EmpathyLab

Pioneer Schools:
Executive Summary

EmpathyLab is a new organisation using the power of stories to inspire children to build their empathy skills and social activism. We currently target 4-11 year olds, using the power of story to build children’s empathy, literacy and social activism. This report covers the impact of experimental work with 11 pioneer schools across England, from November 2015 to July 2016. Together we have been testing this approach:

We have found five main areas of impact

Our work with schools has yielded stronger results than anticipated. We are very encouraged and believe that our approach can give schools a framework for achieving different priorities simultaneously, through normal school activities. Our evaluation found five main areas of impact:

- Children’s empathy skills and wellbeing
- Literacy
- Family involvement
- Social action
- School ethos and strategy

1. Children’s empathy skills and wellbeing

Public Health England research shows that social and emotional skills are more important to children’s attainment than their IQ. (Links between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment, 2014)

EmpathyLab schools report increases in children’s understanding of empathy, changes in behaviour and impact on pupils’ wellbeing. Evaluation included analysis of case studies and “pre” and “post” empathy data.

- 100% of teachers report that they saw increases in six key empathy skills (see page 5) in their children;
- “As a result of feelings, character and empathy work she can now recognise and express her own feelings and those of others. She is calmer in the playground and happier”. Teacher of Year 3 girl, St Hilda’s;
- Children at Netley Marsh Infants School self-report a 100% increase in their understanding of what empathy means and a 90% increase in how to apply it;
- “Using EmpathyLab’s approach has helped us both identify children’s wellbeing issues and supported growth in their emotional literacy”. Teacher, Radnor House.
2. Literacy

One of Ofsted’s “Outstanding” descriptors for literacy outcomes is: “pupils read widely and often...to a high standard with fluency and comprehension”. (Inspection Handbook, 2016)

Schools report improvements in key areas of literacy and increased emotional engagement with texts.

- 100% of teachers from the pioneer schools report impact on: children’s reading frequency and range; enjoyment of reading; wider vocabulary. 86% report impact on more expressive writing; better speaking, listening and participating in discussions. 71% on better inference, prediction and deduction;
- St Michael’s Primary School is now in the top 13% of all schools for reading progress (RAISEOnline) and sees their new empathy emphasis as key contributing factor. A recent Inspector’s report says: “A major influence on raising the school’s reading standards is looking at empathy as a tool to develop understanding within texts and concepts”;
- “If you learn about empathy and read books that include it you get more from your reading. When I feel empathy in stories, I slow down; sometimes I stop and think so much more”. Year 5 boy, Moorlands Primary Academy.

3. Family involvement

In making school leadership judgements, Ofsted inspectors consider how well leaders engage with parents.

EmpathyLab schools report higher than usual levels of parental engagement. Parents are motivated by the “double win” approach which simultaneously builds their child’s literacy and emotional skills.

- “Empathy Oscars was an amazing way to teach kids the concept of empathy. I love the way you brought the idea to life with so much fun involved. That’s what education is all about!!” Mother, John Stainer School;
- Two schools involved parents in children’s empathy work on loneliness; Moorlands Primary School ran an Empathy Reading Café for families; parents at Sutton-on-Trent Primary School helped make children’s social action possible through community links - a GP parent facilitated visits to local groups of older people;
- Beck Primary School has had excellent take-up for an Empathy Parents Book Club.

4. Social action

Ofsted’s common inspection framework emphasises the need for schools “to provide a curriculum rich in personal development to enable children to contribute to wider society”. (How social action is being applied to good effect, 2016)

EmpathyLab schools report unexpected levels of interest amongst children in putting empathy into action.

- Stanmore Primary School’s homelessness focus with child Empathy Detectives has led to a big appetite to fundraise for the local Nightshelter;
- Beck Primary School has had 14 volunteers for Empathy Leaders in the playground;
- A girl from Moorlands Primary Academy read Eva Ibbotson’s One Dog and His Boy, reflected on loneliness, and decided to play with a lonely girl in the playground;
- “EmpathyLab has the potential to change society from inside out”. Teacher, Stanmore Primary School.

