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Fostering Empathy in Middle School Boys: A Path to Peace

An Action Research Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education

Saint Mary's College of California

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership

By

Jessica Preciado

Spring 2020

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This action research project, written under the direction of the candidate's master's project advisory committee and approved by members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership degree.

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Abstract

Fostering Empathy in Middle School Boys: A Path to Peace

By

Jessica Preciado

Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership

Saint Mary's College of California, 2020

Margaret Coughlan, Research Advisor

Empathy has been demonstrated by the research to show great promise in reducing violence, bullying and psychological harm. American psychologist Abraham Maslow sought to create a psychology for the peace table and identified a lack of love and esteem being equal to nutritional deficiencies. The human need of love and esteem can come through empathy. This action research project sought to foster empathy in middle school boys using Sara K. Ahmed's work, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension*. The participants were 80% Latino, 17% Black, and 3% White. Student participants engaged in lessons from Ahmed's work for eight weeks in their Language Arts class. Lessons involved reading, writing in journals, class presentations and discussions on historical literature and students' real life experiences of race, bias, identity, seeing the humanity in others, and acting upon this new knowledge. Empathy measures pre-post intervention showed an increase in empathy.

Dedication

Within one week of concluding this study, the United States and countries all over the world were shut down as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. There have been disproportionate rates of death from the virus in communities of color due to living conditions brought about by systemic oppression and racism that has existed in the shadows for generations. To make matters far worse, on May 25, 2020, a man named George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer who broke protocol when he placed his knee on George's neck for nearly nine minutes. That officer has been charged with second-degree murder, other officers at the scene have been charged with aiding and abetting. Some call George's death a modern day lynching. After years of Black men and Black boys being unjustly killed at the hands of law enforcement: people have had enough. George's murder was the last straw, at the time of this writing, massive uprisings and peaceful protests continue to occur all over the United States and throughout the world calling for justice for George and countless Black lives lost to inequity.

I dedicate this project to every Black person, past and present who has experienced injustice, even to the point of death as a result of their skin color; to those who have been killed during the course of everyday mundane activities, just trying to live their lives. On June 10, 2020, George Floyd's brother, Philonise Floyd, gave his testimony before the United States Congress; when he spoke on the incidences of police officers' unjust treatment of Black men, he said: "Teach them what it means to treat people with **empathy** and respect."

I also dedicate this project to every person of Latin American descent who has been treated as less than and experienced injustice, even to the point of death as they sought freedom and a better life for their families.

I dedicate this action research project to my Black and Latin American students, to every student past and present who has experienced racist microaggressions in school at the hands of teachers, other adults in positions of authority and peers that have made them doubt themselves, stop believing in their own greatness and, in some cases, even extinguished their dreams.

I dedicate this project to my White students whose empathetic actions can support social justice for their Black and Brown brothers and sisters.

To some, empathy may seem to be only a small part of healing the deep wounds caused by the horrific abuse and enslavement of Black people, and the occurrences of deportations that separate families and imprison Latin American immigrant children in inhumane conditions. I say true empathy is at the core of healing. When individuals possess empathy, they feel what their fellow human beings feel. They can only have empathy when they understand, and see the humanity in others. How could anyone of sound mind possibly hate, dehumanize or even kill a person if they truly see the world through their eyes, feel what they feel and recognize their humanity? Empathy is needed to bring about true justice. Wrongs will be made right and the necessary sacrifices in the interest of social justice will be made when we possess empathy.

It is my hope that this project is only a very small beginning of fostering more empathy in our world. Between teachers and students, amongst peers, between people of all races within their own communities and outside of their own communities.

I dedicate this work to my students who will grow up to become the next generation of police officers, educators, law makers, doctors and other roles which no matter how humble they appear, touch the lives of so many. If we plant the seeds of empathy, the potential growth towards healing and justice in this world is immeasurable.

In my Catholic view, all of humanity are beloved children of God. When I gaze upon the multitude of skin colors and ethnicities: I see God's beautiful creation. Only when we use our free will in combination with empathy, to love and honor humanity, will we see justice served.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge and thank God not only for this opportunity to obtain a master's degree from a college as special as St. Mary's, but also for the very saint for whom this college is named, the Mother of Jesus, Mary Most Holy, who has inspired me in prayer and guided me in the way of humility, justice, love, faith, hope, grace, trust, openness, obedience, courage, perseverance, and patience. I also acknowledge my pastor, Father Anthony Le who prayed for me and offered his support, guidance and wisdom which helped me to succeed not only in this program, but also in my life as a mother, wife and friend.

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I absolutely must thank my wonderful students, who are like family to me, for the hard work they did in challenging themselves to see things through the eyes of others and who grew

so much over the course of our *Being the Change* unit. I cannot find the words to express how proud I am of my students. My school and the two hard-working, compassionate leaders who work tirelessly to give our students the best: Chris and Conan, contributed to the success of this project in many ways. I am blessed to have such wonderful administrators, and blessed beyond words to teach at our unique school.

This project would not have been possible without the guidance of my amazing professor, Dr. Monique Lane who enlightened and inspired me. I will never forget Professor Lane, and I am eternally grateful to her for opening my eyes to the dangers of colorblindness and the healing power of talking openly and honestly about race with my beloved students of color. As a Black woman, Professor Lane spoke the truth with love as she opened my eyes to white privilege. Throughout my life I have always been drawn to the beauty of Black culture and many times felt most at home with my Black friends; yet I had no idea how much I still have to learn. I will be an even stronger ally to the Black community now that I am fully aware of my own privilege and at least partially cured of my color-blindness after doing the hard work prescribed by Dr. Lane. This professor has a gift: she is brilliant, genuine, creative, fun, kind, caring and thoughtful, unafraid to speak the truth and a truly phenomenal teacher who cares about and invests in her students. Dr. Lane brought out the best in me, and she helped me to find my way and focus my project on what really mattered to me: fostering empathy in my students to make their lives better, to lift them up and empower them as young men of color.

My professor, and program director, Dr. Heidimarie Rambo also helped me in so many ways. Dr. Rambo went out of her way to make special arrangements to graciously accommodate my proctor essay and interview during the application process. She took time to get to know me and took time to ask me the follow up questions during our interview that would plant the seeds

for my action research project. Dr. Rambo's attention to detail and guidance with the technical aspects of this work were a huge help to me. Not to mention her kindness, patience and encouragement throughout this rigorous program. I am so grateful for Dr. Rambo.

Next, I must acknowledge my brilliant Research Advisor Margaret Coughlan Ed. D. Margaret so graciously shared her extensive knowledge and wisdom with me. She encouraged me to keep going, reassuring me that I was on the right track, that my project mattered and that I was doing important work that would make a difference. Without Margaret's guidance in so many areas I would not have been able to produce such high quality work. She also helped me get through distance teaching, checking in on me through Zoom, encouraging me, commiserating with me about the challenges of distance learning and giving me great ideas and resources that made a huge positive impact on my students and kept them reading from home.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Increasing rates of mass shootings are taking place on U.S. school campuses and various public venues, such as concerts, restaurants and retail stores. These shocking acts of violence could be a result of our changing society. These changes are likely fueled by a lack of personal interaction with other people as social media becomes an all-consuming means of communication. Excessive use of social media may be a cause of the de-socialization of many of our youth (Richards, Caldwell, & Go, 2015). Shockingly, nearly every mass shooting has been preceded by a social media post created by the perpetrators of these appalling and devastating crimes that are scarring the mental health and well-being of our entire nation. The United States makes up only 5% of the world's population and yet 31% of mass shootings occur in the US, and recent studies are suggesting that media has been playing an unintentional role in perpetuating acts of violence (Meindl & Ivy, 2017). Many of the perpetrators of these crimes have been described as having no remorse.

Researchers and political pundits have implied that if these shooters had empathy for other human beings they might not have committed such disturbing and heinous crimes. The mental health crisis currently spreading like an epidemic is no surprise in light of social media induced diminishment of meaningful, loving, social connections. Maslow's (1943) theory of a *hierarchy of needs* suggests that poor access to social connection, love, and belonging may be at the root of poor mental health. One in five children in the United States has a diagnosable mental health condition; sadly, more violence can be expected in the future if these children's social emotional needs are not met (Brenner, 2019).

Many social needs may reflect a lack of empathy. It is plausible that empathy could have prevented the August 2019 tragedies when the news headlines were dominated by the mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, Dayton, Ohio and Gilroy, California leaving a total of 32 dead and 64 injured (Woolfolk, Saavedra, & Salonga, 2019). The perpetrators in all three of these recent shootings indicated through social media posts that their crimes were likely motivated by racial hatred. Clearly the murderers had no empathy for their victims and no capacity to place themselves in the shoes of someone who looked different from them in terms of skin color and cultural identity. The media explodes when a mass shooting occurs. Yet, we never hear much about the fact that far more people of color are killed by gun violence every day than are people who are victims of mass shootings combined (Gramlich, 2018). A recent Pew Research Center survey found that 82% of Black adults said that gun violence is a very big problem in our country, while only 47% of White respondents said gun violence is a very big problem (Gramlich, 2018). Regardless of cause of violence, one might wonder if fostering the trait of being empathetic earlier in life may prevent some from entering into a downward spiral towards not only committing acts of violence, but feeling no remorse for the harm caused to victims.

Perhaps when students learn about empathy there may be less violence in the world and healthier social and psychological outcomes for youth. Middle school is generally considered a pivotal time in a child's life; when students are given the right tools, not the least of which would be the ability to be empathetic, the seeds of good mental health can likely begin to take root. As such, catching students at this early stage of development can create permanent pathways in the structure of their brain that can last a lifetime. There is great potential for reductions in future violence if our youth learn about and are trained to be empathetic.

Statement of the Problem

Billions of dollars are spent annually as a result of youth violence (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). Several recent documented cases of police shooting and killing innocent young people of color show youth of color, especially those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, have the highest rates of living in fear of violence at the hands of law enforcement (Bryant, Adams, Alejandre, & Gray, 2017). Could these deaths have been prevented if the officers involved had more training in empathy and were able to see these young men of color as children, and not an imminent threat? In fact, a majority of parents in low SES households are worried that gun violence can happen at their children's schools (Graf, 2018). And research shows that non-White teens are more concerned about violence than their White counterparts. Graf (2018) does not specify whether families of color are more fearful of shootings at the hands of law enforcement or peers, however it is plausible the increased rates of fear may be a result of having a reasonable fear of violence from multiple sources. From an equity standpoint, it appears that students of color as well as students with low SES standing are in most need of emotional support that would help reduce violence and fear of violence. Additionally, one in five children has some form of a mental health condition (Brenner, 2019). The crisis in mental health needs to be addressed as well as peer to peer violence among our youth.

At the time of this study I taught fifth and sixth-grader in an all-boys Lasallian program located in an urban neighborhood, serving low-income students. The student body was one hundred percent male and ninety-nine percent of my students were of color: 74% Latino, 25% Black, 1% White. My school offered an extended day program, summer camp, and graduate support; however, we were not doing enough to meet the mental health needs of our students. I had 31 fifth and sixth grade students and found that bullying was a daily problem. Bullying is

often at the root of serious acts of violence because of the cycle of victimization. Students often victimize others (Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008) when they are victimized. I was concerned that my students were at risk for escalating violence and poor mental health if they did not learn to have empathy for others or learn the dangers of displaying bullying behaviors.

My students came from a low SES background and therefore were at great risk of living in fear at school and experiencing violence within the communities they called home (e.g., police brutality and other acts of gun and gang violence) (Graf, 2018). My students cared deeply about their families and did not want to disappoint them, as evidenced by the tears I saw during behavioral intervention meetings with their parents. In addition to showing great love and care for their families, my students had shown care for their friends, and for myself as their teacher. However, they continued to repeat the bullying behaviors that most often got them in trouble. Like most young people, my learners struggled to feel empathy for peers whom they did not understand or relate to very well.

I tried positive reinforcement to encourage the inclusive and respectful behavior I expected from my students through verbal and written acknowledgements. For example, I used a daily student of the day proclamation and a printed mini-award, given to the student of the day and taken home to be shown to their parents. I also followed the school's restorative discipline structure. The numbers of daily bullying incidents did not change despite rewards and consequences, daily reminders, and modeling of how students should treat their classmates. Students struggled with the ability to be empathetic towards their peers. These students repeated the bullying behaviors over and over like a bad habit, despite the capacity for expected social

behaviors demonstrated to me during our one-on-one conversations that embodied our schools' restorative justice discipline policy.

There was a great need to stop the bullying behaviors that impact my students' emotional well-being and ability to learn. This was most important work, especially for my student population. Students of color are at far greater risk of being victims of violence, and at far greater risk for remaining in a low SES. It was imperative that my students received the gift of learning about empathy towards others for their future and for the future of their communities. Moreover, these learners deserved to learn in a safe environment where empathy strengthened their emotional well-being so much that they could reach their full-potential and become unstoppable on their path to success and the many wonderful dreams they had for their futures. I believe that when students learn about empathy, and foster utilizing the skill of empathy, they have the potential to create change. Fostering empathy in these young men will potentially reduce bullying-type behaviors and thus improve their lives and the lives of others within their communities.

Purpose of the Research

The release of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) meta-analysis which references 260 research studies on youth violence clearly demonstrates that our nation has a serious problem with bullying among our youth (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). The CDC report highlights the problem with bullying in middle school as it often occurs on a weekly basis: "Bullying is currently the leading form of school violence, with pervasive and destructive effects that persist into adulthood. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that approximately 40% of middle school students are involved in bullying" (Domino, 2013, p. 430).

There is a large body of research focused on fostering empathy as a solution to the fears and bullying so prevalent amongst youth today (David-Ferdon et al., 2016).

My students are from low SES environments and therefore are at greater risk of exposure to violence within their communities. An expert in the field of race and education, Tyrone C. Howard, talks about the violence, drugs, crime, and death that young people in poor communities are exposed to on a regular basis and the toll it takes on their lives (2010). According to Howard, this kind of environment has an “influence on the social, psychological, and emotional well-being that they bring to school, and these effects often go untreated” (p. 110). The student body of my school is very small, with roughly 60 students in grades five through eight. At the time of this study, there were no resources for a school counselor to address the mental health needs of students. This reality was an example of the lack of treatment Howard refers to.

This action research project served to support the emotional well-being of my students by reducing rates of bullying and increasing emotional well-being through Social Emotional Learning (SEL). It involved the explicit teaching of social comprehension focused on empathy. A SEL program is a research-based approach in which students learn to build social skills and positive individual and peer attitudes are developed that can help prevent bullying (Smith & Low, 2013). Studies have determined that SEL involves “the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments” (Ragozzino & Utne O’ Brien, 2009, p. 3). The research about SEL is very promising and it could be an effective prevention measure that addresses the daily detrimental effects of bullying on my students.

The purpose of this action research project was to use Sarah K. Ahmed’s *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension* (2018) as a novel approach to

teaching SEL skills. While Ahmed uses the term “social comprehension” rather than the term SEL to describe her strategies, they are one in the same. Essentially, Ahmed’s work is at the intersection of social justice teaching and social emotional learning. Ahmed describes social comprehension in this way: “You have to see the humanity in others before you are able to activate your empathy. Doing the work of social comprehension erodes the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Ahmed, 2018, p. 4). Ahmed begins her work with a powerful quote from President Barack Obama’s 2016 Farewell Speech in which Obama stresses the relatively slow process of change and the critical need for an understanding of each other in a diverse democracy (Ahmed, 2018, p. 4). Obama’s use of the quote spoken by the character Atticus from *To Kill a Mockingbird* “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” is an exemplar of what it means to have strong SEL skills (Obama, 2016, as cited in Ahmed, 2018, p. 4). SEL requires one to put themselves in the “skin” or “shoes” of others in order cultivate empathy. My hope was that by using Ahmed’s approach with lessons focused on topics such as: Seeing Our Own Bias, Finding Humanity in Ourselves and Others, and Understanding Others’ Perspectives, I would cultivate life-changing SEL in my students. My goal was to use the curriculum so that I would see a decrease in rates of bullying at our school as a natural result of increased empathy. Increasing empathy was the primary goal of this study.

Action Research Question

This study was designed to immerse students in curricular activities that involved self-reflection and go far beyond the critical thinking and writing skills found in the Common Core standards. My action research question was: *How does the explicit teaching of social comprehension using Sara K. Ahmed’s work, “Being the Change,” increase empathy among fifth*

and sixth grade students? I was especially interested in discovering if teaching lessons with themes such as: “Seeing Our Own Bias,” “Understanding Microaggressions,” “Broadening Our Ideas About Who We Are Responsible To and For,” and “Understanding Others’ Perspectives” would result in more prosocial and empathetic behaviors in the classroom.

Limitations

It is important to note that the culture of my Lasallian school is unique and that the timing of my study coincidentally coincided with the implementation of a school-wide SEL intervention and a restorative discipline policy that sought to increase the very same positive outcomes my study was designed to create. Thus, it is very possible that the increase of empathy among my students may be a result of school-wide policies and practices in addition to my work with students using Ahmed’s *Being The Change* curriculum. It should also be noted that my sample size ($N = 31$) was relatively small. A larger sample size that would include more schools and various types of schools would be very telling as to the efficacy of this curriculum.

Additionally, there may be an inherent bias in my research because of the school environment. The students involved are being educated in a culture and community where empathetic behaviors are sought after and consistently rewarded. For example, each Friday one student is chosen as a “Warrior of the Week” (the name of our school’s mascot has been changed for anonymity) based on their overall behavior with an emphasis on good deeds and helping others, actions that require empathy on the part of the acknowledged student. Other schools would need to utilize Ahmed’s program and complete their own inquiries into its effectiveness to provide greater validation of the results of this study.

Positionality of the Researcher

As a teacher researcher, I was very aware of a significant commonality I shared with my students: when I was their age I too lived within a low SES. While I experienced many disadvantages from being impoverished, I did not realize at that time that I had the privilege of being White. I was always treated well by my teachers, and never felt or had to endure what so many students of color experience because of their race. Tyrone C. Howard describes:

...the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions...can have a detrimental influence on students' perception of themselves, their confidence, and ultimately their performance...one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today's racism'...students who have been targets...for years have experienced subpar performance as a result of these subtle assaults on their intelligence because of their race...lead(ing) to levels of anxiety and doubt that can negatively influence school performance (2010, p. 105).

I can only imagine how my life might have been different had I not only experienced poverty, but also the intersectional race and social class oppression experienced by my students. I realize now that I may not have been able to break the cycle of poverty without the educational and job opportunities I received and because of my White privilege, which spared me from the detrimental micro-aggressions so often committed against students of color. In other words, I succeeded not only because of my hard work and the privilege of having the guidance of effective school counselors and a great teacher but also because I am White.

Additionally, as a former perpetrator of color-blindness, I often missed opportunities to validate the legitimacy of my students' feelings about racial prejudice. This practice of remaining mostly silent on race is one that I have intentionally addressed and changed through this study with the students in this study. I can say with confidence that I no longer fit into the category of "Educators [that] ignore race or adopt colorblind approaches, while failing to realize that the greater avoidance of the topic denies students an essential part of their being, and only increases

the likelihood of race becoming an explosive topic” (Lewis, 2006, as cited in Howard, 2010, p.100). Howard speaks in great detail about the necessity of teachers talking explicitly about race in an honest, inclusive way through critical dialogue in order to achieve greater educational opportunities and outcomes (p.108). In Howard’s extensive study of schools that have succeeded in closing the achievement gap (also known as the opportunity gap), he found that the acknowledgement of race was one of the five specific practices and ideological stances that was most critical in these schools’ success (p.130). All the more reason for this to become an integral part of my pedagogy.

My choice of Ahmed’s work for my research was very intentional and stemmed from my learning about Peggy McIntosh’s work in my graduate program. McIntosh points out in her article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” that people of color are far too often unable to make the following statements, which are almost always true for their White peers:

When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared (McIntosh, 2003, pp. 192-193).

