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# EMPATHY IN ACTION: A PATHWAY TO ACCEPTANCE OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES IN SIXTH GRADE STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The need for middle school students to acquire social competence which improves peer acceptance creates the potential for a negative impact to healthy development, especially for individuals with disabilities. The *purpose* of this study was to determine if participating in a simulated experience of visual, auditory and/or hearing impairment would improve empathy and acceptance of individuals with a disability, in middle school students. *Methods*: Forty-four sixth grade students, aged eleven to twelve years, attending a school in the rural Midwest, participated in the study. Students were randomly divided into three groups and participated in three activities for ten minutes each designed to create a simulated experience of having visual, auditory and/or mobility loss. Students completed a pre-test and post-test survey to evaluate change in empathy of students after participating in the simulated activities. Participants also were involved in a debriefing session designed to empower students to create meaning from their experiences. Data was collected and analyzed using SPSS Descriptive Statistics. *Results* indicated on average empathy for individuals with disabilities increased after experiencing each of the three simulations  $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 2.61$ . This difference was found to be significant  $t(43) = 2.18$ ,  $p < .05$ . *Conclusion*: Findings suggest empathy for individuals with disabilities increased after experiencing the simulated mobility, hearing and/or vision loss activities, suggesting social acceptance is possible through experiential and inclusive learning activities specifically designed to improve empathy. Therefore, implementing experiential and inclusive learning activities into school programming and curriculum may foster an increase in acceptance of students with disabilities.

## INTRODUCTION

During middle school, students become increasingly aware of and focused upon social competence and peer acceptance. This has the potential to negatively impact cognitive, physical, and social development (Marotz, 2017). Middle school students in particular are challenged by accepting social differences due to an increased anxiety about their own ability to be accepted by others. This heightened concern with acceptance could lead to internal (self) or external (others) behaviors which may be considered negative and/or abusive (Arseneault, 2018). Living with a disability, as a child, is regarded by medical professionals as an adverse childhood experience. This increases the incidence of exclusion, bullying, neglect and/or abuse all of which have severely profound and negative long-term effects (Waldman, Schwartz, Perlman, & Larsen, 2020).

Prevention of bullying is vital, particularly in populations who already face significant challenges like individuals with academic, social and/or physical disabilities. In a study completed

by Will et al. (2013), an economic game was created to determine how children would punish those who excluded victims and how victims would be compensated. Researchers determined that as age increased, more financial support was given by participants to victims with less being provided to the excluders. Additionally, researchers found when the judge took on the perspective of the victim, both compensation and punishment increased (Will, Crone, Van Den Bos & Guroglu, 2013). Empathy, or “putting oneself in another’s shoes,” is an effective way to facilitate fair behavior. Therefore, if empathy experiences and/or activities were created to enable students to “put themselves into another person’s shoes” the potential to improve acceptance rates of students considered “different” within the middle school population may also increase.

In order to determine if an improvement in empathy could be obtained through activities specifically designed to increase awareness of the challenge’s individuals with disabilities face in middle school, researchers designed a study which simulated the loss of vision, hearing and/or mobility and facilitated the impact of that loss to create an impact upon the participants. The purpose of the research was to identify any change present in the level of empathy middle school students developed for individuals with disabilities after experiencing the activities designed to simulate vision, hearing and/or mobility loss.

## **METHODS**

A total of 44 students (M=21, F=23) from a rural school district in the Midwest ages 11 to 12 years took part in the study. Of the students participating, 65.9% were Caucasian, 6.8% were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 6.7% were Asian/Hispanic and/or Spanish in ethnicity. The pre-test and post-test were developed from previously validated questionnaires and reviewed by four evaluators for content. The pre-test and post-test were comprised of seven questions using a combination of The Likert scale, multiple choice, and open-ended types. Questions focused on student perspectives and empathetic feelings towards individuals with disabilities. Descriptive statistics were utilized to evaluate data. Additionally, the open-ended questions were evaluated by each of the four researchers to identify themes using the constant comparisons method.

Students were randomly split into three even groups and given a number one, two, three, which indicated the activity station where they would begin. Station one related to visual loss, station two was a hearing loss activity, and station three included a mobility loss simulation explained in detail below. Once all activities were completed students gathered into the original large group and completed the post-test. A debriefing session designed to engage student reflection upon the experiences and group discussion focused on learning was held once all participants completed the post-test.