5. School ethos and strategy

“Where empathy is clearly written into behaviour policies in schools the turnaround has been significant”. (Settling to Learn, Bomber and Hughes, 2013)

- Headteachers report that the EmpathyLab approach has potential both to change the school culture and combine the building of empathy and literacy skills - without adding additional work.
St Michael’s Primary School has integrated EmpathyLab’s approach into the School Development Plan for Literacy, RE, PHSCE and mental health issues, child protection, Prevent, e-safety;

“I feel we have a real gamechanger”. Headteacher, Moorlands Primary Academy;

Teachers’ understanding of the educational importance of empathy rose from 68% to 99%.

The involvement of an informed governing body is a key factor for success.

Conclusion

We are very encouraged by the stronger than anticipated results from two experimental terms, working with 11 pioneer schools. We believe these results demonstrate that our approach gives schools a “triple win” framework for achieving literacy, character education and social action priorities simultaneously, and through normal school activities.

This was EmpathyLab’s first major “proof of concept” step. Our school partners tell us that a more systematic, funded programme has significant potential to build children’s empathy skills, wellbeing, literacy and social activism.

We conducted this stage of the work pro-bono, whilst we tested our ideas. Our next step will be to seek funding to create and evaluate a more highly developed schools’ programme, working with The University of Sussex and the Open University.

We have much still to investigate, including how to develop better quality empathy measurement tools, realistic in a school setting and how to help children sustain increases in empathy skills. We want to understand more about what conditions enable enhanced empathy to be developed around key social issues, from refugees to cyberbullying.

But we now have an evidence base from which to secure funding to build a more systematic programme and make EmpathyLab a national force for change. We aim to make a real difference to thousands of children’s lives, story by story. In today’s divided world, the need for more empathy has never been more urgent.

“I’m thrilled that you’ve decided to work with EmpathyLab to help children expand their empathy potential. A wise choice”.

Neil Gaiman

“I congratulate all the EmpathyLab pioneer schools for taking part in this vital and fascinating work”.

Cressida Cowell

EmpathyLab contact details
Chair, Miranda McKearney OBE , miranda@empathylab.uk @EmpathyLabUK December 2016
EmpathyLab is a new not-for-profit organisation, founded in 2014. We currently target 4-11 year olds, using the power of story to build children’s empathy, literacy and social activism.

**Why empathy matters and how to build it**

Empathy is a core life skill, vital in increasingly diverse classrooms and communities. Without empathy children will struggle to form strong relationships and collaborate. Later, in the workplace, they will find team working very hard.

Helping children put empathy into action will reduce prejudice, and build a more caring society. The UK’s shocking post-Brexit rise in hate crimes has highlighted the urgency of educating children to enter into other people’s feelings.

Our brains are plastic, and with practice 98% of us are capable of becoming more empathetic. An engagement with literature is a key tool. An important and building body of recent neuroscience research shows that identifying with book characters helps us become more empathetic in real life. EmpathyLab harnesses this power, immersing children in stories with an empathy focus. This leads to stronger empathy skills and increased social activism as shown in this diagram. Our strategy of developing empathy through books also raises reading standards and engagement.

Our strategy of developing empathy through books can help raise standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening. It can support children with social and communication issues.
Proof of concept

This report covers EmpathyLab’s first big “proof of concept” step. From November 2015 to July 2016 we worked with 11 pioneer schools across England who involved 1560 children in empathy-focused activity. The schools committed to an open, experimental and unfunded programme.