I as a teacher who possesses White privilege cannot make the mistake of forgetting that my life is not an ideal for others to strive for: when Whites work to benefit others, it should not be seen as making “them” more like “us” (McIntosh, 2003). Empathy is at the heart of this work, inspired by the work of outstanding leaders like Ahmed and McIntosh.

I realized while reading Howard’s book that I have the qualities of what he considers an effective empathetic teacher. I “...understand the challenges that poverty poses for many students, but [I] do not become paralyzed by this understanding in [my] teaching orientation, and

instead communicate to [my] students a firm belief in their ability to be successful” (Howard, 2010, p. 48). By acknowledging, honoring, and emphasizing a strengths perspective on the inherent resilience of Black and Brown families, students are empowered. I prioritize making clear beyond a doubt, that I as their teacher, absolutely believe in their ability to succeed and achieve their dreams.

I greatly appreciated and saw myself in Howard’s proclamation of teaching being more than just a job because I teach at a Lasallian middle school. It is a call to make the world better, “a moral endeavor embedded in a cultural context that seeks to defy conventional thinking about culturally diverse and low-income students... informed by a genuine desire to empower students and they see themselves as transformative agents in that process” (Howard, 2010, p. 74). I affirm the emphasis Howard places on the importance of connecting personally to students and teaching with rigor (p. 80). While I saw myself in many of Howard’s recommended teaching practices throughout his text, as with all human persons – I have room for growth.

My own dis-privilege came in the form of poverty. I have very personal connections to the injustices experienced by those living in poverty as described by Howard because of my own childhood. I needed to be aware of my own strong emotions at play in order to remain objective in my research and to not make assumptions about the emotional state and social abilities of my students. The goal of my study was to foster empathy in my students, thus resulting in a more equitable learning environment for all students. My hope was to build an environment where students feel safe and that they belong. I employed member checking strategies in my study and data triangulation to ensure as accurate as possible of a perception of actual increases in empathy. My students’ gains in empathy can translate to opportunities for them to break the cycle of poverty through successful navigation of school life and beyond.

Definitions of Terms

Bullying. Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

Empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand others' feelings and needs. Also, it is the foundation of a safe, caring, and inclusive learning climate. Students with high levels of empathy display more classroom engagement, higher academic achievement, and better communication skills (Jones, Weissbourd, Bouffard, Kahn, & Ross, 2014). Empathy reduces aggression, boosts prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg, Eggum, & DiGiunta, 2010) and may be our best antidote to bullying and racism (Borba, 2018; Santos, Chartier, Whalen, Chateau, & Boyd, 2011).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Social emotional learning has been defined as the “process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs to identify and manage emotions; to care about others; to make good decisions; to behave ethically and responsibly; to develop positive relationships and to avoid negative behaviors” (Elias & Moceris, 2012, p. 424).

Social comprehension. Social comprehension means seeing the humanity in others, so you are able to activate your empathy. The work of social comprehension erodes the boundaries between “us” and “them” (Ahmed, 2018).

Social justice. Social justice requires resource equity, fairness, respect for diversity, and the eradication of existing forms of social oppression. Social justice entails a "redistribution" of resources from those who have "unjustly" gained them to those who justly deserve them, and it

also means creating and "ensuring" the processes of truly democratic participation in decision-making (Feagin, 2001).

Implications

Prior to this study I felt there was a lack of equitable access to education for students due to behaviors that I believed impeded students' ability to learn. There was a lack of empathy among my students and I wondered how students could learn when they were treated poorly by their peers (they were taunted, teased, distracted and picked on). The body of research about social justice supports a great need for empathy amongst our youth for later success in life (Damianidou and Phtiaki, 2016). An increase in empathy could result in more prosocial behaviors that thwart violence among these young men who deserve love and belonging and have a potential for greatness.

The success of my action research project has tremendous implications on what should be taught in schools. There should be a shift towards SEL that focuses on fostering empathy. An increase in my students' empathy can result in better outcomes for all involved. Ahmed states: "When we give our students the floor to say who they are and what that means to them, they are far less likely to allow someone to do it for them" (Ahmed, 2018) This project was instrumental in increasing students' confidence in themselves in addition to fostering empathy. As Ahmed points out, we should not let others define our students nor what they are capable of accomplishing.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The purpose of this action research study was to foster empathy in adolescent boys, in particular 5th and 6th grade students at an all-boys middle school. This Lasallian middle school is a unique program which serves low-income, at-risk youth – most of whom are Latino and/or Black. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently released a meta-analysis which identified the pervasive effects of bullying in schools and the persistence of its negative effects into adulthood (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). This report states: “40% of middle school students are involved in bullying, as victim, bully or bully/victim at least once per week, with peak bullying rates occurring at 6th through 8th grades...” (David-Ferdon et al., 2016, p. 40). Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person or people. The momentum behind research about empathy is a recent headline with Time magazine reporting an article in which neuroscientists, psychologists and educators share their belief that bullying and other forms of violence can in fact be reduced by encouraging empathy in children (Szalavitz, 2010).

Extensive research has indicated a clear link to neighborhood violence and the perpetuation of low SES, which is most likely as a result of the trauma inflicted upon youth from witnessing such violence (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). My students are at greater risk of exposure to violence because of their low SES. Research shows that youth from these neighborhoods almost never receive adequate treatment for their trauma and as a result they suffer the consequences of being unable to break the cycle of poverty (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). One of the key solutions uncovered in the research points to offering additional supports for students within their school environment. Many of these supports involve showing and fostering of empathy as a part of the healing process, as well as awareness and acknowledgment of the

problem by teachers and other adults in a position to offer support services to youth affected by violence in their neighborhoods (Covey, Menard, & Franzese, 2013).

Similarly, support can come in the form of being understood by those around you, especially in the school environment where children spend such a large portion of their lives. This project is grounded on Ahmed's work and curricular support from her book *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension* (2018). The purpose, and goal of this action research project was to help my students achieve the intended outcomes of Ahmed's work of building social comprehension to help students be aware of others and build empathy which can lead students to greater success in school and in their lives, with implications far too great to be measured. The action research question was: *How does the explicit teaching of social comprehension using Sara K. Ahmed's work, "Being the Change," increase empathy among fifth and sixth grade students?*

Overview of the Literature Review

The review of related literature shows the connections between violence, bullying and a lack of empathy, how to foster empathy, and the reasons for looking to empathy as a solution. Research articles that were chosen, were written within the one to ten years and were obtained through Saint Mary's online library resources ERIC, and PsycInfo. The keywords I used were various combinations of the following: *Maslow, bullying, prevention, cause of, middle school, junior high, effective, teaching, empathy, effects of, SEL, social emotional learning, in education, assessing.*

This review of literature begins with Maslow's theory of human motivation and his intentions of discovering a "psychology for the peace table" (Hoffman, 1988). I explored Maslow's description of our human needs as a way to explain the root cause of bullying and as a

way to find ways to meet the human need for love and esteem (Maslow, 1943). Next, the review discusses recent meta-analyses on bullying among youth and the effective programs that have sought to solve this very serious problem that can have lifelong and life or death consequences. Then the literature review summarizes research about empathy, the core of focus of this action research project. The most impactful thing I found in my research was the importance of supporting my students' love and esteem needs as defined by Maslow's theory (1943), I hoped that by supporting these needs there would be the side-effect of reducing rates of bullying among youth who acquire and strengthen their ability to be empathetic.

Theoretical Rationale

Maslow's theory of human motivation was used to frame this action research project. Abraham Maslow, 1908-1970, is considered one the most eminent theorists of the 20th century according to the *Review of General Psychology* (Haggbloom et al., 2002). Maslow's career began in the early 1930s and was rooted in behavioral psychology. In December of 1941 Maslow was sitting in his car watching war veterans passing by in a parade. While watching this parade of veterans he reflected on the thought of the world going to war again (WWII). In that moment he vowed to devote his life to creating a "psychology for the peace table" (Hoffman, 1988). In order for humanity to reach its full potential, there must be peace. Maslow researcher, Todd Bridgman, highlights Ballard's 2006 paper "The Diffusion of Maslow's Motivation Theory in Management and Other Disciplines" for his conclusion that Maslow sought "a psychology that would speak to human potential and wholeness" (Bridgman, Cummings, & Ballard, 2019, p. 83). Maslow's theory of human motivation was first published in the 1943 edition of the *Psychological Review*; this theory is his most well-known work.

A.H. Maslow's theory of human motivation. Maslow's theory (1943) of human motivation contends the motivation for one's actions depend upon basic needs being met, and that there is a hierarchy of these needs. The basic human needs identified by Maslow in his well-known work from 1943 are: physiological (i.e., oxygen, food, water); safety (i.e., a secure job, freedom from tyranny, violence, or disease); love (i.e. belongingness, affection, friendship); esteem (i.e., self-respect, achievement, importance or appreciation); and finally, self-actualization (i.e., reaching one's full-potential, a purpose, satisfaction). The visual representation of these needs in the form of a pyramid is ubiquitously associated with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The physiological needs are placed at the bottom of the pyramid progressing toward the pinnacle where self-actualization can occur. The pyramid image can be seen in nearly all documents, presentations and textbooks describing Maslow's theory; ironically, in Maslow's original work he did not include this visual representation of a pyramid. This is important to note, as the pyramid visualization lends itself to an inaccurate interpretation of Maslow's theory of human motivation: the pyramid implies one level must be conquered before one can move up and work on meeting the needs classified as being on a higher level. It was in fact a businessman named Charles McDermid seeking to market Maslow's theory as a tool for management consultants in the 1960s that created the pyramid visual which led to decades of the false impression that one cannot attain higher level needs without first having lower levels needs fully met (Bridgman et al., 2019).

It is important to set aside the inaccurate pyramid interpretation of Maslow's theory in order to see how this theory correlates to a person reaching their full potential through having their human needs for love and esteem being met, even if their more basic physiological and safety needs are not fully being met. Bridgman supports the idea of a ladder being a more

accurate visual representation of the hierarchy of needs because more than one rung can be occupied at a time with hands and feet on different rungs while the body may lean or rest on other rungs for further support (Bridgman et al., 2019). Maslow's theory of motivation based upon the hierarchy of needs being thought of, or visualized as a ladder rather than a pyramid is supported with Maslow's own words; even though he made no mention of a ladder nor pyramid in his original work. Maslow went so far as to say the health of a person lacking love is just as poor as one who is lacking essential nutrition or vitamins (Maslow, 1943, p. 14). He explains the hierarchy as being flexible and free from value judgement because of the uniqueness of each individual. Some, he points out, may appear to have a greater need for esteem than love or a person may be driven or motivated by a higher need and will place far less importance on physiological needs such as food (pp. 9-10). In order to understand human motivation according to Maslow, and to have a chance at using that knowledge to foster peace his theory must be properly interpreted.

Maslow's theory provided a foundation for understanding how to bring about peace through meeting the basic human need for love and esteem. Bridgman points out that Maslow's theory was for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Bridgman et al., 2019). Maslow's academic writing occurred during the most tumultuous period of the 20th century which included a severe economic depression, horrific wars, and significant movements for social justice and racial equality. Thus, it is fitting to apply his theory to youth from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and those whom experience the injustice of societal oppression because they are persons of color. Even if these youth experience *some* of the most basic needs on Maslow's hierarchy being left unmet, they can still achieve greatness according to the more accurate flexible interpretation of this theory of human motivation. Maslow's theory could help

to bring about peace and facilitation of youth reaching self-actualization or in other words a happy and fulfilled life through successful methods of imparting a sense of love and esteem in their lives. Specifically, love needs include a sense of belonging and friendship, and esteem needs include self-respect and feeling appreciated (Maslow, 1943). There is a skill which individuals can utilize to bring about belonging, friendship, self-respect and feelings of appreciation and more within communities, including school communities: that skill is empathy.

Empathy is an ability to understand and share the feelings of others. One possible way of meeting several major components of the basic human needs Maslow identifies in his theory of motivation is through fostering empathy. Sharing and receiving understanding through feeling the emotions of others is crucial to youths' emotional and psychological well-being. As Maslow states, "Satisfaction of the esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world" (Maslow, 1943, p. 9) and he emphasizes that nearly all psychopathology theorists at that time stressed love needs not being met as the most basic cause of maladjustment. The power of love and esteem are very clear in Maslow's theory. It logically follows that his theory could help students achieve peace through love and esteem. Love and esteem can be built through empathy; thus creating a safer, more peaceful environment at school. If empathy is activated, students would no longer treat each other in ways that produce feelings of inferiority, weakness and helplessness leading to hopelessness or aggression rather than peace. Empathy is a necessary component to building peace through love and esteem.

Review of Related Research

This section reviews research about bullying and empathy. My research on bullying began as I noticed a serious problem with bullying amongst my middle school students and

wanted to find a solution. After researching the impact of this behavior, its causes and solutions, one key concept stood out to me: empathy. Thus, the next phase of my research centered on empathy and how to foster it in children.

Bullying and Social Emotional Learning (SEL). There are staggering consequences when it comes to youth violence and bullying, most notably health and economic consequences. In 2016, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention under the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) published “A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Associated Risk Behaviors” (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). This meta-analysis cited 260 references compiled by several experts in this field. One of the significant findings of this report was that 40% of middle school students experience bullying and its negative impact on their lives. The findings concluded that violence amongst youth specifically, has very serious and lasting health effects for young people; physically, mentally, and socially. Violence amongst youth is a leading cause of death and results in medically treated injuries each year exceeding 500,000 incidents nationwide. The consequences of youth violence go well beyond physical injury. When youth experience violence they are far more likely to experience behavioral and mental health struggles, more likely to experience future violence as either perpetrator or victim, more likely to smoke, use drugs, struggle with obesity, engage in high-risk sexual behaviors, suffer from depression, struggle academically, drop out of school or commit suicide. These findings included victims, perpetrators, and witnesses (David-Ferdon et al., 2016).

Youth violence burdens entire communities. For example, \$18.2 billion is spent annually on medical expenses and lost productivity as a direct result of youth homicides and physical assault injuries (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). The CDC’s report estimates that this is only a

fraction of the actual economic costs of youth violence because this \$18.2 billion figure is not including the costs of arrests, prosecutions, incarcerations, re-entry programs, nor the costs of addressing the psychological and social impact on victims and perpetrators and their families. In addition, this \$18.2 billion figure does not include the communities' expenditures for the property damages, lost wages, and the physical and mental health care needs of the victims. The healthcare system, property values, and the social services system all suffer the negative economic consequences of youth violence and crime. Additionally, states and communities have their resources for other needs and goals significantly diminished by the costs of youth violence (David-Ferdon et al., 2016, p. 9).

The solution to youth violence may be a comprehensive approach to strengthening specific skills amongst young people. The studies cited by this CDC report found that the likelihood of violence decreases when youth have stronger empathy, emotional regulation and management, communication, conflict resolution and management, problem-solving, and impulse control skills. The research base which supports skill-development as a viable solution to youth violence is quite extensive. This research shows that building the interpersonal, behavioral and emotional skills of youth reduce both victimization and perpetration of violence amongst young people. Strengthening these skills amongst young people has also been shown to reduce risk factors, increasing protective factors against substance abuse and supporting academic success. Life skills help youth increase their accuracy in understanding social situations, their ability to avoid risky behaviors and situations, as well as increase their self-awareness, and their capacity to resolve conflicts by non-violent means (David-Ferdon et al., 2016, p. 21).

In Smith and Low's (2013) meta-analysis further supports the concept of bullying prevention through building social and emotional skills. These researchers asserted that SEL supported schools' bullying prevention efforts. They explain the social-ecological framework which consists of reciprocal, constantly changing influences on the individuals involved and their families, schools, communities, peer groups and society at large.

Smith and Low discuss a meta-analysis of more than 200 evaluations which determined that students who received SEL programs had improved attitudes about themselves and others, felt more connected to their schools, demonstrated more positive social behaviors, had lower rates of emotional distress, fewer conduct problems and even had an 11 percentage point improvement in their academic achievement (p. 281).

The *Steps to Respect* program is highlighted in this meta-analysis. This program is based on a social-ecological framework and focuses on rules, policies, supervision, staff training on effective intervention in bullying situations, and social emotional learning lessons in the classroom. These classroom lessons focused on identification of various forms of bullying and encouraged positive behavioral expectations while training students on empathy, friendship skills, assertiveness, and emotion regulation (p. 281). A 33-school randomized evaluation of *Steps to Respect* showed improvement in students' social competence, improvement in staff and students' responses to bullying, a better overall school climate, and overall physical bullying amongst students was reduced (p. 281).

Ultimately, Smith and Low concluded that SEL by itself is not a cure all for bullying, and should not be considered a stand-alone solution. These skills are most likely to help reduce bullying when they are a part of a more comprehensive program with multiple components, such as a strong school climate with responsive staff who effectively intervene on a whole-school

level when peer victimization occurs. Prosocial behaviors must be modeled, encouraged and rewarded consistently as a part of the school's culture (p. 285). Empathy was explicitly mentioned in this work, as playing a direct role in increasing acceptance of others, especially tolerance of children who do not fit the mold of typical social ideals or norms (p. 282).

This meta-analysis was speaking directly to the problems I saw in my classroom. My students need to be taught, given time to practice and have the following skills reinforced day in and day out: empathy, emotion management, social problem solving, and social competence. While reading Smith and Low's (2013) analysis, I was able to picture in my mind recent incidents where specific students illustrated the lack of skills which directly result in the bullying itself and the perpetuation of it. The researchers aptly summarized, "To effectively manage peer challenges, students need to be able to accurately assess social situations and respond in thoughtful ways. Children who are aggressive and bully others often misread social cues and tend to jump to conclusions, see others as more hostile or aggressive than they really are, and come up with fewer and more aggressive ideas about how to handle peer conflicts" (Smith & Low, 2013, p. 283).

The biggest takeaway as it relates to my own study, is that my school is doing a good job of positively stating rules, and setting expectations, but we are not doing enough to teach the specific skills student need to behave as they should, and meet the expectations we have set. Our school needs to adopt a specific, proven SEL curriculum that makes sense for our population. According to Smith and Low (2013), "Rules set the expectations; SEL gives students the skills they can draw on to behave appropriately and meet those expectations" (p. 284).

SEL is not the only component needed to end bullying in schools, however it is a crucial component that perhaps has the greatest impact. We can possibly reduce bullying behaviors

amongst students and their communities by teaching SEL. It might help build understanding, explain misunderstandings between people, or why people act out as because of bias or emotional struggle. It could also help deescalate challenging situations through effective communication and positive assertiveness. Empathy, emotion management, social problem solving, and social competence are important skills for students as they handle life's challenges and function most effectively at school and out in the real world. This research also stressed the importance of teacher training and utilization of effective, proven SEL curriculum, and the need for SEL lessons to be reinforced throughout the schools' culture, and daily procedures in all places and at all times anywhere on campus (Smith & Low, 2013).

In other research, Domino (2013), explores the efficacy of the *Take the Lead* (TTL) curriculum intended to increase social competencies in middle schoolers. *Take the Lead* is a 16-session curriculum created to improve SEL skills for all students. TTL, like *Steps to Respect* utilizes SEL as its foundation. Analysis of the pre and post program data showed consistent significant reductions in bullying and victimization amongst two different groups that went through the program. This article provided a brief theoretical framework and findings of the pretest and posttest control group cohort study of the TTL curriculum on student bullying behaviors. Domino notes that SEL is grounded in previous work on emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salavoy, 1990, as cited in Domino, 2013), and social and emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1995, as cited in Domino, 2013). Domino's 2103 study added to the growing evidence that these types of SEL programs are far more effective than the more punitive programs used in the past. It is important to note that the focus on SEL in schools is a major shift from the old way of using deficit-based practices focused on stopping negative behavior,

shifting to a strength-based behavior change rooted in building social competencies (Domino, 2013, p. 431).

