



Empathy 101: Mid-Pacific students participate in schoolwide empathy study

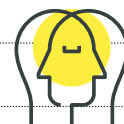
BY JULIE FUNASAKI YUEN

EMPATHY - THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND the feelings of another person. It is the latest buzz word in education, and schools across the country are working on ways to develop student empathy as part of the curriculum. Why? Not only is empathy the driving force behind human behaviors like social bonding and altruism, researchers at McGill University in Montreal have found that it is a driving force for learning. At Mid-Pacific Institute, empathy is a way of life. As a key tenet of the Mid-Pacific Learner Profile, empathy is built into the fabric of learning and embedded in classrooms through the use of Virtual Reality technology and other methods.

When choosing a research topic this year, high school English Language Development teacher Catherine Ball and her Mid-Pacific teacher research fellow colleagues were interested in learning more about empathy and its cultivation in students of all ages.

“In our readings of relevant research we were intrigued to find such a definitive link between sharing empathy and gaining motivation,” says Ball. “Our Mid-Pacific teachers had expressed a strong desire to cultivate ways to increase intrinsic motivation within our student body. Building a strong sense of community as well as an empathetic environment is a natural fit with our Mid-Pacific Learner Profile.”

empathy



Working in partnership with researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Research Schools International, the teacher fellows designed a plan for a schoolwide empathy study. All Mid-Pacific students from kindergarten to grade 12 participated in the six-week study this January and February, and engaged in empathy-building classroom activities developed by the Harvard researchers.

"We do have a biological tendency toward empathy, but this needs to be cultivated and nurtured over time," says Dr. Christina Hinton, Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) faculty member and director of Research Schools International. "We have this very basic ability to empathize and understand, but it's quite a complex skill so we also need to teach children that skill in a robust way. For example, reading. We have a biological basis for language but then we have to be taught how to read very explicitly. Teaching empathy is analogous," says Hinton.

"At Mid-Pacific we believe that student-centered learning requires a deeper understanding of the relationships between teachers and students," says Mid-Pacific President Paul Turnbull. "We also believe that the need for human empathy is vitally important in today's world."

"Thanks to our partners at HGSE's Research Schools International, we're able to go beyond reading about research on this important topic," shares Turnbull. "We are able to conduct this research in our own classrooms, allowing us to translate the results directly into action for the benefit of every student."

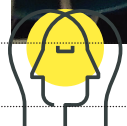
As part of the empathy study at Mid-Pacific, students first completed a multiple choice and open-ended response survey, and over the next four weeks, they participated in 20-minute empathy-building activities twice a week.

The "Weekly Gratitude" activity involved students reflecting on the meaning of gratitude, the impact of expressing gratitude in their own lives, and practicing gratitude every day. They also wrote thank you notes to share with friends and family. Sixth grade teacher Cheryl-lynn Funk discussed the most effective ways to write a thoughtful thank you note with her students.

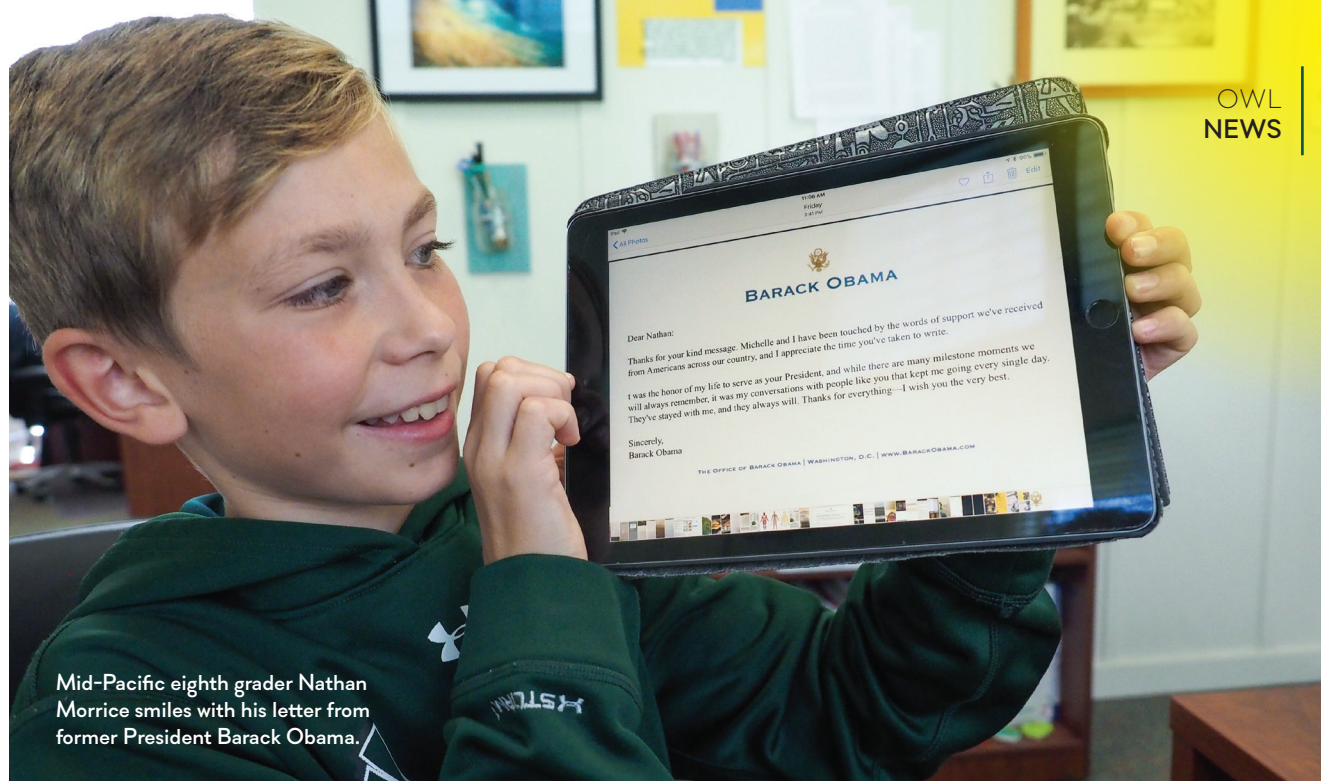
"Empathy is embedded into our curriculum," shares Funk. "Not only should our sixth graders understand the depths of this word, they should have to live it on a consistent basis within their community."

