

Teaching a Core Social-Emotional Skill: Perspective Taking

In this *Kappan* article, Hunter Gehlbach (University of California/Santa Barbara and Panorama Education) says the current attention to social-emotional learning will have a longer shelf life than other trendy topics. But Gehlbach cautions that implementing social-emotional learning in schools raises some important questions:

- Which “soft” skills matter most? Students being caring, morally upstanding, purpose-driven, or empathetic?
- Which proficiencies can teachers actually change? For example, is it realistic that schools can make students more caring?
- Aren’t some social-emotional skills really values that should be addressed by families?

The danger with social-emotional learning, says Gehlbach, is that we’ll “get excited about it, implement a handful of versions, find ourselves daunted by the vast array of components that need to be taught and assessed, become frustrated, and then move on to the next big thing.”

But Gehlbach believes this won’t happen if we focus on “a single, teachable capacity that anchors almost all of our social interactions: social perspective-taking, or the capacity to make sense of others’ thoughts and feelings. The motivation and ability to ‘read’ other people,” he continues, “vividly imagining their unique psychological experience, provides the compass by which we navigate our social world. This capacity allows us to interpret the motivations and behaviors of our friends and neighbors, or to see situations from the point of view of strangers, or to understand and appreciate values and beliefs that diverge from our own. Without it, we cannot empathize, engage in moral reasoning, love, or even hold a normal conversation.” Research suggests that perspective-taking is linked to less stereotyping of others, responding less aggressively to provocation, and developing better relationships with those with different beliefs – in other words, there’s a ripple effect to a number of other social-emotional competencies.

Gehlbach’s and others’ research suggests that perspective-taking can be taught in schools, if four key steps are followed:

- Mustering the motivation to take the perspective of people outside our immediate family and social circle – for example, a cashier, a driver who cuts us off in traffic, a former classmate encountered at a reunion.
- Choosing a particular strategy to use when “reading” the other person – for example, empathizing with someone who is terrified of giving a wedding toast (something you have no problem with) by thinking about waiting for a dentist’s opinion on a root canal.
- Coordinating the available data to make inferences about the other person – for example, reading body language and facial expressions together with verbal cues.
- After making inferences, evaluating if we’re on the right track, because it’s not easy to know what makes another person tick. “All we can do,” says Gehlbach, “is keep seeking feedback, keep trying to read people, and keep refining our impressions as we learn more.”

These skills are learnable, Gehlbach says, and they have a domino effect with other social-emotional skills. He believes perspective-taking can be integrated into any class at any grade level, and suggests three precepts for teachers to keep in mind:

- *Make it a classroom expectation for students to talk about others’ perspectives.* Teachers can ask questions like, “What are some possible reasons the British may have wanted to appease Hitler?” rather than “Why did the British appease Hitler?” Students can also be asked to play devil’s advocate or restate a classmate’s opinion before responding to it. “When disagreements or interpersonal conflicts arise,” says Gehlbach, “it should be considered the norm for students to explain their side of the story and to listen while the other side explains theirs.”

- *Encourage students to be social detectives, not judges.* It's easy for students to jump to conclusions about a teacher giving low grades because she's mean or a classmate starting a rumor because he's spiteful, but they can be weaned away from shoot-from-the-hip characterizations by asking questions like, *Why might she have done that?* or *What's his version of what happened?* "The more students get in the habit of investigating others' perspectives rather than rushing to judge them," says Gehlbach, "the more skilled they'll become at looking for clues that might illuminate others' decisions and behaviors."
- *Provide low-stakes opportunities for practice.* Perspective-taking is an unfamiliar process for many students, and it has to be okay to make mistakes as they learn.

"Once in the habit of trying to gauge other people's ways of looking at the world," Gehlbach concludes, "they will inevitably become more empathetic, more understanding, and more caring; they will become more thoughtful about how to navigate relationships; and they will become more likely to reach out across cultural groups rather than withdrawing into their own clique."

"Learning to Walk in Another's Shoes" by Hunter Gehlbach in *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2017 (Vol. 98, #6, p. 8-12), <http://bit.ly/2n6vzes>; Gehlbach is at hgehlbach@panoramaed.com.