

Towards a Bully-Free World

By Mary Gordon



2020 will live in our minds and hearts as a year of anxiety, stress and loneliness. Schools closed by emergency decree. Our students were suddenly at home. And while children were seeing and hearing apocalyptic news of the deadly virus, just as it upended their lives, the murder of one Black man by a police officer led to a social eruption like we haven't seen in decades. The world shifted.

The students who left our classrooms in the spring will not be the same students who are returning in the fall. They're more aware of danger and death. My own grandchildren talk to me about what they see happening in the world. The seven-year-old's interpretation of this movement is that, "The world has to stop bullying and being mean to Black people." The nine-year-old interpreted foreign policy as, "China is being a bully to our country because they stole two Canadians and won't give them back unless they get their own way."

Children understand when something is unfair. It doesn't matter what label we put on it.

That's how children view bullying – it's unfair. If we do something to somebody else that hurts their feelings or their bodies – that's unfair. Racism and bullying are connected at their root – they're about power. And they're about using power to hurt others.

Our students are ready to stand up.

We have in our hands a tipping point in society. When students come back to school, we have an opportunity to re-calibrate the culture of school. Never in my memory have children been so desperate to return to school. It will be a homecoming. If educators ever felt overwhelmed with the enormous tasks of educating students, they might feel inspired now because they represent stability, security, comfort and hope.

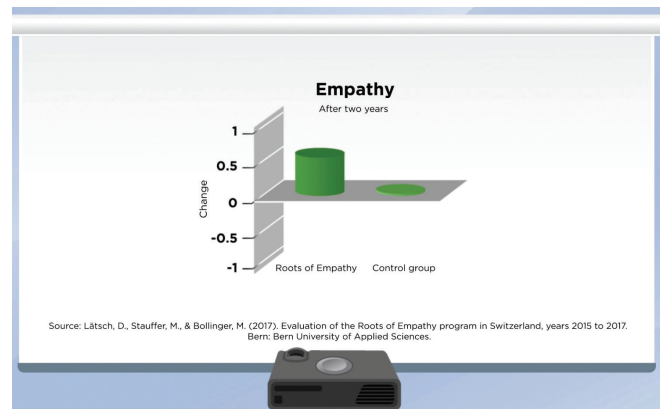
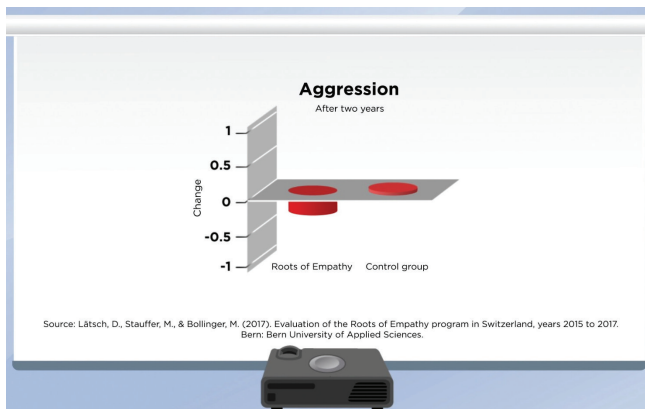
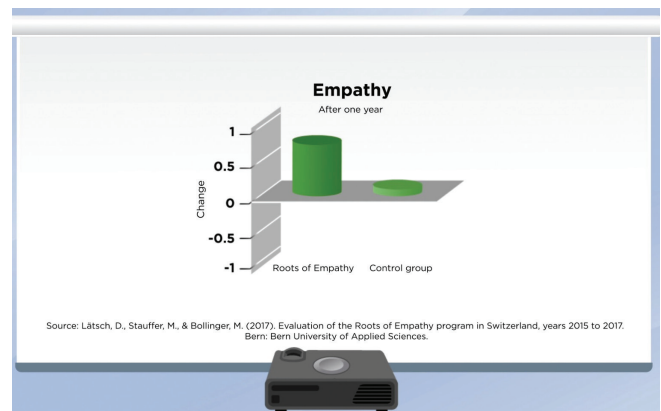
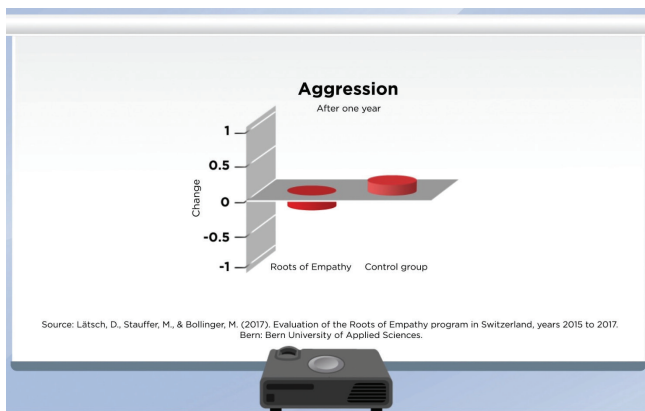
In a democracy, schools are our Department of Public Health, and education is our Ministry of Peace. However, for an alarming percentage of students, their safety is threatened by being bullied. Incredibly, in spite of all the research on bullying and all the training of educators, bullying is pervasive and studies in neuroscience have shown us it has a debilitating and lasting effect on mental health and well-being.

