted the lessons in this unit to cater to students in grades 3-5 as the discussions and content of the lessons match the maturity of this age group. I've also included sample lessons that engage each subject's content knowledge through these grade-bands. I've included the School District of Philadelphia's grade 5 ELA standards that will guide each lesson but are also standards for grades 3 and 4.

Example literacy standards that will be reached in the following lessons and activities are:

Topic	Lesson	Standard	Interpretation
ELA	1 (Social-Emotional Awareness)	CC.1.2.5.A: Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key	SWBAT identify key details IOT determine two or more main ideas of a text.

		details; summarize text.	SWBAT identify two or more main ideas of a text IOT explain how they are supported by key details.
ELA	2 (Empathy)	CC.1.3.5.A: Determine a theme of a text from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.	SWBAT identify key details IOT determine the theme of a story, drama, or poem. SWBAT identify key details IOT describe how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic. SWBAT identify key details IOT compose a summary.
ELA	3 (Community Philosophy)	CC.W.5: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive	SWBAT understand the elements of writing (focus, content, etc.) IOT compose a story that is real

		details, and clear event sequences.	or imaginary containing a clear focus and includes a narrator and/or characters with an organized event, sequence, transitional words, precise language, and grade appropriate conventions of language.
ELA	4 (Community Issue Problem Solving)	W.5.1: Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.	SWBAT compose a piece of writing that provides an argument and explains that argument using facts and/or definitions in an organized way with an introduction and conclusion IOT clearly communicate a written claim or opinion on a topic or interest.

Classroom Activities

Lesson 1: (One Day)

Standard Objective: *SWBAT determine two main ideas IOT explain how they are supported by text details.*

Theme Objective: *Develop social-emotional awareness*

Materials: “Everyone Can Learn to Ride a Bicycle” by Chris Raschka, anchor chart paper, index cards

Lesson Plan:

- (Mini-lesson) Open the lesson by introducing or re-introducing the skill of identifying main ideas in a story. Quickly set up the anchor chart to represent the process for identifying two main ideas and introduce the objective and standard for the day’s lesson.
- (Shared Reading) State that they will share the reading of “Everyone Can Learn to Ride a Bicycle” with you.
- Ask students to predict the story’s plot as well as main ideas and themes they will learn from the story.
- Read the book and stop throughout the reading to ask students questions that appeal to their emotional intelligence and awareness such as, “Did you ever have a similar experience?” Also ask questions such as, “How do you feel about the characters’ experience?”
- Start a new anchor chart. Write the title of the story at the top of the chart and ask students to turn-and-talk about their feelings.
- Ask students to use their feelings to come up with two main ideas of the story. Remember to cite your original anchor chart outlining the process for crafting a main idea.
- Listen to students’ responses and write the main ideas they’ve come up with on the anchor chart.
- (Independent Reading) Explain to students that during their independent reading they will come up with two main ideas the way they did in your shared reading.

Give each student an index card and explain that they will write one main idea on one side, and another main idea on the other side.

- (Guided Reading) Pull groups of students to review the skill and discuss their emotions.
- (Closing) Bring students together again as a group. Discuss the emotions that the students felt during the reading. Explain to students that their awareness of their emotions is helping them to connect to one another and to the characters in the story. Ask three students to share their connection to another student's emotions.

Lesson 2: (Two Days)

Standard Objective: *SWBAT identify key details IOT determine the theme of a story, drama, or poem.*

SWBAT identify key details IOT describe how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic.

SWBAT identify key details IOT compose a summary.

Theme Objective: *Develop and understand empathy*

Materials: "Cinderella", SmartBoard or white board, sticky notes, anchor chart paper,

[Young Peace Leaders Video](#)

Part I: Lesson Plan:

- (Mini-lesson) Ask students to partner-pair-share verbal definitions of the word "empathy." Jot down notes about what you hear and share them with the class after about two minutes. Write "empathy" on the anchor chart.
- (Shared Reading) Show the video: [Young Peace Leaders Video](#). During this video your students will witness middle school students like themselves complete an empathetic activity.
- After the video ask the students to think about answers to these two questions:
 - o What was most memorable about the video?
 - o What moment had the most profound impact on your mind?

- Allow the students to share their answers and write them on the anchor chart under the word “empathy.”
- Distribute sticky notes to students and ask them to write down their anonymous responses to the following questions:
 - “Walk in someone else’s shoes” is a metaphor. (Define metaphor verbally.) Why is this a powerful metaphor?
 - Why is it necessary for someone to “walk a mile” in one’s shoes, rather than just a few steps?
- Have students put their sticky notes on the anchor chart as they complete them and read a few of the responses.
- Engage in a discussion about perspective with students. Ask them to reflect on their perspective from the reading of “Everyone Can Learn to Ride a Bicycle” and ask them how they showed empathy to the character and their classmates.
- (Independent Work) Send students back to their seats to write in their reading or writing journals. Ask them to consider when and why it’s important to show empathy to others in their daily lives. Prompt students to write a brief scenario from the outside world in which it’s important to show empathy to others.

