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In Their Shoes: Active Empathy Through Emotional Literacy With Theatre of Awareness



In Their Shoes is a pedagogical intervention model for preschool, primary, secondary, and special education centers in Spain. The program promotes emotional literacy through consciousness theatre for the entire educational community – teachers, students, families, and non-teaching staff – with the goal of improving coexistence and preventing violence.

The program is built on the understanding that the root of violence can be found in the inability to manage emotions, especially anger, and unhealed emotional pain. Violence also stems from the inability to empathize – “to put oneself in another person’s shoes” and act accordingly – and from a lack of skills in resolving conflicts positively. The assumption is that aggressive or violent behavior in some children may be driven by unrecognized and unaddressed emotional pain.

An article in the latest issue of Childhood Education Innovations magazine highlights this unique intervention model. Learn more by reading the article below. Click the bottom right corner of the flipbook window to read in full screen. There is also a PDF version available for download below the flipbook window.

The UNESCO Convention, approved in 1993, begins with this declaration: “There seems to be in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the difference of people must be constructed.” This profound truth points us directly to the fundamental role of education in the mission of building a culture of peace. However, when we look at the places where education occurs – primarily homes and schools – we often find violence in all its forms. UNESCO warns that violence against children is a global crisis.¹ This includes peer-to-peer violence, commonly known as school bullying, as well as abuse and mistreatment from the adults who should be taking care of them.

In Spain, for instance, approximately 10% of students report having suffered from bullying,² and there has been an increase in violence among minors in public spaces. Additionally, cases of “self-harm” have skyrocketed. There has been a 100% increase in self-harm among children and adolescents and the number of suicide-related hospitalizations has been increasing, with bullying being noted as the main cause for these suicides.³

Challenges as public schools related to coexistence and mental health often lead to a decline in academic performance and an increase in school dropouts. In this situation, it is not only potential problems for employment prospects, poverty, and social exclusion.

Many teachers, both in primary and secondary education – feel overwhelmed by this situation, not knowing how to address it. Although 94% of them believe that being trained in emotional education would improve their professional skills in this area, only 2% of schools currently include emotional education in their education plans. Currently, the issue of violence is not being addressed from the perspective of emotional literacy, compassion, or empathy, nor is it approached from a preventive standpoint that involves the entire educational community.

In recognition of and response to this crisis, the Asociación Teatro de Conciencia (Theatre of Awareness Association), through its program “In Sus Zapatos” (“In Their Shoes”), builds a culture of peace in schools based on emotional education for the entire school community through the socio-emotional learning methodology of Theatre of Awareness.

Innovative Socio-Emotional Learning

In 2012, Pat Beronzi (anthropologist, expert in emotional education, and creator of the Theatre of Awareness), designed and piloted “In Their Shoes: A Space for Active Empathy,” a pedagogical intervention model for preschool, primary, secondary, and special education centers. The program promotes emotional literacy through theatre of awareness for the entire educational community – teachers, students, families, and non-teaching staff – with the goal of improving coexistence and preventing violence.

The program is built on the understanding that the root of violence can be found in the inability to manage emotions, especially anger, and unhealed emotional pain. Violence also stems from the inability to empathize – “to put oneself in another person’s shoes” and act accordingly – and from a lack of skills in resolving conflicts positively. The assumption is that aggressive or violent behavior may be driven by unrecognized and unaddressed emotional pain.

For this reason, “In Their Shoes” promotes three essential axes to emotional learning: music, puppetry, both children and adults with the goal to identify and manage their emotions, fostering empathy and compassionate awareness, and building the ability to resolve conflicts in a positive manner:

- Emotional Identification and Management** – learning to recognize emotions, calm oneself, and avoid behaviors that harm others or oneself in situations that provoke frustration, anger, fear, or sadness.
- Active Empathy and Compassionate Awareness** – learning not only to “put oneself in another’s shoes,” but also act accordingly and try to help others. This approach opens the door to compassion and forgiveness.
- Positive Conflict Resolution** – learning to use discussion, negotiation, and “win-win” agreements where everyone benefits to resolve everyday conflicts. This involves activating active vision communication and employing creative and restorative conflict resolution.

The “In Their Shoes” program teaches emotional literacy to both adults and children through the methodology of Theatre of Awareness, along with play and participatory techniques. Theatre of Awareness is a theatrical methodology that permeates coexistence, “making the invisible visible,” and exploring the basic concepts of emotional intelligence and developing socio-emotional skills. It facilitates emotional education, making it easy to recognize emotions and then learn how to manage them. These skills lead to the development of capacity, assertiveness, positive conflict resolution, compassion, forgiveness, and kindness – contributing to a culture of peace.

