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Fostering Empathy in Children: A Literature Review and Proposal

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Empathy links separate beings together as it enhances interpersonal relationships and motivates justice and prosocial behavior. Therefore, it is beneficial to reflect upon how empathy is first instilled and enhanced, as well as how it is suppressed. With such information, strategies can be devised to foster empathy by means of structured guidance. The experience of empathy involves both cognitive precursors and affective experiences that allow the observer to become involved in the complex, emotional, inner-world of the subject. Moreover, the observer's expression of empathy and an individual's feelings of concern for the subject can be prompted or inhibited by a variety of antecedents such as personal disposition, self-other differentiation, and emotional regulation. The proposed empathy-fostering program utilizes aspects of factors that enhance empathy, such as parenting practices, school environment, and self-motivation. These are translated into self-exploration exercises, role-playing techniques, and content-reflection that afford expressively enveloping experiences while promoting a deeper understanding of thoughts and emotions.

Introduction

Empathy links separate beings together, as personal experiences and emotions traverse the physical boundaries that are capable of keeping us divided (Davis, 1996). By identifying and sharing feelings with someone outside of ourselves during an empathic response, this phenomenon can enrich our lives and those toward whom we express empathy through social and emotional expansion. Many theorists assert that “social life, morality, and altruism” (Harper, 1975) depend upon empathy as an essential social-emotional foundation. In its absence, “social tensions, conflicts, violence, terrorism, and war” (Clark, 1980, p. 190) are the most foreboding consequences. Therefore, it is particularly beneficial to reflect upon what empathy is, how it is first instilled and enhanced, and in what circumstances it is suppressed. Once greater clarity for these thoughts is
achieved, strategies can be devised to help ensure its presence and foster its growth.

Although heated controversy exists over where and when values should be taught, it would largely go unchallenged that individuals, families, and the collective society would benefit from heightened levels of understanding, acceptance, and effective communication among societal members. In other words, the increased emergence of empathy would cultivate positive advancements and improve the quality of life for all; individuals will become more mindful of themselves, of one another’s perspectives and feelings, and replace self-interested conduct with prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, 2005; Hoffman, 2000; Batson, 1991).

The literature presented in this thesis outlines empathy as a multidimensional construct and observes empathy through the lenses of the developmental and social learning theories. It will be purported that empathy involves cognitive and affective processes (Strayer, 1980; Davis, 1983), as its components are achieved in a step-like progression (Yardley, 1999; Hoffman, 1979), which are cultivated or hindered by social influences (e.g. parents and academic institutions, see Roelofs, Meesters, Ter Huurne, Bamelis, & Muris, 2006; Steinberg, L., Blatt-Eisengart, I., Cauffman, E., 2006; Borke, 1973) as well as by an individual’s level of self-motivation. Across the two theories, the manifestation of self- and other-awareness is viewed as essential for an empathic response.

Although the natural presence and appearance-rate of these processes can vary between individuals, focus on the developmental and social learning theories best supports the potentiality of empathy being learned and advanced (Hoffman, 2000) by means of structured guidance. Therefore, a proposal will also be made for the utilization of an empathy-fostering program as a valuable contribution to society. Such a program would focus on fostering empathy via means of role-playing techniques and reflection to increase key elements associated with empathy. The program itself would host an environment conducive to emotive explorations and discussions. Participants would be involved not only in taking the perspective of a character and gaining an understanding of the character’s emotions, but also afforded the opportunity to personally experience those feelings and thus comprehend them on a more profound level. The use of reflections would support more expressive communication skills and establish a broader base from which individuals can understand and appreciate the complexities of human nature.

**Cognitive and Affective Processes**

Despite decades of theoretical and experimental investigation by researchers on this significant social attribute, ambiguity has consistently surrounded the definition and components of the empathic response. While a large proportion of research on empathy has been either solely focused on the cognitive or affective functioning, other bodies of work combine the two to form a multidimensional approach (Hashimoto & Shiomi, 2002; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Hoffman (1984) proposes that empathy goes beyond the simple awareness of another’s feelings, but is “a cognitive and emotional process accompanied by …sharing of others’ feelings” (Quoted in Hashimoto & Shiomi, 2002, p. 584, emphasis added). Similarly, Carl Rogers (1975) refers to the experience of empathy as the observer entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings of which he/she is scarcely aware. (p.4)

An analogous, although more succinct, definition by Cohen and Strayer (1996) describes empathy as “the ability to understand and share in another’s emotional state of context” (p. 988). Therefore, as
substantiated by these descriptions, and others supporting this multidimensional approach (see Eisenberg, 2002; Davis, 1983; Hoffman, 1977), both cognitive and affective capacities are at work during an empathic response.

The cognitive process in an empathic response involves “intentionally adopt[ing] the subjective perspective of others by putting [oneself] into other people’s shoes and imagining what they feel” (Decety & Jackson, 2006, p. 55), which is often referred to by researchers as perspective-taking, affective role taking (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), or cognitive empathy (Smith, 2006). The latter term will be used throughout the thesis when addressing the cognitive dimension of empathy. The affective experience, which will be referred to as affective empathy, “involves resonating with another person’s unconscious affect and experiencing that person’s experience along with him while keeping one’s own self-integrity intact” (Decety & Jackson, 2006, p. 55). Many researchers infer that both are essential for a true empathic response (Brems, 1989). Hoffman (1979) refers to affective empathy alone as an “emotional contagion” (Smith, 2003, p. 4), whereas cognitive empathy alone would only ensure the ability to differentiate oneself from others in opinion and thought (Smith, 2006). The two in operation unite people in a holistically mindful way (Decety & Jackson, 2006).

It is particularly important to emphasize that the empathic response is more exhaustive than an innate experience that can be had by all humans in reaction to another person’s state or condition. While some components of the empathic response are believed to be inherent, such as mimicking observed affective facial expressions (Decety & Jackson, 2006), it is suggested that the entire process requires the development and use of a number of key cognitive and emotional precursors in the observer.

In cognitive terms, one achieves the awareness of cognitive separateness (e.g. mental state, perspective, experiences, and opinions) from others, and gains the awareness that these components are significant in shaping and embodying oneself and others. Through achieving this cognitive capacity, it “presupposes not only the ability to think nonegocentrically but also more socially developed thought” (Brems, 1989, p. 333). In affective terms, there is a degree of an innate reaction to the emotions of others as previously suggested, but one also gains a greater understanding of what feelings are through emotional self-awareness, distinguishes one’s emotional state from others, and acquires an awareness of how emotions represent an individual’s perception of an experience. Therefore, an empathic response requires a level of self-awareness, an awareness of others, both in cognition and emotion.

When both cognitive and affective capacities operate together during an empathic response, the observer appropriately recognizes the emotional state or condition of another (typically through facial or situational cues), infers the subject’s thoughts and emotions from these observations or considers how one would feel within the situation, and then personally experiences an affect that is similar to that of the subject (Lamm, Batson & Decety, 2007; Zhou, Eisenberg, Losoya, Fabes, Reiser, Guthrie, et al. 2002; Hoffner & Badzinski, 1989; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). Insufficient development or use of any of these precursors (e.g. by means of inadequate social experiences or self-motivation) can cause observable disabilities or delays in experiencing an empathic response.