This pursued the following lines of enquiry:

- Why is empathy so important in schools?
- How can words and stories be used more systematically to develop empathy skills?
- What tools and training do teachers and parents need?
- Can an increased focus on empathy improve literacy skills?
- How can we help children put empathy into action?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>No. of children involved</th>
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<td>Beck Primary School</td>
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<td>State Primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Community School</td>
<td>Central London</td>
<td>Independent</td>
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<td>Great Yarmouth, Norfolk</td>
<td>Academy</td>
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<td>Netley Marsh CE Infants School</td>
<td>New Forest, Hampshire</td>
<td>State Infant</td>
<td>90</td>
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<td>Radnor House</td>
<td>Twickenham, London</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>Bushey, Hertfordshire</td>
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<td>Rochdale</td>
<td>State Primary</td>
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<td>The Wroxham Primary School</td>
<td>Potters Bar, Hertfordshire</td>
<td>State Primary</td>
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EmpathyLab’s founding team of five supported the schools, providing:

- Expert input from psychology and literacy experts;
- Strategic planning support, on-going training and consultancy;
- Creative tools, wherever possible child-led;
- Themed booklists (such as homelessness, friendships, refugees);
- Links to authors, publishers and the Patron of Reading scheme;
- Forum for sharing between the schools.

We provided an evaluation framework with staff surveys, children’s case studies and questionnaires, teachers’ empathy skills assessments and running logs recording observations. Although not all schools had the capacity to contribute to the whole process, the evaluation has generated a rich evidence bank shaping this report’s findings.

EmpathyLab created six story-based tools (shown in the circle to the right) to help schools create immersive empathy-building experiences. We also provided lists of core empathy texts characterized by strongly drawn characters and high quality writing and illustration. We involved authors in developing training and on-the-ground models, including Patrons of Reading Alan MacDonald and Ali Sparkes, plus Gillian Cross, Helena Pielichaty and Bali Rai.
**Impact 1: children’s empathy skills and wellbeing**

EmpathyLab aims to build **six key empathy skills**

- The ability to value, feel, understand and respect other people’s experiences;
- Emotion recognition: the vocabulary to share your own and other people’s feelings;
- Effective communication: active listening and deep conversation;
- Strong imagination to enter into others’ feelings;
- The capacity to be reflective, especially about other people’s feelings and perspectives;
- The ability to put empathy into action in the home, school and community.

**Teachers’ assessment**

“Using EmpathyLab’s approach has both helped us identify children’s wellbeing issues and supported growth in their emotional literacy”. Teacher, Radnor House.

“Since we’ve started to focus on empathy in books, the children have become far more willing to see things from alternative points of view”. Teacher, Moorlands Primary Academy.

“Empathy strengthens our relationships, gives us the resilience to try, fail and try again, supporting each other in the learning process and will inevitably produce improved results”. Headteacher, John Stainer Community School.

In assessing the impact of using the EmpathyLab approach, teachers describe how children are now listening to others’ points of view more and thinking about children other than those they know. Several schools were surprised by the depth of children’s responses – children not known for enthusiasm in lessons became very engaged.

In those schools with comparative “before” and “after” data, **100% of teachers report improvements in empathy skills**. Here is an example from a Year 5 class at Beck Primary School:

- 40% increase in empathic communication – active listening and deep conversation;
- 33% increase in the ability to value feel, understand other people’s feelings/perspectives;
- 20% increase in ability to put empathy into action;
- 50% increase in emotion recognition;
- 30% increase in strong imagination in order to enter into others’ feelings;
- 23% increase in capacity for reflection about other people’s feelings.

**Children’s self-assessment**

“If other people, who maybe aren’t so nice, read some of these books, that might change the way they acted. They would think more and maybe understand more. Perhaps schools should discuss empathy in books every week because it would help people so much”. Year 5 girl, Moorlands Primary Academy.

Children were asked to self-report, using a “before” and “after” questionnaire. 420 children completed the questionnaires. Here is an example of the changes, from Netley Marsh Infants School:

- 100% increase in children’s understanding of what empathy is;
- 90% increase in their understanding of how empathy can be applied;
- 70% increase in their ability to name a book that had helped them understand someone else better;
- 60% increase in their ability to explain how the chosen book had developed their empathy;
- 100% increase in their understanding of what makes for a good listener.
Case Study: - 8 year old boy, Beck Primary School

“When we read we imagine we are the characters and we think how they feel”.

