

# Empathy Education: Is “Role Taking” Procedure A Feasible Approach?

Zhaowei Zhang<sup>1,a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of foreign language, Bohai University, Jinzhou, Liaoning, 121000, China.

<sup>a</sup>1462568356@qq.com.

## Abstract

In the 1850s, Henry David Thoreau wrote, ‘Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?’. Over the decades, a variety of violence related to the lack of empathy involving domestic abuse and campus bullying have frequently occupied the headlines. Low empathy constitutes one of the most significant factors for campus bullying. (Baldry & Farrington, 2010). Law enforcement seems to be less valid in eliminating such offense compared with education, especially humanity related education regarding tolerance and empathy education , but the value of empathy education still fails to be recognized in some countries. In this essay, I shall explore the current development of empathy education and feasibility of “role taking” procedure implementation in China.

## Keywords

Empathy education, perspective taking, china, school bullying.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1850s, Henry David Thoreau wrote, ‘Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?’. Over the decades, a variety of violence related to the lack of empathy involving domestic abuse and campus bullying have frequently occupied the headlines. Low empathy constitutes one of the most significant factors for campus bullying. (Baldry & Farrington, 2010). Law enforcement seems to be less valid in eliminating such offense compared with education, especially humanity related education regarding tolerance and empathy education, but the value of empathy education still fails to be recognized in some countries. In this essay, I shall explore the current development of empathy education and feasibility of “role taking” procedure implementation in China.

## 2. TEXT

### 2.1. Current Development of Empathy Education Across the Globe

Multitudes of researches and experiments on empathy cultivation have been conducted in some developed countries. Since the mid 1990s, empathy education has seen an exponential growth in primary and secondary schools to enhance learners’ empathetic instincts in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, etc. (Krznic, 2015). Furthermore, it has been incorporated to a variety of college disciplines including arts, psychology, medicine as well as education. (Bouton, 2016). In addition, there are a range of related institutions including The International Baccalaureate’s Primary Years Program and SEAL program, which aim to combine conversational and experimental techniques to foster individual empathy instincts. (Krznic, 2015). Nonetheless, there is merely fragmented traces of empathy education in China and it can only be found in medical service education for the time being.

## 2.2. Current Development of Empathy Education in China.

Psychologists suggested that empathy can be interpreted as a cyclic model ranging from sense and recognition of other individuals' emotions to understanding and communication of them, which can be vividly illustrated by the compulsory training "role play simulation" for preservice health care professionals. (Hojat et al, 2002). For instance, by performing various roles and putting themselves into patients' shoes, care providers are allowed to empathize sufferers' needs and therefore display respect for their independence and autonomy rather than providing excessive nursing. (Gawande, 2014). However, such widely applied training amongst medical staff failed to shed light on general education system in China. It is apparent that empathy education can effortlessly find its way in medical profession due to the specific relationship between care providers and patients and the empathy-based attribute of the profession. (Hojat et al, 2002). In such circumstance, "role taking" proves to be more feasible in both cognitional and affective empathy cultivation through conversational and experimental empathy training. However, scarce employment of such method can be acknowledged in other majors in college, let alone the general schooling system.

## 2.3. Possible Reasons for Insufficient Empathy Education in China.

There are a range of contributing forces for this blank experiment. A primary obstacle is insufficient knowledge of empathy cultivation and outcome assessment. This is not only due to the personal and intangible feature of empathy, but also because fostering empathy requires endeavors from both cognitive and affective aspects, educators would find it less accessible to develop systematic pedagogy and set criteria to measure it. (Bouton, 2016). In addition, it seems to be demanding for China's schooling to introduce an elaborated empathy teaching approach amid the conventional exam-oriented system. Nevertheless, as one of the most influential countries in the world, China's empathy education should be placed on the agenda as well, embarking on the journey with "role taking" practice.

## 2.4. Feasibility of "Role Taking" Procedure in China

Here are some reasons why "role taking" procedure can be considered. First and foremost, insights can be gained from observing the existing experiments in medical class. Educators and medical staff are the key professions to demonstrate empathy. (Bouton, 2016). The compulsory "role play" training in medical profession could inspire educators to probe the core of this method and elements that can be viable for general schooling system. However, the wider application would be more complex due to the intricate connection between individuals compared with the specific "nurse and patient" relationship. In addition, the cultural context provides an opportunity to breed "role taking". The harmony-oriented interpersonal reaction has been promoted here since ancient times, but individuals are taught to avoid conflicts by inhibiting true feelings rather than taking perspectives and it is the time for refinement. Besides, exam-oriented education can be exploited to fortify significance of empathy teaching. This is because altering examination system seems to be impossible for an intensively populated country, thus, educators could introduce empathy test as well through "role taking" performance and observation.