Affective Empathy

Measurements of affective empathy had previously been dependent upon “self-report and physiological indicators” (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972, p. 525). In concern with the definition of empathy being followed within this thesis and by many researchers (e.g. the observer must experience an emotion that is similar to the emotion experienced by the subject), these testing methods do not provide
concrete evidence of the internal modes of operation that are pertinent to the experience. While some studies (see Levenson & Ruef, 1992, cited in Decety & Jackson, 2006) indicate that the observer's level of physiological response (e.g. muscle activity and heart rate; see Decety & Jackson, 2006) to witnessing a subject in an emotionally aroused state does correlate with the accuracy of inferring the subject's emotional state, such a response in the observer does not necessarily indicate an analogous affect is experienced. In fact, the physiological response could instead be among an array of divergent emotions (e.g. personal distress, excitement, nervousness, and so forth) that would induce a physiological response. For instance, in the case of the observer witnessing the subject in a frightened state due to the presence of snake, while the observer may be able to identify the subject's fear, the observer may instead be feeling excited by the situation. Thus, a heightened physiological response would still be experienced while the emotions are not congruent. However, within the last decade, greater footing has been gained toward better understanding the inner-workings of empathy.

Iacoboni (2007) refers to a ground-breaking discovery of a "neural network of empathy in the human brain" (p. 236), which consists of a cluster of brain cells referred to as mirror neurons. Particularly, during the observation of another's emotional state, it is found that similar premotor cell firing occurs within the observer, especially if emotional facial expressions are imitated. Therefore, most specific to affective empathy, individuals experience a covert form of imitation that occurs within the observer's brain.

Imitation, a central component to the social-learning theory, can be defined as observational learning through witnessing others, which allows an individual to avoid "time-consuming trial and error learning" (p. 237). For example, in watching an older sibling dress himself or herself, the observer would not necessarily have to make the personal discovery that the socks do not belong on his or her hands. Such a skill is linked to "the development of fundamental social skills, such as reading facial and other body gestures and to understanding the goals, intentions, and desires of other people" (Iacoboni, 2007, p. 237). Therefore, with emotions, the imitation of such evokes an automatic response in oneself which would then often lead to the exploration and understanding of that feeling within oneself. Hence, feelings of concern arise "with the mental and emotional states of others. In other words, "empathic people tend to mimic what other people do" (pp. 238-239). Individuals can experience an emotional reaction similar to that of another through exercising the imperative imitation caused by mirror neurons as it evokes the "sharing of meaning between individuals" (p. 240) in addition to applying the knowledge of one's own feelings to others. Therefore, one can assume that experiencing an emotional reaction similar to the subject would entice the expression of empathic concern rather than simply identifying the emotions of another. Along this vein, Smith (2006) refers to affective empathy as "the fundamental basis for social bonding between parents and children" (p. 4) and the facilitator of group cohesion.

**Cognitive Empathy**

As previously suggested, a certain level of physical and cognitive self awareness must be achieved to gain an awareness of others. To make inferences about the mental state of another, it is necessary to first possess knowledge of oneself. Gallup and Platek (2002) suggest that self-awareness acts as the foundation for understanding others as one applies knowledge from personal experiences to those witnessed. More specifically, they assert that "[b]ecause humans share similar receptor mechanisms and brains that are organized in roughly the same way, there is bound to be considerable overlap between their experiences" (p. 36). Thus, Gallup and Platek (2002) discover that organisms (e.g. most humans and chimpanzees) who can recognize themselves in a mirror can infer the thoughts and feelings of others.
Similar to the claims made by Hoffman's (1982) theoretical model of empathy, in which the initial emergence of empathy is said to occur around the age of two, Gallup and Platek (2002) discover that self-recognition while looking into a mirror is seen in infants from 18 to 24 months old.

Prior to this period, an infant cannot comprehend his physical or cognitive independence from other people and objects because of his or her minimal cognitive capacity and therefore remains socially egocentric in nature (Urberg & Docherty, 1976). Consequently, he or she does not fully understand his or her presence, behavior, and the effects of both on people and objects. Without comprehension of the self, one cannot assimilate perceptual and emotional information into social situations. Therefore, it has been found that autistic and schizophrenic individuals, and those with abnormalities in the prefrontal cortex (i.e. the brain region associated with self-awareness) typically demonstrate defective mirror self-recognition and, thus, empathy (Gallup & Platek, 2002).

Infants are often observed dropping their toys, throwing their bottles, hitting mom and dad—all performed to decipher their personal role in the cause-and-effect relationship that occurs between an action and its outcome and how he or she relates to the object. The child gains insight into how his or her self-awareness through understanding one's own experiences and witnessing how his or her behavior alters the situation or an object within varying contexts. This relates to understanding emotions as well, as the experiences afforded and reflection upon the emotions guide one's understanding of others' emotions. Therefore, representations of reality form as he or she distinguishes the separateness of its components from his or her being, gains a level of self-awareness, and builds upon the knowledge acquired to move to higher cognitive levels and achieve more complex patterns of understanding (Urberg & Docherty, 1976).

Once basic cognitive capacities are developed, the child can reflect upon his or her past acquired knowledge to guide his or her present and future behaviors, as he or she is able to organize gained knowledge into intricate structures. The knowledge is assimilated into various situations, so that all of his or her early actions are not solely based in trial-and-error, but the use prediction to help guide behavior (e.g. if a cup is pushed over, then contents will spill out; see Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Through reflections, the child internally evaluates and enriches his or her understanding of actions and consequences. Reflecting upon personal actions, as well as viewed responses either from the object or adult inductions, allows for a greater understanding of rules, the difference between 'right' and 'wrong', and acts as a basis for the ability to adapt these basic principles to interactions with people as well (e.g. if I hit my friend, then she will cry). Therefore, the ability to also infer and predict the emotional state of another is developed.

Furthermore, Johnson (1982) suggests that "the emergence of prosocial and altruistic behaviors in children is related to the age at which they show self-recognition (Gallup & Platek, 2002). Therefore, it may be suggested that the ability to first understand the state of oneself and then the state of other's acts as a foundation for the ability to identify problems, to recognize when an individual is in need, and thus respond to him or her with concern.

Empathy-Related Responding

Concurrent research to the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy includes the observer's response to the plight of the observed subject. In such a case, researchers focus not only on the accurate understanding of and emotional reaction to the state or condition of the subject, but also on the outward expression of such toward the subject (Lamm, Batson & Decety, 2007). Communication directed toward the subject that is verbal (e.g. soothing speech) and/or physical (e.g. prosocial behaviors, concerned facial expressions), which
demonstrates an understanding, a social-emotional bond, and feelings of concern or compassion (Eisenberg, 2005; Hoffman, 1984; Barrett-Lennard, 1981; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Some researchers (e.g. Batson, 1991) consider this external responding a necessary component of their definition of empathy, while others refer to it as a behavior that does require empathy but is a separate entity and thus not an assured course of action. Regardless, because these behaviors have been proven to at least stem from the identification and sharing of another's affective state, it is important to explore and understand how these behaviors are achieved and thus support the advantageous nature of possessing empathy.

As part of a successful empathic response, a level of emotional and cognitive self-preservation is needed to ensure appropriate directionality of the elicited affect. The preservation process includes the observer's maintenance of the vicarious emotional reaction to the subject's affective state, commonly referred to as emotional regulation (Lamm, Batson, & Decety, 2007; Eisenberg, 2002), as well as cognitive separateness from the subject's perspective, known as self-other differentiation (Lamm, Batson & Decety, 2007). Due to the self-agency and regulatory abilities of the observer while witnessing the distress of the subject, the observer experiences feelings of "empathic concern and altruistic motivation, or...personal distress and egoistic motivation" (Lamm, Batson & Decety, 2007, p. 42).

