Roots of Empathy: Changing the world classroom by classroom

Canada
Mary Gordon

Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Roots of Empathy (ROE) breaks intergenerational cycles of violence and poor parenting by raising levels of empathy (understanding how others feel) in children and youth.

File attachments:

Changemakers attachment - financial.doc

About You

Location

Project Street Address
Project City
Project Province/State
Project Postal/Zip Code
Project Country

Your idea

Year the initiative began (yyyy)
1996

YouTube Upload

Project URL (include http://)

Plot your innovation within the mosaic of solutions

Which of these barriers is the primary focus of your work?

Young men’s missing voices and input leads to disconnection and failed policies

Which of the principles is the primary focus of your work?

Create stability and safety without condescension or judgment

If you believe some other barrier or principle should be included in the mosaic, please describe it and how it would affect the positioning of your initiative in the mosaic:

I do not connect young men’s missing voices to failed policies. The policies do not fail for lack of representation from the group they purport to support, but rather the missing voice leads to failed relationships, failed aspirations, and youth who feel like failed people. Young men, who have not had the experience of being listened to, taken seriously or who have not learned the language of their emotions and therefore have no vehicle for expressing their feelings, are rendered socially and emotionally impotent.

In North America, there is a pandemic of loneliness in male youth that is unspoken because it smacks of vulnerability, which society judges as weakness and being non-manly.

Female children are acculturated to be conversant with their feelings both reflectively and in social contexts. They may not have political voice or social influence, but they do have the experience of self understanding and the emotional support of others.

The psycho-social imperative of youth is to carve out their identity and establish their independence. If these two developmental functions fail to mature, the young men continue in a childhood mode. This creates a growing bank of self-loathing, resentment, and anger. Angry young men who do not have emotional literacy, are without voice to vent, and in the absence of voice, may release their anger on the family or society at large, in the form of domestic violence, self abuse, vandalism or gratuitous public violence. Roots of Empathy succeeds in connecting children to one another through their shared feelings.

In summary, rather than focusing on lost opportunities, or policies which fail to produce, we need to focus on young men’s lost dreams and redirect our thinking from the cost of jailing them to the human cost of losing their potential to build civil society.

Innovation

Describe your program or new idea in one sentence.

Roots of Empathy (ROE) breaks intergenerational cycles of violence and poor parenting by raising levels of empathy (understanding how others feel) in children and youth.
What makes your initiative uniquely positioned to create change in your community?

We have failed young men in providing them with the socialization that would equip them with the emotional understanding and social skills that allow them to connect meaningfully in society. For far too many children, school is a fearful and unhappy prison. The pervasiveness of bullying, societal violence and marginalization of all kinds can be addressed when we look at a common denominator of these ills – the absence of empathy. Rolling out a green blanket in the classrooms of the country and inviting a neighbourhood newborn and parent to become part of the community of the classroom, opens the minds and hearts of all students to understand vulnerability and the way an infant communicates their emotional needs. Along with the curriculum, the baby is the agent of change in helping the students understand one another’s feelings. They develop emotional literacy and perspective-taking skills which allow them to become empathic. Roots of Empathy turns classrooms into nurturing learning environments.

Describe how you organize and carry out your work?

The ROE model is based on a community development approach and depends on the contributions of community organizations for instructors and the participation of school boards, principals and teachers to host the program, as well as community parents and newborns to be part of the program. Instructors are trained to deliver 27 lessons over the school year and receive ongoing mentoring. State/provincial coordinators strategize with communities through a Key Point Person from that community in order to support their growth.

What is your plan to scale and expand your innovation into your community and beyond?

Since 2000, the program has grown throughout Canada and was introduced in Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. A courtship period is required in order to ensure readiness and sustainability for the program. In new countries, we require a plan with identified funding and engaged stakeholders. Starting the program in New Zealand, for example, took a few years of discussion and presentations before there was a sit-down with the Prime Minister and three Ministries put forward funding for three years which was supplemented by various foundations, corporations, and private donors. Over time, we would like Roots of Empathy to be global, but in the short term we want to be able to maintain the integrity of the program for every child.

After a dialogue in Washington with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in April 2008, we anticipate requests for the program from other U.S. states. We will expand as far and wide as our capacity permits.

What other resources, institutional, or policy needs would be necessary to help sustain and scale up your idea?

We require resources for training, mentoring, research, and ongoing upgrading of curriculum materials. In countries where English is not the language of currency, we need translation, and sometimes we need cultural interpretation.

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What impact has your work achieved to date?

