1. Background to EL and to empathy

I’m Miranda McKearny from EmpathyLab, a new, not-for-profit organisation passionate about the power of empathy to make the world a better place, and the power of stories to build empathy. We believe that as a society and an education system we are massively under-exploiting the power of reading, writing and storytelling to build the next generation’s empathy skills.

So far, worldwide, there are no empathy education strategies that systematically exploit the power of words, stories and contact with authors to build empathy. That’s the area EL is focusing on. We target 4-11-year-olds, and are working with 11 pioneer primary schools and lots of authors and publishers.

The Lab bit in our name is deliberate – we are a start up, and we’re experimenting.

The EmpathyLab approach

We’re testing the proposition that an immersion in carefully chosen stories and linked activities will lead to children having stronger empathy and literacy skills, and to them being more pro-socially aware and active, putting empathy into action in their homes, schools and communities. Given the importance of empathy, of which more in a minute, wouldn’t it be just amazing if every single story opportunity could simultaneously build children’s literacy and empathy skills? If, educationally, we could have our cake and eat it too? If as well as boosting each individual’s child’s success, we could also focus on our shared humanity?
For me, the Empathy Lab spark came from a seriously fascinating, building bank of neuroscience evidence, which shows that literature develops our ability to empathise with real people in real life. I guess all us keen readers kind of know that instinctively, but I just find it astonishing to see neuroscientists now being able to evidence that. I started to be really intrigued just as I was retiring from the charity I founded, The Reading Agency. I intended to grow courgettes and go trekking, but with the space I’d created, found myself increasingly drawn into this research and what it might mean. Four trusty companion founders got drawn in too, and we have spent 2 years researching, learning and building our action plan.

Very early, when Empathy Lab was just a flicker of an idea, I was lucky enough to have a speaking slot at an early Patron of Reading (PoR) conference. That must’ve been in 2014, and now Empathy Lab is really starting to catch light. Big thanks you to Helena, Jon and Tim, who have really grasped what we’re trying to do, and helped us get going. And to the PoR authors we’ve been working with. This PoR partnership means a lot to us – always been a great admirer, and LOVE the grassroots nature of the scheme.

On our journey of discovery, we’ve heard so many teachers say that the space for developing children’s social and emotional skills is getting squeezed, despite Public Health England’s research showing that these skills are more significant for children and young persons’ academic attainment than IQ.

And we’ve been fascinated by the work of leading psychologists and educationalists who are increasingly highlighting empathy as a pivotal skill. The teachers among you will all have worked with students who find it hard to see someone else’s point of view, and therefore you’ll have seen that empathy is not a fluffy extra, but a hard-edged necessity, a core life skill, especially in increasingly diverse classrooms and communities.

And a skill which disadvantaged and troubled children especially need. One of my favourite bits of reading on our empathy journey was Setting to Learn (2013), Bomber and Hughes. Do read the stonking Chapter 8 which outlines the centrality of empathy to helping troubled pupils settle to learn.
There is research evidence underpinning all these reasons, from wellbeing to school ethos, as to why schools should be taking empathy strategies very seriously. Without empathy young people will struggle to form strong relationships, collaborate or listen well. In the workplace, they will find team working very hard, which is why employers are starting to introduce empathy skills programmes.

And it’s much wider of course than each individual child’s progress. It’s about our common humanity. Helping children put empathy into action will make the world a better place, with less prejudice, and more tolerance. And oh blimey, isn’t it scary how increasingly urgent the need for more empathy feels?

I think we’re all still reeling from the way the Brexit campaign has triggered a shocking wave of racism; and cyberbullying, homophobia and religious intolerance are all on the rise. This slide (above) shows the rise in hate crimes.

So empathy matters. And the cheering thing is that 98% of us are capable of becoming more empathetic. The brain is plastic, and if we practice, we can all grow our empathy muscles, a bit like going to the gym.
And literature has been proven to provide a fantastic empathy workout. That neuroscience research shows that fiction improves what psychologists call “theory of mind” - an understanding of how other people feel and think. As we read, our brains are tricked into thinking we’re genuinely part of the story and the empathetic emotions we feel for characters wires our brains to have the same sort of sensitivity towards real people. A New York team found that literary fiction readers are consistently better at identifying facial emotions than readers of popular fiction. They believe that this is because the depth and complexity of characters mirrors and strengthens our process of trying to make sense of other people.

“Reading is an exercise in empathy; an exercise in walking in someone else’s shoes for a while”

Malorie Blackman

That makes authors incredibly important allies, key figures in a drive for a more empathic society. Couldn’t put it better than Malorie Blackman (above) and Neil Gaiman (below).
I don’t mean that authors write as part of some kind of empathy educational drive, but that authors just are natural masters of empathy, with their understanding of how to use words to create empathy for a character, those characters that neuroscience shows inspire us readers to understand other people better.