Domino's study consisted of a quantitative pre- post-test control cohort group involving 32 classrooms of the entire 7th grade student body of 336, at a suburban Connecticut middle school. It measured for changes in bully and victim behavior among students participating in TTL. The criteria for the study included: (1) commitment to full-scale implementation of TTL (1 day/week for sixteen 45-minute lessons), (2) approvals for whole-grade level implementation, and (3) commitment to faculty and administrator training (minimum of 6 hours) for staff involved in implementation. Research coincided with state mandates to improve existing bullying identification and prevention programming, as levels of self-reported bullying in Connecticut reflected increasing national trends (Domino, 2013, p. 432). Prior to, and at completion of each intervention, students anonymously completed the PRQ, a self-report survey that provided a sum score for bullying (perpetration) and victimization (target) behaviors. Questionnaires took approximately 15 minutes to complete, and were completed at three assessment points: T1: commencement of fall 2009 intervention; T2: completion of fall 2009 intervention, and T3: completion of spring 2010 intervention. Numerically coded questionnaires were distributed and collected by teachers trained in TTL. Responses were assigned numeric values according to PRQ scoring instructions. Data were cleaned for abnormalities and missing data, then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

The results were promising although the data were obtained strictly from self-reporting. This limitation resulted in a likelihood of natural bias, thus influencing the accuracy of the results. Students that took part in the intervention self-reported significant decreases in bullying behavior, both as victim and perpetrator, whereas the control group actually reported an increase

in bullying behavior during the same time frame. Also, results were limited due to the relatively small homogeneous sample size. In addition, the PRQ did not include all areas of bullying and was vague in regards to number of incidents. Future studies would benefit from adding other measures in conjunction with the self-reporting, such as teacher observation and peer nomination. In addition, future longitudinal studies should include larger, more diverse populations with ample comparison groups. Lastly, additional indicators of bullying should be looked at, as well as demographics and multiple risk factors being considered.

Domino's (2013) investigation seems to add to mounting evidence that there is not enough research on programs that are most effective for students of color, as the population was 93% White, 1% Black, 2% Latinx, and 3% Asian. This study confirmed the findings from many previous studies, that SEL programs do reduce bullying behaviors among students through increasing specific social skills of students (David-Ferdon et al., 2016; Smith & Low, 2013).

My research filled a gap in that it included nearly exclusively students of color, and used a different model for teaching SEL, which was focused on the teaching of empathy through social comprehension. I compared to my own data collected through pre and post surveys, my observational teacher journal, and post intervention student interviews. Self-reporting surveys and interviews were valuable additions for collecting more accurate data, as the majority of bullying occurs when teachers are not watching, as well as online and outside of school.

To summarize Domino's (2013) finding, SEL and Positive Youth Development (PYD) are valid and effective options for improving rates of bullying and victimization because they strengthen social competencies that have been proven to reduce risk behaviors. PYD is defined as,

An intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive;

recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths (p. 431).

Ongoing research into alternatives to address bullying is crucial, as most of the programs currently being used have not been very effective. Bullying remains a serious problem in school with as many as 40% of students being involved either as perpetrator or victim (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). We must continue to search for answers to solve this problem on a wider scale, as not many schools are equipped to duplicate this study without funding for proper training and effective implementation of effective SEL /PYD programs like TTL.

I conclude this section on bullying with an article by Nickerson (2018) who emphasizes the importance of recognizing and preventing all forms of school violence and calls for the need to change from a reactionary mindset to a prevention mindset led by a public health approach. The focus here is on teaching self-control, empathy and problem solving when faced with difficult situations.

Past research has proven that social-emotional skills can contribute to safer schools. Nickerson explains how social-emotional skills lead to safer schools. He cites an examination of 213 studies of K-12 SEL programs that showed fewer conduct problems and strong gains in key areas such as perspective taking, conflict resolution and identifying emotions; thus, making a clear connection between SEL and safer schools. However, studies have also shown that results have varied amongst bullying prevention programs, not all have been consistently successful. Yet, growing evidence suggest that SEL approaches are most effective. The majority of the research in this field has been conducted by the Committee for Children's curriculum called Second Step (formerly known as Steps to Respect). Nickerson highlights the promising finding that "After two years, schools implementing the Second Step curriculum saw decreases in

bullying, victimization, and other aggressive behaviors (Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom, & Snell, 2009) and less frequent homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment” (Espelage, Low, & Jimerson, 2014, p. 48). There was a direct increase in success amongst these programs when school staff members demonstrated and consistently used SEL techniques with students. More importantly, students reported even greater success when they were taught to understand how others think and feel, taught strategies to control their own behavior, taught how to take responsibility for their actions, and how to solve conflicts resulting in reduced bullying and victimization (p. 48).

Additional noteworthy findings shared by Nickerson were that focusing on students’ social-emotional strengths led to teachers expecting more positive outcomes, and according to research conducted by Ttofi, Bowes, Farrington, and Lösel (2014), teaching bullying perpetrators social skills and coping skills protected them from negative life outcomes related to aggression and violent behavior (48). “Youth are also less likely to become involved in bullying if they feel like they belong and are connected to their schools” (Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013) and “...students are more likely to ‘see something, say something’ if they feel connected to the adults in their school” (p. 48). Results imply benefits for all students. While this article discussed the impact of all areas of social-emotional competencies, empathy was key.

SEL is the most promising practice for reducing bullying and other forms of violence and harm amongst our youth. SEL programs have been found to be more effective than all other bullying prevention programs. There is research-based curricula available to teach SEL, as well as proven assessments to gather data on which of the social competencies students at different schools specifically need help. There are also lessons available in the proven curricula to address specific areas. Studies are promising that less formal approaches to teaching SEL are also

effective. Teaching empathy, problem solving, and self-control which are the key social-emotional competencies is necessary for prevention, and a far better strategy than waiting until something terrible happens at a school and taking a reactive approach once it is too late.

Empathy. The concept of empathy appeared repeatedly throughout the research on bullying. Naturally, this led my research in the direction of empathy in order to explore ways in which this important skill plays a role in creating schools where students feel safe, supported and accepted.

Empathy measures. I searched for valid ways to measure empathy which led me to an article by Elliot, Davies, Frey, Gresham, and Cooper (2018) which focused the need for a new screening measure called the Social Emotional Learning Assessment (SELA) that would effectively measure outcomes for the increasingly popular and widely accepted Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model five key components. The CASEL five consist of: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making Skills. The CASEL five are the basis for the majority of school-based intervention programs including a national curriculum, the Personal and Social Capability in Australia (p.40). With such wide spread inclusion of the CASEL five in so many schools it was imperative to find a way to measure the impact of the CASEL five.

In the Elliot et al. (2018) study, 12 teachers administered the SELA to their 268 students, then a secondary sample of 266 students one school year later participated in the test-retest follow up study. The author's conclusion that the SELA is an effective measure of the CASEL five was strongly supported by the evidence. The only limitations of the study were human limitations, and the article did an excellent job of sharing every detail of the process along the way as well as when and how events occurred that affected the results of the SELA's efficacy.

For example, one of the evaluations involved six teachers who were not involved in the study to perform an activity to assess the SELA's ability to cover the CASEL five, they gave an explanation as to why only five out of the six involved in that particular activity were able to make the necessary connections: "Five of the six teachers independently completed this task 100% correct; the sixth teacher was more ambivalent and slower, and gave up when she saw others had finished the activity. At the conclusion of the activity, the teachers provided feedback about the wording of the descriptors, but had no difficulty with the meaning of the content of the descriptors, nor the relative levels of performance they communicated" (Elliott, Davies, Frey, Gresham, & Cooper, p. 46). Including the detail about the teacher who seemed "ambivalent and slower," seemed odd for such a formal study, but after reflecting on the reasoning behind it, it seemed valid to mention the normal and natural human flaws that should not be held against the validity or effectiveness of the assessment being studied.

The SELA was scrutinized on many levels. It was implicated that the findings needed to be replicated with larger and more diverse groups of students and teachers in order to establish it as an adequate screening method and confirm that it provides accurate information about students' actual social and emotional functioning. The CASEL competency framework shows promise as a targeted intervention for the majority of students. While Cooper acknowledge there is still work to do, these preliminary finding are very promising and the SELA seems very likely to become a universal assessment to measure SEL outcomes.

Prior to reading this article I was not aware of how technical SEL could be. It was very helpful to learn the significance of the CASEL five and also very significant that a universal test has been developed and is being tested to identify students who are at risk of being a perpetrator or victim of violence or bullying, based on the five essential SEL skills. This has the power to

identify students who may be lost in the crowd, students who may otherwise not be identified as needing mental health support and the development of these crucial skills that impact not only the individual students, but society as a whole. Imagine if the students who commit violent acts upon others had received the therapy and interventions they needed before it got to that point. As far as equity is concerned, I appreciated that the researchers noted the need for more diverse and larger samples of teachers and students. It was also significant that teachers were involved in the entire evaluation process and their input was seriously considered by the developers of the SELA. Lastly, after reading this article I have a much deeper appreciation of all that goes into developing and accessing important tools like the SELA, which can bring the most important needs of our students to light and get them the interventions they need.

This study determined that the SELA was an effective, practical assessment tool for determining students who are at risk for social and/or academic problems. With the incorporation of CASEL five competencies into the vast majority of school curriculum, a universal assessment that could measure these skills is needed. Teachers and researchers involved in the research determined that the SELA is in fact a content valid measure of SEL skills/CASEL competencies. Also, through the research teachers found that the SELA was easy and time efficient, making it reasonable to administer during the course of a realistic school day. The SELA was compared to other similar, but more time consuming tests that have already been proven effective, and the accuracy of SELA results when compared against established tests were equal. While more research with larger and more diverse groups of students is needed, this assessment has been found to be a promising measure for teachers who want to screen their students for social emotional universal intervention programs, as well as monitor students' growth and progress in these areas.

Teaching practices that enhance empathy in schools. I delved into an article by Borba (2018) as the focus of my literature review shifted from assessment into practice. Borba asks the question: Which practices enhance empathy and how will principals know if teachers are implementing them effectively? Borba spent over a decade visiting and conducting research in preK-12 schools, and was convinced that the current empathy crisis among our youth could be solved. Borba shares the following insight:

Empathy—or the ability to understand others’ feelings and needs—is also the foundation of a safe, caring, and inclusive learning climate. Students with high levels of empathy display more classroom engagement, higher academic achievement, and better communication skills (Jones et al., 2014). Empathy reduces aggression, boosts prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg, Eggum, & DiGiunta, 2010) and may be our best antidote to bullying and racism (Borba, 2018, p. 23, Santos et al., 2011).

This simple, yet profound statement summarizes the ultimate hope and goal for my own study. Borba gave me great confidence in going forward and using Ahmed’s (2018) book and curriculum, because Ahmed’s work truly covers all nine of the teachable competencies shared by Borba. Those nine are as follows: Emotional Literacy, Moral Identity, Perspective Taking, Moral Imagination, Self-Regulation, Practicing Kindness, Collaboration, Moral Courage, and Growing Changemakers. There are limitations within Borba’s article, while several credible sources are cited, the exact measures of their findings are not shared. For example, I found it interesting that Borba states “American teens are now 40 percent less empathetic than they were three decades ago” (Konrath, 2010, p. 22, as cited in Borba, 2018). Yet when I looked up the Konrath reference to further explore the statement, Borba had gleaned the statistic from an article about college students, whom may or may not be “teens”. I wondered why Borba chose an article focused on teaching empathy to K-12 students, rather than reference some factual statistics on rates of empathy among this younger age group?

However, Borba's work is very inspirational. The following excerpt from this article demonstrates the essence of her work:

Giving—not receiving—is what makes kids happier, healthier, less stressed, and feel better about themselves (Luks & Payne, 2001). Every student, regardless of zip code, has the potential to make the world a better place, *if* we provide the right experiences. ...Above all the benefits described, empathy makes our students better people. It is what will help them live one essential truth: *We are all humans who share the same fears and concerns, and we deserve to be treated with dignity* (Borba, 2018, pp. 27-28).

Borba's message is at the heart of the reason why educators such as myself are so motivated to lead our students towards empathy.

Lastly, Borba shares seven core principles of effective empathy education, which in her expert opinion must be guided by empathetic school leaders for maximum efficacy. She states that empathy education must be: 1) ongoing and not a one-time lesson, but a sustained focus, 2) woven-in and integrated as a core component of content and school-wide interactions, 3) meaningful and authentic, touching the hearts and minds of students leading them to make the leap from me to we, 4) internalized and adopted as lifelong habits, 5) student-centered, thus their needs drive the lessons and experiences, not the book, 6) respectful relationships because empathy flourishes in a caring and respectful culture, and 7) empathetic leadership must be modeled and expected and be at the core of the principal's vision, purpose, style and interactions with students and staff (Borba, 2018, p. 27).

Borba's article was very heartening, and it was encouraging to hear how teachable empathy is and to see concrete examples of how to teach it within the nine competencies the author outlines for efficacy. I feel so fortunate to be teaching at a Lasallian school with a wonderful principal who already embraces many of these nine competencies. Thus, I was able to use this article to bring it all together and build upon the practices already in place to bring about greater results. Borba's Principles of Effective Empathy Education will be a guiding force to

ensure that we are doing all we can to effectively teach empathy and to have a lasting impact (2018).

Inspired by Borba's work I researched further for specific examples of empathy at work in direct individual school settings across a range of subjects. Gano-Overway's (2013) research explored the relationship between the caring climate, empathy, prosocial behaviors, and antisocial behaviors, like bullying, in physical education. The researcher also investigated whether empathy mediated the possible relationships between caring and social behaviors for boys and girls. Gano-Overway provided initial evidence that when middle school students perceive a caring climate they are more likely to understand their classmates' feelings and thus practice more prosocial behaviors. Likewise, a more caring climate resulted in less antisocial and bullying behaviors. She acknowledges that there is still a great deal more work to be done in exploring the relationship between empathy and social behaviors.

Gano-Overway's study involved 528 (287 female and 241 male) middle school physical education students (sixth through eighth grades) and four teachers. One of several effective data collection tools used by the researcher was the Basic Empathy Scale (BES). As a result of reading this study, I chose to use the BES as a measure for my own action research project. The creators of the BES, Jolliffe and Farrington describe empathy as *understanding* the emotions of another (cognitive empathy) as well as having the capacity to *feel* the emotions of the other person (affective empathy) (Gano-Overway, 2013). Gano-Overway cites experts in the field who suggests that the desire to help others is motivated by empathy; thus, naturally, children who have this innate desire to help, show more prosocial behaviors. Also, that conversely, that children who would be labeled as bullies have lower levels of empathy than do more prosocial children.

While this study's goal was to focus on empathy and its link to prosocial behavior within the physical education classroom, its findings are relevant to all classrooms. It supported existing theory and research that a caring environment supports and increases students' ability to be empathetic, although interestingly the study found that a caring teacher who shows interest in his or her student's lives, only increased cognitive empathy (understanding the emotions of others), and did not increase affective empathy (the capacity to feel the emotion of others). Increased empathy reduced bullying behaviors, and students with less empathy were more likely to engage in bullying behaviors. While girls showed higher levels of empathy, the study concluded that a caring environment benefitted both boys and girls equally.

Fostering empathy in schools as social justice. I researched another facet of empathy literature, this included research that supported the notion of teaching empathy as a way to support marginalized populations. My research into empathy also includes Damianidou and Phtiaka's (2016) work that explores the results of a large-scale study of teachers and their role in maintaining the status quo of injustice and marginalization of less powerful people within society at large. This was a powerful philosophical article that focused on equity and very powerful aspects of empathy. In addition, it contained excellent teaching strategies to use in the classroom to teach empathy. Two common practices stood out, the use of debate, discourse and using literature to create opportunities for students to put themselves in someone else's shoes. This was yet another article that supported the strategies used in Ahmed's (2018) work, which I used for my own study.

While the authors (Borba, 2018; Gano-Overway, 2013) gave solutions to the problem and shared research-based methods for teaching empathy and breaking teachers out of their fear-based curriculum choices that maintain the status quo; they did not study the impact on students,

nor determine if the curriculum they created actually produced the desired results of creating empathy among students and thus planting the seeds of fixing major injustices ingrained in society. Other articles introduced me to important theories and philosophies that prove the value of empathy on a much deeper level and its potential impact on society in the big picture beyond the school years, it connected empathy to equity and social justice in concrete ways. For example, Zembylas (2012) raises the point that "...empathy is considered a valuable pedagogical tool that may open up affective spaces and thereby disrupt the roots of troubled knowledge" (p. 238). Since critical pedagogy is about understanding the suffering, raising awareness, recognizing the oppression and enhancing the voice of the less powerful (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2010), it seems that developing empathy constitutes a basic component of critical pedagogy. But how can we inculcate empathy into our students, so as to foster a fairer world? One of several important theories explored in this article was the following: "...as Freire (1970) and Shor (1992) suggest, education should be a free exchange of ideas where the role of teacher and student are interchangeable. Through this type of dialectic education, students and teachers "become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire, 1970, p. 80).

Damianidou and Phtiaka (2016) sought to create a three-step approach to foster empathy and thus ultimately change society for the better. The first stage helped teachers understand their students, truly listen to them and put themselves in their students' shoes, making student's feel valued and validated. The second stage was only possible once open communication was established. During the second stage teachers could present material relevant to the students' experiences, encouraging them to think critically and analyze the materials (literature, art, poems) asking them to speak up in ways that break the institutionalized silence they are so used to. The third stage asked students to share the knowledge they had gained through this inquiry

process with the larger school community and ideally the world through publication and presentation. The ultimate goal of this study was to help teachers create “informed, democratic, critical, empathetic, and active citizens” (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2016, p. 235).

I searched for more examples of fostering empathy among students in the field of education and found Zhang’s 2017 article to be simple, yet profound. Zhang was a graduate teaching assistant at a northeastern university in the U.S. Zhang herself an English Language Learner (ELL), created a “language shock class” to replicate the benefits of field-experience or short-term study abroad programs when due to limitations such experiences were not feasible to pre-service teachers. Zhang had pre-service music teachers participate in a class on campus at the university where she taught the entire lesson in Mandarin. She used effective strategies so pre-service teachers could experience effective tools they could use with their own students as they could see it working for themselves when living out the experience of an ELL student participating in a lesson when they are feeling lost and overwhelmed due to the language barrier. Most importantly, this classroom cultural immersion experience developed their empathy for students.

Zhang (2017) noted the current emphasis placed on empathy by many researchers in the field today and she sought to focus on developing empathy in pre-service teachers using a cultural immersion experience to help them develop empathy towards culturally and linguistically diverse pupils. While Zhang’s research focused on helping teachers to be more empathetic, her practices could easily be adapted and used effectively with students.

Zhang’s successful intervention through her cultural immersion experience for teachers resulted in more meaningful accommodations for ELL students in particular because of the shock of being immersed in a class taught in a foreign language. The language shock experience

allowed teachers to feel the same helplessness, frustration and confusion commonly felt by their ELL students and resulted in teachers developing higher levels of empathy. As well as motivating teachers to invest more time in developing more culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate lessons to improve their students' experience in the classroom (p. 430). When teachers "walk a mile" in their students' shoes, they were more fully aware of student needs and they exerted more effort to meet these needs effectively.

Continuing down the path of empathy focused on cultural sensitivity, I chose to highlight Newstreet, Sarker and Shearer's 2019 article about exploring multiple perspectives to address religious bias through literature. Newstreet et al. highlight the Muslim refugee crisis, Islamophobic rhetoric, and recent terrorist shootings as a cause of the increased rates of prejudice experienced by Muslim children and their families (p. 559).

This qualitative study took place in a suburban middle school, with sixth graders and used student writings and class discussions to measure growth in understanding and empathy towards Muslim peoples. Using illustrated children's literature as an entry point engaged students, especially ELLs, multi-modal learning opportunities and various perspectives, resources and different types of projects were effective in guiding students from knowing to truly understanding and gaining empathy for Muslims. This teacher researcher effectively used literature text sets and various types of thoughtful, critical inquiry to engage with the material in order to move from knowing to understanding, truly creating experiences and open discussion in the classroom that fostered empathy for the group of marginalized people they were learning about. Islamophobia was effectively combatted by her methods which was proven by the qualitative data collected by the teacher throughout the unit. The strongest qualitative evidence of increased empathy and reduction of phobia was gleaned from the letters Ragina's students

wrote to their pen pals from a rural Bangladeshi primary school (Newstreet, Sarker, & Shearer, 2019, p. 561).