Understanding Emotion Through Performance and Imagery

The Theatre of Awareness methodology uses masks and puppets to project emotions in dramatic and theatrical performances. The audience sees how these emotions can “infect” individuals, leading them to commit aggressive or violent acts. The approach facilitates compassionate awareness, helping people understand that behind every harmful act lies an unrecognized and unaddressed emotion, or emotional pain.

This is why Theatre of Awareness performances, which are always based on the participants’ own experiences, have two endings: one ending reflects emotional literacy, where the emotion “wins the battle” over the individual (emotional hijacking), leading to an aggressive or positive resolution; and a second ending reflects emotional literacy, where the individual – whether adult or child – “wins the battle” against



their mission, develops empathy, and resolving the situation in a positive way. These performances also allow the audience to intervene and collectively reflect on the story and their own experiences, promoting broader learning through both cognitive understanding and lived experience.

The program's chosen method is built on a socio-emotional approach representing evidence and fostering a culture of peace in schools by creating the culture

educational community. In addition to incorporating these major emotional learning goals through theater, the program also focuses on creating positive feedback in classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds as constant reminders.

Peer-to-Peer and Cascading Learning

"In Their Shoes" offers an innovative peer learning and cascading model with the following training pathways:

- **Teachers Training as Facilitators:** Teachers undergo a five-day training course to become facilitators of the program.
- **Facilitators Train Others:** Once successful, these teachers train other teachers, families, and non-teaching staff at their own schools or in other schools within their communities and provinces.
- **Teachers Implement the Method:** After being trained by facilitators, the teachers bring the method into their classrooms — supported by a classroom manual and various teaching resources (adapted to different age groups) — so students can learn with emotional skills.
- **Students Teach Other Students:** Students create a Theatre of Awareness performance based on their experiences or concerns. Through this effort, they teach younger students about the socio-emotional skills and emotional education resources they learned about through the program.

This model not only ensures widespread emotional literacy but also empowers students to become active agents in teaching and spreading their critical skills to their peers. In this way, the program reaches the entire educational community, as the experiences and training are transferred and shared from one person to another, making the learning process more effective and far-reaching.

Teachers are central to the development of the program, serving as the key transmitters in this movement by:

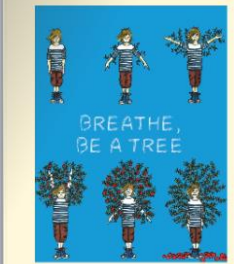
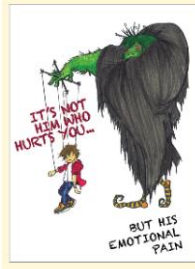
- Implementing the "In Their Shoes" program in their classrooms and using the program's other teaching resources.
- Demonstrating empathy and positive conflict resolution in their role as emotional management models.

For this reason, it is essential that teachers not only learn the methodology but also begin a process of emotional literacy education, as one cannot teach what one does not know or practice. Evaluation also ensure that positive outcomes of the program for teachers include improvement in their classroom management, their relationships with students, and their own lives.

Impact Achieved

Since its inception in 2013, "In Their Shoes" has reached over 10 schools in Spain, Morocco, and Guatemala, impacting more than 300,000 people — including teachers, students, families, and non-teaching staff. The program has received numerous national and international recognitions, such as selection for three consecutive years (2013-2015) by the British organization Hivos/Ed as one of the best and most impactful educational innovations and being featured in the 2013 O.E.A.D. International report on socio-emotional learning. Additionally, the program was selected as an Ashoka Foundation Fellow in 2013. Then, in December 2014, the UNESCO Policy Group Memorandum, Social and Emotional Learning in Education Systems, Policy Guide selected "In Their Shoes" as one of the seven best practices in socio-emotional learning within the Public Education Sector worldwide.¹

Each year, the outcome of the program's implementation are evaluated. In 2019, an external evaluation was conducted by experts from Carlos III University (Spain), Umeå University (Netherlands),



and Spain's National Institute for Educational Evaluation. After more than seven years of activity, "In Their Shoes" has demonstrated significant improvement in the following areas:

- **Emotional literacy** for the main educational community.
- **School coexistence**, contributing to a more peaceful and capillary environment in schools.

This impact is particularly evident in the improvement of relationships between teachers, among students, and between teachers and students. There also have been noticeable changes in classroom dynamics and in how lessons are taught, with a shift toward a kinder and more caring approach to students, which serves as a model for creating a culture of peace.