**Self-Other Differentiation and Emotional Regulation**

Carl Rogers (1961) highlights the importance of separation, as he refers to the empathic process as the ability to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition. Thus, it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if I were hurt or pleased and so forth. If this 'as if' quality is lost, then the state is one of identification (p. 62, cited in Mcleod, 2004, p. 53).

Such awareness and management of separation keeps the observer emotionally and cognitively composed, allowing the observer to focus on the subject's emotions rather than on his or her own. Furthermore, the ability to distinguish oneself from another in perspective and emotion allows the individual to control his or her emotional reaction to the observed situation. If the observer does not claim these crucial states of separateness, he or she will experience negative emotions that cause empathic overarousal (Hoffinan, 2000), frequently referred to as personal distress (Lamm, Batson, & Decety 2007; Batson, 1991).

In a study by Chandler, Greenspan, and Barenboim (1974) that explores egocentricity and deficient theory of mind in institutionalized, emotionally disturbed children, it was observed that this population lacked the ability to differentiate their personal points of view from others and maintain their separateness in roles during testing. Furthermore, the study supports these deficiencies as the source of their highly antisocial personalities and problems with adjusting from one situation to the next. Therefore, the children's inability to maintain a level of cognitive self-awareness allows for insensitivity toward others (both in action and recognition of negative situations) and a lack of mental control over the being they portray in any given situation.

The deficiency in cognitive firmness appears to offer ground for excessive vacillation and faulty functionality during the input and output of information. With little solidity, one's personal perspective can appear indistinct and thus may adapt another's point of view to oneself inappropriately. The fluidity also allows the individual to apply given knowledge erroneously to another, as he or she cannot grasp the
divergent perspectives and cognitive boundaries between oneself and the other. Therefore, while it is a positive attribute to wander in and out of the perspectives of others, to comprehend the effects of situations on another's emotions, it is unquestionably dangerous to one's cognitive, social, and emotional health to lose oneself in that exploration, for it to become more than just an exploration of another but a feeling of self (Rogers, 1975).

Empathic Concern and Personal Distress

When in contact with a person in need, self-other differentiation and emotional regulation work together to dictate the type of response an individual will experience that is based in either other-oriented or egocentric motivations. The observer will thus experience empathic concern or personal distress.

An observer's emotional response of empathic concern toward the subject in need refers to "feelings of sympathy, compassion, tenderness, and...distress or sadness for the person" (Batson & Eklund, 2007 p. 65). When empathic concern is felt, the individual is compelled to assist the subject, to console, to express warmth and understanding. However, to reach this state, Batson and Eklund (2007) convey that the observer must be able to witness the subject's state of need while also being able to take the subject's perspective. Therefore, the amount of empathic concern experienced, as discovered by Stotland (1969), is dependent upon the amount of perspective-taking (i.e. theory of mind) employed (Batson & Eklund, 2007). Therefore, this corroborates the earlier claim that cognitive empathy is the precondition for affective empathy. It would be difficult to actively assist or show concern for a person in need if one cannot observe or understand that person's state or condition and how the subject can be aided. The physical isolation between two beings can stand in the way of relating. But by inferring on a psychological level and using abstract vehicles to merge the gap between perceptions, individuals can achieve emotional reactions that are strikingly akin and demonstrate feelings of concern.

However, most researchers (see Lamm, Batson, Decety, 2007; Eisenberg, 2002) believe that the observer's inability to distinguish himself or herself from the person in need causes the observer to feel as if he or she is personally experiencing the distress. The emotions experienced cause overwhelming discomfort, producing high levels of what is referred to as personal distress, which will typically cause an aversive emotional reaction to the condition or state of the subject. Therefore, a self-focused response will occur to alleviate the discomfort and anxiety, rather than feeling concern or compassion (Eisenberg, 2002). Such personal distress results in the attempt to avoid providing assistance or having contact with the person in need. If unable to do so in the present circumstance, the distressed observer may take preventative measure to avoid that subject or similar situations in the future. Therefore, the observer who can maintain separateness and control of his or her emotional reaction can experience empathic concern for the person in need, and subsequently behave in a prosocial manner (Batson & Eklund, 2007, Eisenberg, 2002).

While some declare that empathic concern is a foundational element of empathy (Davis, 1983), others argue that feelings of concern are not necessarily elicited even if an empathic response is achieved. Hoffman (2000) proposes that an individual can experience an appropriate emotional response to the condition or state of another, but it does not ensure that feelings of concern or sympathy will arise. Hence, an empathic response does not ensure the presence of helping behavior. Therefore, the former perspective asserts that exhibiting prosocial behavior is more complicated than an automatic reaction even when circumstances are favorable.

Influential Factors on Empathy

Although empathy requires the achievement of specific precursors, the capacity to experience similar emotions to others, and the maintenance of cognition
and affect, many studies assert that this does not necessitate one's expression of empathy (e.g. empathic concern). An individual's personal disposition, affected by internal and external influences, prompts the individual to either embrace or inhibit his or her capacity for empathy. Therefore, as this thesis remains on a track toward the cultivation of empathy to combat social ills, it is most appropriate to identify and understand the factors that would elicit empathy and its related positive responses in an individual. Such an understanding could elucidate the necessary, fundamental elements for an empathy-fostering program to approach societal members in the most beneficial way. Particularly, aspects of parenting practices and the school environment, as well as self-motivation (Harwood & Farrar, 2006) will receive attention to determine how these factors influence one's expression of empathy.

**Parents' Influence on Empathy**

Due to the early emergence of empathy, around the age of two, parenting is believed to be a strong influence on an individual's level of empathic concern (Koestner, Franz, Weinberger, 1990). The child-rearing practices employed affect the child's understanding of the self and others through the exploration of behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Furthermore, through the "encoding of past experiences with caregivers, and ... emotional appraisals of those relationships" (Collins, 1996; in Bell & Richards, 2000, p. 73), a mental construct is formed of what an attachment is to him or her and thus affects how the child will form and function within other relationships (Burack, Flanagan, Peled, Sutton, Zygmuntowicz, & Manly, 2006; Joireman, Needham & Cummings, 2001). Parents who are emotionally sensitive and responsive (Bell & Richard, 2000) are able to foster a secure attachment with their child and influence the child's social sensitivity and empathic awareness. Hence, empathy is also a "significant variable in effective parenting" (Farrow & Woodruff, 2007 p. 43). Specifically, empathic parents take the child's perspective to understand his or her physical and emotional needs (Smith, 2006), and their child to explore his or her own position in the world, necessary for the child to gain greater self-awareness and form a level of independence from his or her parents. By remaining conscious of the child's perspective, rather than being highly directive or forceful, the parents are indirectly demonstrating the importance of respecting other's thoughts and feelings. Most specific to the cultivation of a secure attachment between parent and child, it is imperative that trust is fostered and availability is demonstrated to the child (de Minzi, 2006; Bell & Richard, 2000). Therefore, the parental display of emotional warmth, effective communication, and the appropriate amount and reliable nature of directivity can be considered the influential factors on a child's early presence of empathy.