The boy’s teacher said he very much enjoyed the empathy work, including writing about different characters. “It is helping him to start to value other people’s feeling much more; he will now apologise and admit to negative behaviours. He is beginning to put empathy into action. He has been involved in a 1:1 on what empathy means and why it is important, author work, book awards and Empathy BookSpotters”.

Learning the meaning of empathy

“If people understand what it is like to be that person in that situation, they may become more compassionate and start helping people more”. Pupil at International Community School.

Schools used different techniques to teach the concept of empathy, and found that even children as young as four were able to understand it. Work was needed to distinguish between empathy and kindness, or sympathy. This was helped by briefing staff on the three main elements of empathy:

- **Emotional/affective empathy**: we literally resonate with someone else’s feelings. The insula neural area of our brains mimics within us another person’s state;
- **Cognitive empathy**: or perspective-taking, where we apply reason to working out how someone else feels;
- **Empathic concern**: a powerful motivator for helping others, a force for social change.

Case Study: Empathy Assemblies

Netley Marsh Infants School developed assemblies on perspective-taking using the Role-Taking Unit 4 of the Bright Start cognitive curriculum. This covers developing the ability to take different perspectives, first in the physical and spatial domains and then at social level. Children looked at a dice from different angles, and sat in the Headteacher’s chair. They used the concept of standing in someone else’s shoes and thinking about what this might feel like, and explored the feelings of Paddington Bear, Dogger and Something Else.

Author Helena Pietchaty worked with a group of ten KS2 children of mixed ages and abilities at Sutton-on-Trent Primary School. The focus was her book *What’s Ukrainian for Football?* which has an underlying theme of migration and refugees. Their work culminated in an Empathy Play for a whole school assembly. Helena reported changes in children’s understanding of refugees’ viewpoints, and greatly increased enthusiasm for reading.
Focusing on feelings

Several schools reported that an increased focus on book characters and feelings had a surprisingly immediate effect on some students’ wellbeing. They felt this was due to an increased emphasis on emotions in ordinary school activities and teaching, with more time to discuss and share them. The empathy emphasis also increased children’s ability to engage emotionally with texts, with resulting impact on enjoyment of reading, and specific areas of literacy (see Impact 2 section). R.J. Palaccio’s Wonder was consistently cited as a magnificent empathy text, and teachers reported an expanded knowledge of many other superb stories to use in this context.

Alongside encouraging children to focus on the character and feelings, schools used a range of techniques to widen children’s vocabulary for feelings. These included feelings wheels; matching pairs emotions; a Velcro feelings board; an emotion thermometer and a great deal of drama and role play.

Case Study: Year 3 girl at St Hilda’s

This girl’s teacher said that she had trouble expressing ideas and feelings and was aggressive in the playground. As a result of English and PSHE work on feelings, empathy and book characters “she is now clearly able to recognise and express her own feelings and the feelings of others; she is calmer in the playground and happier”. The teacher notes: “This is huge progress as previously she was finding it hard to recognise the reasons why people would be feeling different emotions. She is also using a much wider vocabulary to describe her own and book characters’ feelings”.

In general, as a result of using the EmpathyLab approach, St Hilda’s staff have seen a positive correlation between improved social attitudes, peer relationships and higher than expected scores.

Impact 2: children’s literacy

“If you can enjoy books so much without understanding empathy? I don’t think you can because it wouldn’t mean so much to you. It’s just reading them. You don’t just read the book, you have to stop and think and then go back to the reading.” Year 5 girl, Moorlands Primary Academy.

A key line of inquiry in our experiment was whether teachers find that an increased focus on empathy can improve literacy and reading for pleasure.

- 100% of teachers say EmpathyLab work has a positive impact on: children’s enjoyment of reading; increased reading frequency and range; development of a wider vocabulary;
- 86% say it improves: expressive writing; better speaking, including participating in discussions, and better listening;
- 71% say it improves inference, prediction and deduction. Children have stronger explanations for feelings.

