

BRIAN! YOU ARE TALKING!

"Brian! you're talking!" Pixie practically shouts at him. During the school year, Pixie has been trying unsuccessfully to obtain a verbal answer from Brian, but to Pixie's questions Brian always responds with silence. He makes some diagrams on the blackboard, he looks expressively at Pixie, but he never gives her an answer in words.

During the visit to the zoo, Brian talks to a baby giraffe. It is the first time Pixie hears him talking and to her puzzlement Brian explains, "I never stopped talking to animals".

The kind of relationship that most children naturally establish with animals as well as with other children has been explained by psychologists and psychiatrists in terms of empathy. Martin Hoffman, psychologist and researcher at New York University, states that "virtually from the day they are born, there is something particularly disturbing to infants about the sound of another infant's cry [while their response to computerized sounds of baby cries do not seem to be equally disturbing]. The innate predisposition to cry to that sound seems to be the earliest precursor of empathy." Recent brain studies have even identified individual neurons that respond to specific emotional expressions, "a response that could be the neural basis for empathy," explains Hoffman.¹

Although it is difficult to confirm that the newborn's cries in response to other newborns' cries reflect empathy, it would not be accurate to say that their cries are only reflexes. The researchers report that "on seeing another child fall and hurt himself, Hope, just nine months old, stared, tears welling up in her eyes, and crawled to her mother to be comforted as though she had been hurt, not her friend. When 15-month-old Michael saw his friend Paul crying, Michael fetched his own Teddy bear and offered it to Paul; when² that didn't stop Paul's tears, Michael brought Paul's security blanket from another room."

These small acts of caring observed in infants are considered signs of empathy, ". . . to empathize is to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, and to feel with the heart of another."³ Empathy implies then, the ability to perceive things from another person's perspective, ". . . to see, feel, respond, and understand as if we were, in fact, the other person."⁴

When the individual takes the position of another person, he or she may experience certain changes in his or her muscles and actual physical posture. The involvement with others and the attempt to gain a better understanding of them may be expressed through the physical imitation of gestures and movements. An illustration of these manifestations of empathy can be found in Pixie. During the visit to the zoo, each child is looking for her or his mystery creature. Tommy is looking at a bunch of flamingos which are all standing on one leg. When Pixie sees Tommy standing on one leg too, she knows that Tommy's mystery creature must be a flamingo. In the context of the visit, we can say that Tommy is not just imitating, but trying to understand what it would be like to be a flamingo; how it would be to stand on one leg. If one wants to write a story about a flamingo, it would be useful to understand what a flamingo is and what it might be like to be one. Tommy's behavior can be interpreted in terms of empathy.

However, empathy does not mean that the individual must experience physical sensations, since "empathy can be physical, imaginative, or both."⁵ But even when it is "imaginative" it is more than just "intellectual". With or without identifiable physical sensations, empathy connotes a personal involvement and evocation of feeling. Imaginative empathy means that one person is able to identify those characteristics that make it possible to take "mentally" another's place.

This imaginative empathy is illustrated in Pixie's interaction with Brian. In the ordinary situation in which they are involved, Pixie and Brian interchange information. Pixie shows herself to Brian by means of questions and verbalizations, while Brian

manifests himself through silent actions. Pixie is interested in discovering Brian and makes conscious and systematic approaches to him, picking up the signals that may be useful to understand him.

Pixie's attempts to stand in Brian's shoes by means of imagination can be found in several episodes of Pixie. In Chapter 1, Pixie goes over and sits down next to Brian to tell him about her arm falling asleep. Pixie's behavior can be interpreted as an attempt to bridge imaginatively her experience with Brian's: How would you like it, Brian, if your arm felt like it was made of rubber? In Chapter 2, Pixie asks Isabel how Brian can make up a story about his mystery creature if he never says anything. Again, Pixie perceives Brian's silence as a problem in making up a story and tries to imagine how Brian will solve it. In Chapter 3, Pixie observes Willa Mae talking quietly to Brian and she wonders why anyone would just stop talking ". . . I can't even imagine what it would be like to be silent all the time."⁸ Despite the failure of imagination, Pixie goes on inquiring about why people like him do not want to talk.