Several national and international studies have shown the effectiveness of Roots of Empathy. Research at the University of British Columbia, the University of Western Australia and the government of Manitoba have all shown a significant reduction in aggression and increase in prosocial behaviour in children who have participated in Roots of Empathy compared to those who have not. Results of a follow up of a Randomised Controlled Trial show that these improvements are maintained three years later.

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Number of individuals served

To date, over 210,000 children in Canada have received Roots of Empathy. The program is offered to students in Kindergarten to grade 8 and has a specialized curriculum for 4 different age groups. The program was intended to be universal, not targeted to aggressive children, however it has been piloted with children affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder with great success. The program is offered in both English and French, and is in many aboriginal communities, both on and off reserve. This year saw the launch of the sibling of ROE, Seeds of Empathy; a new program for 3-5 years olds in childcare which is a play-based literacy program with a social and emotional component.

Community impact

ROE doesn’t just come to a classroom or a school, it comes to the community. Because the program relies on having a volunteer parent and newborn for each classroom, there is a general awareness in the pre and post natal community. Many of the childcare centres and organizations where new parents gather may become informally involved with the steering committee in the provision of ROE families. A steering committee is led by a ROE Key Point Person whose time is volunteered from one of the agencies who lead the steering committee. A community champion drives this whole process and that champion may be from any field, but has significant profile and influence in the community. The program is of, for and by the community. Its impact ripples deeply through parent blogs, instructor networks, children’s connections and school sharing. The program is delivered through the public, private and independent school systems. It truly is a community program.

Society at large

Our children are not just a part of the future – they are 100% of the future. We can not re-write history but we can influence the legacy of the future. If every board room and every war room had empathic people sitting in the positions of power, we would have very different outcomes
from society of today where a third of the world is marginalized. Children in ROE challenge injustice and cruelty wherever they see it.

What measure do you use to gauge your impact and why?
In addition to our research portfolio, we provide children with the opportunity to evaluate their experience of the program. From the children, we hear what they feel they have learned rather than what we think they have learned. They tell us that they are worried about many things. They tell us that they often feel sad and lonely. Their art tells a very deep story – a story that never exaggerates - it is the poetry of their souls.

Sustainability
How is your initiative currently being financed and how would you finance further expansion and/or replication?
Currently we are financed by a combination of government, foundations, corporations, private donors, revenue from trainings, keynote presentations by the founder, and the sale of intellectual property from the book “Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child” and other writings by the founder.

Provide information on your current finances and organization:
a. and b. and c. please see attached
d. 27 full time staff, 44 part time staff

Who are your potential partners and allies?
Teacher federations, school trustee and parent associations, child advocacy groups, domestic violence and child abuse prevention groups, peace education groups, mental health agencies, children and youth rights advocates, pediatric psychiatrists, public health agencies, service clubs and faith-based organizations.

Who are your potential investors?
All levels of government: municipal, state, federal (health, education, justice, employment and immigration, aboriginal, social services and recreation) boards of education, and community based agencies who work with children’s issues.

The Story
What is the origin of this innovation? Tell us your story.
Mary Gordon began her career as a Kindergarten teacher, determined to make a difference in children’s lives. She was appalled at the inequity of readiness in her students. She realized that it was a combination of parenting and socio-economic circumstances that limited or liberated children’s opportunities to soar.
She was breathless in the face of the intolerance and marginalization of overall society, for the circumstances of her students’ families. Ms Gordon was determined to break this cycle of marginalization of children who were disadvantaged by birth. She wanted to prove that birth was not destiny.
In 1981, she left the classroom and founded Canada’s first and largest school-based Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, to support families like the families of her students.
Parents with infants and preschoolers were supported not only in their parenting issues, and bread and butter issues, but in issues of education, job training, abuse, legal and health.
As the administrator of this program, she encountered a great deal of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. Ms Gordon realized that the common denominator of the suffering was the absence of empathy. In 1996, off the side of her desk, she created Roots of Empathy. To make this a national agenda, she created a program which could be introduced universally to the classrooms of the country as children are mandated to attend and where the children would break intergenerational cycles of violence and poor parenting.

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers marketing material.
Mary Gordon, Member of the Order of Canada, is the Founder, President and inspiration behind the Roots of Empathy program. She was the founder and administrator of Canada’s first and largest school-based Parenting and Family Literacy Centres. Ms. Gordon is a best-selling author with extensive experience as an educator, public speaker and curriculum developer. She is the recipient of several prestigious awards recognizing her contribution to innovation in education and international social entrepreneurship. She is an Ashoka Fellow.

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