



قودوا
Q U D W A
QUDWA 2017

MEET THE MENTOR—Dr. Michele Borba

Saturday October 7th, 2017

Speaker: **Dr. Michele Borba**, Educational Psychologist, Michele Borba Inc., USA

Facilitated by: **Alanoud Madhi**, Senior Associate, Crown Prince Court of Abu Dhabi, UAE

Summary Paragraph

Which techniques can teachers apply in the classroom to put empathy, kindness, caring and courage back in the education agenda? Dr. Borba is globally recognized for her expertise in parenting, bullying and character education.

Keywords: Teaching Strategies

Key Points

Dr. Michele Borba is a parental counsellor, expert on bullying, and author of 24 books, most recently 'UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World.'

She began by defining empathy as “seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another.” She continued that children are born hard-wired for empathy, but that it must be cultivated by parents and teachers, or it will lie dormant. She pointed to an alarming 40 per cent drop in empathy among teens in the last 30 years (as measured in a University of Michigan study tracking thousands of incoming students), which corresponded with an equally sharp rise in narcissism, because “when narcissism goes up, empathy dies, and tolerance and caring goes.”

“The good news is, empathy can be taught,” Dr. Borba said. More than any other skill, Dr. Borba framed empathy as crucial for building the pro-social, altruistic service leaders that 21st century employers are looking for. At the recent Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum, empathy was named as the top employability factor.





Empathy is also the seed of resilience, Dr. Borba continued, which addresses children's growing mental health needs: "we have never seen such stressed, anxiety ridden children. Suicide and depression are skyrocketing." Moreover, when empathy goes up, bullying and aggressive behaviors go down.

To cultivate empathy, Dr. Borba identified nine competencies that can be worked into all curricula:

1) Emotional Literacy

"Empathy starts with emotional literacy, reading other people's emotions," Dr. Borba said. "The longer our children look at screens, the lower the emotional literacy. We have to balance technology with face-to-face contact."

2) Moral Identity

A child needs to have a moral rudder, which is what pushes a child to see themselves as a caring person. This can be instilled with words and praise.

3) Perspective Taking

The Harvard Business Review has stated that understanding where another person is coming from is important and crucial in today's globally connected, multicultural world. "We are more likely to empathize with people like us," she explained. "To empathize with 'them,' the more we expose our children to others, the more their minds and understanding open, and their empathy widens."

4) Moral Imagination

Empathy is one part affect, another part cognitive, and a third is acting in a pro-social way, propelled by moral imagination. York University in Canada did an MRI study that discovered that film and literature stimulate our empathy centres in the brain. Teachers can achieve this by exposing children to emotionally rich films and books.

5) Self-Regulation

"Self-regulation is key," said Dr. Borba. "Our children have to be able to dial down stress and anxiety, and to recognize their onset." Affluent children are at the highest levels of stress. So while they can feel empathy, they also 'dial it down' because they are in survival mode.

6) Practice Kindness

Getting children to practice kindness activates empathy, because children see the impact of being friendly on other people. Teachers can model this by being kind and doing random acts of kindness.





7) Collaboration

Dr. Borba identified collaboration, or getting along, as one of the top employability factors.

8) Moral Courage

Moral Courage can be defined as getting up the nerve to step in, speak out, and have a voice. Teachers can foster this by getting children's opinions, debating issues, or even learning theatre.

9) Altruistic Leadership

"This is the epitome of what we're looking for," said Dr. Borba. "The goal is service. Doing good for others. A child who wants to better the world."

Dr. Borba differentiated empathy from Emotional Intelligence (EI), saying that while EI is important in that children learn to identify their own emotions and read those of others, EI does not stretch far enough on feeling with another.

"As teachers, we need to be deliberate in helping children feel *with* another human being," she said. "The starter of empathy is EI, but empathy is made up of skills. We need to realize that empathy is a muscle that can be exercised."

When asked how teachers can 'exercise' their students' empathy muscles, she responded, "a teacher of empathy needs to start with themselves. If we are warm, caring and respectful ourselves, that's the start. We need to tune into our students."

As much as possible, Dr. Borba said, "regardless of how large the class is, tune into the ones who are bound to lose, who desperately need your help. Stand closer to them, greet everyone when they come in, call on them more often. The seed for empathy is looking up and facing another person face to face."

Dr. Borba also brought up parenting, which she said was one of the top factors in dipping empathy levels. "Parents are countering empathy by not using inductive discipline, which is showing kids what 'we' do in our family, or expressing disappointment when they let us down," she said, adding that parents are afraid to damage a child's self-esteem by setting appropriate boundaries.

"Teachers need to teach the parents what they are doing and invite them to build a bridge." She gave an example of a second-grade class that allowed parents to drop in for a special session where the kids taught the parents how to make 'I' messages.

Moral education in the classroom can take many forms. Dr. Borba recalled many simple ideas from her travels around the world, and suggested that the easiest is finding a moral 'mantra' or quote that helps kids to stay on track. For instance, in a bare-bones school room in Vanuatu, a teacher





had hung up a simple sign that said, 'we stand up and do the right thing.' In Armenia, perspective taking skills were instilled by employing a full time chess teacher. In Canada, Dr. Borba even witnessed a class where the teacher brought in a baby in to teach emotional literacy! Students tried to deduce the baby's emotions from her behaviour.

To measure whether moral education is working, Dr. Borba advocates monitoring behavior. "Are you noticing a child is engaged in more pro-social behavior patterns? Does he or she seem concerned about others?" Some schools are putting an empathy score on report cards. "Sit down with the staff and decide what kind of people should graduate from this school," she said. "Then do pre and post evaluations on these measures."

A multicultural environment goes hand in hand with empathy, especially service-based or project-based learning. One school in Canada participated with a school in Rwanda, using math and science to connect with them on preparing a well.

Despite the fact that screen time can force empathy down, Dr. Borba insisted that Skype and Facetime can still provide face to face interaction. Moreover, despite the bullying and negativity that can lurk in online spaces, Dr. Borba has found evidence of students changing internet culture. For instance, during her research on altruistic kids, she found one boy had started a positive twitter feed complimenting other people school. Others followed him and emulated him, affected by the positivity. He was then contacted by kids all over the world who wanted to beat the negative online culture. When children are exposed to elevating stories such as this one, they are more likely to emulate them.

A word on gender and empathy: Dr. Borba stated that she found that parents talk to their girl children about emotions five times more by the age of two. She said that while we must talk feelings more to boys, "don't assume that because boys aren't sharing feelings, that they don't have empathy. Remember there is the affective piece, which is sharing concern, and the other is perspective taking. Boys are brilliant at that."

The third part of apathy is what Dr. Borba calls the "prosocial, action piece." When she was researching prosocial leaders, she found far more stories about boys, which she attributes to parents' allowing boys to take more risks as they get older.

Main Takeaway: Empathy is the most important 21st century skill, and it can be taught.

