

Confronting the Empathy Deficit: Ontologies of Caring and Being in school classrooms

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Abstract

Empathic research and learning are critical additions to the discourse around supporting young people in the world today. The need to reimagine education in schools as environments for young people to discuss not only aspects of their lives inside and outside school, but to respond to and act on world events, is essential. The vital need to build young peoples' capacity to engage empathically with others and the world is crucial in relation to a current widespread empathy deficit. This deficit prevents empathic engagement in the dilemmas of unknown others and with the natural world.

The presentation will report findings from a qualitative inquiry which drew on Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, Deleuze, Guattari, Bourriaud, Habermas and Dewey and their exploration of the relationships between embodied knowing, aesthetic knowing, relational aesthetics, empathy and being. The methodology sought empathy in the inter and intra subjective dialogue, actions and interactions, that take place when affect is presented as central to the production of Visual Art. An artfully empathic methodology reimagines educational research through an ethnologically oriented and artful lens. This methodological approach responds to an increasing dialogue in research about the importance of arts-based methods to accommodate pedagogical sensibilities and renewed understanding of the notions of difference, subjectivity and empathy.

A multiple site case study method was used to identify and describe what empathy looks like and where it occurs in visual art studio learning. Data was collected from multiple sources in three secondary Visual Arts classrooms in NSW, Australia. Empathy was revealed in visual art studio learning as complex and inter-related, present in the natural and reflective conversations between students and teachers, and students and peers, and in their actions, movement and interactions.

It was found that student artists enacted empathy as Caring for Self, Caring for Others and Caring for the World. Empathy as Caring was afforded through curriculum and pedagogical conditions where student artists engaged in artmaking through creative, reflective and reflexive Modes of Being. The combination of pedagogical and curriculum conditions saw the development of a model which describes student artists' empathy as Ontologies of Caring and Being.

This inquiry into empathy in visual art studio learning demonstrates empathy in one curriculum area, and poses further questions of how this model may be applied to other areas of curriculum.