



Empathy School: A Democratic, Nature-Based SEL School

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The seeds of Empathy School were sown a decade ago as my wife and I hitchhiked the world, learning how democratic education had taken shape in different cultures. Later, the roots of Empathy burrowed deep into the fertile soil that Harvard Graduate School of Education offered us. During the COVID-19 lockdown, as dark clouds of fear spanned the horizon, schools closed, and people fled. Empathy sprouted in Bali, Indonesia.

To us, democratic schooling has everything to do with empowering children to make decisions for themselves while also understanding and respecting the decisions of others. Through Social Emotional Learning (SEL), a high level of freedom and self-discipline, and the creation of meaningful and immersive Project-Based Learning, students will gain leadership and citizenship skills.

Empathy School was formed in 2020 in Ubud, Bali, Indonesia. We are a private/non-profit partnership with 100 students between the ages 1 and 14 from more than 40 countries. Our school families are 20% Indonesian and 80% digital nomads/expatriates/immigrants to Bali. Our

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classes are arranged by ability, not age, so it is common to find kids of different ages learning together. This has also helped us attract both kids who have fallen behind and academically advanced kids, as our system allows each individual to get customized learning support. On a typical day, students have classes in Social Emotional Learning, Math, English reading and writing, Nature Sciences, STEAM, 2D and 3D Arts, Sports, and Project-Based Learning.

Our campus is 8500 square meters of terraced land dotted with outdoor classrooms and hundreds of fruiting trees and bushes among vast rice fields that spread into the jungles and rivers. All the classrooms and furniture were built from local materials, including bamboo that grows in the jungle only meters from the school. Our artisans, gardeners, cooks, and cleaners come from the Balinese village that hosts us. When the school is not in session, the local community, both adults and kids, are welcome to use the school as a park—playing football, having a picnic, or just resting after a long day of work. Much of this is done because we know that a school is the heart of a community, so we must support and respect our host community. This has also meant that when there is a conflict, the community's goodwill can often help solve it.

We have various local scholarship programs to improve the English capacity of the village children. We are not yet able to offer full scholarships to local students. We are wary of doing so for young children due to the fear of eroding their native culture, which is very easy to do at younger ages and results in social isolation from the native community. When we form our high school, we plan to incorporate a sizable number of local children from our village. High schoolers would benefit from our programs while retaining their native cultures.

We have over 25 teachers who undergo more than 300 hours of training yearly. Our teachers run a quarterly Professional Development Training Seminar to train public and private school teachers and principals from around Bali in Nature, SEL, and Democratic Schooling techniques. We have reached hundreds of teachers around Bali, and our next training will be hosted at a public school, so we are very excited to reach far more teachers!

Since we have high expectations of ourselves and our students, we also parallel these high expectations in our community members. Parents are expected to be involved with their kids; join and lead seminars and parent gatherings; advise us on topics they are experts in; help to review this essay; and meet with the teaching and leadership regularly to discuss their

child's growth. Parents actively volunteer to meet and guide new parents to help them understand the school culture.

DEMOCRATIC IDEAS

You can see what a school values by seeing what it teaches and how it's members act. Through all that we teach and model, our kids become able to implement strategies to change their emotional state and be mindful enough to determine their classmates' emotions and understand the reasons behind them. It is from this that kids can understand the weight of their choices on the world and be more willing to participate in it. This skill development allows us to have a level of freedom and a level of Self-Discipline not common elsewhere. All students are expected to be fully mindful of their conduct and participate in mediation if they have a conflict; to support student-to-student mediation if they have the skills necessary; to transition between classes without teacher support as young as age six (each child has a unique schedule); to set class agreements; to vote on which group projects they would prefer to work on; and to respect the tools such as hammers, saws, forge, etc. which they regularly have access to.

BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT

Respect for boundaries and consent is a key value at our school. We recognize that everyone has the right to decide what happens to their body and to set their own limits. For example, if I ask you to mud wrestle with me, and we have plenty of smooth mud pools on campus, you could accept, or you could reject, but either way, I can accept your choice because I have learned boundaries and consent. Unfortunately, young children are still learning about these concepts. For instance, Riko first arrived at our school at age five, and he didn't understand the importance of asking for consent. He assumed that because he loved to play in the mud, other kids would too, and he sometimes pulled them in the mud without their permission. That didn't work out well, and soon I had two angry, mud-soaked, fighting children—all because everyone wants consent to what happens to them.

Throughout our day at Empathy, we rigorously instill these essential skills through morning circles, in our SEL classes, and often when a conflict arises (as many disputes arise from a failure to set boundaries or ask for consent). When there is a conflict, or any sort of need for emotional

support, students (teachers and parents are also welcome) can freely visit the “Peace Room” which is a dark, soothing, scented, quite, airconditioned environment filled with calming toys and beanbags and our Wellness team staff. This environment is very unique on campus and allows us to quickly change a child’s physiology, and thus gives us the opportunity to steer children into an emotional state more conducive to learning. Doing all of this dramatically reduces student conflict, allowing children and teachers opportunities to craft agreements to support everyone’s physical and emotional safety. In all my more than 17 years as a teacher, principal, and education director, I have not encountered an environment so low in conflict. I attribute this entirely to the teaching of boundaries and consent. We also teach these skills to our community through Non-Violent Communication (NVC) seminars and ensure we set clear boundaries with our community when they join Empathy. Through these lessons, we aim to create a safe and respectful environment for everyone at our school.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

In many traditional schools, students are expected to obey a teacher’s commands primarily because they fear punishment. At our school, however, we believe that true order can be achieved through self-discipline. We strive to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages students to reflect on their actions and make thoughtful decisions. We do this in three primary ways.

First, we strip the classroom of coercion tactics such as punishment and rewards. Instead of simply punishing a student for misbehaving, we take a more holistic approach. We ask the student to instead meet with one of our counselors to talk about what happened, why it happened, why society has a specific rule related to what happened, and what alternative strategy could be used in the future to reach a more desired outcome. By doing this, we help students to gain a deeper understanding of social norms and expectations. It is an arduous journey, but it grants a great deal of mindfulness around society’s expectations of children.

Another way we promote self-discipline is by removing all rewards from the campus so intrinsic motivations can flourish. In business class, YiFan, nine, fell in love with it, not because of the class materials, but because he sees how his efforts in class lead directly to a better quality of life for the small businesses he and the other kids have helped to grow. Similarly, in Math class, Vavara races to learn more, not because she wants a gold star

but because she knows she will be using these skills to measure campus with strings and her flourishing cartography skills. It is the long-term systematic removal of rewards allows kids to benchmark and observe their own personal growth while focus on the joy behind, and in front of, their work. By removing extrinsic rewards and punishment, we hope to create an environment where students can focus on the joy of learning and their own personal growth goals.

As the poet Rumi says, we meet our children in a field that is “beyond ideas of wrong and right.” Our approach to conflict resolution involves empathy and restorative justice circles to support our kids with conflicts. Children are taught how to listen to each other and explain from their perspective what happened. We focus on mutual understanding and long-term communication skill development. This has led to kids who expresses their anger and unhappiness in a manner that is so clear that conflict can be avoided and explored in depth.

A few months back, Eelco, a six-year-old, ran up to me. “Jeff hit Tav.” He panted and continued, “Jeff felt sad and angry when Tav took his eraser. Jeff has a need to keep his school supplies safe. But Tav felt excited when he saw the tiger eraser, because he loves tigers.”

Eelco then took me to the boys, who had already settled the conflict between themselves without any kind of punishment, just a deep understanding of themselves. This focus on mutual understanding and long-term communication skill development has resulted in children who can articulate their anger and unhappiness in a clear and constructive manner, helping to avoid and explore conflicts in greater depth.

