Research Guide (Grades 7–12)
College and Career Competency: *Empathy*

Definition:

Empathy is defined as the ability to relate to the perspective or feelings of another individual. Hoffman (2000) characterizes empathy as "an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own" (p. 4). Without empathy, individuals remain indifferent or dismissive towards others and may engage in antisocial behavior. Empathy, then, provides a means for people to lead compassionate and socially aware lives.

N. Filbert (2014), https://manoftheword.com/

Essential Components for Students:

1. Make efforts to understand others: their contexts, feelings, and behaviors.
2. Communicate your understanding of someone's personal situation.

Competency Sequence for Students:

These targets describe how students demonstrate competency knowledge (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018). These targets can be used to determine students' growth over time.

	Empathy
Beginning	• Interprets emotions in the facial expressions or behaviors of other people. • Identifies what kind of emotion(s) specific actions or responses might cause a person to feel. • Demonstrates helping behaviors when someone is hurt or sad. • Identifies and labels their own basic feelings and emotions.

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Emerging	• Describes similarities and differences between themselves and others. • Demonstrates increased awareness of others' feelings and perspectives. • Defines feeling words that describe basic personal emotions in themselves and others. • Recognizes when someone needs help, and offers help. • Interprets facial expressions and nonverbal cues of others. • Demonstrates basic listening strategies.
Proficient	• Demonstrates listening strategies. • Describes meanings of various feeling words and pairs feeling words with scenarios imagining another's perspective. • Describes the importance of understanding perspective. • Demonstrates methods to understand a peer's perspective, such as asking questions. • Communicates in respectful ways when responding to different points of view.

Research:

- Empathy is part of social and emotional learning, which has been shown to improve students' academic performance and lifelong learning (Zins et al., 2004; Zorza et al., 2019).
- Empathy includes recognizing and understanding another's feelings (cognitive) as well as sharing and vicariously experiencing those emotions (affective; Calandri et al., 2021). Empathy is positively correlated with adolescents' interpersonal functioning (prosocial behavior) and mental health. It inhibits aggression. Those with low empathy are less able to imagine how their behavior affects others.
- Researchers found that empathy together with social responsibility was a leading predictor of student enrollment in college and graduation (Sparkman et al., 2012).
- A widely cited study by Konrath et al. (2011) indicates that American society has undergone a sharp decrease in empathetic thinking and behavior since the year 2000. The study, which draws data from 14,000 college students, shows that members of the Millennial Generation are far less inclined to demonstrate perspective taking and empathetic concern than previous generations. The authors cite increasing levels of self-centeredness as a driver, noting that empathy and narcissism are negatively correlated. In addition, the authors speculate that more time spent interacting with others online through social media rather than through face-to-face social interactions contributes to decreased empathy. Konrath and her colleagues speculate that recent increases in bullying, violence, and other unwanted behavior are connected to this decline in empathy.
- A London-based consulting company has found a direct connection between empathy and commercial success, based on data from an annual Global Empathy Index (Lublin, 2016; Parmar, 2015). The top 10 companies on the index generated 50% more net income per employee than the bottom 10 companies. The index is compiled using a combination of publicly available and proprietary data pulled from surveys and social media.
- Empathy has proven to be a highly desirable trait and crucial skill in a range of professions, including those in healthcare, social work, education, and business (Cruz & Patterson, 2005; Hojat et al., 2013; Payette & Libertella, 2011; Pedersen, 2010; Williams & Stickley, 2010). Given the desirability of empathy, professional and vocational education programs are increasingly screening applicants for empathic dispositions and teaching students skills associated with empathy. In fact, about 20% of U.S. employers offer empathy training as part of management development (Lublin, 2016). One such training program, for new and established professionals, is at Massachusetts General Hospital.

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- Empathy is connected to **self-awareness**. More specifically, students who are self-aware of their own personal characteristics, including strengths and weakness, can better empathize with others regarding differing traits and areas of improvement (Baron-Cohen, 2011; Brent & Millgate-Smith, 2008).
- When teachers display empathy towards their students, they model desirable behavior and improve the overall learning experience. Students typically derive trust and gain confidence when a culture of empathy is present in the classroom (Berkovich, 2020; Cooper, 2011).
- Research across a wide variety of disciplines shows that the arts provide excellent opportunities to introduce and instill empathy among students (Arnold et al., 2014; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Jeffers, 2009; Laird, 2015; Mogro-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020; Orzulak, 2006). Exposing students to works of literature, the visual arts, and music prompts them to see the world through the eyes of others. Engaging students in discussions and other activities related to examining the perspectives of others further aids students in appreciating experiences and perspectives not necessarily their own.
- Studies show empathy gaps between designers and users (Demetriou & Nicholl, 2022). Asking art students to make a product without context removes a chance for empathy with the user and other stakeholders. It is important to think about the user rather than only the product. "When designers are given the task of designing an object, a stumbling block is to be fixated on the product. In such cases, the designer's approach is introspected and convergent, rather than outrospected and divergent" (p. 6). Embedding empathy into the creative process encourages creativity and results in successful design.
- Social interaction is limited to the people living near students. Reading and writing extend that range of interaction, allowing students to experience more relationships than they might otherwise and giving them deliberate practice in building empathy (Çelimli, I., & Higdon, 2019).
- History courses can help students develop empathy (Casale et al., 2018). Students may not be empathetic toward people from the past, thinking them ignorant, morally deficient, or old-fashioned. This point of view, which comes easily, prevents students from contextualizing history and from recognizing the perspective of past people. There are four steps to applying empathy in teaching history: finding an event that shows people's activities, examining the event's context and chronology, analyzing primary and secondary sources, and creating a narrative of how the event developed and ended (Elbay, 2022).
- Role-playing is an effective method for initiating and fostering an empathetic mindset among students. Whether they compose character biographies, act out roles, or play simulation games, role-playing shifts students' viewpoints and increases their awareness of the thoughts and feelings of others (Bachen et al., 2012; Cooper, 2011; Fischer & Vander Laan, 2002).
- Multicultural education prompts students to look beyond their own cultural paradigms and find value in the lives of other people. Such experiences have been shown to bolster empathy and other desirable attributes, including a sense of fair play and justice, among students (Cruz & Patterson, 2005; Dolby, 2012; McAllister & Irvine, 2002).
- Students who regularly interact with animals or care for their needs tend to show an increase in empathetic behavior and personal responsibility (Daly & Suggs, 2010; Hergovich et al., 2002; Sprinkle, 2008; Wilson, 2014). Classroom pets, for example, can consistently reinforce prosocial behavior, including empathy.
- A key element of successful socialization is the ability to relate to others and express appropriate responses during interactions. Empathy contributes to the well-being not only of the individual but also of those around them and of the environment (Stern & Cassidy, 2018). Students with autism can find it hard to be empathetic and make social connections; however,