The neuroscience/empathy research has focused to date on fiction, but surely great poetry and non-fiction, can play a vital role too.

**What is empathy?**

> The ability to feel and understand other people’s emotions and perspectives
> A core life skill; vital for successful relationships, collaboration and learning
> A force for social change as empathy is put into action

3 main elements: affective; cognitive; empathic concern

**EmpathyLab**

Before outlining what we’re up to with schools, I’ll just share the awesomeness that there are at least eight brain structures involved in our ability to experience empathy, plus processes in our nervous and neuroendocrine systems. And our definition of it: you wouldn’t believe what a hotly contested area this is! Psychologists, neuroscientists, sociologists and philosophers all have different interpretations. But most agree that empathy is made up of three main elements, each with different brain wiring:

*emotional/affective empathy* where we literally resonate with someone else’s feelings,

*cognitive empathy* or perspective taking where we apply more reason to working out how someone else feels and

*empathic concern*, which is a powerful motivator for helping others, a force for social change.

2. **What we’re currently doing**

So, enough of the theory, what are we actually DOING?

**Skills we’re aiming to build**

**Empathy**

- The ability to feel, connect to and respect another person’s feelings
- Good communication: active listening and deep conversation
- A strong imagination - to enter into other people’s feelings
- The capacity to be reflective, especially about other people’s feelings
- Putting empathy understanding into action, pro-social attitudes and behaviour

**Reading for pleasure and literacy**

- Enhanced motivation to read widely for pleasure and information
- Expressive writing ability to describe people’s feelings vividly
- Better speaking and listening
- The ability to analyse the writer’s craft in creating characters’ feelings
- Wide knowledge and enjoyment of reading from a range of cultures

**EmpathyLab**

EmpathyLab is working with 11 very different pioneer primary schools in an experimental programme, the splendid Jon Biddle’s school in Great Yarmouth is one of them. The work
focuses on building these (above) six key empathy skills, and surmises that building these should also have an effect on key aspects of literacy. Schools are exploring the outcomes and planning implications of a sharper empathy focus, and how to make more systematic use of literature and story work to build empathy skills.

**The EmpathyLab approach**

Genuine partners in an experimental approach, testing out that flow we looked at earlier.

Empathy Lab provided a research base and conceptual framework, creative ideas, resources and access to psychology and literacy experts for two terms of very experimental work, spring and summer 2016. Two Patron of Reading authors – Bali Rai and Gillian Cross – ran workshops at our kick off gathering, showing how authors could be powerful contributors. This was not an off the peg programme, it was unfunded and exploratory, very much a Lab. And the schools took very different approaches to using our research and resources.

**Strategy:** Some did a lot of strategy work, changing the School Development Plan to embed an empathy focus and the use of stories to build it. St Michaels in Rochdale feature the work in the English section of their plan, but also in RE, H&S, child protection, Prevent, PHSCE and mental health issues, E-Safety and character education. While they were working with us, they had an inspection and the inspector identified Empathy Lab as “a major influence on raising standards in reading” and a “key driver of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of children”
Refocusing: Others used our resources and training to refocus existing English and literacy work, and regular activities like the end of day story. Building on the research about how exploring book characters can make us more empathic, they experimented with helping children take a different pathway through the text, focusing on characters and their dilemmas and feelings more than the plot, using lots of drama and immersive activities so children can really FEEL and name the emotions of the characters. Teresa Cremin, Professor of Literacy at the Open University, is an important partner, and she used Angus and the Good Train (above) as a fantastic stimulus for social justice focused discussions, and Mr Wintergarten’s Garden (also above) works beautifully for work on loneliness.

"I don’t always think about what might happen next, but I always think about how a character might be feeling after a story ends. When I read Not as We Know It, I thought about the character of Jamie. His brother was probably going to die and I realised how hard it must have been for him to know that.

It’s never happened to me but I understand it through the story."

Gracie, Year 3

Programmes: others tested programme ideas with the potential to become national. At The Reading Agency I learnt that creative programmes like Summer Reading Challenge can move mountains. We’re on the hunt for a national empathy programme!
At Hampshire Stanmore School’s children became *Empathy Detectives*, investigating homelessness.

They put on their empathy-spotting glasses and started with stories like Way Home and worked with author Bali Rai to explore prejudice towards the homeless and other groups and had a powerful visit from the local Nightshelter, read lots more stories and did a lot of writing. Ali Sparkes is from Patron of Reading, and did lots of really creative underpinning work on empathy.