It was difficult to find fault with such a well-thought out and significant study, one limitation I noted was that pretests were not given to show how much growth had truly occurred. However, it was clear students gained new insights and shifted their ideas about Muslim people in a positive direction as demonstrated through class discussion, pen pal letters to Muslim children and their other written discourse.

The last article in this section provides still more support for the method of using literature to foster empathy in students with Masko and Bloem's (2017) research that focused on using children's multicultural literature to help teach equity and build empathy. These researchers were inspired to use this multicultural literature approach by an analysis described in Paul Gorski's *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* (2013). Masko and Bloem were able to show students that they did in fact have room for growth and were successfully able to increase empathy in their students. They were unable to make much ground on increasing White students' comfort levels in discussing race and experienced a great deal of resistance in the forms of White fragility and White fatigue prior to the experience of reading these pieces of children's literature. Despite the resistance, their experiences with the literature allowed them to gain new perspective and shatter stereotypes through the insights they gained from the text. Using children's literature to build empathy in readers is not a new idea; it is a commonly accepted notion in the field of literature studies that literature builds empathy. Rasinski and Padak (1990) published a wide-reaching article applying Banks' (1989) curricular model to uses of multicultural literature, stating that "literature does more than change people's minds; it changes

people's hearts" (Rasinski & Padak, 1990, p. 577). If literature does in fact change people's hearts, it is most certainly an effective means of fostering empathy in teachers and students alike.

Conclusions

In summary, one of several key findings from this literature review is the connection that can be made between Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation and the needs of love and esteem that must be met for the human person to achieve their full potential, and thus be in a state of peace. If our needs are met, and are in a state of peace, bullying behaviors are simply not going to occur. As demonstrated by the literature covered throughout this chapter, bullying has deleterious effects on society as a whole, and this problem is quite rampant. Bullying costs our nation tens of billions of dollars each year in medical, familial and property damage, and also preventing its victims (some 40% of middle schoolers) from learning (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). These statistics do not bode well for our future.

In addition, the variety of literature covered herein regarding empathy showed that there are promising solutions in the field of SEL which have shown that we can successfully reduce rates of bullying and increase prevention. Empathy plays a key role in creating safe and healthy schools (Borba, 2018). The literature reviewed shows that a momentum behind research on empathy has been building. Szalavitz's (2010) article identified that neuroscientists, psychologists and educators believe that bullying and other forms of violence can in fact be reduced by encouraging empathy in children. The literature reviewed focused on several populations, however I was unable to find literature that delved into fostering empathy specifically among middle-school boys – my target group, or studies that specifically used Ahmed's program to bring about change through social comprehension.

These findings informed my own action research project as the basis for using the promising curriculum from Ahmed's (2018) work, *Being the Change*. Ahmed's work contains lessons that create opportunities for student self-exploration, social interaction and it connects literature with the lessons. The curriculum provides students an opportunity to immerse themselves in the lives of others who are different from themselves, as well as the same, inside and out. It is through fostering empathy that bullying can be decreased.

In the following chapter I will discuss my classroom demographics, the data collection strategies, procedures and analyses after implementing Ahmed's *Being the Change* program with the goal of fostering empathy among my junior high students.

Chapter III

Method

“Bullying can affect everyone—those who are bullied, those who bully, and those who witness bullying. Bullying is linked to many negative outcomes including impacts on mental health, substance abuse, and suicide” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS), defines bullying as a power imbalance between youth used to repeatedly subject the less powerful victim to unwanted harassment and aggressive or threatening behavior (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). David-Ferdon and colleagues (2016) report that approximately 40% of middle school students are involved in bullying as witness, perpetrator or victim. However, research suggests that bullying can be decreased through fostering empathy (Nickerson, 2018). Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person or people. Time magazine’s “How Not to Raise a Bully: The Early Roots of Empathy,” shares neuroscientists, psychologists, and educators’ belief that bullying and other forms of violence can in fact be reduced by encouraging empathy in children (Zembylas, 2010) and this project sought to combat bullying through empathy.

As a result of their socio-economic status my students are at greater risk of exposure to violence within their communities. Dietrich and Zimmermann (2019) suggest that having an aggression-related mindset is related to bullying behavior (Cook et al., 2014 as cited in Dietrich & Zimmerman, 2019). Dietrich and Zimmerman concluded that *hostile attribution* bias plays a role in higher rates of bullying amongst students of lower socioeconomic status as mistrust is necessary in order to survive growing up in dangerous neighborhoods. This hostile attribution can be described as a natural tendency to interpret the behavior of others as intentionally hostile,

whether the actions were actually hostile or not. It is critical to remember that poverty causes desperation for survival regardless of the race or ethnicity of the individuals living in it. These inequities seem almost insurmountable, especially in the face of systemic oppression . My study hoped to offer some relief, pedagogical support, and social awareness to improve students' educational and life outcomes in such an environment.

This research used Sarah K. Ahmed's (2018) curriculum *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension* to intervene on the rates of persistent bullying behaviors that I have observed among my students. Ahmed describes social comprehension as seeing the humanity in others so that empathy can be activated (2018). Empathy is a very important piece of the puzzle for humanity and is integral in building courage and peace. Thus, my project asked the question: *How will the explicit teaching of social comprehension using Sara K. Ahmed's work, Being the Change, increase empathy amongst fifth and sixth grade students?* This chapter describes the setting, participants, data collection strategies, and the data analysis plan for my empathy project.

Setting

This study took place at a Lasallian, all-boys middle school (grades 5-8), strategically located in an underserved neighborhood. In a recent case study of this well-known area in great need of social justice, it was cited that 23% of its residents live in poverty, and 43% of residents are non-naturalized Latinx immigrants, with an ethnic make-up of 57% Hispanic/Latino, 21% White, 11% Asian, 6% other, and 5% Black. Around 40,000 residents live in the neighborhood. It is a fairly densely populated area with a mixture of suburban homes and crowded apartment complexes. The school serves students from the underserved neighborhood in which it is located, and from surrounding communities in different cities. Despite economic disadvantage, these

students are able to access transportation through the hard work of parents who give all they have for their sons to receive educational opportunity.

The school is inspired by the mission of the De La Salle Christian Brothers which began 300 years ago with the sole focus of educating the poor in order to break the cycle of poverty. The school seeks to provide a transformative, accessible Catholic education to change the lives of underserved students and their families for the better. The school works with philanthropists and partners within the surrounding community to create opportunities for our students, and to offer continued support to graduates and their families. This school provides a holistic approach to education which addresses the whole student: mind, body and spirit. The school values creating opportunities for students to give back through service, practice their faith through prayer, develop critical thinking skills, and grow into life-long learners.

Students receive extra academic support in small class sizes of 15-18 students, and required homework hour sessions after school with volunteers from a nearby highly acclaimed university and high performing high school serving as tutors in addition to teachers. Eighty percent of students made honor role, and the school-wide average GPA is 3.3. English is a second language for 44% of the student population. Approximately half of the student body (52%) are bilingual, Spanish speakers. One third of the parent population (33%) needs a translator to be present in meetings, including parent-teacher conferences. This is provided to bridge the language gap and to make sure parents have a voice within our school community and that the needs of their children are met.

There are less than 100 students at the school all of which are male. Each grade level, 5th-8th, has an average class size of 16. The demographics of the student population is: Latino (85%), Black (14%) and White (1%). We have less than 10 full-time teachers, two administrators

who teach a few courses and three other support staff. The female staff consists of 33.3% Black, 33.3% are Latina, and 33.3% are White and the male staff, 20% are Asian and 80% are White. Only 27% of the staff are bilingual and speak Spanish.

Demographics of the Classroom

Participants were recruited from my fifth and sixth grade English Language Arts classes. I taught the entirety of fifth and sixth grade classes at the school. There were 16 fifth graders and 15 sixth graders, for a total of 31 students in my classroom throughout the day. A parental consent letter was sent home to parents advising them of the research study and the invitation to participate. Students whose parents provide informed consent for their child's participation were asked to participate via a student script and an assent form. Only the results of those students whose parents provided parental consent and who gave student assent are included in the data analysis. Thirty students agreed to participate. The participants were all male and included: Latino (80%), Black (17%), and White (3%). Sixty percent of the participants were bilingual Spanish speakers. Several of the students (16%) had IEPs for attention-related learning differences.

Data Collection Strategies

Data measurement was triangulated using qualitative and quantitative measures to determine if the *Being the Change* curriculum increased levels of empathy amongst students. These measures included a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire called the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) administered pre- and post-intervention (see Appendix A), “At First I Thought...Now I Think” student journal entries pre and post individual *Being the Change* lessons (see Appendix B), and post-intervention one-on-one student interviews (see Appendix C). In addition to the three main measures employed, teacher field notes were taken to record as much additional

information as possible on the impact of *Being The Change* on student's demonstration of empathy towards one another.

Basic Empathy Scale. The Basic Empathy Scale (BES) is a 6-point Likert scale self-report questionnaire ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). This Likert scale provided quantitative data on student levels of empathy. I used the 18 question English translation of the Adapted Spanish Version licensed under PsycTESTS (see Appendix A) used with permission for non-commercial research and educational purposes and created in 2014 by Sánchez-Pérez, Fuentes, Jolliffe, and González-Salinas. Of the 18 questions, nine measured cognitive empathy and nine measured affective empathy skills. Cognitive empathy is the skill of being able to recognize and understand what others are feelings. Whereas affective empathy is the ability to actually feel what the other person is feeling.

The BES questionnaire contained statements such as: "I can understand my friend's happiness when s/he does well at something," "I find it hard to know when my friends are frightened," "I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me," "I am not usually aware of my friend's feelings," "After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad," and "Seeing a person who has been angered has no effect on my feelings." Student ranked these statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

This questionnaire was given anonymously, pre- and post-intervention. Responses were scored and analyzed quantitatively comparing pre-intervention levels of empathy to post-intervention levels of empathy.

At First I Thought...Now I Think, journal. Throughout the six-week intervention using the *Being the Change* program, students used the "At First I Thought... Now I Think," journal entry (a traditional T-chart graphic organizer) (see Appendix B) to record their ideas,

thoughts or opinions of various aspects of humanity, such as identity, heroism or matters of culture or race before reading a meaningful story or viewing art work or a short film sharing varying personal experiences and points of view. Students then completed the “Now I Think” portion of the chart after the lesson for visual side by side comparison of growth or change in perspective after learning from other’s personal experiences. This record of student growth was analyzed qualitatively.

One-on-one interviews with students. I met with students one-on-one in a confidential setting and asked students several questions related to empathy and their experience with the *Being the Change* curriculum. I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix C). I asked students what empathy meant to them, whether or not our *Being The Change* unit helped them understand empathy, and how it helped. If they answered that the curriculum did not make a difference, I asked them to share freely why they thought so. I asked students if they felt that they had more empathy towards other people after experiencing the unit. Next, I asked students if people in our class were more kind and understanding after these lessons. I defined bullying as treating others poorly, teasing, or being intolerant of others. I asked if in their opinion, had there been more or less bullying happening since we completed the lessons from *Being The Change*. Lastly, I wanted to know if students were glad we did this program, and if they thought I should continue to do *Being The Change* with future fifth and sixth grade students.

I pulled students one at time into the hall way where I had chairs set up near a table. I did not rush students and allowed them to speak on each question for as long as they liked. I asked follow up questions if students did not give examples that supported their responses. Interviews ranged from two and half minutes up to nine minutes in length, dependent upon how much the individual student wanted to share. While interviewing each student I asked other teachers to

keep their doors closed for privacy and if anyone walked by while we were talking I paused the interview so students would feel free to talk openly without worrying about their peers overhearing their answers. This measure also ensured students were not influenced by the answers of others. Students were told their honest opinions were valuable to me, there were no wrong answers or penalties of any sort and regardless of their answers they would each be receiving a token of appreciation from me the next day in the form of a snack brought in for the whole class. I expressed to students I wanted to know what they really thought, and that honesty would help me determine if *Being the Change* was a worthwhile program and whether or not I should use it again for different groups of future students. I recorded the interviews using the Voice Memo feature on my iPhone then uploaded the recordings to GMR Transcription's website. I read through the transcribed recordings, coded the data and looked for themes as I analyzed the text qualitatively. I also conducted a frequency count of key themes to analyze the data quantitatively.

Teacher Field Notes. At least three times a week I took notes in a personal journal during my prep period after completing *Being the Change* lessons. I recorded my observations of what went well and what did not go well, based on student interactions during that day's lessons. I also took note of any significant or memorable exchanges between students, as well as between teacher and student, which indicated a showing of empathy or lack thereof.

Procedures

Pre-intervention Procedures. All students in the class were invited to participate in the study. I read the Script for Student Assent to potential participants, and then distributed the Assent to Participate in Research form for willing students to sign. Students were advised that an additional copy of the Assent to Participate would go home in their weekly parent

communication folders to be discussed with parents, signed and returned if both parent and student agree to participate. Participants were told that even if they initially agree to participate, they could decide not to participate at any time and there was no penalty for deciding to withdraw from data collection. For those students who did not elect to participate in the study, I did not include their data in the analysis. However, content related classroom discussion, and reading and writing assignments were a regular part of the curriculum and my teaching practice. As a result, students participated in all classroom lessons and English Language Arts assignments as they normally would.

The Fostering Empathy project was implemented over a six-week period, from January to March. At the beginning of the study I individually assessed students' level of empathy by administering the Basic Empathy Scale—Spanish Adaptation for Adolescents and Young Adults (see Appendix A). At the completion of my study I met with each student participant to conduct one-on-one interviews regarding the *Be The Change* curriculum. I had been with this same group of students since the beginning of the school's summer camp program and felt that students trusted me, and I had a good rapport with their parents as well. My students were comfortable talking with me. Prior to this project, I met one-on-one with all students on a regular basis as a part of our regular academic discussions for goal setting, progress made, etc. I also met with students regularly during lunch time if I saw that they were excited to tell me about something going on in their life, or if they seemed to be feeling a bit down. I would check in with them and refer them to our caring admin team for counseling, etc. if needed. I did all I could to ensure that my students knew that they were not judged, or penalized for any honest opinions or feelings they choose to share with me, and I tried to remind them of this often. The goal in my classroom has

always been to create a safe space for all students.

Intervention procedures. Students participated in English Language Arts lessons that met Common Core State Standards using Ahmed’s curriculum from her book, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension*. Targeted social comprehension concepts included: Listening With Love, Finding Humanity in Ourselves and Others, and Facing Crisis Together. Additionally, students used tools such as the “At First I Thought...Now I Think” journal to reflect on how the experiences in the lessons affected their outlook (see Appendix B). Students participated in classroom dialogue based upon the recommended readings and writing assignments from Ahmed’s lessons . We proceeded through each chapter’s themed lessons sequentially, spending approximately one to one and a half weeks on each chapter, adjusting as needed depending on the rate at which students were ready to move on to the next chapter. All lessons occurred during students’ regular, daily 50-minute long English Language Arts periods.

Data collection strategies for this study included pre- and post-test BES surveys (see Appendix A), students’ “At First I Thought...Now I Think” journals (see Appendix B), researcher field notes, and post-study one to one interviews conducted during students’ regular school day (see Appendix C).

Post-intervention procedures. Upon completion of my intervention, I administered the same BES survey (see Appendix A) to students to analyze any shifts in their perceptions after the intervention. I also conducted one-on-one interviews with all students who agreed to participate in my study. I had a total of 31 students participate, and met with all of them over the course of three weeks. Individual interviews took place in my empty classroom during 10-15 minutes of the students’ 60-minute lunch and recess break. Students were allowed to eat their lunches

during the interview. I also provided additional snacks for the interviewees as a token of appreciation for participating in the interview during their lunch period.

I conducted one-on-one interviews (see Appendix C) in order to find commonalities and differences in how they personally experienced Ahmed's Social Comprehension lessons, as well as what they felt they did or did not gain by doing so.

I created audio recordings of my post-intervention interviews using my iPhone in the classroom or meeting room on campus where the interviews took place. Audio recordings were necessary only as a temporary record until I was able to transcribe the interviews into a word document. I deleted the recordings after each interview was transcribed. Participants' recordings were stored on my phone, which is password protected, and kept confidential. All methods and data collection tools for the study were discussed with my faculty advisor. Only the students who had assented/consented to participate and who provided parental consent were included in this research.

If any sensitive information surfaced during the survey, journal or interview process as with any other situation in which students share about their lives with their teacher--I followed the procedures required of me as a mandatory reporter and did all I could to ensure the student received the safeguards and services he needed.

As researcher, I ensured that the information presented was developmentally appropriate and in line with the Common Core State Standards. Students constructed their own understanding of the themes of this study, and they were given multiple opportunities to share feelings and ask clarifying questions to ensure adequate understanding. The content that students learned and experienced was communicated to parents through sharing of student work at back

to school night as well as students taking completed assignments home to share with their families.

Plan for Data Analysis

All sources of data were chosen to identify the answer to the question: *How will the explicit teaching of social comprehension using Sara K. Ahmed's work, Being the Change, increase empathy amongst fifth and sixth grade students?* Results were supported through the triangulation of data.

The first data source, the BES Likert scale questionnaire (see Appendix A) was analyzed quantitatively. The questions were divided into cognitive and affective categories, then divided into categories of positive or negative statements within each category. It was necessary to divide up the types of statements for accuracy. For example, a response of six (6) or strongly agree, on a negative statement indicated a lack of empathy, whereas a response of six (6) or strongly agree on a positive statement indicated the presence of empathy. I calculated the mean scores on the 1-6 scale, 1 being strongly disagree, and 6 being strongly agree for each category and statement type for each student pre- and post-intervention, to determine how many individual students saw overall growth in empathy. I also calculated the mean scores of each grade level, fifth and sixth grade to look for differences between the two age groups. Lastly, I calculated a general overall growth score comparing the mean scores of all 31 students pre-intervention to the mean scores post-intervention.

My second data source, the "At First I Thought...Now I Think" T-chart journal entries were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Student journals were read and notes were typed up, both coding common themes and tallying the number of similar responses, thus documenting significant evidence of growth in students' recorded thoughts showing evidence of

empathy towards others. I analyzed evidence based upon students' opinions and feelings towards groups or individuals different from themselves and how those views shifted after learning more about others through stories, art, film and in-class discussion with peers.

The third source of data, creating triangulation, were the one-on-one interviews conducted post-intervention. These student interviews were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The disaggregated data, was coded and common responses were tallied and used to create a table quantified and that clearly showed the most common responses to the questions indicating whether or not growth in empathy had occurred in students as a result of the *Being the Change* program. The responses were carefully transcribed using the services of GMR Transcription. Next, meaningful and otherwise significant quotes from students were noted and analyzed qualitatively through the creation of a table which grouped and categorized responses as themes emerged.

Lastly, my fourth source of data were teacher field notes, analyzed qualitatively to note observations that both supported and contradicted some of the findings from the other data sources.

Summary

This study sought to foster empathy amongst middle-school boys. I first saw the need for increased empathy amongst students when I observed bullying behaviors. I intentionally did not measure bullying behaviors for this study, as I wanted to focus on what I wanted to see more of in students: empathy. Over the course of six weeks I taught from Ahmed's work *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension*. Lessons included such themes as: "Exploring our Identities," Listening With Love," "Being Candid," "Becoming Better Informed," "Finding Humanity in Ourselves and in Others," and finally, "Facing Crisis

Together.” These lessons were a new and unique experience for my students, while simultaneously meeting grade-level Common Core Language Arts standards for reading, writing and speaking.