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these students can be taught (e.g., by use of social stories, verbal and/or visual cues) to relate to others in an empathetic fashion (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Golan & Baron-Cohen, 2006; Yirmiya et al., 1992).

- Having positive social interactions is important because students can receive help from their classmates and friends to complete academic tasks and solve conflicts, which leads to an increase in motivation and commitment to school (Zorza et al., 2019), raising students' **self-efficacy** (Zarei et al., 2022).

Assessment:

- The Empathy Formative Questionnaire (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2016) is a 15-item instrument that measures students' proficiency in two essential components of empathy: making efforts to understand others' contexts, feelings, behaviors, etc. and communicating that understanding. The Empathy Formative Questionnaire results can be used by both teachers and students to assess relative strengths and areas for improvement. Students are asked to rate themselves on each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not Very Like Me*, and 5 = *Very Like Me*); results are displayed on a 100-point scale. The results are automatically graphed for students once they complete the questionnaire, enabling them to immediately reflect on their results. Results are also available to the teacher for individual students and in aggregate. While the questionnaire is written at a seventh-grade reading level, per the Flesch-Kincaid readability score, it can be adapted for grades 1–5 as necessary. The following example items represent each of the two essential components:
  - o I try to see things from other people's points of view. (Understand others)
  - o I say things like, "I can see why you feel that way." (Communicate understanding)
  Teachers can access the questionnaire by setting up an account through https://www.cccstudent.org/ and following the instructions to launch a survey and administer it to students. Students (and teachers) can use individual questionnaire results to identify empathetic behaviors that students can focus on cultivating or strengthening. Empathy is also embedded in assessments on **assertiveness** and **conflict management**.

Instructional Practices:

- The College & Career Competency Framework includes empathy-embedded curricula on **assertiveness** and **conflict management**:
  - o *Teaching Assertiveness in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Noonan et al., 2022)
  - o *Teaching Conflict Management in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Noonan et al., 2017)
  Each set outlines more than 25 instructional activities across eight lessons. The lessons include explicit instruction and application elements that teachers can modify based on students' experiences and needs. The lessons, accompanied by a PDF student workbook with worksheets that can be reproduced to facilitate learning, are available for purchase at https://www.cccframework.org/competency-lessons-and-student-workbooks/.
- The Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM (2015) provides lesson plans that integrate studying the arts into the grades 9–12 curriculum. These are designed to help students develop a capacity to understand one another's feelings and motivations and then collaborate and problem solve. For example, students can learn to understand the implications of culture on politics by looking at history through the lens of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire."

- PBS (n.d.) provides lessons on teaching empathy. For example, students can reimagine fairy tales by "walking a mile" in each character's shoes.
- Alanna Jamieson (2015) describes using the Dickens novel *Oliver Twist* as a platform to discuss empathy.
- For help in finding diverse lessons, Multicultural Lesson Plans and Resources provides a clearinghouse of multicultural lesson plans and resources (Sass, n.d.). For example, students can list and discuss the cultures they have been exposed to and what they learned from those cultures.
- Project Happiness has an easy-to-use lesson for understanding and developing empathy (Taran, 2013). The lesson comes with supporting worksheets.
- Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, offers educators a lesson on developing empathy. The lesson is available in grade-appropriate modules spanning pre-K to grade 12. The website includes specific examples of fostering empathy in the classroom through students' involvement with animals.
- A blog post by Joe Hirsch (2014), an educator in Dallas, highlights the use of cooperative learning, specifically the jigsaw method, for developing empathy because students get experience on how another person's thinking works and that everyone has something valuable to offer.
- The Teaching Channel (n.d.) has created a short lesson, with video and student questions, that uses role-playing as a means to explore ageism and foster empathy.
- Parenting Science provides evidence-based tips for fostering empathy (Dewar, 2020). Some examples are shown below:
  - seize everyday opportunities to model and induce sympathetic feelings for other people,
  - help kids explore other roles and perspectives, and
  - help kids discover what they have in common with other people.

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