When the students come back, they're going to be dysregulated. The early tasks are to help them with emotion regulation, which means they have to talk about how they feel. Until we are able to reach our students emotionally, we will not be able to teach them.

One example is the Roots of Empathy program, which I first created for Ontario classrooms in 1996. It helps develop student's emotional literacy by having them interpret the feelings of the tiny baby and then share when they had the same feelings. This emotional literacy that develops is the affective part of empathy, which when coupled with perspective taking, the cognitive aspect of empathy, will act as a brake in preventing children from doing harm to others. As educators, we have an opportunity to refocus on preventing bullying from happening by helping students develop empathy.

Like Colin Kaepernick, the NFL quarterback who knelt during the national anthem to protest police brutality against Black people. What a brilliant example of someone who, against all odds, had the moral courage to "stand up" by kneeling down. He was vilified by his bosses, by political leaders, by the public, nationally and internationally.

Kaepernick was bullied as he was taking a stand against the bullying of others. He sacrificed almost everything. And then this spring, the world saw what he saw; felt what he felt.



We can explain to our students that when they see something that is unfair, such as bullying, that it is not their fault, but it is their responsibility to do something. When students see bullying of any kind, they can be encouraged to call it. It takes both empathy and moral courage to stand up to bullying.

School administrators and teachers can't possibly always monitor bullying. When students trust that they will be supported if they challenge bullying, they will heroically do it in the moment rather than just going to their principal or teacher.

In order to help a child feel a sense of belonging, which opens them to learning, students need to trust – it's the currency of interactions. They need to know that if they challenge bullying, they'll be safe doing it. Relationships are the vehicle for everything. If a student is bullied, trust is ruptured – trust in school as a safe place, in teachers, and in principals – and the damage affects it all – mental health, well-being, and, of course, the ability to learn.

In a recent international survey, on average, 93 per cent of students reported that if they saw a friend in the playground being bullied or treated meanly, they would help them. Only 85 per cent said they'd help a student who

wasn't a friend. That difference in "in-group/out-group" empathy is quite typical. But it can change, depending on how schools establish a culture of non-bullying. Students have opportunities to understand bullying from the perspective of how they would feel if their "baby" was bullied. These discussions open students to take the perspective of a vulnerable person and to realize that we are all just bigger babies. This perspective accounts for the significant reduction of bullying in classrooms that host the Roots of Empathy program.

When it comes to bullying, my hope is that we begin to face its systemic nature the way the world is finally, more openly acknowledging systemic racism. Because systemic bullying – from the corporate world, to institutions, to government – is a hidden killer of human spirit and potential. We can do something. We can seed empathy in young children and help them nurture it. Students can become adept at de-escalating conflict – in classrooms and schoolyards. That is our pedagogy of hope.

There are always heroes among us. And they are, I guarantee you, in our classrooms. [CP](#)

Mary Gordon, Founder and President of Roots of Empathy