I administered a pre-invention BES Likert questionnaire, and had students take the same questionnaire post-intervention. Along the way I kept track of student progress and growth towards empathy through the “At First I Thought...Now I Think” journal entries and kept track of other classroom observations through teacher field notes. Finally, the project culminated with one-on-one interviews with students to learn whether or not this program had helped them grow in empathy for one another in their own words.

In this chapter the context, purpose and goals of this action research project focused on building empathy were reviewed. The school setting and demographics of my student participants were identified. The measures for data collection and the procedures were explained. This mixed method approach uses a triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data sources to ensure validity. The next chapter will present the data collection and analyses.

Chapter IV

Results

Serious concerns of violence in schools and public venues make it clear something must be done to help curtail this trend. The literature reviewed in Chapter Two demonstrated the value of empathy, as well as its potential to combat bullying and violence. For example, Nickerson (2018) made it clear that empathy is key to healthier students and schools; this research concluded teaching empathy was amongst the top three skills needed by students to create safer schools. Abraham Maslow (1943), moreover, reinforced the idea that empathy matters in his theory of human motivation, suggesting that it would be prudent to look to empathy to create inclusion and combat an individual's propensity towards violence or bullying towards others. In fact, Maslow's theory was created as he sat watching a parade of war veterans. He vowed to devote his life to creating a "psychology for the peace table" (Hoffman, 1988). I saw a need to instill peace at my middle school with bullying occurring in classrooms and around campus on a daily basis. I observed a lack of empathy amongst students as a primary cause of the bullying. Bullying leads to anger and resentment, which can easily turn to retaliation and violence (David-Ferdon et al., 2016).

My desire to reduce rates of bullying led me to choose fostering empathy as the focus of my research. I hoped to curtail present and future violence in the lives of my students. The action research question was: *How does the explicit teaching of social comprehension using Sara K. Ahmed's work, Being the Change, increase empathy among fifth and sixth grade students?* My goal was to increase levels of empathy amongst my students in the hope that bullying behavior would be reduced and understanding and kindness increased amongst my student population.

Overview of Methods and Data Collection

My action research project used Sarah K. Ahmed's work, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension* (2018). I taught her lessons to my students with such themes as: "Seeing Our Own Bias," "Understanding Microaggressions," "Broadening Our Ideas About Who We Are Responsible To and For," and "Understanding Others' Perspectives." The curriculum spanned eight weeks and included reading and writing assignments. Students completed each assignment in their personalized journal, and participated in group sharing and partner activities as recommended in Ahmed's book. Throughout the study I considered my students' needs, as Ahmed offered suggestions with room for flexibility, I adapted the lessons to be most relevant to my student population.

Prior to commencing the intervention of Ahmed's curriculum, I administered the pre-intervention survey called the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) (see Appendix A). The BES is a professional measure of empathy in youth and adults. I also introduced a pre-intervention journal activity (see Appendix B) called "At First I Thought...Now I Think..." Although I had known my students for over six months (we met in summer school), the BES and journal activity provided a clearer picture of empathy levels amongst my students. After the eight-week intervention, the post-intervention measures included the BES, part two of the student journal activity, and one-on-one interviews (see Appendix C) with 27 of my 31 participants.

Demographics of the Participants

The participants in this study came from a low-socioeconomic background as our school specifically serves historically marginalized populations. All student participants were proficient in English. Almost half of the student populations (44%) spoke English as a second language, and 52% of the students were bilingual, Spanish speakers. Thirty-three percent of parents needed a translator to be present in meetings, such as parent-teacher conferences, to bridge the language

gap and make sure they have a voice within our school community and the needs of their children are met.

Participants for this study were recruited from my fifth and sixth grade English Language Arts classes. All the participants were male. Additionally, there were 16 fifth graders and 15 sixth graders, for a total of 31 students participating in my study. All 31 students and their parents agreed to participate. Of the 31 learners, the racial background of the participants were: Latino (80%), Black (17%), and White (3%). The majority of students were Spanish speakers (60%). Sixteen percent of my students had IEPs for attention-related learning complexities.

Due to the behavioral variances between my fifth and sixth grade classes, I decided to break my participants into subgroups by grade level. My sixth graders group had a history of greater behavioral problems. Fifty three percent of all behavioral incidents was accounted for by the sixth grade class. I wanted to see if the data would be different between these two grade levels. Additionally, I was interested in the results for the whole group of participants.

Overall, the fifth ($n = 16$) and sixth grade ($n = 15$) students had similar racial and gender identities, the primary difference between the two groups was their incidence of behavioral problems. Behavioral incidents are defined as documented incidents of classroom disruption, or behavior that is verbally, physically or emotionally harmful to self, other students, or staff, including teachers. Figure 3 shows the average percentage of behavioral incidents across the entire school, grades five through eight in the trimester preceding the intervention.

Behavioral Incidents Across the Entire School's Student Population

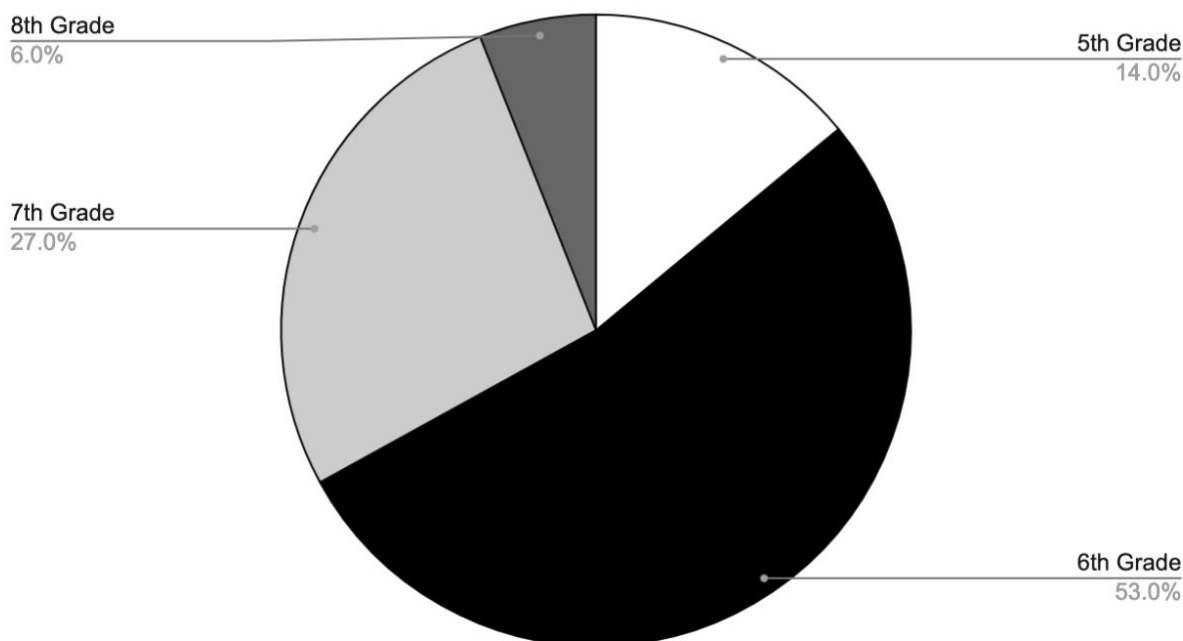


Figure 1. Percentage of behavioral incidents belonging to each grade level in the school's entire population of 60 students, composed of 16 fifth graders, 15 sixth graders, and equal numbers of seventh and eighth graders. ($N = 49$ incidents).

Of the 49 incidents that occurred in the trimester prior to my intervention, seven incidents were committed by fifth graders, 26 by sixth graders, 13 by seventh graders, and three by the eighth graders. Racial, economic and gender demographics are consistent across the entire school's population across all grade levels including the fifth and sixth grade participants. In other words, there is essentially no demographic variation between grade levels. Keep in mind the participants for this study were only the fifth and sixth grade students in Figure 3.

The 31 total participants in my study comprised 48% of the entire student population of the school and 69% of the school's behavioral problems according to the most recent trimester's data as reported by my site's administrators. This data was recorded prior to my intervention with Ahmed's *Being the Change* program. This data is consistent with the incident report percentages of these groups throughout the school year. There is no post-intervention data

because we were unable to complete the last trimester of the school year on campus due the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic that required our school to move to distance learning, only interacting with students via online resources, such as Google Classroom and Zoom.

Analysis of the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) survey

The 18 question Basic Empathy Scale (BES) survey (see Appendix A) was based on the English translation of the Adapted Spanish Version and was used with permissions granted for non-commercial research and educational purposes (Sánchez-Pérez, Fuentes, Jolliffe, & González-Salinas, 2014). Half of the BES survey questions explored levels of cognitive empathy and half indicated affective empathy. Cognitive empathy is present when a person is able to consciously recognize and logically understand another person's emotional state, sometimes called "perspective taking." Affective empathy, also known as emotional empathy or emotional contagion, allows a person to unconsciously, and automatically experience a vicarious sharing of another's emotions, such as feeling what others are feeling in that moment (Prochazkova & Kret, 2017). Figures 2 and 3 show the pre- and post-intervention results of the BES survey by cognitive, affective, and overall empathy levels of the fifth and sixth grade subgroups.

Basic Empathy Scale (BES) Results for 5th Grade Students

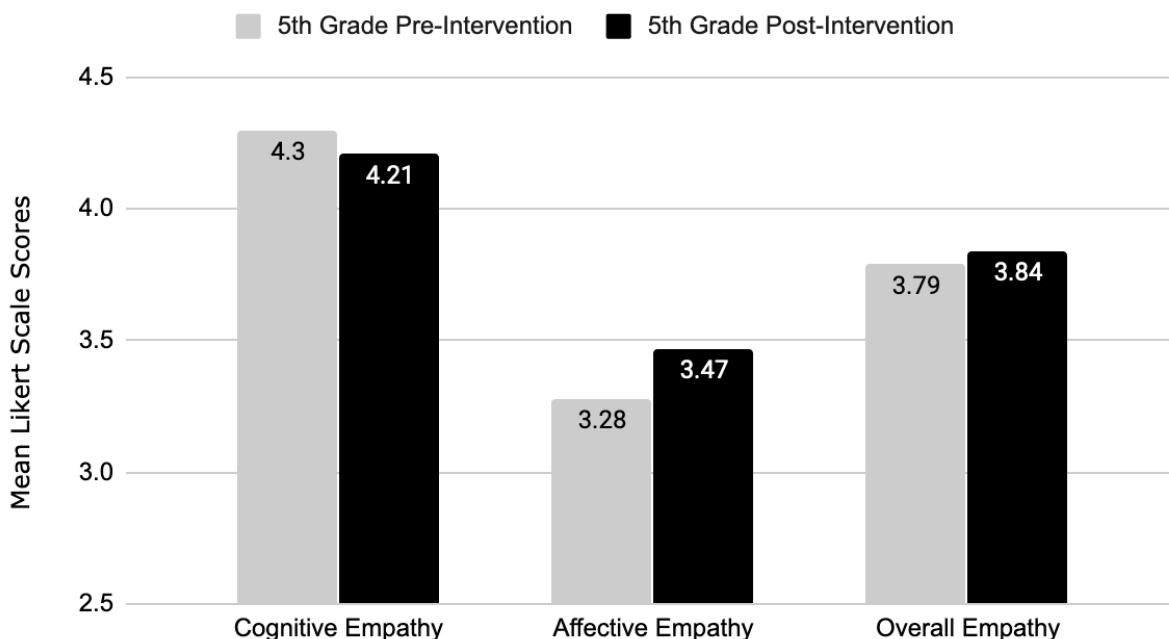


Figure 2. Fifth grade pre-post mean Basic Empathy Scale results, based on a 6-point Likert scale survey, ranging from one being strongly disagree, to six being strongly agree. A higher number answer on the Likert scale indicated a higher level of empathy demonstrated by the response ($n = 16$).

According to the Basic Empathy Scale survey, there was a small decrease in cognitive empathy among fifth grade participants. A higher score indicates higher levels of empathy. Fifth grade students saw the greatest increase in affective empathy with a 0.19 increase ($M = 3.28$ pre-intervention, $M = 3.47$ post-intervention). This increase in affective empathy counteracted the -0.09 mean Likert score decrease in cognitive empathy, resulting in an increase of 0.05 Likert points for overall empathy. Results of the BES survey showed an overall increase in empathy when comparing pre- and post-intervention survey responses.

The pre- and post-intervention BES results for the sixth grade subgroup are shown in Figure 3.

Basic Empathy Scale (BES) Results for 6th Grade Students

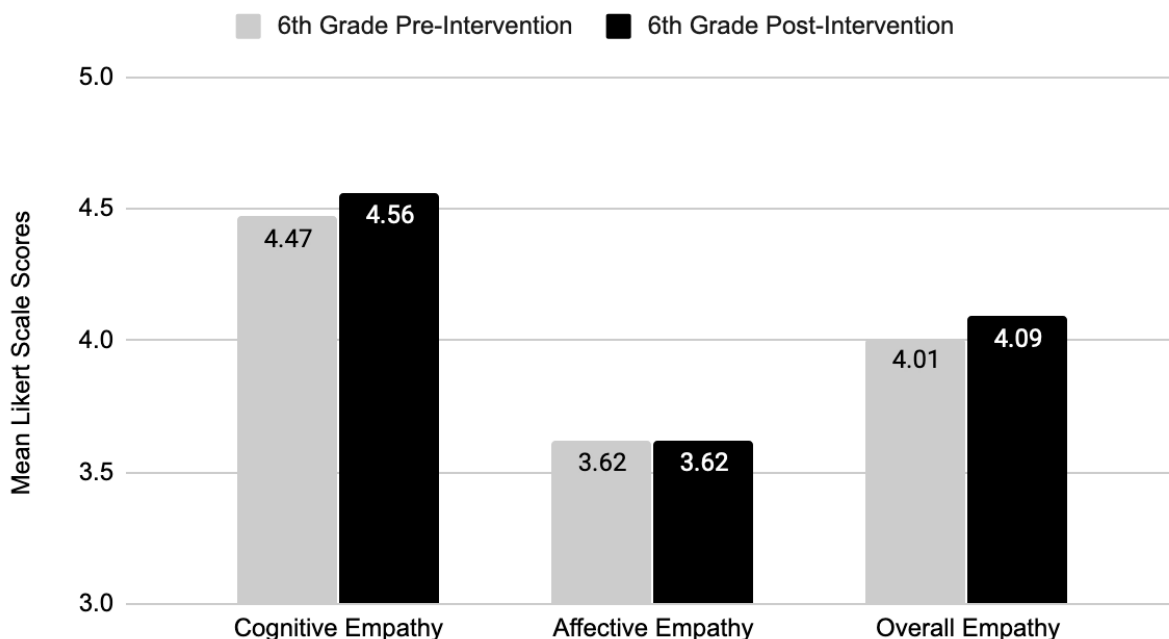


Figure 3. Sixth grade pre-post mean Basic Empathy Scale results, based on a 6-point Likert scale survey, ranging from one being strongly disagree, to six being strongly agree. A higher number answer on the Likert scale indicated a higher level of empathy demonstrated by the response. ($n = 15$)

Sixth grade student participants showed a 0.09 increase in cognitive empathy mean scores. Their rates of affective empathy remained exactly the same pre- and post-intervention. This subgroup saw an increase in overall empathy of 0.08 points. As noted in Figure 3, the sixth grade subgroup had higher levels (53%) of behavioral incidents at the start of the intervention. Yet, you can see by the mean Likert scale scores this group started off and ended with higher levels of empathy according to the pre- and post-intervention BES survey, than did my fifth grade subgroup.

A comparison of the two groups was created by putting these two subgroups side by side in the Figure 4. The figure shows the overall changes in mean Likert scale score measures of empathy, pre- and post-intervention. This figure can help portray what happened before and after implementing Ahmed's *Being the Change* curriculum.

5th and 6th Grade BES Pre-Post Intervention Change

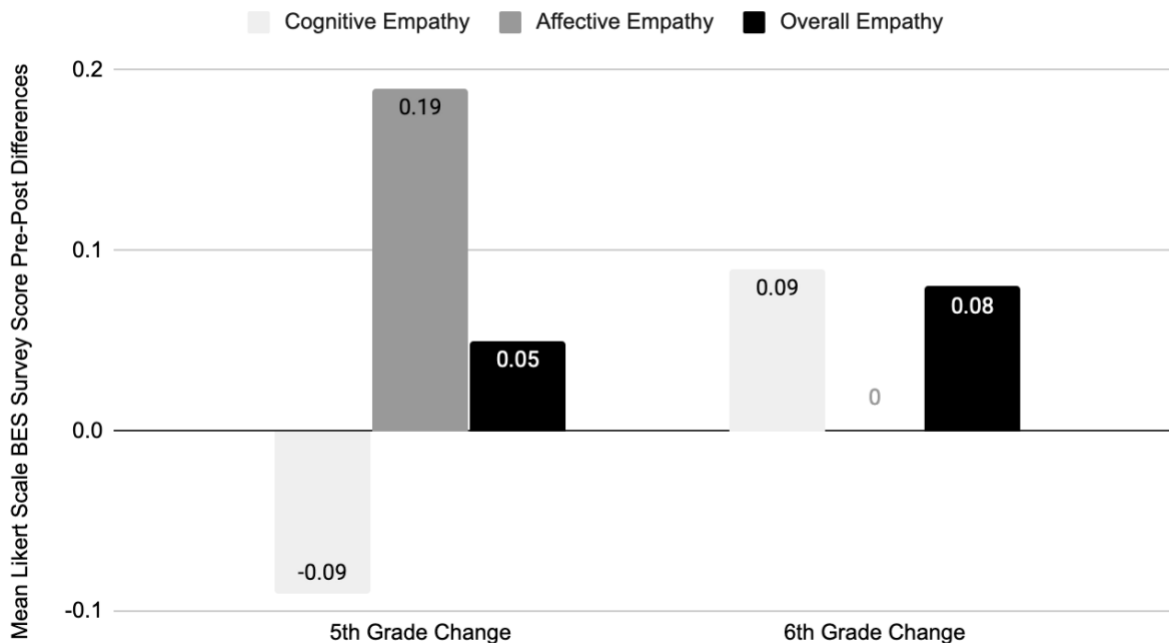


Figure 4. Pre-post intervention change in mean Likert scores, fifth grade ($n = 16$) compared to sixth grade ($n = 15$).

A view of mean scores for the questions on the survey that were indicative of cognitive empathy, shows that fifth grade students had a decrease of -0.09, whereas sixth graders had an inverse, a 0.09 point increase. In the area of affective empathy, fifth graders saw a 0.19 increase in mean scores, and sixth grade saw no change, thus no bar indicates no change in pre- post-intervention BES sixth grade scores. Lastly, when combining cognitive and affective scores to get a sense of overall empathy, the sixth grade subgroup saw a greater increase in overall empathy, 0.08 points compared to fifth grade group which saw a 0.05 point growth.

Finally, Figure 5 shows the combined BES pre- and post-intervention scores in cognitive, affective and overall empathy for all participants ($N = 31$).