Part II: Lesson Plan

- (Mini-lesson) Using any version of the story, “Cinderella,” show students the cover and ask them to predict the day’s topic. Allow them to respond. Remind students of the standards and objectives of today’s lesson.
- Using an anchor chart or SmartBoard write a summary of Cinderella with the students. Begin by asking what they know about Cinderella then summarize the plot.
- Next, ask students to consider the perspective of another character from the story. Underline the characters’ names in your summary. Explain to students that they’re going to re-write the story from the perspective of another character with a group. Use your preferred strategy to group students.
- (Independent Work) Allow students to write and illustrate the story from their character’s perspective.

- (Closing) Ask groups to switch and read another group's story. While reading the story ask groups to note some common main ideas or themes in their reading journals.

Lesson 3: (One Day)

Standard Objective: *SWBAT understand the elements of writing (focus, content, etc.) IOT compose a story that is real or imaginary containing a clear focus and includes a narrator and/or characters with an organized event, sequence, transitional words, precise language, and grade appropriate conventions of language.*

Theme Objective: *Develop a community philosophy through narratives*

Materials: SmartBoard or white board, standard paper, anchor chart paper (optional)

Lesson Plan:

- (Mini-lesson) Re-introduce the topic of individual feelings and lead into a discussion about how individuals impact a group. Next, tell a brief story about how individual's feelings affect group feelings. Explain that you've been thinking about emotional awareness and empathy and you're wondering how that impacts how we, as people in a community, behave toward one another?
- Hand out paper and ask your students to write or draw their definition of "community."
- Write the following essential questions on the SmartBoard or white board while they're working:
 - o What are your personal values? Where did you get your values from and how do you practice them daily?
 - o How do you interact with people around you at school and at home?
 - o What do you do to learn the experiences and beliefs of other people?
- Ask students to answer these questions on the back of their paper.
- (Shared Writing) As a whole group, come up with a creative way to represent your personal, individual belief system. [As my class participates in a dance program we decided to use a dance using songs about friendship.]

- Using the SmartBoard, anchor chart paper or white board, reflect on your life and write a narrative about how you developed those beliefs. Allow the students to contribute some ideas to your creative writing process but the narrative should be yours, as the teacher, sharing the writing. Use evidence and be as appropriately honest as possible.
- Toward the end of your brief narrative write about how your individual beliefs led you to join the community of teachers and become a teacher. Write about the shared beliefs of the teaching community and make connections to individual beliefs.
- (Group Work) Direct students to reflect on their community definitions and answers to the essential questions. Ask them to consider these thoughts as they move into their group work. Allow students to choose a group that they feel shares the same beliefs as they do, without knowing exactly what those beliefs are just yet. Remind them that as a group they're going to be coming up with a representation of their group's community belief system. Guide them to verbally share their personal narratives with each other in a similar manner to the one that we wrote together, and to use those individual experiences and values to create a community philosophy, or belief system.
- (Closing) This may have to happen during the next writing period but allow each group to share their process and final representation.

Lesson 4: (One Day)

Standard Objective: *SWBAT compose a piece of writing that provides an argument and explains that argument using facts and/or definitions in an organized way with an introduction and conclusion IOT clearly communicate a written claim or opinion on a topic or interest.*

Theme Objective: *Define and problem solve a community issue*

Materials: anchor chart, SmartBoard or document camera, local article about community issue, writing or reading journals

Lesson Plan:

- (Mini-lesson) Recall students' previous projects about community representation. Discuss how you feel emotional awareness, empathy, and community philosophy are related. Using an anchor chart, make a web with the term "community" in the middle. The arms of the web should be emotional "awareness," "empathy," "values and philosophy" and "issues." Tell students that today you'll be working through a community issue and attempting to define the underlying cause, understand the community values that could help, and use empathy to solve the problem.
- (Shared Reading) Ask students to bring their reading or writing journals to the shared reading space. Project or share an article about a local community issue. Read the article to students and highlight the main issues or main ideas, reinforcing reading skills.
- Ask students to turn-and-talk about the main issues in the article and consider the community values that would help to solve this problem. Give students approximately one minute to think and share, and then have some students share aloud.
- Define the issue with the students and explain that they will be writing their opinion about the issue.
- (Independent Writing) Prompt students to write their opinion about the issue in their journals. Ask them to explain both perspectives on the issue, recalling the "Cinderella" project, and have them pick a perspective in which to elaborate. Explain that they're writing their personal opinion that aligns with their individual values and philosophy. Give students approximately ten minutes to write their opinion.
- Stop students from writing and explain that for the next 20 minutes they will be writing about a solution to this problem. As a group, visibly note the community values that need to be considered in order to solve the problem. Explain that these values should guide students to argue their solution to the issue.
- Allow students to complete the writing and turn it in for your review.
- (Closing) As this topic may have been sensitive to some students it's important to allow students to share in an anonymous manner, only if they feel comfortable.

Give students a few minutes to close out the lesson on their own by having a group discussion. Provide little prompting or guidance. Stop the discussion at an appropriate point.

Resources

One More Moral Value Fighting Poverty. (2005, January 30). *New York Times*. Retrieved June 26, 2018, from http://www.nctsnct.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/understanding_the_impact_of_trauma.pdf

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Young Peace Leaders: Cultivating Empathy. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://why.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/transt.pd.empathy/young-peace-leaders-cultivating-empathy/#.WzGqZhJKjeQ>

Appendix – Lesson Resources

- Lesson 1
 - o “Everyone Can Learn to Ride a Bicycle” by Chris Raschka
- Lesson 2
 - o <https://why.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/transt.pd.empathy/young-peace-leaders-cultivating-empathy/>