“Impact noticeable when reading The Graveyard Book – predictions now linked to what they know about characters and not guesses”. Moorlands Primary Academy

“Writing much improved because exposed to emphasis on feelings and emotional insight. Much better character development”. Sutton-on-Trent Primary School

“A major influence on raising standards in reading within the school is looking at empathy as a tool to develop understanding, within texts and concepts”. Inspector visiting St Michael’s Primary School

“The book area is used much more now. A boy on Pupil Premium is enjoying reading so much more; we had to issue him a new library card because of his much increased borrowing”. Netley Marsh Infants School
St Michael’s Primary School is now in the top 13% of all schools for reading progress (RAISE Online). A recent Inspector’s report says: “A major influence on raising the school’s reading standards is looking at empathy as a tool to develop understanding within texts and concepts”.

Schools used neuroscience research about the power of character to refocus existing literacy strategies like guided reading, reading aloud, book studies and discussion. Stanmore Primary School developed empathy book boxes for staff, for use in the regular reading aloud of stories at the end of the school day. Wroxham Primary School created an empathy shelf in the library – the PTA paid for the books, bought from EmpathyLab’s list of core empathy texts. Radnor House ran creative writing workshops inspiring children to write about a displaced character, exploring how it feels to arrive in a different country.

Supported by EmpathyLab, schools developed new pathways through texts, focusing on character and feelings more than plot. They created more immersive experiences linked to texts in order to deepen children’s emotional engagement with the characters, and social issues. They made use of the ideas in our Empathy Storykits to initiate the activities. In addition to the statistics above, schools reported seeing children writing more quickly in the first person, and more expressively because of their emotional involvement and much wider feelings vocabulary.

### Motivating children

"I find empathy in books really interesting, as I didn’t used to think how people were feeling, I just used to read. Now I feel a lot more imaginative, it gives the story a lot more background about what might have happened and why”. Year 5 girl, Moorlands Primary Academy.

“Reading Divergent made me understand why my friend likes to risk herself and challenge her limits”. Pupil at ICS.

"Thinking about empathy when I read makes me want to read more, because I get so much more involved in the story”. Year 5 boy, Moorlands Primary Academy.

EmpathyLab is developing a tool called Empathy BookSpotters which inspires children to lead the school’s empathy work, share recommendations and analyse the ways in which books can build empathy. Schools using the tool report changes in children’s enjoyment of reading and understanding of empathy.

Some children made and donned empathy glasses before their BookSpotting sessions; some presented the week’s “spotted” books to their peers in library hour; others swapped empathy book bags every Friday in assembly. Their motivation and excitement was built by sharing their ideas across the pioneer schools. They posted postcard empathy book reviews and recommended books through the Book Spotter database.

Children at Stanmore Primary School receive EmpathyLab postcards from BookSpotters at Moorlands Primary School (left). Children also used the postcards at the South Bank Centre’s Imagine Festival (right).
Impact 3: Social action

“I’ve finished One Dog and his Boy where the main character is very lonely. When I’d finished, I thought a lot about the book. One day I saw a girl in the playground who looked really lonely, she was sitting down on her own, and so I went and played with her. The book caused me to change my behaviour”. Year 5 girl, Moorlands Primary Academy.

Increased social awareness and social activism are key EmpathyLab aims. We explored how children can become empathy activists driving for a more empathic society. Schools approached this in different ways:

**Case study: Empathy Detectives at Stanmore Primary School**

Stanmore Primary School trialled EmpathyLab’s idea for a club called Empathy Detectives. Their chosen social issue to investigate was homelessness. Children were immersed in stories about homelessness such as Mr Stink, That Pesky Rat and Way Home. Author Bali Rai ran a session on challenging our prejudices and the school arranged a visit from the local Nightshelter.