Basic Empathy Scale (BES) Results for all Students

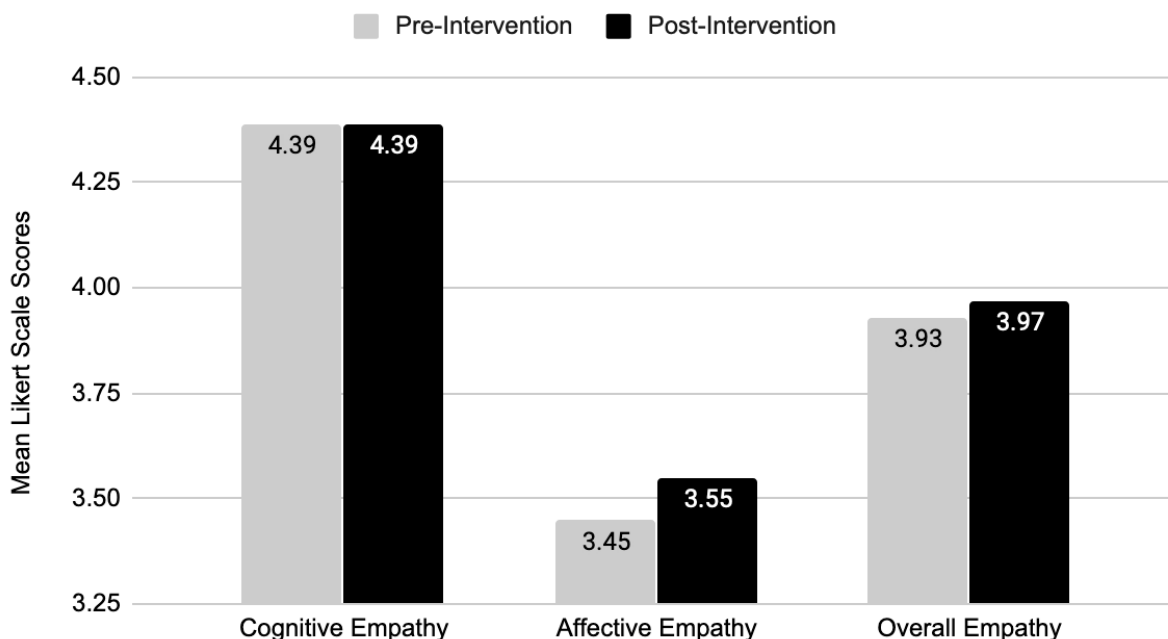


Figure 5. All student participants pre-post, mean Basic Empathy Scale results, based on a 6-point Likert scale survey, ranging from one being strongly disagree, to six being strongly agree. A higher number answer on the Likert scale indicated a higher level of empathy demonstrated by the response. ($N = 31$).

The cognitive empathy mean scores remained the same pre- and post-intervention for both groups, $M = 4.39$ on the 6-point scale. Figure 5 shows that the greatest overall increase of 0.10 points for all participants, occurred for affective empathy ($M = 3.45$ pre-intervention, $M = 3.55$ post-intervention). Overall empathy scores across all 31 participants saw an increase of 0.04 points.

The following section, further quantitative data taken from a measure provided by student work: a pre-post journal assignment from my intervention using the *Being the Change* curriculum, shows more data indicating growth in empathy amongst student subgroups and as a whole.

Analysis of Student Work, “At First I Thought...Now I Think...” Journals

This style of pre and post student journal (see Appendix B) was a highly encouraged activity across the *Being the Change* curriculum. Students began their journal entry with a T-chart on which one half says, “At First I Thought...” where students recorded their initial thoughts on a subject before a lesson, then completed the other half of the t-chart entitled, “Now I Think...,” after the lesson. I am only sharing data from one particular “At First I Thought...Now I Think...” journal entry as this one was most clearly indicative of a growth in empathy amongst students. This particular entry asked students to rank three concepts for the value or place they held in their lives from one to three. Number one being the concept or value that was most important in their life, and three being the least important of the three options, none the less still important, albeit ranked lower than their number one priority in life.

The three values students were asked to rank were: “achieving at a high level,” “happiness,” and “caring for others.” After completing all of the lessons from *Being the Change*, at the very end of the unit students were asked to once again rank these same three values. For purposes of this research, the concept of “caring for others” was the response which most closely correlated to empathy. If students chose caring for others over personal happiness, or a high level of personal achievement this indicated that the student thought of the needs of others first, cared about and wanted to help first, thus requiring more empathy than putting either of the other two concepts first. Ranking “caring for others” as number two or three did not indicate that a student was not empathetic at all; rather, ranking “caring for others” number one implied higher levels of empathy. Students were instructed that there was no wrong answer, this was a straight forward ranking of three positive concepts.

Figure 6 shows pre and post rankings of “achieving at a high level,” “happiness,” and “caring for others” for fifth graders:

5th Grade "At First I Thought...Now I Think..." Journal Responses

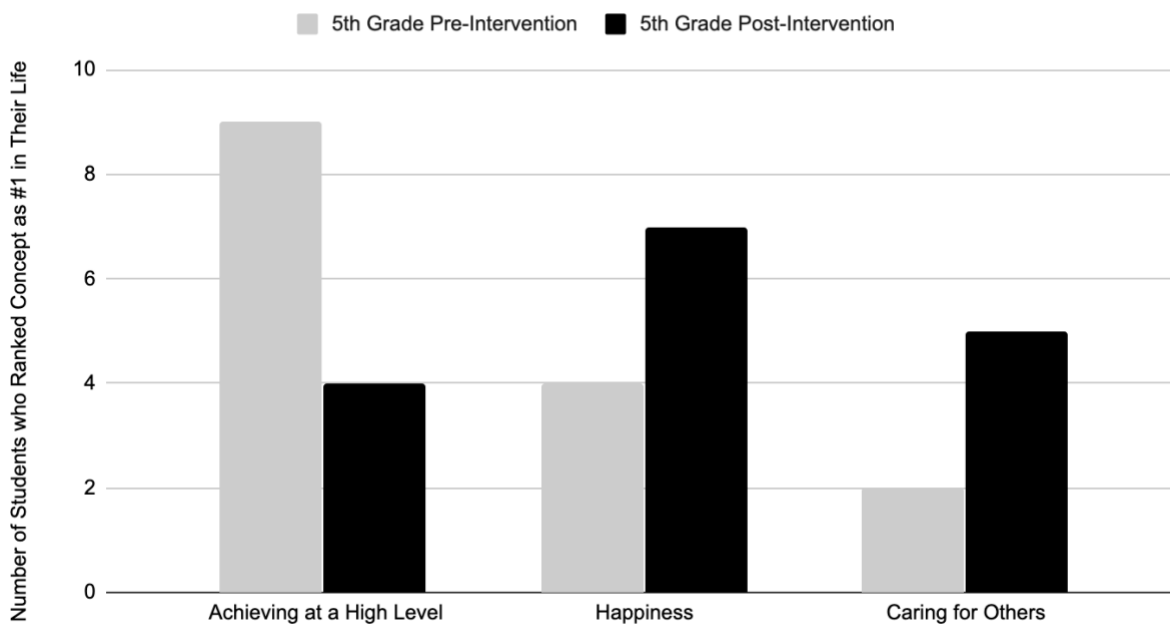


Figure 6. Fifth grade participants' pre-post journal responses. ($n = 16$).

Pre-intervention responses are indicated by the gray bar and post-intervention responses are represented by the Black bar. Before completing all of the lessons in the *Being the Change* curriculum, nine fifth grade students ranked achieving at a high level as the number one priority in their life, four students ranked happiness as number one and two students ranked caring for others as the most important. After the *Being the Change* intervention, five students ranked “caring for others” as number one in their life, as compared to two students’ pre-intervention ranking. The number of students choosing the most empathetic response more than doubled.

Next, Figure 7 demonstrates the same data for sixth graders’ pre and post journal entries, “At First I Thought...Now I Think...”, ranking “achieving at a high level,” “happiness,” and “caring for others”.

6th Grade "At First I Thought...Now I Think..." Journal Responses

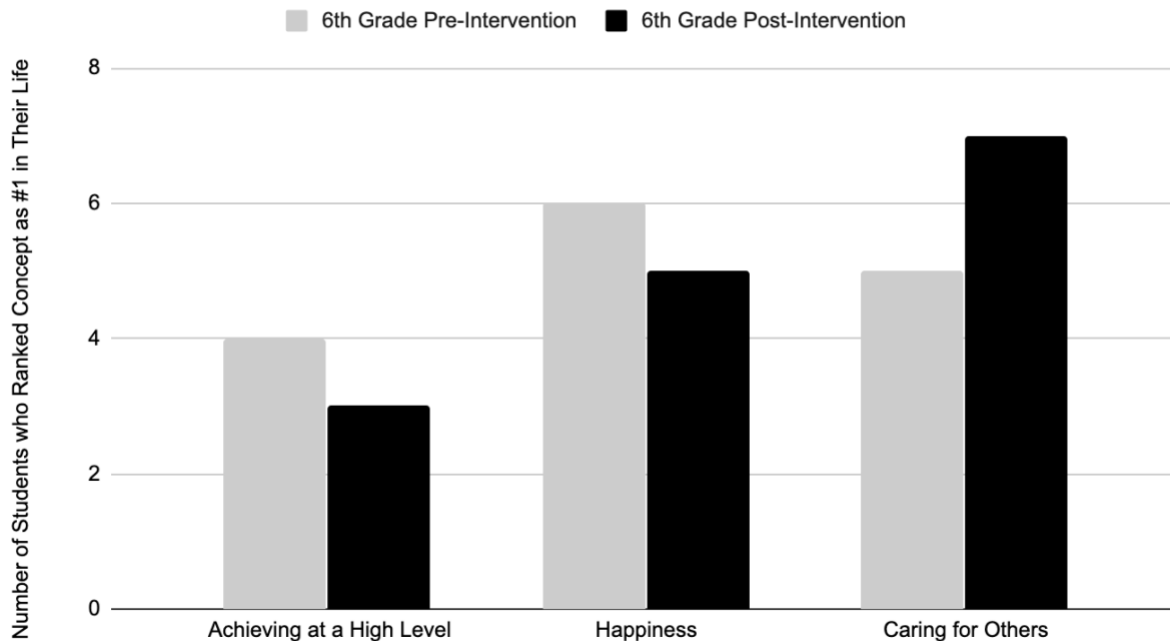


Figure 7. Sixth grade participants' pre-post journal responses ($n = 15$).

Figure 7 supports previous data, which indicated the sixth grade subgroup began (pre-intervention) with higher levels of empathy than the fifth grade subgroup. Five sixth graders (33%) ranked "caring for others" as being number one in their life, whereas two fifth graders or 13% ranked "caring for others" (Figure 6) as being number one in their life pre-intervention. Post-intervention, the sixth grade scores "caring for others" increased from five to seven students. Thus, there was an increase in the sixth grade subgroup scores from 33% to 44% in "caring for others" as number one in their lives, above achieving at a high level or personal happiness.

Lastly, the two subgroups were combined (see Figure 8) to evaluate the overall change in student views prior to and concluding the intervention.

"At First I Thought...Now I Think..." Journal Responses for all Students

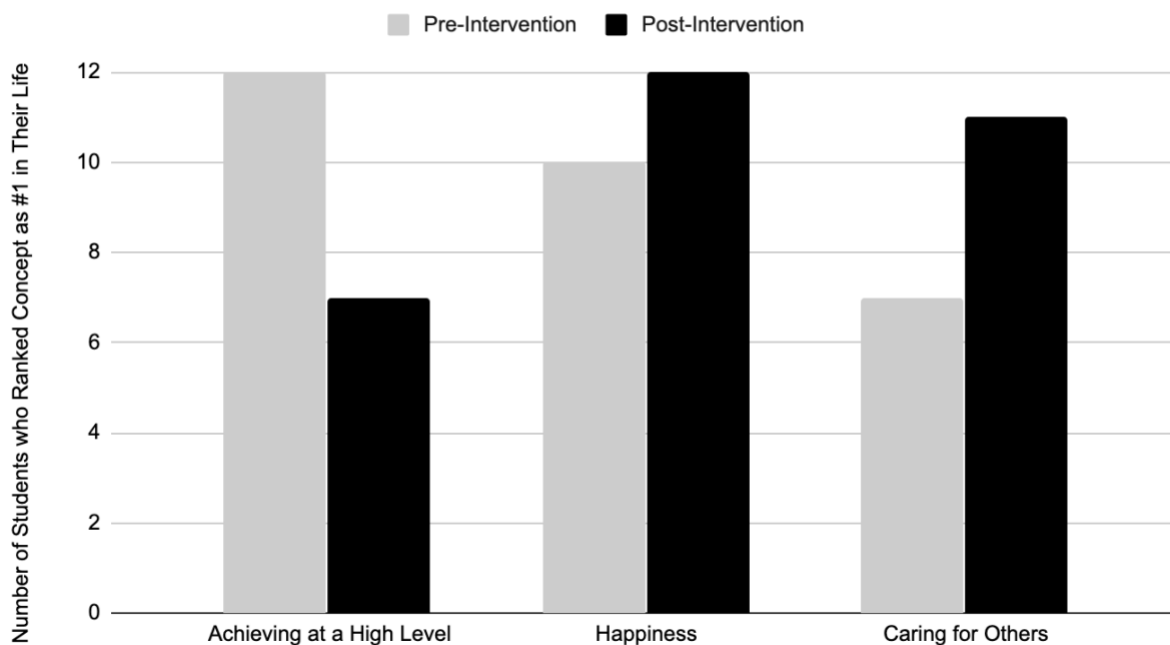


Figure 8. All student participants' pre-post journal responses. ($N = 31$).

Figure 8 shows that pre-intervention 23% of the participants chose the answer most indicative of empathy ("caring for others"), whereas post-intervention 36% demonstrated that this higher level of empathy was important. Pre-intervention, a majority of students chose "achieving at a high level" as most important. Post-intervention, the majority of participants chose "happiness." There was an increase from seven students ranking "caring for others" as number one, to 11 students ranking it number one. The data in Figure 8 clearly indicates the greatest growth in students choosing "caring for others" as number one; compared to significantly fewer students choosing "achieving at a high level," post-intervention; and a smaller increase in students who chose "happiness" as number one over "caring for others."

Analysis of Post-Intervention, One-on-One Teacher-Student Interviews

After the completion of the *Being the Change* unit, I conducted one-on-one teacher-student interviews. Twenty-seven students were present on the day that I was able to conduct the

interviews. Therefore, four students did not participate in the concluding one-on-one interviews. I chose to interview all of my students in one day because reports coming out at the time indicated schools would be closing by the following week at the latest in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Student interviews provided qualitative and quantitative data. I read through the interview questions on the typed transcripts from GMR Transcription services. For each question, I coded the data and looked for patterns, then themes.

Table 1 contains word for word excerpts taken from the interview transcripts. Fifth and sixth grade students are represented equally—and, as with all data from this study, I have maintained anonymity by excluding student names. Column one contains the questions students were asked and columns two through five contain student answers that were chosen as representative of the answers I heard most frequently from the majority of the 27 students who were interviewed. It is important to note that four students (19%) did not understand what empathy meant, so I told them the meaning of empathy to ensure that they would be able to answer the subsequent questions in the one-on-one interview.

Table 1

Student Quotes from Post-Being the Change One-on-One Teacher-Student Interviews

Questions	Student Responses	Student Responses	Student Responses	Student Responses
1. What does empathy mean to you? Did our <i>Being the Change</i> unit help you understand empathy?	"Empathy to me means, like, caring about others like you care for yourself."	"It means being kind and kinda like treating others the way you wanna be treated. But mostly, it's kinda like just putting yourself in other people's shoes and being able to feel what they feel."	"Empathy means that like you know how other people are feeling. Like that thing we read about Roger and this other lady who showed empathy because she knew how it was to go through that situation."	"Empathy means to me...thinking how they feel, and not, like, being selfish, and, like not doing something that they – don't want to do. You want to think...you want to know how they feel."
2. Do you feel that you have more empathy towards other people after completing the lessons from <i>Being the Change</i> ?	"I think it did help me be more aware of what I'm doing with people and how much empathy I'm giving to them."	"Well, yeah! Because like before, I didn't know if other people were mad at me or sad...I just kept doing the same, what I do. And now, I can understand what I'm doing to other people and how I'm making them feel."	"I think yes, because I used to not like people and I didn't like working with people sometimes, but now that I'm working with people like with <i>Being the Change</i> , I get it now."	"Yes, because it showed me, like, how I should look out for others, and I should think, like how they would be feeling...how I would be feeling in the situation."
3. Do you feel people in our class are more kind to one another and understanding after these lessons...in your opinion has there been more or less poor treatment, teasing or intolerance of others...?	"...we're getting a better bond...ever since we did <i>Being the Change</i> ...I'd say less now because we apologize and all that. Mistakes make us grow, and now that we know, we don't do that anymore. So yeah, I think <i>Being the Change</i> did help."	"Yeah, because in the beginning of the year some people would call me...Yeah. But it's working out more now because they don't call me that anymore...There's been less because I haven't seen that much teasing."	"Yeah, because in soccer, I see a lot of people helping others up more instead of making jokes about them falling."	"Yeah, because we did a lot of stuff with people. We worked with the class, and I'm guessing right now that everybody has empathy for each other...There's been less teasing...yeah, there's just less chaos and teasing."
4. Are you glad we did this program, and do you think I should continue to do <i>Being the Change</i> with future 5 th and 6 th grade students?	"Yeah. I'm pretty sure they'll like it because they're gonna know other people's personalities and how they feel...and they'll feel more comfortable that the teacher is helping."	"Yes, I think that you should do it because when we were doing some of the stuff I thought of things that I wouldn't have thought...I was thinking of other people."	"...yes because you kind of helped us a lot and what happens if, like, the next 5 th graders are, like even worse and they fight a lot, even more than us. And I feel like if you teach that class, it could help them."	"Yes. I'm glad we did it, and I think you should keep on doing it because it really changed people."

The excerpts in Table 1 reveal a range in students' ability to articulate personal experiences. Some students were able to give very specific and detailed examples to support their opinions and experiences, and others gave more basic or simple responses.

Four themes emerged from analysis of the one-on-one interviews. I reviewed the interview text and did a frequency count per each of the themes. The purpose of creating this quantitative analysis was to create an overall picture of the effect of the intervention on the group as a whole (see Figure 9). I counted similar responses and determined percentages to compare the number of similar responses.

Post-Intervention Student Interview Responses

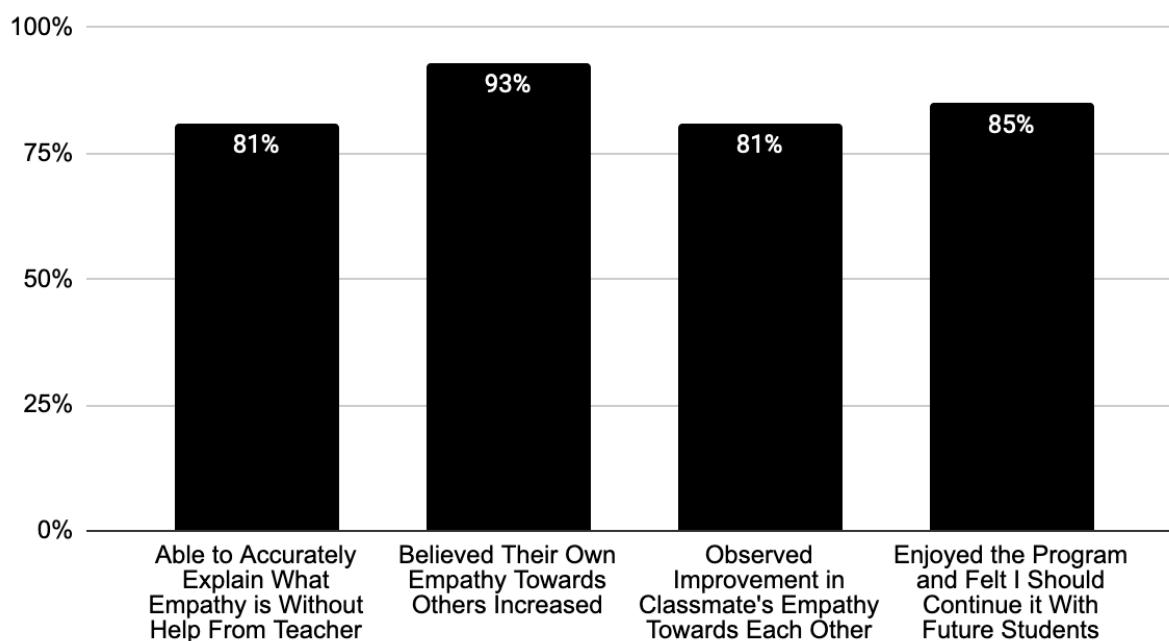


Figure 9. All student participants' one-on-one student-teacher interview responses to questions (see Appendix C). See Table 1 below for questions and sample responses ($N = 27$).