The teachers staged a homelessness experience where the school was locked and the children had to find somewhere to sleep and now the Empathy Detectives are really fired up about fundraising for the homeless.
The very multi-cultural John Stainer Community School in Brockley mounted a massive Empathy Oscars scheme. Children and parents read books to identify their top empathy boosting characters, and the children then wrote some great nominations. A term’s worth of further reading and group work culminated in an Oscars award ceremony, with staff dressed up as the top ten nomination from children. SO much excitement, around reading, persuasive writing through the nominations, and book characters. A really interesting model for simultaneously building empathy and literacy. The winner was Miss Honey.

And then there was Empathy Book-Spotters, which all the schools contributed to. This is a two-pronged idea. Firstly, the creation of a child led team, empowered to lead the school’s work on identifying and sharing great empathy texts. Secondly, a shared database of empathy book recommendations from children themselves – us adults may think we know what works to build empathy, but what do children themselves think? Presentations, regular library sessions, shared work at home.

Here are some lovely responses to question about books that help children understand someone else better and this (left) about how that might change things – I especially love “never just think about you” (right)– could be Empathy Lab’s strapline!

Together with our partners, we think Empathy Book-Spotters has enormous potential to become an important resource, and we envisage developing it into curated collections, displays in schools and libraries, a focus for family work and maybe a whole new national programme.
I’d love to see if any of you might want to get involved in contributing to Empathy Book-Spotters. It’s not open access yet, but we could arrange it, and it’d be fantastic to work with you on developing this very promising resource.

**Social action:**

Very important to us is the end result of children learning about empathy – putting it into action. The pioneer schools have been doing some really interesting work here. Beck – Sheffield – Empathy Leaders. Sutton on Trent – Falls Group, linked to a theme of loneliness.

**Parents:**

And to end my snapshot of how we’ve been working with schools, just some snippets about parents. An empathy education programme is obviously not going to work without the involvement of families. So we’ve been experimenting with different models, depending on the school context.

Netley Marsh Infants ran a special family empathy briefing as part of World Book Day, with pyjamas and hot chocolate; they have a lovely drop in model. Beck Primary are running a family empathy reading group, and Jon ran an Empathy Reading Café, getting much higher response rate from parents than normal.

**So what now?**

In Autumn 2016 we will issue a report on the impact so far of our work in schools. Got the schools back in July together to reflect on and share impact. Incredibly heartening and exciting, especially for an unfunded, not yet systematic programme. Real impact on behavior/empathy skills; on literacy; and on putting empathy into action. Important curriculum synergies are emerging, especially in the area of reading for pleasure and empathy’s impact on inference and deduction and the ability to write imaginatively from another point of view.

Very excited they all want to carry on. In 2017, EmpathyLab will be continuing to work with our 11 pioneer schools, and start to build links between them and public libraries, and start to scope a roll out to more schools, underpinned by research with Open University and Sussex.

A few of our goals include: policy work, Empathy Day, and developing a national programme for schools.

And then...drumroll...there’s **authors**! We are starting work on building an army of authors who will support and extend our empathy work. We are running a test bed, April 2017 author training day in partnership with Patron of Reading and the Society of Authors, and expert contributions from Alan MacDonald, Ali Sparkes, Robin B, Teresa C. A few places, and would love to hear from any PoR authors interested in taking part.
So that’s me very nearly done. I’d like to finish by hearing from the children involved. Because that’s what really matters.

Firstly (above), 3 of their top Empathy Book-Spotting recommendations: Ibbotson’s One Dog and his Boy, Gleitzman’s Boy Overboard, and Chris Riddell’s Something Else, which never fails to leave me in tears.

“Schools should discuss empathy in books every week because it would help people so much”

Romy, aged 9

And then 9 year old Romy, from Jon’s class, who thinks that empathy work is very powerful:

“Schools should discuss empathy in books every week because it would help people so much”

Romy, aged 9

“I’ve finished One Dog And His Boy where the main character is very lonely. When I’d finished the book, I thought a lot about it. One day when I was in the playground I saw a girl who looked really lonely, she was sitting down on her own, so I went and played with her”

And finally, Gracie, who perfectly exemplifies that flow of immersion in stories leading to more empathic behaviour. Having read Eva Ibbotson and thought about it lots, she decided, the sweetheart, to start playing with a lonely girl in the playground. What a simply
wonderful example of the quiet power of stories, and how the explicit teaching of empathy can affect change.

This is important work, and I’m really looking forward to talking to you all about how we can work with PoR schemes to make our communities better places, step by careful step.

Thank you

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