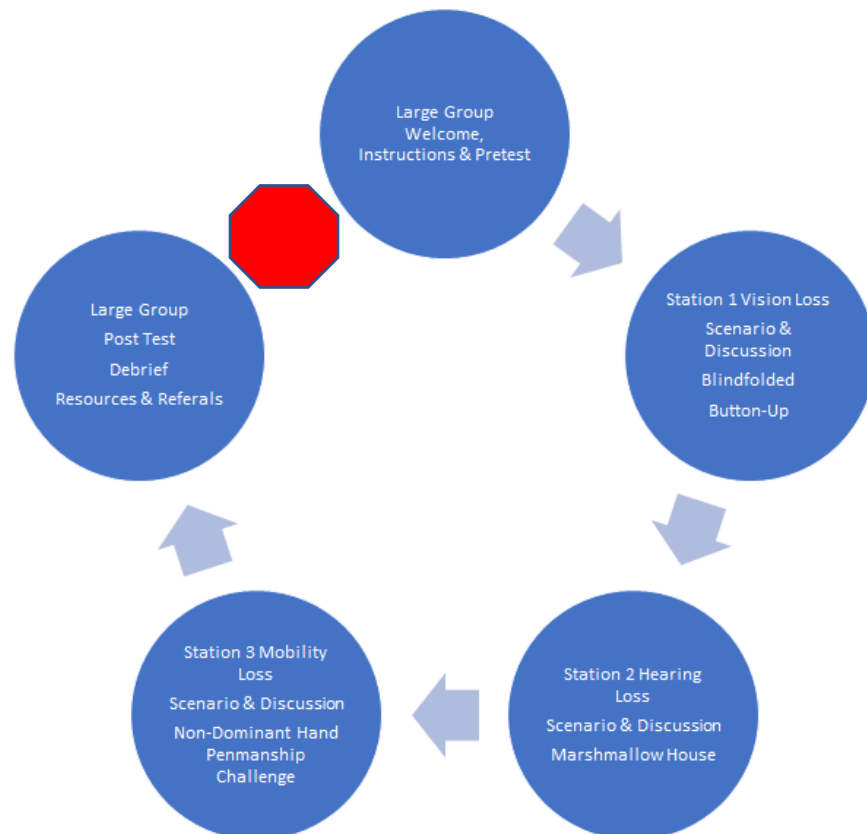
## **STATION ACTIVITIES**

The three stations completed for the study simulated a loss of either sensory and/or motor capacity and were designed to provide an experience of what life might be like with the particular disability. Approximately ten minutes were allowed at each station, and students were alerted when they had one minute left to complete their task before transitioning to the next station. Groups were rotated through each station in order to provide three different experiences of sensory and/or motor loss. Each station was led by two researchers and took place in separate labeled areas (vision, hearing, and mobility). Timers were set together in unison by each researcher responsible for time. When the time for the station had ended, one researcher walked

students to their next station while the other researcher waited to welcome the next group to begin to prepare them for the activity.

At each station, students were read a scenario by the researcher which depicted experiences related to a specific disability in hopes of personalizing the disability for students prior to participating at the station. For example, students were asked to think of a person they knew or cared about with a visual disability during the visual loss simulation. Students were then given directions read verbatim by the researchers prior to the beginning of their group's task. Students were allowed to ask questions to clarify their task, but the researcher was only allowed to re-read specific parts of the instructions in order to simulate an emotional reaction to the loss. The students were offered a reward for "successful completion" of each task in order to further the impact of the loss if they were unable to complete the tasks. The purpose for the reward was to increase the feeling of loss by the participant, to potentially increase the empathetic response when awareness of others' loss occurred. When each group had completed the instructions and scenario discussions ten-minute timers were set in unison by researchers.

*Figure 1: Empathy in Action Activities*



*Vision loss simulation station:* Students were asked to think about a person they knew and/or cared about who had suffered from visual loss. A predetermined scenario related to vision loss was read and each student was asked to visualize a person they knew/cared for in the leading role of that scenario. A small discussion about what it was like for the person was shared by all who could relate to the scenario. Students were then asked to wear blindfolds and attempt to put on a long sleeve shirt and button it up in a minute or less on their own. Students were told that only the successful students who properly buttoned up their shirts would receive the reward in

order to increase the impact of stress and a sense of loss if students failed to do so. Students were allowed three attempts.