## 2.5. Application of "Role Taking" Approach

With regard to specific approaches, I would like to illustrate them from two aspects, government and schooling. First and foremost, the education department should attach more importance to empathy cultivation by introduction of related policies. For instance, when they emphasize the excellence in academic performance, they should refer to empathy outcome as well. This is because the essence of education highlights the enlightenment of humanity involving shared feelings and mutual understanding rather than unique talents development. Education should serve for the majority and they are common individuals. Awareness of human

nature is prior to expertise in some domains. (Sukhomlinskii, 2001). Second comes to the schooling system. Considering that empathy cultivation generally consists of two elements, cognitive and affective empathy and the former one is the prerequisite for "role taking" application, educators have to employ a range of techniques to enhance learners' awareness of feelings, namely, emotion recognition. To illustrate, multiplying classes including poem, literature appreciation from primary school enables learners to become more responsive to sentiments, which stems from the fact that empathy is closely related to aesthetic appreciation. (Zheng & Li, 2006), followed by feelings expression.



If aforementioned procedures are smoothly implemented, "perspective taking" can be available to experiment from two approaches, in-class and outside-class. Based on children's capacity of cognitive empathy, educators can incorporate more "role-taking" classes like drama-play in the initial stages to foster affective empathy. Drama play class should be regarded as the perspective taking training rather than a recreational activity, which allows children to explore various characters and express them vividly, which enhances feelings taking skills.(Dong & Zheng, 2019). Moreover, this can address the predicament that individuals are taught to suppress their feelings to pursue harmony. Furthermore, educators should take the initiative to create the "role taking" context so that learners can be affected inadvertently. Instructors should consider from students position on a daily basis to set a model. (Sukhomlinskii, 2001). According to "contact theory", cooperation with people who differ from us helps diminish prejudice and foster perspective understanding. With the emphasis on social experience and outside class over the recent years, instructors can utilize these occasions to integrate "role taking" programs, which intends to extend peer empathy to wider range of groups involving forlorn seniors, disabled adults and even the children suffering from poverty. For instance, the regular community service can be used as an opportunity to gather primary resources regarding their perspectives and values. If it is possible for schools to introduce the systematic and elaborate empathy cultivation class in the initial stages, the "role taking" class with the principle of "thinking and feeling spiral" can be experimented. The spiral investigates a range of activities that aim to build learners' empathy. This spiral is consistent with the rules of empathy development and children's learning process. (Skolnick et al, 2004)

As you can see, the spiral is composed of four major learning processes: building personal concrete connections to the topic, inquiring and imaging someone else's life and investigating content resources to perform "acting as if" that requires perspectives taking in someone else's role. Seeing that all these sessions are based on the recognition of one's inner feelings and

capacity to sense others', classes of encouraging learners to convey their feelings freely from the early stage is suggested. Therefore, emotional communication training should be considered from kindergarten. Taking the aforementioned analysis into consideration, drama play and aesthetic appreciation classes should be employed from elementary school stage, enabling children to establish connection with topic and engage through the session in the form of stories, pictures as well as objects. When learners enter the high school, they are encouraged to perform experimental empathy to collect primary resources. Finally, based on the accumulated contents and capacity to empathize peers, they are expected to perform "as if" in the form of various outputs. With children's empathy development, educators can upgrade the training contents based on this model. (Skolnick et al, 2004). For instance, if the 8-year-old is trained to express feelings in the primary school, he would be anticipated to understand others' emotions in secondary stage, succeed by the capacity to perform "perspectives thinking" in college years, which can be enhanced via persistent "perspective taking" training.

Admittedly, effective evaluation remains to be an impediment for "role taking" application. Even though a range of assessments including self-report and observer evaluation have been experimented, subjective perception and individuals' sentiments are inevitable. (Zheng & Li, 2006). Nevertheless, if taking the conventional "score-oriented" system into consideration, educators can try to set "acting as if" as one of the criteria in empathy score assessment, in the form of both theory and practice test, which could be incorporated to China's college entrance examination to arouse attention from both educators and students, but this assessment might be quite rigid for the reason that examiner fails to grasp feelings of the role that is to be acted and mingles personal perception with the criteria, resulting in controversial and unconvincing outcome.

### 3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, empathy education should be at the core of social skills cultivation and worth implementing from primary stage of general schooling system, which would foster empathetic and compassionate instincts among adolescents and address campus bullying issue. Despite the undesirable development of empathy education in China, I personally believe that "role taking" procedure is a feasible approach to fill the current blank with the concerted endeavors from educational department and schools. If possible, the combination of both "perspective taking" session and "thinking and feeling" spiral should be employed from the initial stage of schooling system. Undeniably, domestic empathy education requires more detailed investigation and experiments in the future.

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