Figure 9 shows overall what students felt about the program according to the four main categories reflected by each of the four bars in the chart above. Data showed that 81% of the 27 students interviewed were able to accurately explain what empathy means without help from the

teacher, and they affirmed that the *Being the Change* unit gave them a greater understanding of the meaning of empathy. Most of the students (93%) believed that their own personal levels of empathy increased towards other students, and 81% observed improvement of their classmates' levels of empathy towards themselves and others as observed by more kindness and caring towards one another and few incidents of bullying. Lastly, 85% of the 27 students interviewed enjoyed the program and felt there was a big enough impact on fostering empathy that they thought I should continue the program next year.

Summary

The purpose of this action research project was to determine if the lessons in Ahmed's book, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension*, would foster empathy amongst my students. The three data sources highlighted in this chapter, : pre- post-Basic Empathy Scale (BES) Likert- Scale Surveys, the pre-post "At First I Thought...Now I Think..." student journals, and post-intervention student interviews provide a means to triangulate data sources to show support for an increase in empathy and reduction in bullying-type behaviors. The results of this study indicated that students grew in their understanding of empathy, experienced feeling more empathy towards and from others, and could identify specific examples of instances or moments when empathy was demonstrated as a direct result of what they had learned throughout the intervention. Students also noted that in the past certain students reacted in a bullying-type manner (such as laughing at and making fun of someone who fell down while playing soccer), now these same students thought about how the other person was feeling and responded more empathetically.

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative data analyses will be interpreted in the following chapter. This interpretation will involve comparing results to the information shared in

the literature review. Chapter Five includes further implications of this study, with detailed anecdotes from my classroom experience throughout the administration of this intervention. The concluding chapter includes plans for my future work as a transformative teacher leader—which are a direct result of conducting this action research project.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Next Steps

Empathy could be an antidote to the bullying and violence that plagues so many of our schools, homes, neighborhoods and public spaces. Violence begets more violence, victimized students far too often victimize others in turn (Barker, 2008). Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as Black and Brown youth and their families, are more likely to experience fear on a daily basis from the violence they see in their neighborhoods and schools (Graf, 2018). Michele Borba, Ed.D. is an educational psychologist, former teacher and highly respected expert on fostering empathy and resilience in children and teens as a solution to the tragedies of youth violence and bullying. Borba's thirty years of experience have led her to conclude that empathy, defined as being able to understand the needs and feelings of others, is the foundation of an inclusive learning environment that is safe and caring (Borba, 2018). Based on her research and engagement with extant literature, she made the determination that empathy is in fact the *best* antidote to racism, bullying, and aggression because prosocial behaviors are increased significantly by empathy (Eisenberg, Eggum, & DiGiunta, 2010 and Santos, et al., 2011, as cited in Borba, 2018). Nearly 50 years before Borba and many other experts in the field of empathy began their work, Abraham H. Maslow began formulating his well-known theory of human motivation, and emphasized the human need for love and esteem as an integral part of the psychology that he desired to bring to the world that would bring about peace (Maslow, 1943). After I explored Maslow's work and over 50 experts in the fields of youth violence, bullying, social-emotional learning and empathy—my research pointed me on a clear path to peace for my students: fostering empathy.

When I first met my fifth and sixth grade students I was struck by the extremes I saw in their behaviors. I saw so much kindness and care towards the peers they liked and so much love for their families; yet, the cruelty they were capable of towards their unfavored classmates was heart-breaking. These young men were so sensitive, thoughtful, and caring that it baffled me how they could engage in bullying behaviors so frequently. For example, I saw the same students who had reached out their hands to pick up a friend who had fallen down or shed tears during parent-teacher conferences (when they knew they had let their parents down), surround a shy student, taunting him by pretending to embody a zombie when they knew zombies were his biggest fear. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 40% of all middle school students are involved in bullying in some capacity (Domino, 2013), so what I observed should not be surprising. However, seeing the effects of these behaviors on hearts and minds in the real world amongst students that I had gotten to know and grown to care about, lit a fire that inspired me to act. I saw such an obvious lack of *consistent* empathetic attitudes and behaviors among my students. Hence, I recognized the potential for such greatness if only they could realize what they were doing and why it was wrong. If only they could stop and recognize the damage they were causing to the peers they were bullying and the damage they were inflicting upon their own humanity.

After being introduced to Sara K. Ahmed's (2018) work, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension*, I gained promising tools and strategies to engage these youth and lead them on a journey towards empathy. My work was inspired by Ahmed's extensive 15 year teaching experience in diverse settings with diverse populations, and her focus on designing her classroom to help students to see the humanity in others and discover their own dignity. Moreover, Ahmed served on the teacher leadership team for an organization (Facing

History and Ourselves) dedicated to developing empathy for others and inspiring critical thinking in students. I had faith Ahmed's work, and framed my action research project on the question: *Will the use of Sara K. Ahmed's work, Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension, increase empathy amongst fifth and sixth grade students?*

My action research project followed a mixed-method approach. I relied on qualitative and quantitative measures to determine an increase in empathy following my intervention aligned with Ahmed's (2018) work. In the previous chapter I shared the data from my findings, regarding an increase of empathy in my student participants. The data answered my question in the affirmative: yes, the use of Ahmed's lessons and strategies from her *Being the Change* book, did increase empathy amongst my fifth and sixth grade students. In this chapter, I will share a complete summary of my findings, the interpretation of my findings, the limitations of this study, and my personal plan for future action as a teacher leader. In the summary of findings section, I will focus on my three primary data sources which triangulated to support my findings: the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) survey (see Appendix A), students' At First I Thought...Now I Think... journal entries (see Appendix B), and post-intervention student interviews (see Appendix C for the interview protocol). The following section, which shares the interpretation of my findings, will go beyond the numbers to express the true impact on students. Next, in the sharing of limitations, I will indicate areas for improvement and untapped potential for future research on fostering empathy in students. After sharing all of this in detail, I will share my plans for the future in relation to the important work explored within this action research project and study.

Summary of Findings

Each of the three measures used to determine the efficacy of utilizing the *Being the Change* curriculum to foster empathy was unique. The Basic Empathy Scale (BES) was a 6-point

Likert scale survey consisting of 18 questions. This survey was found in the PsycTESTS database, created by experts in the field and used with permission (see Appendix A) and was given pre and post intervention. The second measure was an ongoing journal assignment directly from the *Being the Change* curriculum entitled, “At First I Thought...Now I Think...” (see Appendix B). The third measure were post-intervention student interviews I conducted with 27 of the 31 total participants. Due to the onset of COVID-19 I was unable to interview the four student participants who were absent prior to closing the school. The one-on-one interviews only occurred upon completion of the *Being the Change* curriculum, and the questions can be found in Appendix C.

I used Ahmed’s book to design lesson plans that made up an eight-week long unit. Students completed lessons from *Being the Change* curriculum daily, and we covered topics, concepts, and lessons from every chapter in the book. Examples of some of the topics specifically covered in the lessons from Ahmed’s work were: “Affirming Our Identities,” “Journeying into Our Family Histories,” “Seeing Our Own Bias,” “Understanding Microaggressions,” “Refusing to Let Other’s Bias Define Us,” “Moving Beyond Our Initial Thinking,” and “Understanding Others’ Perspectives” (Ahmed, 2018).

Basic Empathy Scale (BES) Survey. The participants in this survey were my fifth ($n = 16$) and sixth ($n = 15$) grade students. Students in these two subgroups had unique characteristics and personalities and I wanted to examine whether the *Being the Change* intervention would have a different effect on these two subgroups. I was interested in how students would respond due to age and personality differences. For example, the sixth grade class on average accounts for 53% of the entire schools’ behavioral incidents, whereas my fifth grade class only accounted

for 14% of the entire school behavioral incidents (see Figure 1). I compared pre and post survey results by separate subgroup and as an entire group ($N = 31$).

Interestingly my sixth grade subgroup had more behavioral problems initially, yet they scored higher on the BES survey indicating that this subgroup began with higher levels of empathy than my fifth grade subgroup (see Figures 3 and 5). Pre-intervention, the sixth grade group had a mean score of 4.47 on the cognitive empathy portion of the survey whereas the fifth grade subgroup had a mean score of 4.3 on the 6-point scale. The sixth grade group pre-intervention affective empathy measure yielded a mean of 3.62, compared to the fifth grade mean of 3.45. Lastly, the two types of empathy BES measures were combined and the average pre-intervention scores for the sixth grade group had a mean of 4.01, whereas the fifth grade group mean stood at 3.79. Sixth graders consistently demonstrated higher levels of empathy.

Post-intervention BES results showed that the fifth grade group score decreased 2%, or -0.09 Likert scale points in cognitive empathy, whereas the sixth grade subgroup showed the exact opposite with a 2% increase, or a 0.09 Likert points in cognitive empathy. The fifth grade subgroup saw the greatest increase in the measure of affective empathy with of 6%, or 0.19 point increase, and there was no change in the sixth grade group pre and post-intervention scores. Lastly, measures of overall empathy showed a slight increase of 1% or 0.05 point change for fifth graders and 2% or 0.08 point increase for sixth graders (see Figure 4).

As an entire group ($N = 31$), cognitive empathy remained exactly the same pre and post with a mean of 4.39. However, affective empathy increased 3% with 0.10 points change. Overall, empathy for the entire group increased by roughly 2%, or 0.07 points (see Figure 5). These results, while modest, showed overall growth of empathy amongst students pre and post-

intervention. I will delve more thoroughly into this in the Interpretation of Findings sections later in this chapter.

“At First I Thought...Now I Think...” journal entries. The student journals were evaluated pre and post intervention, separately and then combined for overall results. One of the most telling “At First I Thought...Now I Think...” journal activities involved asking students to rank three values in order of importance. The first value was “Achieving at a High Level,” for example, getting good grades. The second was “Happiness,” meaning personal happiness or being generally satisfied with their life. The third and last value being ranked was “Caring for Others,” as in helping, spending time with and/or looking out for family, friends and others in their lives (Ahmed, 2018 p. xxiii).

Pre-intervention, more than half (56%) of the fifth graders ranked “Achieving at a High Level” as number one, one fourth of the subgroup ranked “Happiness” as number one, and only two (13%) ranked “Caring for Others” as number one (see Figure 6). The sixth graders started off with higher levels of empathy (13% in “Caring for Others”) before the Being *the Change* curriculum was implemented, with just under one quarter of students ranking “Achieving at a High Level” as number one, nearly half of the students in this subgroup ranked “Happiness” as number one, and one third of this group ranked “Caring for Others” as the number one priority in their life (see Figure 7). Sixth grade showed 33% of students ($n = 15$) ranking the most empathetic response as number one in their lives, as compared with 13% of fifth graders ($n = 16$) ranking the most empathetic value as number one.

For post-intervention results, I will focus solely on changes seen in the category of “Caring for Others,” as this was the value that most indicated the presence of empathy in students. Fifth grade student saw 19% more students, choosing “Caring for Others” as the

number one priority in their lives (see Figure 8). Sixth graders showed 13% increase in students, ranking the most empathetic value as number one in their lives. Overall, the *Being the Change* curriculum resulted in a 13% increase in all student participants choosing the most empathetic value as being most important to them. Ultimately, post-intervention 35% of students chose “Caring for Others” as being number one in their lives after experiencing the lessons from *Being the Change* compared to 22% pre-intervention (see Figure 8). The post-intervention results brought to light an interesting and meaningful connection to students’ journaling regarding a lesson on Harriet Tubman, which I will share more about in the Interpretations section.

Post-intervention student interviews. The post-intervention student interviews supported the positive outcomes of this intervention. Students were interviewed one-on-one (see Appendix C). During the interview, students were encouraged to speak freely and with honesty. Students knew there were no penalties or wrong answers. These questions were combined into four key categories: 1) Able to accurately explain what empathy is without help from teacher, 2) Believed their own empathy towards others increased, 3) Observed improvement in classmate’s empathy towards each other, and 4) Enjoyed the program and felt I should continue it with future students.

I coded the transcribed responses and determined that 81% of interviewed students ($N = 27$) were able to accurately explain what empathy means without my help (see Figure 9). Additionally, 93% of students believed their own empathy towards others increased, and 81% observed improvement in their classmate’s empathy towards each other. Lastly, 85% of the interviewees enjoyed the program and felt I should continue it with future students (see Figure 9). I will delve more into the students who were not in the majority with their viewpoints later in this chapter.

Student responses to the question: “What does empathy mean to you? Did our *Being the Change* unit help you understand empathy?” demonstrated how much the intervention helped them see empathy in their own lives. For example, one student answered “Empathy means that like you know how other people are feeling. Like that thing we read about Roger and this other lady who showed empathy because she knew how it was to go through that situation.” The interaction between the story character’s this student mentioned was an excellent example of what empathy means. Another answered: “It means being kind and kinda like treating others the way you wanna be treated. But mostly, it’s kinda like just putting yourself in other people’s shoes and being able to feel what they feel” (see Table 1). This student’s response used common examples given by many students, which indicated a good understanding of empathy, specifically being able to feel what another person is feeling or putting yourself in their shoes.

Attitudes about having empathy. Student responses to the question: “Do you feel that you have more empathy towards other people after completing the lessons from *Being the Change*?” revealed how students internalized the concept of being empathetic. In one response, students told me: “Well, yeah! Because like before, I didn’t know if other people were mad at me or sad...I just kept doing the same, what I do. And now, I can understand what I’m doing to other people and how I’m making them feel” and “I think yes, because I used to not like people and I didn’t like working with people sometimes, but now that I’m working with people like with *Being the Change*, I get it now.” Students names have been omitted from for anonymity, however I will be able to share more of their individual stories and the significance of these direct quotes, later on in the chapter.

Attitudes about others being empathetic. Student responses to the question: “Do you feel people in our class are more kind to one another and understanding after these lessons...in your

opinion has there been more or less poor treatment, teasing or intolerance of others?” revealed how students felt others treated them. Representative student answers included: “...we’re getting a better bond...ever since we did *Being the Change*...I’d say less now because we apologize and all that. Mistakes make us grow, and now that we know, we don’t do that anymore. So yeah, I think *Being the Change* did help” and “Yeah, because in the beginning of the year some people would call me...Yeah. But it’s working out more now because they don’t call me that anymore...There’s been less because I haven’t seen that much teasing.” There is so much more to these students stories, so much that can be learned from students’ experiences that will be shared later.

Students’ views about the value of intervention program. Lastly, students were asked: “Are you glad we did this program, and do you think I should continue to do *Being the Change* with future 5th and 6th grade students?” This question was designed to learn more about what was valuable to students in learning about empathy through the designed intervention curricula and why it is important to learn about empathy. Students responded: “I say yes because you kind of helped us a lot and what happens if, like, the next 5th graders are, like even worser and they fight a lot, even more than us. And I feel like if you teach that class, it could help them,” also, “Yes, I think that you should do it because when we were doing some of the stuff I thought of things that I wouldn’t have thought...I was thinking of other people.” Common themes of self-awareness and awareness of others emerged across each student interview, and for each of the questions asked of them. Students demonstrated their growth with actual examples and stories from our time spent engaging in lessons from *Being the Change*. All three measures showed an increase in empathy amongst the vast majority of student participants.

Interpretation of Findings

Classroom experiences created through the use of Sara K. Ahmed's (2018) work, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension* were in fact successful in fostering empathy amongst my fifth and sixth grade students. Students demonstrated higher levels of empathy in their pre and post BES survey results, in their own writing from the pre post "At First I Thought...Now I Think..." journal entries, and in their post intervention interview responses. Additionally, I was able to observe positive changes regarding empathy in my students which I wrote about in my personal teacher field notes journal. These reflections will further illuminate key findings. Because I was able to triangulate my data, through the use of three primary measures that were both qualitative and quantitative the answer was clear, and each source of data supported and reinforced the findings of the other data sources. In this section I will delve into the stories behind the results from each source of data.

Basic Empathy Scale (BES) Survey. As mentioned previously, my sixth grade students accounted for 53% of the entire school's behavioral incidents in the most recent assessments. This statistic was not surprising from experiences of observations of this group. It was within this sixth grade group that I observed the most serious cases of bullying, and the most incidents of hurt feelings and strong emotions resulting in confrontation. Conversely, my fifth grade students accounted for 14% of the entire school's behavioral incidents across the entire school's makeup of four grade levels and they had the milder incidents of bullying, though they likewise showed strong emotions when they felt slighted by a classmate; rather than confronting peers first, they almost always came to me first, in tears telling me what their classmate had done to hurt them. This allowed me to intervene and help the fifth grade students work it out before it escalated into a behavioral incident. Teacher intervention and support for problems between students often occurred after the problem had erupted into a behavioral incident for sixth grade students. And

yet, sixth graders started off higher on the empathy scale according to BES and showed twice as much improvement in overall empathy when compared to fifth graders.

Ironically, for the sixth grade students, it seemed that their greater levels of empathy as documented by the BES survey, perhaps resulted in stronger emotions and without the tools for healthy ways to express these emotions they erupted into arguments between peers. For example, as in the incident I mentioned earlier in the chapter when students surrounded a vulnerable student pretending to be zombies it resulted in the student victim being overcome with tears of fear; another student bystander who frequently had behavioral incidents, came to his friend's aid and nearly got into a fight with the offending students. Research has shown that social-emotional skills result in safer schools, especially when students are taught perspective taking related to empathy, emotion identification, and conflict resolution (Nickerson, 2018). In future studies, it would be worthwhile to investigate if Ahmed's work not only helped to increase empathy, but as I have reason to believe, may also help students to cope and find healthy ways to manage their big emotions. This could be measured in part by including post-intervention behavioral incident data in addition to the empathy measures such as the BES.

“At First I Thought...Now I Think...” Journal Entries. The students' writing in these pre post journal entries demonstrated once again that sixth grade students started off with higher levels of empathy. The pre-intervention entries indicated that 33% of sixth graders chose the value most indicative of empathy, which was “Caring for Others” as number one; whereas 13% of fifth grade students chose “Caring for Others” as their number one priority over “Achieving at a High Level” (i.e. good grades), and “Happiness” (i.e. being generally satisfied most of the time). It was promising to see that the fifth grade students had a greater increase in empathy when comparing pre and post data from these journal entries as compared to sixth grade: post-

intervention 19% more fifth graders ranked “Caring for Others” as number one in their lives, and 13% more sixth graders priorities shifted over the course of the *Being the Change* unit to selecting “Caring for Others” as being their top priority in life.

The validity of student responses to the values ranking journal activity were substantiated by students’ academic outcomes. Fifty-six percent of fifth graders ranked “Achieving at a High Level” as number one in their lives pre-intervention, whereas only 27% of sixth graders ranked “Achieving at a High Level” as their number one priority. Academic awards from this school year validate their stated priorities: 75% of fifth grade students were awarded First or Second Honors, while 47% of sixth grade students received First or Second Honors.

As I prepared to adapt the *Being the Change* curriculum to meet the interests and needs of my own students, I wanted to make sure that they truly understood what was meant by each of the values statements: “Achieving at a High Level,” “Happiness,” and “Caring for Others” before I collected my pre-intervention data for this measure. I decided to show students a powerful short film appropriate for their age and our school-setting. We watched an extremely well-done cartoon adaptation of Harriet Tubman’s life created by The Torchlighters: Heroes of the Faith, entitled: “Harriet Tubman: The Moses of her people.” After watching the film, I asked students to put themselves in Harriet Tubman’s shoes and rank the three values of: “Achieving at a High Level,” “Happiness,” and “Caring for Others,” as they believed she would rank these values based upon what they learned about her from this short film. Surprisingly, 100% of my 31 student participants recognized Harriet Tubman’s selflessness and chose “Caring for Others” as what they believed would be her number one priority in life. After seeing these *unanimous* results, I was confident that my students new exactly what was meant by these value statements

prior to identifying them for themselves in their pre-intervention “At First I Thought...Now I Think...” journal entries.

