

Why I Want My Daughters To Learn Empathy Rather Than Chinese

By Ana Sáenz de Miera

Since I've become a mother I have received all kinds of advice about what my daughters should learn in order to be successful. Computer programming. English. Chess. Ballet. Chinese. Math. Team sports. Music. Martial arts.

I'm pregnant with my third daughter; I'm already in my seventh month, with a visible belly. Every day, when I take the overcrowded train home from work, I notice how people see me, and turn the other way. Better said, they turn to their smartphones, avoiding the pregnant woman to whom they know they should be giving their seat. Only a few people look at me in the eyes and stand up to offer their place. I don't know if they speak Chinese, if they know about programming, or if they're good at math.

But what I do know is that they all have something in common: empathy. An empathy that drives them to do something to the benefit of others. Empathy in action.

This is the kind of empathy that pushes you to take action for someone else – to set up a delivery room in Cameroon, to donate your time and effort for a common good. The kind of empathy that motivates a young boy or girl to launch a social initiative with a group of friends.

But that's not all. Empathy in action, contrary to common misconceptions, is not only good because it helps others. Empathy is essential to achieve personal success. Empathy makes you a better team member. It helps you become a good leader. It makes companies focus on the true needs of their clients. Empathy enables us to know how to behave in a job interview.

Empathy is not only about looking around you. Empathy makes you look in a different way, focusing on the needs and preparing yourself for action.

The good news is that empathy can be taught and practiced. There are many social entrepreneurs around the world, such as Mary Gordon from Canada, who have encouraged the practice of empathy in schools for almost 20 years, proving its benefits with tangible results.

Across the world, many schools have understood that the world is changing, and that it's changing fast. They've also understood that education has to focus on new skills that are necessary in today's society. Not only empathy, but also teamwork, creativity and leadership.

Nowadays, these skills don't count as indicators for the top 100 schools rankings, which, unfortunately, still focus on traditional academic results. But if we become more aware of the importance of empathy – as we did decades ago with literacy – and start demanding and practicing it, things will change.

I want my daughters to learn empathy. I don't want them to turn a blind eye to the problems around them. I want them to be active citizens who are aware of what is happening and who can take action. I want them to be personally and professionally successful. And I want them to travel to China and be able to understand the locals just by looking into their eyes.

Being a good public speaker is worthless if you don't realize that what you're talking about isn't interesting for your audience. Empathy in action drives us towards innovation and makes us more pragmatic and successful. Happier. And most importantly, it helps our world become a better place.

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