Attempts to empathize with others is at the same time a real concern about others' experience, and the expression of the personal necessity to be an object of empathy and understanding. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, when empathy takes place between individuals, their relationship may come to be reciprocal. Pixie's effort to understand Brian is in a way an effort to be understood by Brian. And in Chapter 5, Brian does begin to reciprocate when he helps Pixie in her confusion about relationships and offers her a diagram to solve it, or at least, to help her to solve it.

To place one's self in another's place, in other words, to be empathetic, does not mean to lose one's individuality, but makes the experience of the other more intense and profound. When a person empathizes, ". . . he is capable of experiencing in himself a mood that is so analogous to the mood of the other person as to represent the exact feelings of the other person quite closely. He remains an individual in his own right with his own private experiences, but in moments of empathy he experiences the keenest and most vivid sense of closeness or sameness with the other person."

The sense of closeness or sameness with the other person that occurs as the result of empathy is also illustrated in Pixie. In Chapter 7, Pixie and Brian talk to each other. Pixie asks Brian all those questions that have been going around her mind about his silence. Through Brian's answers, Pixie realizes that he is experiencing something important in his relationships with people. First, Brian talked to people but it did not make any difference. Then, he became silent. Now, he has decided to talk to people again. "Maybe because he thinks it makes a difference now," Pixie concludes. The conversation between Pixie and Brian, and the feelings it evokes in them both, illustrate the experience of empathy, "it made me feel good to know that Brian was talking again".

It is difficult to say to what extent the capacity to experience empathy is a result of organic dispositions or the result of social interaction. Certainly the good conditions of the neurological apparatus, as far as the researchers have demonstrated, is a necessary condition to experience empathy. Psychopathologists have determined that illness characterized by the lack of concern for the others and the disposition to cause pain to others is related to damage in the specific zone of the brain in which empathetic responses take place.

However, equally important in the development of empathy is the social interaction and the educational process. Beginning in early childhood, differences emerge in the degree to which people are empathetic. Dr. Radke-Yarrow states that around the age of two or three it is possible to observe different styles and amount of empathy. Studies show that "children were more empathetic when their mothers disciplined them for the distress their 'being bad' had on another child, saying for example, 'look how sad you've made her feel'."¹¹

The way in which children are educated in relation to empathy affects their attitudes and their awareness of others, and it is reasonable to think that it will also affect their moral character. For instance, there is a big difference in propitiating empathy by means of making the child feel guilty about other's feeling and facilitating empathy by means of guiding the child to imagine how it would feel to be treated in a certain way. It is reasonable to expect that the child who is "induced" to empathy in a guilty manner may ask for empathy in a similar way, namely, making others feel guilty. There is also a difference between stating for the child why and what the other person is feeling, and guiding him or her to discover and imagine the other's circumstances and feelings by listening and observing those clues or signals by which the others express themselves. It is also reasonable to expect that the child who is "educated" in empathy may seek empathy in a respectful and careful manner.

If empathy is considered more than a mere biological or sentimental response to others, then its social relevance may be realized. The sociological approach to empathy (and I would say the educational approach to empathy) is an important dimension of children's personhood, and has been described as the "mutual understanding among members of the same group," among members of the same community.¹²

Considering the social approach to empathy, Brian's resistance in talking to people can be interpreted in terms of the lack of empathy in his community. It seems that Brian's experience is one of isolation; what he thinks or says has no relevance to others. However, becoming a member of Mr. Mulligan's class constitutes for Brian a different experience. Other students, like Willa Mae, Pixie, and Mr. Mulligan, pay attention to his comments and convey interest in him. As soon as Pixie sees the opportunity, she observes Brian and tries to know his thoughts and feelings. Brian is accepted as a member of the group and has a special place there: his own place. In this group, Brian experiences empathy and is able to express empathy to others.