**Emotional warmth and communication**

Coleman (1992) credits closeness in the family environment as the basis for empathy. Feelings of trust and openness by both parties foster a positive parent-child relationship and useful social outcomes in the child. Therefore, an individual who experiences a secure attachment within the home will likely have well-rounded social, emotional experiences. On the contrary, a child with an insecure attachment demonstrates more egocentricity and inhibited perspective-taking skills, self-worth, and emotional language skills (Burack et al. 2006).

As reviewed by Ruffman, Perner and Parkin (1999), many studies have shown that the discussion of emotions by parents highly correlates with a child's understanding of emotions. As the parent reflects on emotions, the child can witness the effectiveness in this exploration and how to engage in it. Such a thoughtful family environment raises the child's feelings of safety and trust, which encourages the discussion and exploration of his or her own emotions as well. Subsequently, as Park (1994) explains, parents also teach the child "about the rules and regulations that govern the expression of emotion and differences..."
among emotions; and...regulation of the provision of opportunities to learn about emotions” (Eisenberg, Fabes & Murphy, 1996, p. 2227). Therefore, through the parents’ engagement in guided discussions and explorations of various types of emotions with the child, he or she gains greater emotional self-awareness and greater control over emotional regulation (Kerns, Abraham, Schlegelmilch, & Morgan, 2007). Both skills are imperative for experiencing an appropriate empathic response, as previously discussed. When personal emotions are understood and emotional exploration is encouraged, the child is more likely to delve into the emotional state of others. However, when parents demonstrate a lack of communication during discipline, a cold disposition, and neglect of utilizing opportunities that allow for emotional exploration, the child is left without the proper emotional self-awareness to understand and be sensitive to the state or condition of others, along with difficulties in emotional regulation.

When parents demonstrate emotional warmth, the child develops an “internal working models of the self (as worthy of love, or not) and others (as trustworthy or not)” (Joireman et. al, 2001, p. 63; see also Kerns et. al. 2007). The child is able to internalize the experience of affirmative emotions through the empathic parent-child interactions, and thus will likely recognize its enhancement of self-worth (Benard, 2004), healthy functioning (Joireman et. al., 2001), and subsequently desire to share these positive sentiments and experiences with others as well. On the other hand, Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, Usher, and Bridges (2000) discovered in a follow-up study that children with mothers who consistently conveyed or experienced negative affect with them were found to later display low measures of empathy and concern for others. Therefore, parents who are not responsive and are emotionally insensitive respond to their child with less affective response patterns, which results in the child’s decreased ability to be affectively responsive during interactions with others.

Experiencing negative affective responses can result in frustration and anger in the child, while producing consequences of emotional distance and physical acting-out (Knafo, 2003; Bornstein, 1992). Thus, this may imply dysfunction in understanding or being sensitive to a person in need or in causing another distress. Therefore children who do not experience emotionally warm environments are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior, due to the minimized likelihood of considering others’ emotional states or conditions (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006), essentially mirroring the emotionally neglectful experiences they have had in the home.

**Direction and control**

From the beginning, parents guide and direct their child, affording the opportunity to understand the self in relation to the world. It would be considered the healthiest circumstance when a child is given structure, but are able to explore within the boundaries set by the parents; to master that circle through awareness and experience, then have the boundaries of the circle be appropriately expanded by the parents’ appraisal. This allows for the child to remain within structured boundaries, but to also experience autonomy and reflection within the permitted area. Over time, the child learns what these boundaries mean, how they relate to the expectations parents hold. As a result, the child will explore in an autonomous manner beyond the feasible boundaries, and learn on his or her own.

This is similar to disciplinary tactics employed, where a child is approached with flexibility and the parent employs cognitive empathy (Smith, 2006) as they are mindful of the thoughts and feelings the child may have been experiencing during his or her actions, as well as during the utilization of a disciplinary measure. Therefore, empathic parents recognize the importance of firm, yet respectful, disciplinary tactics that are mindful of the child’s perspective as well as his or her level of understanding. The use of effective communication to discuss why the child’s behavior
was inappropriate, engagement of the child in correcting the “wrongs” (i.e. making amends with a peer he or she hit, or cleaning up a deliberately-broken vase), and utilization of time-outs have been found to allow for reflection and internalization of consequences. Therefore, empathic parenting entails walking the child through emotions, behaviors, and consequences. As a result, the child will be apt to employ reasoning and act appropriately in situations without the parents’ presence at a later time. The appropriate thoughts and behaviors will be attributed to the self, due to the absence of the external authority with whom to ascribe them, and these values are then integrated into his or her character (Hoffman, 1977). When non-empathic parenting is employed, the child may experience high directivity with little ability to self-explore, or minimal limits are set with little explanation given of proper behavior or understanding of consequences. In either case, the parents neglect to consider what the child needs; they do not place themselves in his or her shoes to consider how the child will interpret the interactions or situations so as to develop in a healthy manner. In particular, overly controlling or forceful methods of direction arouse a high level of affect in the individual. Such an approach may “prevent effective processing of the inductive content, thus perpetuating the felt opposition between desires and demands” (Hoffman, 1977, p. 301). While the child may outwardly behave in either situation when the parents are present, Hoffman (1977) suggests that, at some point, the child will face situations where he or she is expected to recall the lessons presented in previous situations without their guidance. Therefore, rather than internalizing lessons or discipline, the individual focuses on relieving the affective overarousal (Hoffman, 1977). Greater self-focus is experienced to relieve their feelings of anxiety from the overarousal, making it difficult to engage in other-oriented focus, as previously discussed in the section that addresses personal distress and emotional regulation. Similarly, when a child is given little direction and lax control is present, the child has difficulties understanding the situations at hand himself or herself and is not afforded the opportunity to develop proper decision-making skills. Therefore, the proper reflection upon behaviors and emotions, the establishment of autonomous control, or the formation of a firm self-identity are not achieved in either situation, which is inhibitory to the cultivation of empathy (Zhou et. al., 2004; Bornstein, 1992). Furthermore, these children would be most susceptible to being “influenced by the opinions of others, to yield to others in interpersonal transactions, and to comply with others” (Bornstein, 1992, p. 10) without taking into account his or her personal feelings. Thus, a firm grasp on cognitive and emotional awareness is neglected and the cultivation of empathy is inhibited.

The Academic Environment’s Influence on Empathy

Studies that focus on the school environment, a particularly influential social institution, demonstrate great similarities to the effects of parenting styles on a child’s empathy. Lewis (1995) asserts that “[i]ntentionally or not, school shapes children ethically, socially, and intellectually. Are all three considered in designing every facet of school life?” (Lewis, 1995, p. 209). Therefore, in a school environment where the child’s acquisition of social development (e.g. “sympathy, empathy, and concern for others”; see Lewis, 1995, p. 32) is most important, positive social excellence, and surprisingly greater academic achievement as well, is seen. In these settings, students engage in a greater amount of self-directed, group-based work and more social exchanges with peers that are monitored by the teacher (Lewis, 1995). Such an approach allows for social learning to be properly guided by a knowledgeable adult and thus enhanced. Particularly, this demonstrates that an individual’s cognitive, emotional, and social development may be a life-long
process rather than solely based on parent-child interactions, which can be a positive notion when considering the potential effectiveness of a program aimed at enhancing the socially-imperative skill of empathy.

