

Imagining how others feel

Extended example: child labourers

by Dr Sue Knight

Topic objectives

This topic builds on the Stage 1 topic, 'Empathy', with the aim of scaffolding the continuing development of students' capacity to understand the feelings of others, including those in circumstances which differ markedly from their own.

This topic encouraging students to:

- Engage in targeted exercises and discussions which scaffold the development of the cognitive-imaginative process of putting ourselves in another's place;
- Recognise the importance of developing the ability to engage in this cognitive process.
- Employ this process in an attempt to understand the feelings of children who are child labourers.

Background to the topic for teachers

A newborn baby reacts to the distress cry of another with cries of her own. A young child runs to his mother for comfort when he sees another child in distress; an older child feels sad when she talks to a friend whose dog is lost, and offers consolation; an adult hears about the poorly resourced schools in Timor-Leste, feels concern for the Timorese children and posts off a box of books her own children have outgrown.

The 'matching' reactions of the newborn baby and the young child would appear to be instinctual (or automatic). The older child also experiences feelings that match, more or less closely, the feelings of her friend. However, unlike the baby or young child, the older child is aware that her feelings derive from an understanding of her friend's emotional state, and she moves to offer support. The adult's concern for the Timorese children does not come so much from sharing the children's feelings, as from engaging in an intellectual-imaginative process of seeing things from another's perspective or putting herself in another's place. Her response comes then, at least in part, from her knowledge that the children are in need and is 'targeted' to those specific needs.

These responses can be described as different 'layers' or 'levels' of empathy.

Even as adults, we retain the baby's instinctive 'matching' capacity. For example, "if we see a child fall and scrape its knee, we flinch, and exclaim "ouch!" as if what happened to the child happened at the same instant to ourselves." What is more, "(human) study participants mimic observed facial expressions and report corresponding emotions even though the expressions were presented too briefly for conscious perception"¹.

But as our capacity for complex thought develops we are able, first (at around age two), to distinguish between ourselves and others, allowing us to knowingly share another's feelings and then, with the continuing development of our intellectual and imaginative faculties, to adopt another's perspective.

Clearly, the empathising of both older child and adult involves reasoning as well as feeling. In other words the process requires cognitive as well as emotional capacities. And the reasoning component allows us to widen the scope of our empathising; to understand the feelings of those we are not in direct contact with or who are in situations very different from the ones we ourselves have faced.

Stage 2 (even year) Topic 6

These feelings and reasoning processes are widely recognised as playing an important role in moral development and decision-making: they motivate us to act in a way that benefits others, even when this comes at a cost to ourselves.

This topic builds on the Stage 1 (odd year) topic 1, 'Empathy'. Here, we set out to engage students in a series of more complex exercises designed to scaffold the continuing development of their capacity to understand the feelings of others, including those whose circumstances differ markedly from their own. Our particular focus in this context is on children who are child labourers.

Notes:

¹ Frans B. M. de Waal, 'The Antiquity of Empathy', *Science* 18 May 2012: Vol. 336 no. 6083 pp. 874-876.

Topic Structure and Resources

Aim of lesson	Resources
Lesson 1: Can we imagine how others feel? Introduces children whose lives are similar in a great many ways to the students' own.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Copies of scenarios 2, 3, 4 and 5 (enough for one between three students)
Lesson 2: Can we imagine how Sahir feels? This lesson poses a challenge: that of understanding the feelings of those whose lives are very different from their (and our) own.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Image 1: Boys at loomImage 2: Sahir's dad

References

Lesson 2

Image 1 – Sahir's dad

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Xhosa_brickmaker_at_kiln_near_Ngcobo.jpg

This file is in the public domain, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Author: Gregorydavid 15:34, 10 January 2007 (UTC)

Image 2 – Boys at loom

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/unicef/5703433927/>

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Lesson 1: Can we imagine how they feel?

For this lesson you will need:

- Copies of scenarios 2, 3, 4 and 5 (enough for one between three students)

Whole group discussion – Scenario 1

5 minutes

This topic is about using our imaginations to try and work out how other people feel. We are going to start with some scenarios about children whose lives are similar in many ways to yours and then, in the next lesson, we will read a story about a child whose life is very different to yours.

Let's start with a scenario about Jack.

Scenario 1

Jack is nearly six, and today he is having a party. He has invited everyone in his class. He's very excited - and so are the other kids. It's a 'Spooky' party, and the garden is decorated with scary things - spiders and skeletons, bats, ghosts and vampires. The birthday cake is a big spooky castle. There will be spooky games and lots of good food.

His friends are coming at two o'clock. That's only an hour away. Right now Gus, his older brother, is standing on a chair, hanging up some black balloons. But the ground is uneven, and the chair is wobbling. And suddenly Gus is lying on the ground. He's crying, and his arm is sticking out at a funny angle. Gus' dad kneels down and looks at his arm.