For instance, the reduction of violent communication and cheating has led toward a more positive approach to conflict resolution. Interestingly, positive punishment has been replaced by restorative practices, where teachers actively engage with students to find joint solutions, particularly when lessons has occurred.

"Instead of yelling in class, I ask: 'What's wrong? How are you feeling?' The approach problem-solving differently, more calmly, using what you're going to teach about." (Teacher)

As a result, the relationship between students and teachers transforms. When a student behaves disruptively, the teacher is able to calmly encourage the student to give attention to the student's needs, rather than resorting to traditional responses like ignoring, punishing, or shaming them. Teachers' perceptions of their students change, leading to improved relationships.

"When you change, they change too, and I believe that has been changed in our conflict between children are managed." (Teacher)

"If you tell a child, 'I trust you, I know you're not going to do it,' you're not going to do it." (Teacher)

Teachers report that the training has had a big impact on both their professional and personal aspects. For many, the program has contributed to improved relationships with colleagues as well.



Impact Assessment Data

Students:

- **92%** have learned to recognize and identify their emotions.
- **90%** of teachers believe that students are now kinder, more forgiving, more willing to listen, and more empathic.

Teachers:

- **87%** calm down more quickly when feeling angry.
- **88%** believe there has been an improvement in school coexistence and climate.

Families:

- **43%** report to participate less frequently.
- **24%** show less often.
- A large majority reports a better understanding of their children and spending more quality time with them.

Overall Recommendation

Almost **100%** of all participants recommend the program.

Key Messages to Take

Education is the task of transforming human beings to bring them closer to their own humanity — a state of goodness, beauty, and truth — so we should recognize that a necessary aspect of education is educating to live in peace with oneself and with others.

Our goal with the program "In Their Shoes" is to reach as many teachers, families, non-teaching staff, and students as possible. We firmly believe that we can construct a culture of peace by practicing through the universality of emotional literacy. To achieve this, we have learned that there are four key messages that any educational innovation initiative should take in order to wake up with the goal of achieving systemic change:

Partnerships With the Public Sector and Free Access to Resources

For the Theatre of Awareness Association, it has been and continues to be a priority to work hand in hand with public administrations, without profit purposes. Having public endorsement of great importance to us, therefore, since 2017, the program has been offered free of charge to educational centers in the Community of Madrid (Spain) through the Sub-Directorate General for Innovation Programs and Teacher Training, General Directorate of Educational and Quality of Education. For the past four years, it has been available in other Spanish regions through public tenders for the teachers. Furthermore, interventions in Morocco and Guatemala have taken place in public educational institutions as well.

Additionally, we have decided to share our educational resources for free in Spanish and English so that teachers worldwide can serve them as being some aspect of our method and that, throughout our sharing in writing words of peace in their schools. All our resources are available for free download from our website: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>, and teachers from over 20 countries are already using them.

Ongoing Evaluation to Improve and Adapt

Over the years, the intervention model has been improved thanks to constant evaluation and adaptation to the reality and needs of schools, with new educational resources have been created for different educational stages. Receiving suggestions from all involved stakeholders has facilitated the program's adaptation to various contexts as well as in purpose of emotional literacy for better coexistence. This does not mean that adaptation has not posed challenges to the organization, as it would have been easier to leave the program as-is during the pilot phase. However, the effort to address continuous evaluation and improvements in terms of effectiveness and efficiency has proven worthwhile for the impact we seek.

Establishing the Facilitator Role

The stability process represented by "In Their Shoes" has only been possible thanks

to the facilitators, who are responsible for implementing the program in schools. It is crucial that all facilitators are active learners, as this is a participatory and cascading training model. Teachers who are trained to become facilitators have previously undergone training in the program and fully comprehend its value and benefits. Then, the course is an additional year of training to become certified facilitators and are provided with opportunity to ensure that the program remains consistent across all contexts, regardless of who the facilitator is.

Trust, Hope, and Gratitude

When difficulties have arisen in our work, we have been addressed by love, developed important practices for our culture of innovation, trust and hope. We are deeply grateful to all the public and private institutions that have supported us, as well as all of the educational centers, teachers, families, and non-teaching staff, and students who have believed the power of the method and that emotional literacy through Theatre of Awareness is a viable pathway to achieving it.

Peace and calm resources can be downloaded for free at: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>.

Spain: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>

Morocco: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>

Guatemala: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>

USA: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>

UK: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>

UNESCO: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>

Discovery Database: <http://www.theatreofawareness.org/resources>