In a highly structured, directive learning environment, the child is expected to sit still for long periods of time, not speak unless spoken to by the teacher, and avoid peer interaction during classroom-time – making the child susceptible to boredom. Essentially, this is highly restrictive on a child’s autonomy and can have adverse effects on learning. In highly-structured, but less directive, learning environments where scholastic independence is supported and peer interactions are encouraged, the child is best prepared for positive empathy development. Talking, laughing, and cooperating with peers during the learning process can have positive consequences; learning becomes an enjoyable experience and healthy interpersonal relationships are fostered. Therefore, information can be absorbed at greater rate, as distractions that break focus or rhythm are more likely evaded.

In a classroom focused on social competence, these children engage in tasks meant to enhance their capacity for empathy through other-oriented awareness. They participate in guided peer-activities where they are continuously expected to consider the feelings and perspectives of others. For example, Lewis’ (1995) review of Japanese classrooms that foster social competence use a monitor system, which requires a child to act as a leader within the classroom on a rotating-basis. The leader brings order to the classroom by “decid[ing] when the class [is] quiet enough to eat... evaluat[ing] other students’ behavior and [leading] the class in solving disputes or problems” (p. 106), among many other introspective and directive duties. The leader has been in the follower’s position before, understands how he or she has preferred to be treated, and can accordingly carry out his or her duties in a firm, yet sensitive, manner. The followers also acquire a greater sense of self-awareness and self-control as they witness how their actions provoke specific positive and negative reactions in the leader, as well as understanding that “[t]he child standing at the front of the class struggling to quiet classmates could be you – and would be in a matter of days” (p. 107). The children relate to one another on a deeper level through these challenging experiences, they understand each other’s struggles and triumphs, and are active, influential agents in their peers’ conditions as well. Therefore, this type of academic setting not only promotes academic exploration, but emotional and perceptual exploration of the self and others, which is useful for positive empathic development.

Surprisingly, while much less emphasis is placed on academic classrooms where social competence is the main objective, these students show greater academic success in several areas (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004; Lewis, 1995). A school setting that focuses on social competence entices “greater ultimate academic achievement than does direct instruction” (p. 33), as the passion for intellectual and social learning remains within the students’ hands. These students may “pursue activities they find meaningful – activities of their own or shared invention, pursued in an environment rich in friendship and built up through the thoughtful comments of other children and adults” (p. 34). They learn to be socially and academically self-aware, to reflect more on other’s emotions and school materials, and to be thoughtful in social and academic action. Whereas, highly directive learning environments force children to learn facts and information, host a disengaged relationship with teachers, and only allow children to engage in time-restricted, unguided peer interactions, where a rift begins to develop between work and play, between learning and “fun”.

When afforded emotional exploration and room for autonomy with guidance, one is allowed the opportunity to understand thoughts, emotions, and
behaviors to a greater extent and align one’s personal desires with positive social expectations. In this way, both parents and social institutions “enhance the development of social competence, which is essential for self-control and cognitive development” (de Minzi, 2006, p. 190). Thus, the warm, structured environment provided and the sensitivity to a child’s perspective and emotions foster positive empathic development. Therefore, not only is it important to be taught empathy directly as the exploration of one’s own and other’s thoughts and feelings occur, but also for one to operate in a free-flowing, enriching environment conducive for such functioning.

Self-Motivation

As discussed, the amount of empathy experienced between individuals can vary due to their capacity for it, whether they can utilize the appropriate cognitive precursors and affective processes. Moreover, individuals who have the capacity to display empathy also dictate whether they embrace or inhibit it. In the latter case, some mindfully neglect their use of empathy as it does not seem beneficial toward achieving personal ambitions. Unfortunately, the actual benefits of possessing empathy are so often overlooked. Hoffman (2000) asserts that empathy is “the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible” (p. 3). More specifically, research has found that empathy motivates justice and sympathy (Kristjansson, 2004), decentered thinking that improves interpersonal relationships (Urberg & Docherty, 1976), and the proclivity toward prosocial behavior and conflict resolution (de Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2007; Hoffman, 2000; Batson, 1991). Therefore, it is highly beneficial for individuals to employ self-motivation and maintain an awareness of the useful nature of empathy for the enrichment of their social lives.

The ability to experience an affective response to another’s situation allows for the individual to obtain a level of emotional intimacy with others and participate appropriately in social encounters. To do so, it is essential that the individual have an understanding of what “appropriate” entails. As the well-known moral saying goes, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. This clearly articulates the importance of imagining oneself in another’s position as if it were oneself, to reflect upon one’s own expected treatment, and then treat that individual in a likewise fashion. Therefore, it can be said that the Golden Rule is empathy set in motion. It is a conscious process that requires that an individual mindfully apply his or her acquired knowledge of one’s own thoughts and emotions to others.

In the societal sphere it would be rare to find a well-functioning group or culture that supports the presence of deceit, injustice, or aggression within its assembly. The compelling nature of these behaviors is that they usually stem from a very specific focal point and are used to gain a very specific goal: the self and the attempt to benefit on the self. In practicing psychotherapist Dr. LaBier’s (2007) experiences, he refers to these empathy-neglecting individuals as possessors of Empathy Deficit Disorders (EDD). Although this terminology is not listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the adverse effects on our society and on the mental health of individuals can readily be seen (LaBier, 2007). In his article from the Washington Post, Dr. LaBier (2007) declares that people who suffer from EDD are unable to step outside themselves and tune in to what other people experience. That makes it a source of personal conflicts, of communication failure in intimate relationships, and of the adversarial attitudes — even hatred — among groups of people who differ in their beliefs, traditions or ways of life (p. HE05).

Thoughtful reflection on societal expectations reveals that the United States of America, most specifically, has been founded on the principles of social harmony and equality; as Thomas Jefferson’s well-known phrase in the Declaration of Independence outlines: We hold these truths to be
self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (US Const., art. 1 sec. 2). This is to say that we have the right to live as we so choose, but to also be mindful of one another’s rights, to not harm or stand in the way of others as they attain their own happiness within the limits of the law. Therefore, to utilize empathy — to take into account other’s perspectives and feelings while also experiencing similar emotions to that influences our social behavior — we can remain mindful of how we interact with one another. Paradoxically to America’s foundation, our modern time hosts rampant self-focused behavior and an ambitious strive toward selfish goals. Specifically, individuals with EDD exhibit emotional isolation, as they are more focused on attaining material possessions, higher social statuses, and are involved in a variety of other egocentric behaviors (LaBier, 2007). Essentially, through what has become a warped “American Dream”, financial and material prosperity is promoted, but the adverse effects are emotional insensitivity toward and negative or trite social interactions with family, friends, coworkers, and other fellow citizens.

Despite the difficulty for most in our society to recognize the immediate and long-term harm of self-interested behavior on the micro-level, as it would often simply be regarded as an individual’s motivated and perseverant disposition toward achieving a goal, such behavior is also quite detrimental and more observable on the macro-level. Dr. LaBier (2007) asserts that EDD is particularly dangerous in today’s increasingly interconnected, global world. It plays out in ways both small and large: In troubled intimate relationships, when partners become locked into adversarial positions; and in warfare between groups with different beliefs, such as Palestinians and Israelis locked in a death grip (p. HE05) In both situations, there is the same lack of understanding, the absence of perceiving the emotions, hopes, and struggles of the counterpart; which often results in unnecessary conflict and egotistical obstinacy. We so often cannot see past ourselves in such a way that we are unable to recognize the commonalities we share across genders, races, and a vast array of other factors.

