

Activating Social Empathy – A Junior Cycle SPHE Resource

Introduction

Empathy – the ability to understand others’ perspectives and share their feelings – is a key social-emotional competency which is associated with positive health, social, and academic outcomes for young people. Activating Social Empathy (ASE), a programme developed by a team at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in the University of Galway, aims to promote social-emotional development in adolescents by teaching core empathy skills and fostering a connection between empathy, social responsibility, and civic action.

The ASE programme has been introduced to 120 second-level schools in Ireland to date and was recently adapted for inclusion in the new Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) toolkit at Junior Cycle. This article provides an overview of the ASE programme and emphasises the importance of such resources in contemporary educational contexts.

What is empathy?

The teenage years are pivotal for the development of empathy, because this is a time when there are significant leaps in processes such as being able to take another’s perspective (Santrock, 2022). Adolescence is a time of deep identity exploration and development. If empathy-related values become integrated into this emerging identity, this lays the foundation for lifelong prosocial and civic behaviour (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Malti et al., 2016). School settings, with their diverse learning communities, can present rich opportunities for modelling, teaching, and practising dispositions and skills related to empathy.

The term empathy is often used to describe our ability to understand others’ perspectives and share their emotions, and our willingness to use these understandings and feelings to engage in active, helping



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This article describes the Activating Social Empathy (ASE) programme for Junior Cycle developed at the University of Galway. It outlines the nature and importance of empathy and empathy education, and it details the findings of evaluation of the ASE programme for teachers and students alike.

behaviours. Research indicates that empathy is not a fixed trait but rather a set of skills that can be learned and enhanced over time (Davis & Begovic, 2014). Empathy is an important skill for young people to learn, as it is intricately connected to their personal and social wellbeing. For example, it is linked to more positive peer relationships, greater mental wellbeing, improved school engagement, and fewer bullying incidences (Zych et al., 2019). Promoting greater empathy at individual level can help create more inclusive communities and foster greater altruistic values (Malti et al., 2016).

Empathy education at post-primary level

Internationally, findings from numerous empirical studies indicate that empathy can be strengthened through social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes. Under the umbrella of wellbeing education, educators in Ireland have started to explore the benefits of empathy education for students through the implementation of SEL curricula and programmes.

One such initiative is the Activating Social Empathy (ASE) programme, a research-based, practice-oriented resource to support teaching and learning for Junior Cycle SPHE. As part of the SPHE toolkit, it presents a unique option in the domain of social and emotional learning by specifically targeting the enhancement of empathy in young people aged 12–16.

The four ASE sessions are directly aligned to learning outcomes in the recently redrafted Junior Cycle SPHE specification. During the sessions, teachers facilitate learning aimed at deepening students' understanding of empathy, developing their empathy skills, helping them respond with empathy, and empowering them to address barriers to empathy. It is envisaged that these sessions would be used by SPHE teachers as an introduction to empathy for First Year students and as a springboard for empathic relationships at this crucial time in their lives. The sessions are accompanied by a teacher manual that includes all necessary materials to aid implementation.

ASE programme evaluation

The original ASE programme, from which the introductory sessions for SPHE were developed, underwent rigorous evaluation over a number of years. Findings indicated that students who took part showed increases in empathy, social responsibility, emotional competence, and helping behaviours.

The most recent phase of our research has focused on teacher and student voice to explore the delivery and effectiveness of the programme in schools. Data from participating schools indicated that the ASE programme was well received, with the active learning elements particularly boosting student

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interest and engagement. Increases in the understanding of empathy were reported by teachers and students, with students reporting that they felt more self-aware, more responsive to others, more confident in their communication skills, and more tuned in to helping others.

Students also noted that when their teachers were open to listening, had a good understanding of empathy themselves, and were kind and considerate, this increased students' interest in the programme, and their perceived value of it. Interestingly, teachers also reported that facilitating the programme had positive outcomes for them professionally, prompting them to reflect on their teaching, adopt a more empathic approach to communicating with students, and try to be more understanding of reasons behind students' poor behaviour. Teachers reported that pre-existing familiarity with students enabled them to select and tailor programme materials and activities based on their students' strengths and interests.

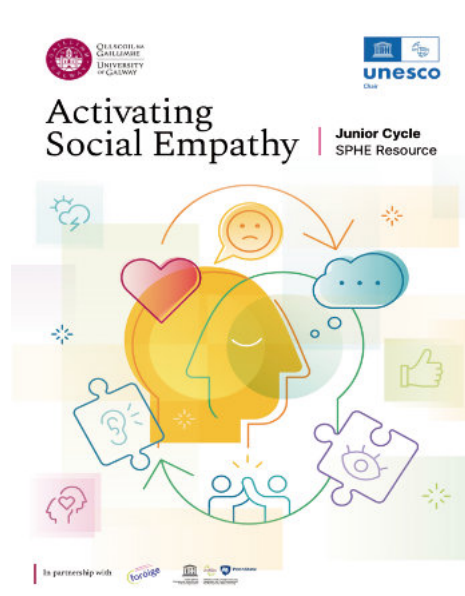
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The research uncovered some challenges relating to programme delivery, including difficulties with timetabling, a lack of training in the social-emotional learning domain, and a lack of protected time for planning. Our research indicates that despite the centrality of wellbeing in the Junior Cycle curriculum and in school policy, it is still deemed as a less valued and less supported area of learning. One key issue is the lack of mandated training in this area for teachers and the challenges this creates, as many recently qualified teachers are timetabled for this area of learning.

Conclusion

Teachers and students were, on the whole, very positive about the implementation of the ASE programme in their schools. Many noted the importance of such a programme as it increased understanding of empathy, promoted prosocial behaviour, and improved peer relationships. There was a strong indication that teachers would continue with the programme, and students felt that it was worth developing these skills further.

With these promising findings on usability and relevance, we



are hopeful that the ASE SPHE resource will provide further impetus in the effort to create an empathy ripple effect from schools to society, led by the wonderfully capable young people of Ireland.

The Activating Social Empathy sessions are available on the Junior Cycle SPHE toolkit at www.curriculumonline.ie and at www.universityofgalway.ie/cfrc/unesco-chair/activatingsocialempathy/asejuniorcycle/. Schools that complete all four ASE sessions and provide feedback can receive a UNESCO Certificate of Completion. Tá an acmhainn seo ar fáil trí mhéan na Gaeilge.

The QR code below also points to ASE programme resources on the University of Galway website.

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