The term’s focus culminated in a homelessness experience. After school, the buildings were locked, and children had to find somewhere to settle, with sleeping bags and just four possessions. School Librarian Ali said “powerful stuff and totally unexpected reactions. One child - a very quiet boy who has to be prompted to say anything at all in our club sessions – had worked out a full back story and stayed in character the whole time. Another boy got very angry about being constantly moved on, saying ‘I don’t know what gives you the right to tell me what to do. We are all human beings’”. The children are now keen to fundraise for the local Nightshelter.

“Sutton-on-Trent Primary School’s focus on empathy and loneliness led to children visiting The Falls Group, a local group of elderly people who had recently experienced falls. This was facilitated by a parent who was a local GP. The children also visited a local care home to read to the residents.
Moorlands Primary Academy also focused on loneliness at school and in the wider community. They explored the theme through books such as Neil Gaiman’s *Graveyard Book*. This led them to think about older lonely people and visit the local care home, Burgh House. They read poems and chatted to the residents.

**Case Study: Year 4 boy, Stanmore Primary School**

This boy helps with the care of his parents. He has sometimes struggled to see other people’s point of view and this has caused conflict in and out of class. He was a member of the experimental Empathy Detectives club.

Staff noticed an improved ability to listen, and he really surprised them with his natural passion for community action. He had lots of ideas for how to raise awareness and funding for the local Night shelter and could explain why this is so important. He improved his ability to value other people’s experiences and views, and his class teacher says that when writing he is much more able to describe a character’s thoughts and feelings in detail.

**Case Study: Empathy Leaders at Beck Primary School**

A focus on empathy led children in Beck Primary School to set up Empathy Leaders “on the Yard”. Children designed the job description for the Empathy Leaders and the teacher had 14 volunteers to support children who feel vulnerable in the playground.

“Empathy is important because you can find out how a person is feeling. If a person is feeling unhappy then you can help them or play with them so they feel content”. Year 4 boy, Beck Primary School

**Impact 4: family involvement**

“I wanted to tell you how amazing I thought the Empathy Oscars were last week and how much we all enjoyed it. What an amazing way to teach the kids the whole concept of empathy. I love the way you all bought the idea to life so cleverly and with so much fun involved. That’s what education is all about!!!” Parent, to John Stainer Headteacher.

**Case study: Empathy Oscars**

The multi-cultural John Stainer Community School in Brockley trialled EmpathyLab’s idea for Empathy Oscars. Children worked with their families in the Easter holidays to nominate their favourite empathy book character.

After much school group discussion, reading and persuasive writing, they voted for a winner, who was announced at a glittering red carpet ceremony involving the whole school community – children, parents, governors and Charlie, the school dog. Staff dressed up as the ten top characters. The winner was Miss Honey, from *Matilda* (on left, with Charlie the school dog and Sue Harte, Headteacher).
The schools wanted to explore strategies to involve parents in using books to build literacy and empathy simultaneously. They were surprised by parents’ eagerness to engage, and reported changes in their understanding of the relevance to children’s development of “double win” empathy and literacy activity, leading to social action.

**Case study: Empathy Reading Café**

Moorlands Primary Academy sometimes experiences low rates of parent participation. Staff were delighted to get 50% of invited parents to their Empathy Reading Café to hear what the children had been doing. They worked with their children on an Empathy Reading Journey, remembering empathy books they had read as a family. Parents helped make decisions about social action activities, like visiting a care home and inviting in representatives of refugee groups. The school plans to run a regular Empathy Reading Café with the support of the pastoral team.

Beck Primary School was delighted by the enthusiasm for a Years 2 and 3 family Empathy Book Club. This ran for four weeks and was held in the neighbourhood centre, targeting children who could benefit from further developing their empathy skills. Parents and children together read and discussed books, talked about the meaning of empathy, used a parents’ questionnaire and created an empathy portfolio. The Club will be repeated in the new academic year.

Netley Marsh Infants School involved parents in their drop-in after school reading/empathy club and a World Book Day pyjama empathy evening with stories and hot chocolate. They also attended EmpathyLab training with Hampshire Library staff, aiming to develop staff and parents’ skills in empathy book-talking.
EmpathyLab has the potential to help change the school culture and strengthen learning values. Headteachers report impact on staff skills, school culture, children’s behaviour and engagement with social action.