Instead, we hastily comply with dogmatic distinctions that are based on superficial differences, as we assume that there is a great barrier between the “us” and “them”, with no similarities across these seemingly impenetrable categories. Clark (1980) declares that the inability of human beings with power to understand the legitimate needs and aspirations of other human beings—the inability of human beings to understand that their fellow human beings share their anxieties, their frailties, their posturing, their desire to make the most out of the limited interval of conscious and evaluative life—this lack of simple expanded empathy, in the eyes of this observer, is the basis of social tensions, conflicts, violence, terrorism, and war” (p. 190, emphasis added). Therefore, approaching societal members with the importance of empathy, expressing the positive consequences and fostering understanding between the observer and the subject, can be entice self-motivation, which is particularly important for the expression of empathic concern. Thus, individuals have the capability to alter their current states of thinking and lack of empathic application, and can retrain the brain toward being empathic individuals.

Retraining the brain toward empathy

While both nature (e.g. genetics, temperament) and nurture (e.g. environmental and social influences) have been proven to play crucial roles in shaping who we are, studies on the brain may indicate the level of personal regulation we have over ourselves even beyond personally uncontrollable influences such as parenting. In Dr. LaBier’s (2007) article, he suggests that individuals have the ability to control the structure of their brain, by retraining your brain to take advantage of what is known as neuroplasticity....research shows that as you refocus
your thoughts, feelings and behavior in the direction you desire, the brain regions associated with them are reinforced. What's more, changing your brain activity reinforces the changes you're making in your thinking. The result is a self-reinforcing loop between your conscious attitudes, your behavior and your brain activity” (p. HE05).

Furthermore, research on the mirror neurons supports these claims, as intentional focus on recognizing emotions when witnessing facial cues has been shown to increase the brain activity in the regions associated with one's own emotional expression (Iacoboni, 2007). These findings indicate that we have the neurological capacity to alter our patterns of thoughts and actions once viewed as automatic and unalterable. Therefore, perhaps these neurological findings could suggest that dispositional and environmental factors are not the end-all and be-all of determining who we are; that we are not doomed to be the byproduct of influences beyond our control or as helpless as to which we may find comfort in resigning. Regardless of the factors that shape us from our earliest awareness, we can self-remember, we can direct our thoughts to the person we want to become. Therefore, as a more solid self is formed, we can press on our surroundings, rather than only allowing them to press on us, and raise our own levels of understanding. Dr. LaBier highlights the positive outcomes that result from such redirected focus, as you can deepen your understanding and acceptance of how and why people do what they do and you can build respect for others. This doesn't mean that you are whitewashing the differences you have with other people or letting them walk over you. Rather, empathy gives you a stronger, wiser base for resolving conflicts and trumps self-centered, knee-jerk reactions to surface differences (p. HE05).

Essentially, it appears that we can teach ourselves to be more caring, empathic beings and can experience enhanced interpersonal relationships, greater feelings of self-worth, and a variety of other heightened socio-emotional consequences.

Introducing an Empathy-Fostering Program

By opening our channels, we experience the world with greater clarity, become more in tune with ourselves and our surroundings, soaking everything in through all of our senses and organizing the information within our minds. In Harwood and Farrar’s (2006) article on empathy, they assert that “having a more advanced understanding of the mind can lead to more sophisticated social and emotional understanding across a range of situations” (p. 401). The more we begin to understand ourselves, the more we begin to understand others. Upon understanding others, life begins to make more sense. Therefore, empathy may be a platform for elevated levels of thinking through the achievement of greater personal harmony and, subsequently, social harmony. It will be proposed that the means by which such heightened awareness, and thus empathy, can be achieved is through theatrical and reflective methods. Self-exploration exercises, role-playing techniques, and content-reflection will have a number of positive results.

Such methods enhance both cognitive and affective capacities and possess a tighter grasp on utilizing these capacities. Hence, they will also have the greater ability to identify problems in life and the aptitude to create solutions. Particularly relevant to social situations, individuals will gain a greater understanding of divergent thoughts from their own and more intimately comprehend emotions, thus enabling them to enhance relations with others. Furthermore, the guidance from the program facilitator will be aimed at ensuring self-other differentiation and emotional regulation as well. The atmosphere provided by the program will host emotional warmth to enhance the amount and content of communication among participating peers.

Ideally, such a program would target very young children so as to introduce such techniques around the time that empathy would naturally emerge. Nonetheless, because of positive evidence for the
potentiality of retraining the brain, all ages could benefit from such a program. However, the rest of the thesis will refer to the program as if it were being used with early elementary-school-age children. Furthermore, because these ideas are still in an early stage, without official plans having been drawn up or studies conducted to provide evidence for the effectiveness of such methods, the remainder of the thesis will focus on the goals of the program and how rudimentary, theoretical techniques may be beneficial, with the aforementioned literature throughout this thesis to support such claims.

*The Benefits of Theatre*

While there is limited information on intervention and prevention programs that address empathy, research supports the use of role-playing as a way to enhance its presence (Blank & Jensen, 2005; Salas, 2005; Guzzetta, 1975; Metcalf, 1931). The use of theatre or drama can be the channel for understanding the self, others, and situations to a deeper extent than is so often encountered or allowed in daily life. The individual can comparatively assert his or her own state of being by stepping away from it, seeing the world through another person's eyes by employing perspective-taking and feeling his or her joys and sorrows, as well as dissecting situations to better understand the moral implications or consequences— all without having to realistically encounter such experiences oneself. As Burton (1995) states, “If one self-remembers, one can observe errors in others and avoid making them oneself, just as one can know about a cold without having one” (p. 32). Effectively, the methods applied within the empathy program would promote self-remembering and consequently enhance personal and social functioning.

*Heightened Awareness of the Self*

The core of heightened awareness, which is at the base of empathy, consists of an awareness of the self that can then be applied to others. When enhanced and when one consciously seeks to remain in a heightened state of self-awareness, great advancements can be found. Robert Earl Burton (1995), author and founder of a school for spiritual development, contends that this heightened awareness of the self, or what he refers to as “self remembering”, entails the attempt within a specific moment to be more conscious, ...more present. It is a form of active meditation that may take place in any moment and in any situation, in which [one] works to be aware both of himself and of his environment simultaneously. ... Repeated efforts to self-remember lead to higher states of consciousness, and a quite new understanding of humanity's place in the universe (p. x).

Therefore, self-awareness is not a preoccupation with oneself, but being conscious of oneself and alert to the world through an understanding of oneself; not to focus on the self, but to focus through the self. It refers to the process by which definitional knowledge about oneself is attained (i.e. reflecting upon the self; see Mendaglio, 1995). Self-awareness allows one to reflect upon who one is, how one feels, what one thinks, and how one behaves both independently and in comparison to others. Therefore, while it involves a level of personal acceptance of oneself, it also requires one to be honest with oneself, to not blind oneself to the negative aspects of who one is, but to actively use the information to make self-improvements when necessary (Mendaglio, 1995). Therefore, one may not like what is discovered, but can utilize the knowledge in a way to avoid negative mental-states, such as egocentricity, while actively seeking a state of selflessness.