In the "Say it with an Emoji" empathy exercise, students practiced identifying and labeling their emotions using emojis and then discussed these emotions with their classmates. After participating in the exercise, a sixth grader shared, "A lot of people have the same feelings, and realizing that made us happy and energetic."

In the "Echoing a Friend" exercise, students paired up and shared responses to specific questions with their partners including "What is the highlight of your week so far?" and "What is your favorite memory?" The partner then shared this experience with the class. "I know people were actually listening to what I said," shared a Mid-Pacific fifth grader. "That felt really good."



empathy



Mid-Pacific eighth grader Nathan Morrice smiles with his letter from former President Barack Obama.

At the end of the six-week study, the students completed a closing survey and participated in interviews with researchers. Many students enjoyed the study and felt the empathy-building exercises were helpful in developing empathy in themselves and their classmates.

A second grader commented, “I realized people are like magnets. If you say good, positive things they move towards each other. If you say negative things, they move away.”

“I value gratitude more,” expressed an eighth grade student. “I am more aware of being thankful. People do so much for you.”

Eighth grader Nathan Morrice got an extra special surprise after deciding to write his thank you note to former President Barack Obama. With the encouragement of his teacher Marci Awaya, Morrice researched the Obama family website and sent a message of gratitude to President Obama on a Thursday morning. He was excited to receive a reply from the former president on Friday afternoon saying, “It was the honor of my life to serve as your President, and while there are many milestone moments we will always remember, it was my conversations with people like you that kept me going every single day.”

Since completing the data collection portion of the study, Mid-Pacific teacher fellows noticed an empathy ripple effect happening on campus. Third and fourth grade teacher Torri Montes describes how the elementary school students fully embraced the empathy study and especially enjoyed writing notes of gratitude. “The kids really loved writing them,” she shares. “And even better they loved giving them. They would give them and come back with huge grins on their faces. It was a really exciting moment for them.”

“I have a student in my class who received two notes of gratitude from peers and both of them talked about his creativity and how much they admired that,” says Montes. “And when I talked to him, I asked him ‘I notice you’re really happy. What

made you so happy?’ and he said, ‘I didn’t realize my friends knew me as well as they know me, and that they appreciate that part of me,’ and so I think that really shows the power to build relationships when we have students expressing gratitude to each other for the gifts that they share.”

First and second grade teacher Eric Royo says, “We also found that the students like to continue writing the gratitude notes on a regular basis. Many teachers are leaving special papers out for writing gratitude notes that students are still continuing to take advantage of.”

The research team at Research Schools International and the Harvard Graduate School of Education will be analyzing the data gathered from the Mid-Pacific empathy study and will share the results with faculty later this fall. Dr. Christina Hinton and Research Schools International Director of Research Dr. Catherine Glennon discussed the study with Mid-Pacific faculty members during a Professional Development Day presentation on February 16.

Hinton and Glennon also provided strategies to Mid-Pacific teachers for effective methods of building empathy in classrooms including empathizing with students, modeling empathy for others, making caring for others a priority, and setting high ethical expectations in classrooms. “We talk all the time about how important it is to study and do your homework, but do we talk explicitly to children about how it’s important to us that they are caring and show compassion?” shares Hinton. “The idea is to really make it a priority explicitly with the students to make sure they understand that these are our real values.”

For more information on tips for developing empathy in children, visit Harvard University’s Making Caring Common Project website at <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu>.