Finally, we do Problem-Based Learning. For Primary, this is one hour per day. For middle school, this is all day long. Our projects are not simple, nor are they always expected to succeed. Failure can be a fantastic way to learn what didn’t work. In the PBL class, students’ activity discusses how to co-create rather than settle on compromises.

One example of this is our “Marbe Run” project, which requires dozen of children to build with sweat, tears, and even a few hammer blows to the fingers. Their pride beamed, yet it collapsed under the rain. The tears flooded, but they started again. This time it was bigger, better built, and more dynamic. And then the termites came, chewing up all of their love and passion. This time the tears were dry and the desire to rebuild was there. They scrapped it, removed the termite colony, and built it again. They argued, they listened to each other. They refused to compromise, yet they collaborated. Six months on they have a marble run that circles a

banana grove two times; it has twists, turns, funnels, tunnels, and most importantly, passion. The time spent planning and discussing together makes project time useful—regardless of the project outcome.

SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH OUR COMMUNITY

As a democratic school, it is vital that our community plays a crucial role in shaping and supporting our long-term mission. It is also imperative to us that the precise boundaries we set exist to distribute decision-making power to the right areas. For example, the Math director is responsible for the math curriculum. The principal is responsible for ensuring the quality of math teaching. Parents are empowered to support us, advise us, and guide us, but they know from day one that they cannot fire or hire teachers, nor can they set any curriculum. Through clear boundaries and the willingness to work with the minds of the many stakeholders, we can achieve all that we do.

PARENTS ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Parents advisory council is an empathy circle that does not include any members of the Empathy Team to ensure transparency and unbiased opinions. We believe that if we were involved in the council, it would be stressful for us (hearing problems and not strategies), and it would make parents less likely to speak the whole truth (by staying out, the reports they give us become anonymized). The council meets monthly and has very clear boundaries, and old members help new members understand our core culture and avoid making suggestions that go against our values.

The council has had many meetings, and their suggestions have been extremely useful and have led to improvements in areas of the school in which members may be experts or be very passionate about. A few results include new learning tools, ideas on improving on-campus safety, increased garden plant variety, we now teach survival (guided by parents) in science class, and support to create an app for the school.

While we value the input of our parent groups, we must maintain strict boundaries to ensure our core values remain intact. It is inevitable that there will be times when community members choose to make decisions or take action that cross stated boundaries. Yes, as leaders, we can and should review our boundaries, but we must also be clear to our parent groups that we will not quickly shift boundaries that go against our values.

SUPPORTING OUR WIDER COMMUNITY

We regularly meet with our local community leaders to see how we can find new ways to collaborate. Be that a new programs for children, new ways to drive local economic growth or environmental sustainability, or just to find ways to improve the quality of life of everyone in our community. We enter into these meetings with no expectations, and with the mindset that we are not here to compromise but find a way to build something new and better together which will best meet all of our needs. It is from this mindset that we have been able to create a more just and peaceful community.

The teaching team created and leads our “Skill Share,” the largest professional development program in Bali. Every three months, our team invites public and private schools to join us and learn about education topics. We have covered many issues, from how to do Project Based Learning (PBL), to how to Use Non-Violent Communication in the classroom, to seminars on teaching the female menstruation cycle to young teens. The ministry of education, and a wide verity of NGOs support us in this project. We take this project on ourselves because we that if we truly want to make systematic change we cannot just focus on ourselves but spreading the seeds of change in all directions.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Empathy is on the correct path, a path cleared before us by generations of scientific research into how young minds grow and develop. My sons (aged 2.5 and 9) attend my school, so student outcomes directly impact me. Every day I watch as my oldest son and his friends set physical and emotional boundaries with the games they play, and I smile wide as my youngest asks for consent to play with his friends. I am excited to see my sons grow up in this democratic environment where boundaries, consent, and self-discipline will help my sons to grow up to be kind, wise, and patient individuals and future leaders.

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