In the context of an empathy-fostering program, pantomiming and self-awareness exercises can be utilized as a way to strengthen one's understanding of the self. Through the use of thought and movement, pantomiming heightens one's awareness of what is going on both inside and outside of oneself during the exercises. It causes the individual
to become conscious of how the movements one chooses to conduct create a scenario, an interaction between the inner and outer world. Therefore, it encourages active reflection upon one's thoughts, feelings, and actions during a task. Self-awareness exercises can be an extension of the pantomimic or exercises performed in isolation in which a real object is used and the child is asked to consider how the senses are used during the interaction. Through the use of both pantomimic and self-awareness exercises, it is as if one is encouraged to control a small, curious observer living within one's own mind—similar to a bright-eyed, curious child who constantly asks the Five Ws and one H (who, what, when, where, why and how). That tiny-self focuses not through the eyes on the world beyond, as one might assume, but focuses on the mind, questioning thoughts and information that enters and what will be output by one's larger self. Hence, as stated by Burton (1995), "You are what observes, not what you observe" (p. 23). For the young participant, the pantomimic and self-awareness exercises can include something simple like selling ice cream or jumping rope.

The child pretending to sell ice cream would be seen pushing an imaginary ice cream cart down the imaginary sidewalk, ringing an imaginary bell. It is important to work on the participant's form, as the goal is to make the imaginary look real. Other actors could also be involved in these exercises, such as pretending to buy and consume the ice cream. Consuming a real ice cream cone, whether assigned as homework or supplied during the program, could aid in accomplishing the task. The participants must concentrate on holding the cone, feeling the weight of the ice cream on the cone, the coldness as it approaches the face, the sweet taste and cold sensation as it first touches the tongue and is then swallowed—concentrating on all of the senses involved. As one begins to draw oneself deeper into the self, one becomes more conscious of one's thoughts and feelings.

The use of the jump rope scenario as a self-awareness exercise helps one become more aware of their physical proximity and movement. When the participant uses a real jump rope, they are to feel the weight of the rope, the movement of the hands, wrist, elbow, arms, and how the body is affected by the jumping motion, the pull of the rope, the position of the feet as well as the weight on the feet, how the energy is distributed throughout the body. Through these exercises, that tiny-self keeps track of the questions and answers acquired to reach a better understanding of oneself that leads to constancy in one's behavior, a firm grasp on one's identity, and consistent responsiveness to the world in a mindful manner. Therefore, to be aware, and in control, of one's own thoughts and emotions invites the individual to be conscious on a higher level through self-awareness, to maintain differentiation of oneself from others, and to appropriately respond to the needs of others. **Heightened Awareness of Others**

The mindfulness of one's existence and consciousness of one's emotions motivates attentiveness to the presence and state of others as well. Burton (1995) describes the measurement of success as not only being how much one is conscious of oneself, but also outwardly considerate of others. To support and better illustrate his point, Burton (1995) states,

> Take this idea simply, as all profound ideas are simple. If two people are passing through a door, and you choose to be the second to pass through it, you have been externally considerate....Our lives are composed of moment-to-moment struggles to be present and we grow in proportion to our ability to give, which is why conscious beings are characterized by compassionate actions that elevate humanity (p. 7). Therefore, to be continuously present, to sustain a level of constant self-awareness, promotes a clearer mind for thinking and behaving prosocially toward others. Unfortunately, our daily lives are often clouded by needless anxieties and conflicts that not only keep
us from achieving a state of peace within ourselves but in reaching harmony and unity with others.

In an article, Hoffman (1977) raises an issue with common methods used to test children’s affective role-taking abilities. During a customary study, the subject is told an uncomplicated story where a particular emotion is expressed. Additionally, the subject views a picture or series of slides illustrating the events of the story. The child is then asked to infer how the character from the story is feeling. It is shown that simple and familiar scenarios would elicit the highest scores. Therefore, Hoffman (1977) proposes and cautions that with the use of these methods, affective role-taking ability is “confounded with actual similarity, and young children can perform well by simply attributing their own past or probable response to the story character” (p.297). Moreover, Hoffman (1977) purports the confounding variable may “account for the frequent finding that dissimilarity (as to sex, age, race) or use of unfamiliar situations results in decreased accuracy scores especially in younger children”. However, when taking this variable to a new, positive level, it may support the beneficial effects of guiding a child through experiences they might not otherwise encounter, to actively acquaint them with the experiences of others to make them more aware of others. Therefore, the use of role-playing allows the child to experience some level of bodily experience that may be similar to that experienced by another, but more importantly they can experience something very similar to another on an emotional level. The individual can even take these stored bits of emotions and information from role-playing to figure out new scenarios, as gained affective knowledge is assimilated.

As part of the role-taking exercises, it may be most beneficial to involve moral and/or emotion-laden content. To illustrate, a scene may be created based on Mark Twain’s (1994) novel, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. It would touch on the emotions and circumstances involved in Huck Finn’s encounter with his estranged, abusive, alcoholic father who kidnaps him from Huck’s caretaker, the widow. Huck faces a dilemma in which he seeks the love and affection of his father, but experiences regular beatings and is locked in a cabin for days at a time. To participate in such a scenario that is unfortunately not uncommon, the child-actor not only explores his or her feelings during the scene, but is also able to experience greater empathy in a very intimate sense for the many children who do come from this type of home. only does the child-actor benefit from this process, but the child-audience within the small group is afforded the opportunity to gain insight into the self and others through witnessing the event, and can subsequently experience an affective reaction to the scenario as well. Therefore, neural imitation (Iacoboni, 2007) is afforded as participants are exposed to various scenarios and emotions, where their level of conscious awareness is raised and brain activity demonstrates the breaching of observation to actual feelings being evoked.

The Atmosphere of the Empathy-Fostering Program

The program would actively ensure that the participants are offered guidance and direction, but without restriction on their autonomy. Therefore, each participant is afforded the opportunity to form a better relationship with and understanding of oneself. This is achieved through an atmosphere that maintains personal freedom in the guided-setting and reduces feelings of anxiety and defensiveness that obstruct the self-awareness process. Similar to the concept introduced in the earlier section that discusses parental control and the school environment, the atmosphere an individual is exposed to is a strong influence on the flow and quality of both input and output information. If the atmosphere provides a sense of warmth and security, the individual can feel comfortable sharing in emotional communication, can appropriately integrate learned information into one’s working knowledge,
and maintain self-other differentiation and emotional regulation.

Participation in the various techniques, guidance by program facilitators, and afforded peer interactions can assist the participant in learning how to achieve a heightened state of consciousness, where, as Burton (1995) believes, the individual can avoid "being immersed in his internal world, or lost in his reactions to the many stimuli around him" (Burton, 1995, p. x). The stimuli Burton (1995) refers to is similar to the personal distress experienced when in contact with a person in need, which inhibits one from aiding the individual, and instead focus on relieving one's own distress. Moreover, it also includes the reverse as well, which relates to Burton's second principal of "transformation of suffering". That is to say, he stresses the importance of accurately dealing with "each negative or painful experience or emotion" (p. x) when one is the victim, as a way to enhance the self rather than inhibit it.

Working with victims

In returning to Hoffman's (1977) concerns, his interpretation of the confounding variable of personal experience affecting one's level of empathy may support the possibility that a child who lives a difficult life, full of pain and suffering could have a higher capacity for empathy towards those who also experience adversities. It would be sensible, however, to question whether or not these maltreated individuals would be in an emotionally-stable position to readily participate in empathic concern and prosocial behaviors since their own experiences make them more susceptible to issues with depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders. Therefore, guiding a child who has led a difficult life, with use of the empathy-fostering program could provide the child with greater strength, to protect himself or herself in a healthy way rather than being emotionally torn apart or projecting the pain onto others.

