

Practicing Empathy

Adapted From: Katherine Murphy, Hunger Educator

Overview

Students will break into groups. Together, they will create an understanding of the difficulties associated with old age and access to grocery stores.

Goals

The students will:

- Be able to define empathy
- Be able to explain the distinction between empathy and sympathy
- Be able to articulate the experience of an elderly person going to the grocery store

Materials Needed

- Tape
- Large rubber balls
- Vaseline
- Large spoons
- Cheap sneakers (suggested, not required)

Instructions

Have students break into small groups and map out (from memory) the grocery/food stores in the neighborhoods closest in proximity to the school (or wherever this exercise is taking place).

Then ask the students what it would be like to live a mile away from the grocery store without a car. Give each group a \$20 discretionary weekly budget and ask them to imagine a sixty year old grandmother without a car and living alone. The young adults should answer the question: "How should this grandmother get to the store?" Ask the students to consider the grandmother's budget when making their decision.

Some groups will have different responses. Likely responses will include: "walk," "utilize public transportation", "take a cab", "go with a neighbor", and "have someone bring the food to her."

After the young adult groups have made their decisions, add another variable. Tell them that the discretionary money also has to go toward food. Any money spent on transportation will literally take food out of the grandmother's mouth. Also, eliminate the option for any free transportation. Have the students discuss the grandmother's options further.

Allow the students to engage in an open discussion about the difficulties involved in creating fair options for the grandmother. Limit the conversation to five to ten minutes and proceed with the exercise.

Recruit a few volunteers. These volunteers will tape the other young adults' joints with electrical tape. Apply large clumps of Vaseline. The volunteers will cut rubber balls in half and tape half of each ball to the soles of the young adults' feet. Then take all these young adults for a twenty minute walk around campus. If feasible, allow those students with tape to continue wearing them throughout the school day (or the length of duration the young adults are at the activity center).

If there are enough volunteers, assign each person with a ball taped to the foot a buddy(or two). Have the two experience similar, ordinary activities throughout the next hour together. For instance, if the students are headed to lunch, the buddies and the person with the balls taped to their feet will walk to the cafeteria/lunch room together. The day/opportunity for the group to come back together, have them discuss their experiences.

Generate a discussion about the difficulties experienced.

Definitions

Empathy: Identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives.

Sympathy: harmony of or agreement in feeling.

Evaluation Questions

1. What is empathy?
2. What is the difference between empathy and sympathy?
3. What is it like to be an elderly person going to the grocery store?