'It's broken', his dad says. 'We'll have to get him to hospital. He'll need an operation to fix this.'

'Sorry Jack', said his mum, 'we'll have to cancel the party.'

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a brief discussion of the following two questions. Use questions like "why do you say that?", "does anyone have any other ideas / reasons?" If students are unsure ask them to discuss with the person next to them before starting the group discussion. Prompt with the additional questions only if the students cannot come up with anything:

1. Can you imagine how you would feel if you were Jack?

Additional questions only if needed - Would Jack be: worried about Gus? annoyed at Gus? upset about missing his party? worried about letting his friends down?

2. What about Gus? Can you imagine how he might be feeling?

Additional questions only if needed – Would Gus be: in pain? scared about an operation? cross with himself for falling? embarrassed?

Group discussion – scenarios 2, 3 and 4

18 minutes

Now I am going to give you some more scenarios and I'd like you to work in groups of 3 to discuss them.

Organise the students into groups of three. For each of the following three scenarios:

1. Read the scenario to the whole class
2. Hand copies of the scenario to each group
3. Allow the group 2 minutes to discuss the question/s
4. Facilitate a brief, whole group discussion, of the questions then repeat with the next scenario

 **Scenario 2**

Isaac is waiting for his mum to pick him up from after school care. He's been waiting for quite a while. One by one the other kids have left, and now he's the only one in the room. Then the OOSH carer, Alex, comes up. 'Your mum's stuck in traffic', he says. 'She's not sure how long she'll be. Don't worry - I'll wait with you until she comes.'

They wait and wait. To Isaac, it feels like hours have gone by. But still his mum doesn't come.

'How long do you think she'll be?' he asks.

'I'm not sure', Alex says. 'She'll probably be here soon.'

Isaac is hungry and tired. And it's starting to get dark. He really wants to get home.

More time passes. 'How long will we have to wait?' he asks again.

And Alex says, 'I don't know - your mum will probably be here soon.'

And Isaac slumps down into a chair.

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a brief discussion of the following two questions.

1. How would you feel if you had to wait like that?
2. Can you imagine how Isaac is feeling?

 **Scenario 3**

Almost every afternoon since she started school, Maya's dad has come to collect her from school. He always walks, and he always brings Misty, their dog, with him. Then all three of them walk home together. Misty is old - much older than Maya, and now he walks slowly. But he still loves the walk to the school. And he loves to see Maya coming out through the gate.

But this afternoon Maya's dad is on his own.

'Where's Misty, Dad?' Maya asks.

'He's sick', her dad says. And when they get home, Maya can see that for herself. She pats Misty gently. 'Please get better, Misty', she says.

Next morning, as she walks in the school gate, her friend Abby runs up. 'Hey Maya!' she says. 'Do you want to play basketball at lunchtime? I'm getting some teams together.'

'I don't know' Maya says. 'I don't really feel like it...'

'What's wrong?' Abby asks.

'Misty's sick', Maya says.

'Don't worry', says Abby. 'She'll get better. And you have to play basketball. I really need you on my team.'

So Maya plays basketball. But she can't concentrate very well because she's still worrying about Misty. So she misses lots of shots, and drops the ball and doesn't run as fast as usual.

At the end of the match, Abby comes up to her. 'You didn't try at all!' Abby says. And she walks away.

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a brief discussion of the following two questions.

1. Can you imagine how you would feel if you were Maya?
2. Do you think Abby understands how Maya is feeling? *Take responses, and after each one, ask: What makes you think that?*

 **Scenario 4**

Mia, Sophie and Thanh are friends. They play together at lunch and at recess. They all love basketball. Just about everyone in their class does. Mia and Sophie sit next to each other in class, and Thanh sits on the other side of the room.

Now it's just before lunch and Mia wants to know whether Thanh has brought his basketball to school. So she scribbles a note and folds the paper over into a small square. The teacher is writing their maths homework on the board, and Mia whispers to Sophie. 'Throw this to Thanh for me. You're a better shot than I am.'

But just as Sophie throws, the teacher turns around. 'Sophie', she says, 'you know it's against the rules to pass notes in class. And you know what the penalty is. I'm afraid you will have to spend your lunchtime picking up papers.' And then the bell goes.

Sophie goes to her bag and takes out her lunch box. 'Sorry Sophie' Mia whispers. 'We'll play basketball together tomorrow.'

'I don't want to play with you', Sophie says.

'Why are you being so horrible?' Mia asks. 'I said I was sorry.'

Sophie doesn't say anything. She just walks away and sits with Thanh instead.

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a brief discussion of the following two questions.

1. Can you imagine how you would feel if you were in Sophie's place?
2. Do you think Mia understood how Sophie was feeling? *Take responses, and after each one, ask: What makes you think that?*

Whole group discussion – Scenario 5

5 minutes

Reform the circle for a whole group discussion.