Particularly, studies suggest that when a child experiences an insecure parental-attachment, he or she often focuses on "self-directed regulation strategies, such as... self-soothing methods" (Koulomzin, Beebe, Anderson, Jaffe, Feldstein & Crown, 2002, p. 6), as a way to deal with the overarousal of emotions from the lack of care received by his or her caregivers during distress. Similarly, as discussed in a preceding section, children also experience overarousal with highly-directive and emotionally-aloof parents. The child can become weighed down by the negative experiences, the lack of nurturance and warmth and, consequently, not understand oneself well, but seek to protect oneself through defensive thoughts and behaviors. By not receiving proper guidance in understanding one's own thoughts and behaviors or being sensitive to emotions, it is thus difficult to effectively deal with one's own sorrows or those of others. The insecure individual becomes lost within the distress of surrounding circumstances, both occurring to oneself or in witnessing the distress of another and retreats (Eisenberg, 2002). This self-soothing, once older, could become an attempt to find solace through vices (e.g. alcohol, drugs, eating disorders).

Being too submersed in oneself, especially without the appropriate understanding of the self to make positive changes while in that deep emotional state, one is only making it more difficult to appropriately view the self, which forms a vicious cycle. With the lack of self awareness, one cannot understand others or relate to them well (Burack et al., 2006). This prompts negative experiences during interactions with others (through inconsiderate words, aggressive or thoughtless behavior, etc.) which sustain the rift between others and oneself. Self-worth and self-esteem are harmed and the individual still feels disengaged from others and at a loss with oneself, maintaining hedonism to soothe the emotional ache. But transforming suffering (Burton, 1995) calls for one to use experiences as a tool to better understand oneself, as opposed to letting them distort or inhibit thoughts and emotions that cause one to turn inward to...
feel safe, to place a barrier around oneself. The techniques used within the program and the atmosphere provided will equip these children with the coping skills to face the adversities that can weigh him or her down and press through; not with a vengeance or by ignoring the problems, but to use a clear mind and maintain a strong disposition. Therefore, both performing and witnessing situations an individual is either new to or can already identify with will enhance one’s sense of self, understanding of others, and address issues in oneself and in the interactions had with others.

As previously discussed, retraining the brain is a possibility (Iacoboni, 2007) as the individual actively transforms his or her own suffering or chooses to take the perspective of suffering subject in attempt to understand his or her emotional state. Thus, while one may have been raised under inhibiting circumstances—absent of empathic parenting or schooling or culture—it is not necessarily the case that empathy is unattainable. Particularly with the environment provided by the program, individuals can involve themselves in increasing their awareness of thoughts and emotions. This greater understanding involves one mentally storing past emotions and experiences (both personal and witnessed), causing the mind to expand, becoming more flexible, but also more organized. One can apply the stored, well-organized, and well-understood knowledge to one’s daily life, where positive personal choices and interactions with others result. We can use personal and witnessed negative experiences to help us gain a deeper understanding of suffering, inevitable circumstances (e.g. death or pain) that will always be a part of life (Burton, 1995). For it is the way we perceive such situations and deal with them that determines how they will affect us and how we will approach others. So many dedicate their lives to contemplating the social ills of the world—social scientists, politicians, philosophers and the like—to lighten the load, to find solutions. It is of personal belief that approaching and correcting these problems can be vastly accelerated through raising the self-awareness of the masses, for all rather than just a handful, to approach the world with a mindful-disposition achieved through empathy.

Enhancing communication

After the role-taking scenarios, the children have the chance to verbally reflect on these emotions during the guided reflections. As discussed in an earlier section, discussing emotions is critical for understanding emotions and consequently, for experiencing empathy. Furthermore, Verducci (2000) discusses the importance of reflection and direction, as these provide fertile ground for explicit and trenchant moral discussion. Even the necessity of an actor to play evil characters (and the ease/dis-ease and pleasure/pain with which an actor does so) becomes fodder for discussion. Like literature, drama classes provide a forum to experience and address the complexities and ambiguities of morality” (p. 96). Furthermore, the guided reflections increase the likelihood of abused children discussing their experiences with group peers and the program facilitators, allowing them to receive the necessary help. These individuals will recognize they are not alone emotionally, both from role-playing emotions within the same vein of those experienced by a character in a story and in witnessing the heightened state of understanding in their peers and the facilitators as well. Furthermore, it will allow other children to feel safe in discussing their emotions too as they witness their peers opening up.

To identify with a character in a scene allows the abused children to discuss the emotions they experience within the scene and at home, and become more apt to deal with the adversities in their own lives. It is because of the experiences they have endured that makes them more prepared to possess a greater capacity for empathy. Concurrently, the abused children also act as a model for the other children to better understand the perspective and emotions of someone with true, first-hand experience. Together,
all of the children, no matter where they come from, begin to identify with one another, begin to unite across their differences. As Blank and Jensen (2005) assert,

One of the reasons that the theater is so well suited for this [moral] conversation is that narrative theater has at its heart the process of empathy. Oedipus could trigger response and conversation in Greek society because everyone, in his or her own way, was potentially Oedipus. The very experience of watching a story unfold in the theater triggers identifications; these new identifications crack open our comfortable, sedimented everyday identities and generate reactions and questions — and when a culture grapples with these questions together, it begins to change (p. 19).

Therefore, as individuals are afforded the opportunity for cognitive and emotional exploration in a nurturing environment, they can begin to employ problem-solving skills to enhance their own lives and the lives of others. These individuals can relate to one another at their core, with the similar emotions we all feel rather than focusing on superficial differences.

**Discussion**

The proposed empathy-fostering program is aimed at encouraging participants to establish a foundation from which they can think. Its purpose is to increase their depth of understanding of both thoughts and emotions, subsequently raising their social-emotional competence and problem-solving skills. Moreover, through raising the social awareness and compassion of individuals from all walks of life, it is as a way to help bring greater unity to our communities, as individuals share in the joys and sorrows of one another. It appears that many of society’s problems revolve around self-focused thinking and the inability to step outside of oneself to understand the experiences and feelings of others or deeply concern oneself with the personal influence one has upon others.

Initially there will be a change in the way children interact with one another. It is of personal belief that peer relations will be more positive, as enhanced levels of communication and understanding will deflect the troubling presence of bullying, teasing, and the other harmful forms of interaction. As these children age, it would seem logical to also see a decrease in more serious issues such as drug and domestic abuse, as the effects of such behavior on the self and others will be greatly considered.

Furthermore, participants can also become more empathic parents, which will aid in passing along this imperative social skill to subsequent generations. Therefore, the implementation of an empathy-fostering program to society will be immensely beneficial.

While the design of this specific program is relatively young and has not been scientifically explored at this point, its conceptual components have been under examination for a number of years; with even some components, such as the beneficial nature of theatre, for centuries. Therefore, merging all of these ideas together – the usefulness of understanding the self and others, the influences that enhance empathy, specific techniques that bolster self-exploration and strengthen cognitive processes, and a variety of other topics addressed in this thesis as well as those not yet considered – could potentially enhance the presence of empathy.

**References**