“EmpathyLab takes a refreshing approach to developing children’s understanding of themselves and others. A valuable resource for making our school and community better places. We have integrated its working principles and tools across different areas of school life, including learning values, staff CPD, regular literacy activities and support for families”. Executive Headteacher, Netley Marsh Infants School.

“Since working with EmpathyLab, empathy has now permeated across the whole of the curriculum and in every corner of school, including social aspects”. Headteacher, St Michael’s Primary School.

“Empathy skills are a key aspect of the social and emotional skills needed by our intake. We have a duty to help our children make a positive contribution”. Headteacher, Beck Primary School.

Whole school planning and activities

The involvement of the Senior Leadership Team is needed to integrate empathy education strategically. Several of the pioneer schools have now changed their School Development Plan to embed EmpathyLab’s principles:

- St Hilda’s School Development Plan now incorporates working with EmpathyLab on social and emotional wellbeing, behaviour and relationships. Empathy even features in yoga sessions. Sharing between staff is supported by staff meetings and a staffroom empathy log book.
- Netley Marsh Infants School has integrated the approach into: regular literacy activities; assemblies; home learning; teaching school values; staff CPD; pupil voice; community links.
- St Michael’s Primary School has integrated EmpathyLab’s approach into the following areas of the School Development Plan: Literacy, RE, PHSCE and mental health issues, child protection, Prevent, e-safety. The school has started an Empathy Council.
- The Wroxham School used EmpathyLab’s listening audit as a catalyst to deepen the school’s focus on listening well, conducting a whole school survey.
- Sutton-on-Trent Primary School built empathy techniques and creative activities into their SEAL assemblies.
- The International Community School (ICS) linked their EmpathyLab work to the school’s Service in Action strand of the International Baccalaureate.
Staff skills and understanding

EmpathyLab provided training from psychology experts, a research bank and practical tools to develop teachers’ understanding of the educational importance of empathy, and the skills needed to develop it. Settling to Learn (Bomber and Hughes) and How to Listen so Kids Will Talk (Faber and Mazlich) were often cited as useful references books in this context. Brené Brown’s video on the difference between empathy and sympathy was also useful.

- Staff understanding of the importance of empathy in schools rose from 68% to 99%.
- “I have altered my practice to teach empathy explicitly”. Teacher, Beck Primary School.

Staff feedback about changes in their understanding and use of the skills needed to develop children’s empathy skills. The “pre” and “post” surveys showed substantial rises in staff confidence.

![Graph showing staff feedback](image)

**Staff feedback**

“I understand now just what a force for change empathy is, and how in order to develop their empathy skills, children need to experience teachers’ own empathy towards them”.

“It has been so useful to share ideas with other schools, and hear experts in their field speak about the background/scientific research behind empathy”.

“This can make an impact in so many ways. Working with EmpathyLab has created a big opportunity for reflection and professional dialogue”.

“Working and reflecting with EmpathyLab I’ve gained insight into really obvious, easy applications in school I simply hadn’t thought of”.

“The psychology briefings helped me see how central empathy is to helping children feel safe enough to learn, and to how the whole school community operates...because schools are all about relationships”.

“Learning empathy through book characters’ feelings makes so much sense, because schools are awash with stories”.

“The empathy book-talking training will change how I deliver my drop-in sessions with parents”.

“I have altered my practice to teach empathy explicitly”. Teacher, Beck Primary School.
Partnering with authors

Authors are key partners in the EmpathyLab approach - neuroscience research shows that identifying with book characters builds our real-life empathy skills.

The experimental schools’ work showed the added value of involving authors in an expanded role, as empathy experts, building empathy and literacy skills simultaneously. The Patron of Reading* model is particularly interesting in this context, because it creates sustained contact between authors and children, adding an inspiring new relationship into the teaching mix.