I have one last scenario for you.

 **Scenario 5**

Yesterday, Kai's class had a really hard maths test. Kai studied hard for it, and he did well - better than he's ever done in a maths test before. His friend, Marcus, is pretty good at maths, but he hardly studied at all. And he did badly - much worse than he usually did.

At recess, Kai ran up to Marcus. 'Hey Marcus', he said, 'you won't believe this, but I got an A! I've never got an A for maths before!'

'Stop bragging!', said Marcus, and he walked away. Kai ran after him. 'Wait...sorry Marcus', he said. 'How did you go?'

'Why should I tell you?' Marcus said. 'But If you must know, I got a C.' And he stomped off.

'He's just jealous', Kai thought to himself.

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a brief discussion of the following questions:

1. How do you think Kai felt when he got his test results?

Additional question only if needed

– *Would Kai be: happy? proud that he studied hard? relieved? glad that he had studied hard?*

2. Do you think Marcus understood how Kai was feeling?

Additional questions only if needed

– *Was Kai actually bragging? Could Kai have assumed that Marcus probably got an A as well?*

3. What about Marcus? How do you think he felt when he got his marks?

Additional questions only if needed

- *Do you think Marcus was annoyed with himself? or embarrassed because he usually does better? Would he feel as though he let himself down?*

4. Do you think Kai understood how Marcus was feeling?

Additional questions only if needed

- *Kai thinks that Marcus is jealous, is that right? Is Kai jealous? Could Marcus just be really annoyed with himself – do you think Kai would know?*

End the lesson

2 minutes

Facilitate a brief discussion of the following questions to end the lesson:

1. Do you think it is important to try and understand how our friends feel? Why do you think that?
2. Do you think that using your imagination to put yourself in your friends' shoes can help you understand how your friends are feeling?

Lesson 2: Can we imagine how Sahir feels?

For this lesson you will need:

- Copies of Images 1 and 2

Remember last lesson

1 minute

👉 What did we talk about last week?

Just like last week, this week you will be using your imaginations again, but this time, instead of scenarios we are going to be reading a story.

Story - part 1

3 minutes

📖 Sahir and his family

Sahir is eight years old, but he looks younger. He is short for his age, and thin. He lives in another country, a long way from here. There are five people in Sahir's family: his mum and dad, his younger brother and sister - and Sahir himself. His family lives in a small village where his father has a job making bricks. In Sahir's village, bricks are not made in factories, by machines. Instead, Sahir's father makes bricks by hand.

Show Image 1: Sahir's dad

It's a hard job, making bricks by hand, and Sahir's father works at it every day from first light until sunset. He does this so that he can buy food for his family.



On his fifth birthday, Sahir started school. He can still remember almost everything about that day. It was the day he first held a book in his hand and the day he played cricket for the very first time. And it was also the day he first played on the lawn. The lawn was in front of his classroom. The grass was soft and there were no stones to hurt his feet when he played tip with his friends.

Sahir loved school and he learned quickly. Before long he could read his favourite books all by himself. And, with a bit of practice, he became the fastest and most accurate bowler in the cricket team.

Then, when he was seven, his little sister came down with a fever that would not go away. She cried a lot, and wouldn't eat. So Sahir's mum took her to the hospital in a big town many kilometres from the village. They were gone for a long time. For all this time, Sahir could not go to school. Instead, he stayed at home, looking after his little brother and cooking the meals while his father worked at his brickmaking. It seemed to Sahir that his father was working harder and harder.

Sahir loved his little brother and took good care of him. But he missed school and he wished his sister would come back and be well again. 'If only Mum would bring her home', he thought. 'Then everything would be all right.' But he said nothing.

A month passed. And then, at last, his mum and his sister were back!

But Sahir could tell that something was wrong. And that night his father took him aside.

'You know, Sahir', he said, 'it cost a lot of money for your sister to stay so long in hospital - more money than I can pay. I have found you a job a long way from here with a rug maker. You have small hands and nimble fingers - just right for tying knots. You will be a good rug maker. And the money you earn will help pay the hospital bill. I am very sorry Sahir', he added.

Sahir had been looking forward to his mum and sister coming home for a long time. But now it has all gone wrong.

Discussion

10 minutes

Think back to last week's scenarios. Was there a scenario about a boy who had been looking forward to something for ages, but then things went wrong and it didn't happen? (*Only if necessary: Do you remember Jack's birthday party?*)

- 👉 Can someone remind us of what happened in that scenario?
- 👉 What did we say about how Jack felt?

Now let's get back to Sahir.

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a discussion of the following questions:

1. How do you think he felt when his dad said he couldn't go back to school? Before you answer that, try to put yourself in Sahir's shoes. How would you feel if you were told you had to leave your family and friends and go to work a long way away, where you didn't know anyone?