*Hearing loss simulation station:* Students were asked to think about a person they knew or cared about who had hearing loss. A scenario related to hearing loss was read by the researcher and students were asked to reflect upon and discuss the scenario. Students were instructed to build the exact replica of a premade house on display using the materials (mini marshmallows and pretzels) in front of them. Students were told that if they followed the researcher's instructions exactly, they would be able to build the replica of the house and receive the prize. The students were then instructed to place ear plugs into their ears and cover them with a pair of noise cancelling headphones prior to the researcher reading the instructions. The instructions were spoken by the researcher at a volume considered normal for a one-on-one conversation as the students began to build. The researcher was not allowed to repeat the instructions. The hearing loss simulation was notably able to create the most intense emotional reactions as evidenced by increased verbal frustration, physical tension, and expressions of anger.

*Mobility simulation station:* Students were asked to think of someone they knew and/or cared about who has a mobility disability i.e., in a wheelchair, on crutches, and/or had lost a limb. Students were then asked to hold up the hand that they wrote with while a researcher placed a pencil in the hand which was not held up. Students were asked to write what the researcher spoke verbatim and told that if their script was legible and accurate, they would receive a reward. The researcher was not allowed to repeat the instructions. The researcher acted as the judge regarding legibility and accuracy and had a scripted response to frustration regarding negative expressions of the fairness of their judgements were verbalized by students. Physical tension, verbal frustration and anger were also noted when judgments of achievement were deemed negative or unfair by participants.

## POST-TEST EVALUATIONS

Upon completion of each station students were gathered into the initial total group and given a post-test survey identical to the pre-test survey with the exception of one open-ended question which required students to reflect upon what they learned about individuals with disabilities as a result of their experiences during the simulated activities. Students were then invited to participate in a discussion about their experiences from the activities and asked what they had learned focusing, specifically on self-reflection. A debriefing session was held to impart self-awareness, reflection and meaning upon the students. Students were made aware that they may experience feelings of sadness, anger, fear etc. as a result of their participation and experience in this study. Students were encouraged to talk with their fellow students and family about those feelings as often as they felt they needed to. Additionally, students with feelings which became intense or troublesome were advised to contact their teachers and school counselors if they should experience these feelings for longer than a school week. Teachers and School Counselors were provided with additional educational resources and referrals to be able to answer questions and facilitate care and closure for all students who participated in this experience.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were ran and results indicated that on average empathy for individuals with disabilities increased after experiencing the simulations  $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 2.61$ . The difference between the pre-test and post-test assessments was found to be significant  $t(43) = 2.18$ ,

$p < .05$ . These findings indicate that empathy and level of acceptance may be increased for individuals with disabilities in a brief amount of time in middle school aged students. Qualitative themes included an increased awareness of the challenge's individuals with disabilities face, increased respect for individuals who are strong enough to handle the difficulties, increased compassion for experiencing hardships, and increased interest in finding ways to support individuals with disabilities. This study demonstrated the potential to significantly improve how students perceive others, specifically individuals with disabilities, by utilizing active, experiential, and inclusive educational strategies in a short amount of time. The duration of each of these activities individually did not exceed ten minutes, for a total of approximately 30 minutes to complete the three simulated experiences. This makes participation in simulated experiences with disabilities an efficient and potentially effective strategy to teach and improve awareness for the challenges individuals with disabilities must face.

## DISCUSSION

Sixth grade students displayed an increase in empathy towards individuals with disabilities after direct participation in a simulated visual, auditory and mobility loss activity. The experience of a disability when paired with a sense of reward loss was able to foster an increase in understanding and empathy for the level of difficulty a person with a disability must face on a daily basis. Therefore, experiences which include personal loss and/or suffering seem to foster increased empathy in middle school students. These findings indicate potential for uniting individuals with differences through compassion developed from personal experiences. The results of this study were notable due to the short duration of the activities. Engaging students in interesting and fun activities designed to foster learning for what it is like for an individual living with a disability is complex and involves emotional reactivity. This research supports the potential to empower students to learn self-awareness and self-regulation skills as it simulated a small amount of loss compared to the profound amount of loss students with disabilities must experience. Extended research should be completed to evaluate if the level of loss is more severe when a longer simulated experience is provided. The potential to teach students how to manage loss is also present when engaging these simulated activities which could increase social emotional regulation and should be investigated in future research.

