

The Empathy Quotient

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I have seen the video, “The Adaptable Mind” so often that it has become like that song you can’t get out of your head. It’s difficult for me to turn around these days without running into another article that connects back to the tenets of the video, which prophetically describes five characteristics today’s youth must have in order to succeed in tomorrow’s world – Curiosity, Creativity, Initiative, Multi-disciplinary Thinking and Empathy. I feel like the video is the paddle and I am the ball, connected to the paddle by an elastic band on one of my favorite (and my mother’s least favorite) toys growing up — the paddleball.

1. POLITICAL TOLERANCE: OLIVIA CAPESTANY, ROOSEVELT HIGH

I read a powerfully insightful article in the Seattle Times in early September. We in education know that if you want powerful insight, you turn to your students. Olivia Capestany, a senior at Roosevelt High School, hit a home run in her article about the need for more political tolerance at her school. She describes the emotional reaction she had when her journalism teacher invited in a recent graduate to speak to the class following the election. He was wearing a red Make America Great Again hat and supported Trump in the election. During the discussion, Olivia, a Clinton supporter, became distraught. “I was so upset, I had

to run out the room to calm myself down. After a few minutes of deep breaths, I realized that he felt as strongly about his beliefs as I do about mine and I should respect him.”

“ Olivia Capestany, a senior at Roosevelt High School, hit a home run in her article about the need for more political tolerance at her school.”

She went on to describe growing up in a Cuban American family and the impact that has had on her valuing free speech, “because in Cuba, that privilege was limited. I think that’s why I struggle with intolerance, especially if it’s me being the intolerant one.” She returned to the class and continued to participate in the discussion. The “ah ha” moment for her came the next day in the follow-up discussion. “There were many different feelings expressed, but the common thread was shock. Nobody had ever talked to anyone like him before. That surprised me. I never realized how little political diversity there was in my school, and it opened my eyes to the fact that there were probably other students who, like Machala [the speaker], were loyal to Trump but too afraid to speak up.”

Olivia expanded on this topic and offered advice for schools today. She also personalized it by sharing what she plans to do. “Going into my senior year, I hope to encourage respectful and robust debates in my classes and maybe participate in several of the new clubs. Although the clubs are just starting to change the climate at Roosevelt, these students may have found a solution — simply listening to each other.”

2. MICHAEL BENNETT’S LAS VEGAS INCIDENT

Olivia’s article was followed the next day in the Times by a column from sports writer Larry Stone, which presented the same theme in front of our faces to analyze our reactions to the Michael Bennett incident in Las Vegas. “My hunch is that you saw this incident — in which the Seahawks star said a gun was held to his head by Las Vegas police — through the prism of your previously held beliefs. People are hunkered down on this issue — as they are on so many issues in our increasingly divided society.” In this article, Doug Baldwin channeled Olivia Capestany as he counseled Bennett in the aftermath of the incident. “My initial reaction was, ‘Let’s think this through,’” Baldwin said. “Let’s not allow our first order of thought, which is based on emotion, to cloud our better judgment.”

Doug Baldwin has been a voice for thoughtfulness in the past and he used this opportunity to once again

READ OLIVIA CAPESTANY’S ARTICLE AT:

seattletimes.com/education-lab/student-voices-my-class-talked-with-a-trump-supporter-heres-what-i-learned/

speak out. “Again, my challenge and my encouragement to everybody who’s interacting and engaging with this story, is to be empathetic. I can’t say it any more. I think that’s our number one problem in society, that we’re just not empathetic. I understand everybody has their own political views, their own ideals of what’s right and what’s wrong. But if you put yourself in someone else’s shoes, just for a moment, maybe you might act and think differently than you normally do. And the same for the other side. If they put themselves in the other side’s shoes, maybe they’d act and think differently as well.”

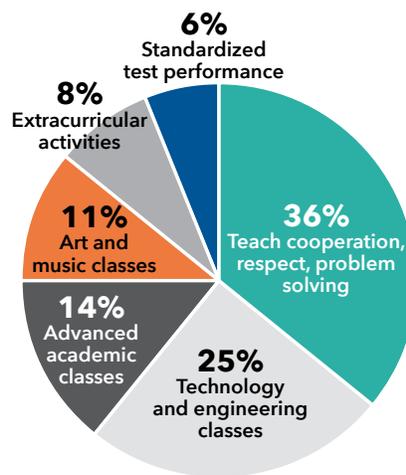
3. PHI DELTA KAPPA POLL ON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

These two articles brought me back to *The Adaptable Mind*, but isn’t the public much more concerned with schools scoring well on things that are assessed on standardized tests than worrying about how students

interact with each other? As it turns out, no, they are not. In this year’s 49th Annual Phi Delta Kappa Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, the responses to the question, “What is the most important factor in school quality?” are as follows:

Most important factor in school quality

PDK National Totals, 2017



“ Again, my challenge and my encouragement to everybody who’s interacting and engaging with this story, is to be empathetic. I can’t say it any more.”

4. INTELLIGENCE, CREATIVITY, AND WISDOM AND THE WAY WE THINK

A recent online article in the PDK Newsletter by Cornell professor Robert J. Sternberg sent me back to the video once more. The article, “Testing: For better or worse,” begins by outlining the reasons for the enormous increase in IQ scored around the world in the 20th Century. In Figure 1, he compares intelligence to creativity and wisdom. In his article, he states that “creative and wise thinking differ in many respects

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Figure 1

Differences between problems requiring general intelligence, creativity, and wisdom

	INTELLIGENCE	CREATIVITY	WISDOM
Kind of thinking	Largely convergent	Largely divergent	Largely dialectical and dialogical
Degree of structure	Generally well-structured	Generally ill-structured	Always ill-structured
Dependency of context	Often low context dependency	High context dependency	High context dependency
Existence of a single correct answer	Often a single correct answer	Often multiple good answers	Multiple, usually not quite optimal, answers
Role of originality	Often low	Always high	Usually high
Role of knowledge	Usually positive	Not always positive	Usually positive but limited
Role of values	Often hidden, not apparent	Partial role	Important role
Objects of thinking	Ideas, things, or people	Ideas, things, or people	People
Dependence on multiple perspectives	Often low	Often high	Often high
Short- vs. long-term rewards	Short and/or long	Usually long	Short and/or long
Role of common good	None in particular	None in particular	Critical
Role of ethics	Typically none	Typically none	Critical
Role of competing interests	Typically none	Typically none	Critical
Ease of teaching and testing	Easy to moderate	Difficult	Difficult
Rewards in educational contexts	Usually, positive	Sometimes positive, often negative	Sometimes positive, often negative

from the kinds of thinking required for getting high scores on tests of traditional cognitive skills.”

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According to Sternberg, there is evidence that the improvements we have made in general intelligence might have come at a cost to creativity and wisdom. “Our world would be a safe and wonderful place for most of us to live in if only our creativity and wisdom had improved in the last century the same way our intelligence did.”

As we move forward with the implementation of accountability measures in ESSA, principals can play a key leadership role in not letting that bright shiny object blind students, staff and communities to the imperative challenge of our graduates becoming empathetic, creative, complex problem-solvers who take the initiative necessary to solve the global issues facing our country this century. ■



Gary Kipp has served as AWSP's executive director since 2003. He has more than 40 years experience as a teacher, assistant principal, principal and assistant superintendent.

Humor me!

Created by **David Ford**, Retired Washington State Principal