Additional questions only if needed

- *Would you be shocked? scared? upset? angry?*

2. What about Sahir's father? Before his mum and sister came home Sahir noticed that his father had been working harder and harder. Why do you think that was?

Additional questions only if needed

- *Perhaps he was working harder to earn extra money to pay the hospital bill?*

3. How do you think Sahir's dad felt when he told Sahir that he couldn't go back to school?

Additional questions only if needed

- *Do you think his dad felt: sad? sorry for Sahir? desperate? guilty?*

Story - part 2 and an activity

8 minutes

📖 The next day a man drove into the village in an old truck, and took Sahir away from his friends, his family, and his school. They drove for many hours until they came to a great shed on the outskirts of a big city. As Sahir stepped inside the shed, he felt the heat of the air and coughed as he breathed in the fluff from the wool that was used to make the rugs. And then he saw the children sitting on the floor in a long row. In front of each child was.... 'What is it?' Sahir asked quietly.

Show Image 2: Boys at loom

- 👉 Does anyone know what this is?

(This is a photo taken in 2006 of some boys in Pakistan doing the same thing that the boys in front of Sahir were doing.)



'It's a loom' the man said.

'What are they doing?' Sahir whispered again. The children's fingers moved so quickly he couldn't tell.

'Tying knots', the man said gruffly.

👏 Can you imagine what it would feel like to be in Sahir's place?

Additional questions only if needed

– *Would you feel frightened, lonely, afraid of what might happen to you?*

Sahir soon discovered that the children tied knots all day, and sometimes into the night. They just tied knots. The rugs were made of knots. They had to tie about a million knots to make each average size rug.

👏 Can you tie a knot? Hands up if you can.

Hands up if you are wearing shoes with shoelaces. If you are, I want you to untie one of your shoes and put it on the floor in front of you. If you don't have shoes with shoelaces you might need to ask another student if they can lend you their other shoe.

When I say go you are going to tie and untie the shoelaces. I want you to keep on doing that, tying and untying for 5 minutes. Go! *Time 5 minutes (which will seem a long time).*

Now I want you to imagine that you have to keep on doing that for 5 hours and then, after a 20 minute lunch break, for another 5 hours.

👏 How would your fingers be feeling?

👏 What about your hands?

👏 And what about your back?

👏 And what if you had to tie the knots up high – with your arms raised – like this? Mime a demonstration. Show me how you would tie knots up high.

Story - part 3 and a discussion

7 minutes

📖 Sahir's long days were spent in the shed, tying knots. There was no time for playing and no time for reading - and anyway, there were no books - and no time even to walk in the fresh air. His back ached and his fingers were sore, but still he had to keep working. Sahir missed his family and his friends. And he missed school. He was paid 11 cents for each hour he worked and he kept wondering how many more hours he would have to work to pay off the hospital bill.

Can you imagine how you would feel if you were in Sahir's place?

Additional questions only if needed

– *Would you feel unhappy, helpless, lonely, scared?*

It was two years before Sahir's father came to take him home. 'Oh Sahir!' he said. 'You are so thin and your skin is so pale. And you haven't grown taller - in two years you have grown no taller! But never mind - now I will take you home. You will be able to play in the fresh air and read your books. And you will be able to go back to school.'

And that is what happened. Now Sahir is back at school.

What do you think it would have been like for Sahir when he went back to school? Before you answer, try to put yourself in Sahir's place once again. Imagine you are Sahir. You have had two years away from school. When you left you were eight years old and in Year 3. Now you are ten. In the two years you have been away, you have had no chance to read or to write or to play sport or do maths - no chance to learn or practise anything except how to tie knots. And you look different from the other kids - you are shorter and thinner and your skin is paler.

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a discussion around the following questions

1. What will it be like when you go back to school?

Encourage and broaden the discussion, only if required, with these additional questions

- What year will your friends be in now?*
- Will you be able to go into Year 5 with them or back to Year 3?*
- How will you get on with kids 2 years younger than you are?*
- And you look different now – will some of the kids make fun of you?*

2. Will you like school as much as you did before?

End the lesson

1 minute

Take a few responses to each of these questions:

-  Do you think you have some idea of the way Sahir and his family might have been feeling during this time?
-  Do you think it's important to try to understand the way other people feel, even if those people are a long way away from us, and have different sorts of lives? Why do you think that?

Students will probably find it hard to give reasons here. But if they do have trouble, don't worry. This point is picked up in many later topics, and the point of the question is just to get them to think, and perhaps puzzle, about it. Students might say that it's important because there might be something we could do to help people like Sahir and his family through international organisations. They might well come across analogous issues in HSIE (Human Society and its Environment) in class.

~~~END OF TOPIC~~~

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