Case study: Patron of Reading

Author Alan MacDonald is Beck Primary School’s Patron of Reading. He worked alongside teachers, using a dual literacy/empathy approach. They based sessions on his book *Trolls Go Home*, exploring the meaning of empathy and encouraging children to talk about being different. Work included drama techniques like hot seating, advice corridor and Spot the Emotion.

Alan: “I was surprised by how well they took to the drama. Some of the comments we recorded at the end showed they had really grasped the idea of empathy and were putting it in their own words – one boy said ‘it’s like a body swap with someone else’. At the start I asked what empathy meant. No one had much idea. By the end they were very confident to explain the word in their own terms. One or two children who I’m told can be difficult or less engaged in class were very enthusiastic in taking part”.

Photograph: Beck Primary School teachers with author Alan MacDonald and resources used in dual approaches to teaching literacy and empathy. Children loved exploring the theme of differences, and the feelings of Ulrich the troll in Alan’s *Trolls Go Home*. They particularly enjoyed stepping into Ulrich’s shoes...

*http://www.patronofreading.co.uk
**Challenges and reflections**

In the next stage of our work we will be reflecting and acting on **challenges and factors for success**:

- Measurement: how we can develop better quality empathy measurement tools, realistic in a school setting;
- Attainment: the desirability of demonstrating a link between empathy and reading attainment/progress;
- Social activism: how we can best help schools and families make the link between stories and social activism;
- Learning about empathy: the best way to support schools in helping children achieve a deep understanding of empathy, and its difference from kindness and sympathy;
- Attitude change: how we identify and activate the factors which could build a strong empathy movement, in the same way as the unexpected growth of the mindfulness movement;
- Publishing: how our work might help address the shortage of books reflecting the growing diversity of our communities and classrooms, vital for underpinning empathy work in schools and homes.

**Conclusions and next steps**

“*I think you’re at the start of something big*”. Sir Peter Bazalgette, Chair, Arts Council England

EmpathyLab’s experimental, pro-bono work with 11 pioneer schools has yielded stronger results than anticipated. It is clear that our approach of combining stories, empathy and social action gives schools a framework for achieving different priorities simultaneously, and through normal school activities. The programme has enabled us to identify positive initial evidence against each of our five lines of enquiry and has highlighted areas for further development.

Embedding EmpathyLab’s approach into the School Development Plan and subtly refocusing teaching and whole school activities can achieve a range of outcomes. Including improvements in: children’s pleasure in reading and their literacy and empathy skills; teachers and parents’ skills and understanding of the child; schools’ community connections. It can build pupils’ understanding of social issues and fuel their desire to put empathy into action.

We have much still to do and learn, and many unanswered questions. But we are very encouraged by the results from experimental work across two terms. This was EmpathyLab’s first major “proof of concept” step. Our school partners tell us that a more systematic, funded programme has enormous potential to build children’s empathy skills, wellbeing, literacy and social activism. **Our next immediate steps** will be to:

- Seek funding to create and evaluate a systematic schools’ programme, working with the University of Sussex (Professor Robin Banerjee) and the Open University (Professor Teresa Cremin);
- Build school models, continuing to work with 10 pioneer schools and a small number of new schools;
- Develop new resources , including for families;
- Create a team of child advisors;
- Build a new network of public library partners;
- Explore the national potential for programmes such as Empathy BookSpotters;
- Create an Author Empathy Army of 80 authors;
- Develop our policy work and our partnerships;
- Establish a new national Empathy Day.

We would like to thank the inspiring children and school staff we have worked with. We now have an evidence base from which to secure funding to build a more systematic programme and make EmpathyLab a national force for change. We aim to make a real difference to thousands of children’s lives, story by story. In today’s divided world, the need for more empathy has never been more urgent.
Thank you and contact details

We owe a real debt of gratitude to the people who have advised, encouraged, partnered and supported us thus far.

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Netley Marsh Infants School
Moorlands CE Primary Academy

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Teachers and speakers share learning at the Pioneer Schools evaluation day, 8 July 2016, held at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

EmpathyLab Pioneer Schools Evaluation 2016