Students responded positively to the visual loss activity, Blindfolded Button-UP. Each group requested to participate multiple times within the ten-minute time interval. The hearing loss activity, Marshmallow House, created an increase in frustration levels as students were judged by researchers on their exactness of replicating the example. This station seemed to foster an increase in frustration levels as students were not able to hear the instructions and very few were able to complete the task exactly as the example on display. When researchers gave "Judgements" defensiveness ignited debates about how similar structures were to the example on display. In the mobility loss station students showed the highest frustration levels and most active debating behavior in response to the judging of legibility and accuracy.

Frustration levels observed were mitigated in this experiment by the environment. The research took place in a classroom familiar to the students participating, with their own teachers and administrators present. In a different setting frustration may have resulted in anger or even conflict. The experience of loss was an important factor because students had to feel a connection with the level of loss others facing a disability must constantly overcome. As experiences with disabilities increased, the perceived level of differences by students decreased, indicating that it

became easier to accept as normal. Therefore, creating experiences which provide children with exposure to disabilities and/or foster personal experiences of a disability like these simulations do seem to increase the student's ability to accept a disability as normal. Students who reported an increase in empathy through their own personal connection with these simulated experiences may find it easier to accept and respect individuals with disabilities. If acceptance increases, it is likely to decrease the potential for bullying and prevent adverse childhood experiences for those individuals who encounter difficulty and/or exclusion due to their disability.

### **LIMITATIONS**

There were several variables which presented as limitations of this study including a small sample size. In the future a larger sample size is suggested to improve the significance of these findings. The diversity within the population of participants in this study was relatively low. Future research should include a more diverse population. A total of 93 percent of students reported having a relationship with a person who was known to have a disability. Additionally, many participants indicated that they had experiences with a person who has been diagnosed with a disability. This may be since a student within this population of participants was a person with a disability or a person who has a disability may have been present in their family. The high incidence of exposure to disabilities could have skewed the results as the presence of a disability was consistent in this population's day to day experiences. Further, this study did not examine the lasting effects of the significant increase in empathy. Future research should employ strategies to examine the change in empathy resulting from participation in this study over time to identify if long term effects exist and/or change over time

Future researchers should also account for students with disabilities when screening and/or selecting student participants. Research suggests that early childhood is an ideal placement for inclusive educational strategies (Beneke, Newton, Vinh, Blanchard, & Kemp, 2019). Though this population was younger than adolescence, studying children ages three, five, or nine may yield very interesting results since the importance of peer acceptance does not pique until approximately middle school age. This would bypass any defensive or social norming behaviors which make it difficult for educational inclusion practices to be accepted and adopted.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Future research could include application of these findings to program development within schools to create new relationships between students of all cognitive, physical, and mental skill levels. Campaigns which promote student awareness of disabilities could also include experiential activities in order to directly engage students who do not have experiences with persons with disabilities. It is also important to note that acceptance of any person with a difference from the socially accepted "norm" does seem to contain a level of internal and external conflict which needs an opportunity for resolution. Differences are threatening to individuals of all ages for a variety of reasons. A child's age is linked to how they process differences and develop perceptions of individuals with disabilities. Children younger than middle school age approach the topic of disabilities with curiosity and a relatively "positive outlook," whereas older children are more likely to focus on the challenges of life with a disability (Kayama, 2017).

Simulating experiences outside of individual disabilities to include economic disadvantage, mental health, domestic violence, etc. is an area where researchers also need more information in order to contribute to the health and well-being of students today. Preventative efforts need to

engage people from a young age, as early as pre-kindergarten and researchers should continue to study experiential, inclusive strategies which require active participation. It is possible to influence the perception of disabilities in middle school students in as little as ten minutes through active participation in activities which simulate the challenges disabilities present to individuals. Imagine the level of acceptance which could be achieved for all individuals with differences if activities like Empathy in Action were adopted into a curriculum to teach empathy and acceptance to students of all ages across the United States.



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