Similarly, Lipman and Sharp suggest that the change observed in Brian's behavior has something to do with being a member of a community of inquiry, "a community that has taken his views seriously, treated him with respect, and built upon his ideas in a constructive manner."¹³

Ann Sharp, in her paper "The Community of Inquiry: Education for Democracy", describes the characteristics of such a group, which may illuminate the relationship between Brian's change and the community of inquiry. One characteristic is related to certain care for others' growth, which is "essential for the development of trust, a basic orientation toward the world that accounts for the individuals' coming to think they have a role to play in the world, that they can make a real difference."¹⁴ This care is manifested by listening to one another, by taking one another's ideas seriously, and by making room for others in our personal lives. In short, care ". . . presupposes a willingness to be transformed by the other . . . to be affected by the other."¹⁵

Another characteristic of the community of inquiry is the "sensitivity to context and respect for all participants as potential sources of insight".¹⁶ The sense of community in a group and the respect and acknowledgement of others' opinions as a source of greater self understanding and growth makes possible the individual's readiness to observe, grasp, and respond to others' signals. To the extent to which the individual believes in others' personal richness and value, he or she can persevere in the attempt of mutual discovery. Pixie's attitude toward Brian illustrates this point. According to Lipman and Sharp, "she [Pixie] might feel that if only he [Brian] would start speaking, they would have a lot to say to each other. They could also learn a great deal from each other."¹⁷

The social character of a community of inquiry contributes to the development of empathy, which is important not only in the sphere of personal growth, as has been pointed out in the case of Brian, but also in the development of social imagination as a factor involved in social growth.

The development of imagination as a means of perceiving the other's view is a necessary condition to the occurrence of empathy. The development of imagination constitutes one of the strongest tools of the community of inquiry to make meaning to one's and another's experience. Imaginative reasoning in a community of inquiry is described by Sharp as the "essence of education". She states that "imagining is a crucial step in the growth of philosophical reasoning within a classroom community of inquiry . . . It is expression of this kind that enables children to become conscious of themselves in relationship to the other people in their world. This is the essence of what we mean by education."¹⁸

Sharp contends that in a community of inquiry the children develop the habits of reflecting about matters of importance, and of questioning for assumptions and alternatives. Children also develop the ability to compare "one's own views with the views of one's peers," which leads them to wonder about the arguments and reasons of those views, and how they come to be.¹⁹ Imagination is a necessary condition of this kind of reasoning process. If the individual is unable to imagine how it would be to be in "another's shoes" he or she will have difficulty grasping the very meaning of others' perspectives. Imagination is then, a source to inquire and to make meaning of one's and others' experience and to explore different alternatives of being.

The process and some of the benefits of participating in a community of inquiry are nicely illustrated in Mr. Mulligan class, and specifically in Pixie and Brian's relationship. The capacity to understand and empathize with others' perspectives and their meaning, as we have explained, implies a biological basis and an educative action. It is difficult to determine our capacity as well as our moral authority to affect or modify the neurological apparatus of children, but it is not too difficult to realize the power and the responsibility we have in offering children educative situations in which they can make use of their natural (organical) disposition to respond to one's and others' necessities: Necessity of being cared for, understood, and respected. Necessity to experience one's self as integrated in the world. Necessity to experience that we have something to express, and to know that what we express really makes a difference.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Goleman, D. (1989, March 28). Researches trace empathy's roots to infancy. New York Times (Science Section). This article includes interviews with: Martin Hoffman, psychologist at N.Y. Univ. Dr. Radke-Yarrow, Carolyn Zahn-Waxler, and Dr. Brothers. All of them involved in Experimental Brain Research. Oxford Univ.

² Ibid.

³ Katz, R. L. (1963). Empathy. Its nature and uses. MacMillan. (p. 1).

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Lipman, M. (1981). Pixie. Montclair, NJ: First Mountain Foundation. (p. 7).

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Katz, 4.

¹⁰ Lipman, 62.

¹¹ Goleman.

¹² Katz, 2.

¹³ Lipman, M., & Sharp, A. M. (1984). Looking for Meaning. New York: University Press of America. (p. 267).

¹⁴ Sharp, A. M. (1989). The community of inquiry: Education for democracy. Unpublished manuscript. (p. 3).

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹⁷ Lipman, & Sharp, 267.

¹⁸ Sharp, A. M., & Lipman, M. (1978). Some educational presuppositions of philosophy for children. Oxford Review of Education, 4(1).

¹⁹ Sharp, A. M. (1986). Is there an essence of education? Journal of Moral Education, 15(3), 189-196.