In my teacher journal, I noted an increase in acts of kindness that further support that more students began to place greater value on caring for others after experiencing lessons from *Being the Change*. For example, towards the end of the intervention, around week six of the eight weeks, I observed students apologizing to one another if they had hurt someone’s feelings, far more often than before the intervention. I also saw students helping each other up more often when they fell while playing soccer on the playground. Perhaps most significantly, I observed one of my “bullies,” ceasing to torment his biggest target and making an effort to befriend the boy he once teased mercilessly. I saw the “bully,” stay after class to help the other student, and even generously sharing games with him and including him more in activities with the other students. I placed quotation marks around the word, “bullies/bully” because I am seeing stigma attached to this word. There is a need for greater empathy for these students labeled as “bullies” – they might be struggling personally and need support to deal with their own emotions rather than taking their problems out on others.

Youth involved in these negative behaviors are more likely to experience future violence, smoke, use drugs, suffer from depression, struggle academically, drop out of school or even commit suicide (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). These serious, and lastly effects of trauma are reason enough to have compassion on the children whose behavior is too often seen as bullying, rather than a cry for help. The CDC’s extensive meta-analysis determined that strengthening empathy specifically and other skills which strengthen emotional regulation and conflict management for example, reduces these risk factors and increases healthy lifestyles and supports academic success (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). Students’ journal entries demonstrated growth in

the skills determined by the CDC to mitigate risk factors and increase the likelihood of healthy lifestyles and student success.

Post-Intervention Student Interviews. The qualitative data that came from these one-on-one interviews was perhaps my richest and most meaningful source of information when it came to determining this study's effect on students. It was here, in these interviews, that I most saw the theories from the literature review come to life. Most notably, as Abraham H. Maslow observed, a lack of love is just as detrimental to a person's health as a lack of essential nutrients or vitamins (Maslow, 1943; 2013, p.14). As noted in my teacher journal, I actually observed more smiles and greater exuberance in the majority of my students throughout the school day than I did prior to this intervention. Apparently, an increase of love from peers and even myself as a result of the *Being the Change* experiences improved the students' well-being, which is in line with Maslow's powerful theories on human potential.

Within the analysis of these interviews it came to light that improvements I saw in students were in fact due to this intervention. On average, 85% of students spoke of and demonstrated how they had grown not only in their intellectual understanding of empathy, but in their actual ability to be more empathetic towards others, and felt I should continue to teach *Being the Change* lessons to future students believing they would benefit from the experience (see Figure 9).

In order more fully appreciate the impact of this study, I will give more context and background to some of the students' direct quotes that came out of these interviews. Beginning with responses to the question: What does empathy mean to you? Did our *Being the Change* unit help you understand empathy? When one student stated, "Empathy means that like you know how other people are feeling. Like that thing we read about Roger and this other lady who

showed empathy because she knew how it was to go through that situation” (see Table 1). The student who made this statement was one of several typically boisterous students who was profoundly silent after hearing this story. It was very evident that his heart was touched by the story and he was at a loss for words and nearly teary eyed when he pondered the inspiring compassion and selflessness he had just heard about. In this quote, the student was referencing an aspect of a lesson from *Being the Change* entitled, “Broadening Our Ideas About Who We Are Responsible To and For: Our Universe of Obligation” (Ahmed, 2018) where I read the short story, “Thank You, Ma’am” by Langston Hughes to the students to prepare for a class discussion on who matters in our lives and who we are willing to help and why. The “Roger” character that was mentioned by the student was one of the main characters in the story, along with “this other lady” he mentions, who is the other main character, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.

In the story, Roger attempts to steal the purse of then stranger, a later middle-aged, large, strong woman named Mrs. Luella. She captures the would-be thief after his failed attempt and essentially drags him back to her home in a headlock as an act of compassion to set the young teen boy straight and teach him a lesson before he goes on to ruin his life if he continued down this criminal path. Later in the story, Mrs. Luella shows Roger great kindness, feeding him, giving him money and an opportunity for redemption. Mrs. Luella shares with Roger that she took pity on him because she knew what it felt like to be so desperate for money and to go without when she was his age. My student participant showed in his thoughtful comment, that he defined an important aspect of empathy as knowing what the other person is feeling. The student participant said that in the story, Mrs. Luella was empathetic towards Roger because she knew what it was like to be in his situation. Mrs. Luella saw past herself, and her empathy allowed her

to see the humanity in Roger. Hughes' story, "Thank You Ma'am" had a profound effect on all of the students, including one unexpected reaction.

This unexpected reaction was significant because it showed how taking the time to understand others' feelings is so integral to creating a safe, inclusive and caring learning environment. Because empathy reduces aggression and encourages positive social interactions (Borba, 2018, p. 23), if I had not handled this student's reaction with care, and showed his peers how to react with empathy, this could have left the student feeling angry, excluded, and misunderstood.

The student who had the unexpected reaction was troubled by a particular part of the story, "Thank You Ma'am." This is important to the interpretation of the data, as it calls attention to the personal trauma or sensitivities students may bring into the classroom. This student could not see the kindnesses and empathy demonstrated by Mrs. Luella towards Roger because when she first caught him during his failed robbery attempt, she had kicked Roger in the butt several times while he was on the ground and she yanked his shirt hard before she forcibly walked him to her home when she saw that he was hungry, in need of compassion, and in need of an important life lesson.

This student was visibly upset and frustrated by the story, he interrupted with frustration during the class discussion that took place afterwards because he was so angry that this woman had "abused" Roger, he was adamant that Mrs. Luella was the real criminal and should be arrested for "beating" Roger. After thinking more about this student's reaction, while he stated that the story did not help him understand empathy; perhaps he "hated" the story so much, because he may have had an experience with child abuse in his personal life, outside of my scope of knowledge, or perhaps it was this student's abundance of empathy towards Roger that caused

his angry outburst regarding Mrs. Luella's physical roughness with him at the beginning of the story. In the future I would give a disclaimer before reading this story to prepare students who may be sensitive to events in the story. I would also recommend finding an additional story that teaches the same lesson in a less violent way should any students demonstrate the need for an alternative story. It was important that I took the time to meet one on one with the student who was upset by the story to listen to him and validate his concerns. In addition to the impactful experiences such as these from the literature recommended to enrich the *Being the Change* lessons, students benefited greatly from lessons that centered on their personal identities.

Regarding one of many lessons that centered on personal identity, in a final example of the backstories that lie behind students' answers to the interview questions, I will share the significance of one student's response to the question: Do you feel people in our class are more kind to one another and understanding after these lessons...in your opinion has there been more or less poor treatment, teasing or intolerance of others? This student responded, "Yeah, because in the beginning of the year some people would call me...Yeah. But it's working out more now because they don't call me that anymore...There's been less because I haven't seen that much teasing" (Table 1). These words came from a student who had been teased about his name since the beginning of the school year, and every school year before that at other schools. He was very sensitive about this teasing and prior to *Being the Change* he had tried to stop the teasing to no avail, even when teachers had tried to intervene.

The resolution to this student's lifelong problem of having his unique name made fun of by changing it to a similar sounding title of a popular movie, which I cannot mention for anonymity and respect for this student, came after our class engaged in a lesson entitled "Placing Ourselves in the World: Stories of Our Names." In this lesson, Ahmed states, "names matter"

(2018, p. 14). Through this experience students not only uncovered the etymology of their names, but the family histories, power and importance of their names. Through class discussions and carefully structured sharing using best practices outlined by Ahmed, this student was able to gain the respect and empathy needed from his peers to finally put a stop to the years of teasing about his name that he had endured. This student was not only grateful that his own personal experience of teasing had stopped, but he also noted his appreciation that he had not been seeing as much teasing of his peers since we as class had completed the work in *Being the Change*.

When my students openly shared their experience of this intervention, it provided me with a clear picture of the positive impact this study had on them. Specifically, I learned that choosing the right pieces of literature that students can relate to does in fact help them to grow in empathy, in combination with meaningful class discussion where students feel heard and the teacher effectively facilitates discussion between peers and provides opportunities to learn more about and understand one another through the lessons based on Ahmed's recommendations in her *Being the Change* curriculum; real, positive change can occur. Through the abundantly rich qualitative data derived from the transcripts, important moments where students' voices were heard occurred in a most important way; in addition to the successes, it exposed some limitations and areas of improvement I can focus on for these lessons when I teach them to my future students.

Limitations

My limitations include the small sample size ($N = 31$) and the unique culture of my Lasallian school. All Lasallian schools are modeled on the values of Catholic Saint, John Baptist de La Salle and follow five core Lasallian principles – which include respect and inclusion (Lasallian, 2020). It is possible that the culture of my school was an advantage to my particular

study because empathetic behaviors are rewarded and encouraged consistently in all aspects of my school.

Another limitation, although I saw it as what made my study unique and so important, was that the participants were: all boys, and 97% youth of color. Eighty percent of my student participants are Latino, 17% are Black and 3% are White. It would be quite telling to see if *Being the Change* would produce different results in a larger school, with a greater number of student participants, and including students of more diverse gender and racial identities.

This action research project may fill a gap in current studies on empathy, as the majority of the literature centers White student participants. The young scholars in this inquiry have abundant and unique cultural strengths. For instance, their families teach them from a young age and model for them the importance of respecting grandparents and elders. Parents teach, model and encourage their children to put family members ahead of their own youth-typical interests (such as video games); instead they are taught to spend time with their elder family members and help them with whatever they need. I observed my students feeling proud and not complaining about the time they spent visiting and caring for family members who they admire. The love they have for their grandparents, great aunts and uncles, is powerful and inspiring. Also, my students deeply respect and appreciate their parents in a way that only a child whose family has gone through the types of struggles unique to those who experience systemic racism could understand. I consistently saw this unique level of respect, appreciation and love for their parents shine through during any specially scheduled family meetings and our regular trimester conferences where all students are celebrated for academic and personal success, to highlight strengths and make game-plans for those not yet reaching their academic potential. The list of cultural strengths of my students of color is extensive, and it includes traditions passed down for many

generations such as elaborate celebrations that require the families to come together and work as a team to create beautiful hand-made decorations and delicious foods that take hours and hours to prepare, for example, all of the love and hard work put into our annual December celebration for Our Lady of Guadalupe. The cultural strengths and family practices that my students bring to school may also have given them advantages in seeing the importance of building up an inclusive community in which empathy is key.

Another limitation was the newness of the curriculum. I created my lessons based on Ahmed's (2018) work and then used these lessons as the intervention. My students pointed out to me in the one-to-one interviews that some of the lessons from the promising practice this intervention was based upon could have been delivered more effectively by myself. This is not surprising, as this was the first time I had taught these lessons. Some students shared that the lessons were boring at times, perhaps teaching them again would allow more time for creativity in my presentation as I will already be familiar with the material. I could also consider trying out the multitude of recommended resources shared by Ahmed that I was unable to get to in this first iteration of a *Being the Change* unit.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the limitation of the length of the study. This study occurred over an eight-week period. In reality, the author of this program, Sara K. Ahmed (2018) recommends in the extensive introduction of her book *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies for Teaching Social Comprehension*, that the lessons in this book are reinforced over the course of an entire school year. Ahmed repeatedly stresses the importance of continuing this work all year long. It would be advisable to recreate this study implementing the curriculum in a fashion that is more closely aligned to the author's *original* intent, to integrate and reinforce these lessons over an entire year rather than rush through each lesson as a stand-alone during an eight-

week long unit. As such, time was a limiting factor. Moreover, as a Language Arts teacher, it would be quite manageable to base an entire year's work on the numerous literary resources recommended by Ahmed. The resources which could easily be adapted to include assignments that could also include my school's expectations to meet standards like those adopted under Common Core.

Plan for Future Action

I am a renewed and truly inspired teacher after completing the rigorous coursework and action research project that comprised the Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership (MATL) program. I have always felt a lack of equity in our education system, a sense that something was missing, something was off, but I could not explain it and was unsure of what to do about it. In the past, I had naively taken the colorblind approach to teaching, which ignores race as if it does not matter and attempts to make it a non-issue leaving students feeling invalidated and unheard (Howard, 2010, p.100). I was unsure of how to navigate the acknowledgement of race and the real injustices my students faced in their realities. After much research, meaningful discussion, and hard work I have arrived at the following philosophy of teacher leadership that is aligned more closely with what I believe:

Transformative teacher leaders, by their example, inspire other teachers: to create space for student voices to be heard, to be humble enough to recognize when to let students lead, to unconditionally advocate for and touch the hearts of their students. In turn, they model for their students how to treat one another, show students the power they have and foster the confidence they need to discover their inherent value, importance, and place in this world.

This philosophy was inspired not only by my own experience in the field and conducting my own research, but by the numerous experts and theorists we studied in the MATL program, and especially by the example of Professor Lane, our primary instructor throughout the program, who embodies these values and models them by her treatment of her students.

My developing views about teaching with a more culturally inclusive stance have also been supported by key writers and theorists. Just a sampling of some of those who influenced and inspired my transformative teaching leadership philosophy: Saint John Baptist de la Salle (Van Grieken, 2019), Tyrone C. Howard (2010), Abraham Maslow (1943), and Sara K. Ahmed (1980). Maslow (1943), an American Psychologist, and creator of the Theory of Human Motivation determined that “satisfaction of the esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world” (p. 9). You can see his influence clearly in my philosophy. St. John Baptist de la Salle, Priest, Educational Reformer, Patron Saint of Teachers of Youth, Founder of Christian Brothers Schools, and prolific author and writer of curriculum believed teachers can perform miracles by touching the hearts of their students (Van Grieken, 2019).

Tyrone C. Howard, UCLA Professor, social justice leader, author *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms* (2010), deeply impacted me with his statement that “...the disproportionate occurrences of violence, crime, drugs, and death that young people in impoverished communities are exposed to on a regular basis have influence on the social, psychological, and emotional well-being that they bring to school, and these effects often go untreated” (p. 3). I have experienced this environmental stress first hand as a child growing up in poverty and it resonates especially now as I teach and serve students from a low-socioeconomic background. Ending with the author of the program I based my own promising practice on for my research, Sara K Ahmed, educator, leader and author, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies for Teaching Social Comprehension*. Ahmed states, “you have to see the humanity in others before you are able to activate your empathy. Doing the work of social comprehension erodes the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. xv, 2018).

My action plan as a transformative teacher leader. As an inspired teacher with a clear transformative teacher leadership philosophy, I plan to use my knowledge and experience to help other teachers to truly see their students for who they are and to create more equity for students, wherever I go. The more teachers who can create equity in the classroom and serve students in ways that will break barriers and unlock each individual student's potential- the greater the positive impact on the world for many generations to come. Some of the challenges I foresee based on past experience are that some teacher colleagues may resent the bonds and transformative relationships I have with students. As a result, there may be tension amongst, and poor treatment by colleagues intensified by a lack of administrator awareness and support.

There are some solutions and non-negotiable values that I will remain steadfast in implementing, such as: teaching my version of Ahmed's program, showing respectful boldness and doing what is right even when it is not the popular thing to do. I will not be afraid and make the effort to show my colleagues they matter to me – meeting them where they are, taking the time to listen, and having lunch with them. I will keep modeling my philosophy and the ethic of care found therein, and truly care about colleagues in their humanity, and when necessary confront those who are doing harm to students through ill-informed good intentions or otherwise.

Some additional challenges may come in the form of mandated curriculum not allowing enough time for creating space for student voices to be heard and for the formation of transformative relationships with students. When this happens, myself and other teachers may want to give up; it may seem impossible to meet the demands of our institutions and accomplish this way of teaching that touches hearts. Some solutions and non-negotiable values that I am ready to commit to in this area are: creating the time and space for student voices to be heard outside of instructional minutes, opening up my classroom at lunch time, being the lead teacher

for a student group that meets after school, going to student's sporting events or games, plays, etc. Just the act of truly being there and enjoying the privilege of being a part of students' lives matters and can transform their educational experiences and perceptions of themselves.

An integral aspect of achieving my future plans will revolve around the continued refining and development of the most impactful ways to continue to share the *Being the Change* curriculum with as many students and educators as possible. It will be of the utmost importance to routinely examine my practice and reflect on outcomes as I continue to grow and make changes where I see room for improvement. In future studies, it would be worthwhile to investigate if using Ahmed's work might also help students to cope and find healthy ways to manage their big emotions. This is so vital because of the promising results of this study which impacted students in such a positive way through fostering the skill of empathy, and the immeasurable potential for more peace in our world as a result of a greater numbers of people having more empathy for one another.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Basic Empathy Scale Survey

Take your time and carefully read each statement, then circle your answer below on the scale:

1. I can understand my friend's happiness when s/he does well at something.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

2. I find it hard to know when my friends are frightened.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

3. When someone is feeling 'down' I can usually understand how s/he feels.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

4. I can usually work out when my friends are scared.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

5. I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

6. I can usually work out when people are cheerful.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

7. I can usually realize quickly when a friend is angry.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

8. I am not usually aware of my friend's feelings.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

9. I have trouble figuring out when my friends are happy.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

10. My friend's emotions don't affect me much.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

11. After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

12. I get caught up in other people's feelings easily.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

13. Other people's feelings don't bother me at all.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

14. I often become sad when watching sad things on TV or in films.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

15. Seeing a person who has been angered has no effect on my feelings.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

16. I tend to feel scared when I am with friends who are afraid.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

17. I often get swept up in my friend's feelings.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly

18. My friend's unhappiness doesn't make me feel anything.

6	5	4	3	2	1
Agree Strongly	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly



Basic Empathy Scale--Adapted Spanish Version

PsycTESTS Citation:

Sánchez-Pérez, N., Fuentes, L. J., Jolliffe, D., & González-Salinas, C. (2014). Basic Empathy Scale--Adapted Spanish Version [Database record]. Retrieved from PsycTESTS. doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/t41914-000>

Instrument Type: Inventory/Questionnaire

Test Format:

The 18-item Spanish BES-SR and 17-item Spanish BES-PR utilize a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Scores on cognitive and affective empathy scales are calculated by dividing the total score by the number of responded items included in each scale.

Source:

Sánchez-Pérez, Noelia, Fuentes, Luis J., Jolliffe, Darrick, & González-Salinas, Carmen. (2014). Assessing children's empathy through a Spanish adaptation of the Basic Empathy Scale: Parent's and child's report forms. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol 5.

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doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/t41914-000>

Basic Empathy Scale--Adapted Spanish Version BES, BES-PR, BES-SR

Self-Report

Cognitive scale

- 3 I can understand my friend's happiness when s/he does well at something.
- 6 I find it hard to know when my friends are frightened.
- 9 When someone is feeling 'down' I can usually understand how s/he feels.
- 10 I can usually work out when my friends are scared.
- 12 I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me.
- 14 I can usually work out when people are cheerful.
- 16 I can usually realize quickly when a friend is angry.
- 19 I am not usually aware of my friend's feelings.
- 20 I have trouble figuring out when my friends are happy.

Affective scale

- 1 My friend's emotions don't affect me much.
- 2 After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad.
- 5 I get caught up in other people's feelings easily.
- 8 Other people's feelings don't bother me at all.
- 11 I often become sad when watching sad things on TV or in films.
- 13 Seeing a person who has been angered has no effect on my feelings.
- 15 I tend to feel scared when I am with friends who are afraid.
- 17 I often get swept up in my friend's feelings.
- 18 My friend's unhappiness doesn't make me feel anything.

PsycTESTSTM is a database of the American Psychological Association

Appendix B

“At First I Thought...Now I Think...” Journal Template

At First I Thought...	Now I Think...

Appendix C

One-on-One Interview Questions

1. What does empathy mean to you?
2. Did our *Being The Change* unit help you understand empathy? If so, how? If not, why do you think it didn't help?
3. Do you feel that you have more empathy towards other people after experiencing the lessons from *Being The Change*?
4. Do you feel that people in our class are more kind and understanding after these lessons, why or why not?
5. If bullying means treating others poorly, teasing, or being intolerant of others...in your opinion, has there been more or less bullying happening since we completed the lessons from *Being The Change*? Can you give some examples?
6. Are you glad we did this program, and do you think I should continue to do *Being The Change* with future 5th and 6th grade students?