



Mary Gordon

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Roots of Empathy

Interviewed by **Nelly Kelders**, Member Services Director
Written by **Marisa Celenza**, Editor

Roots of Empathy is a unique program that had humble beginnings in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and has now attained international status. Mary Gordon, the founder, president and inspiration behind Roots of Empathy spoke passionately about her program.

Mary began her career as a kindergarten teacher in 1969. She feels the greatest impact on children's lives takes place if you work with the very young. After about three days of teaching, she came to the realization that not all children enter school the same way. Children witnessing domestic violence and suffering from child abuse did not get a fair chance. The children she saw before her did not have equal opportunities. Although some of the differences could be attributed to lower income levels, what she noted was a difference in preparedness for school. She suspected that the different attitudes of her students were a direct reflection of the parents and their skills during the child's early years and critical development milestones. She wanted to help families, knowing that every parent does the best they can.

In 1981 Mary Gordon opened school-based Parenting and Family Literacy Centres in several inner-city schools across the Toronto District School Board. These centres represented the plurality of the world and the sacrifices people make for their children. Through these centres, Mary regularly observed the cycle of abuse and neglect that were often passed on from generation to generation. She spoke of working with 13-year-old mothers living in abusive relationships, who were children themselves. A child caught in this lifestyle had great obstacles to overcome once they entered school. She believes that sustainable change starts with schools.

These parenting centres led to the development of the Roots of Empathy (ROE) program in 1996. The impetus was to take the parenting centre concept further. Mary hopes to change the world child by child. This is reflected in the title of her book, *Roots of Empathy Changing the World Child by Child* (2005).

As stated in the Roots of Empathy program information booklet, the mission of the ROE program is:

to build caring, peaceful and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults. The focus of ROE in the long term is to build the capacity of the next generation for responsible citizenship and responsive parenting. In the short term, ROE focuses on raising levels of empathy, resulting in more respectful and caring relationships and reduced levels of bullying and aggression.

The Roots of Empathy program is for elementary children from Kindergarten to Grade 8. It is built around a classroom visit by a neighbourhood infant and its parent. This is usually a baby and mother, sometimes the father or the baby with both parents. At the start of the program, the baby should be from two to four months of age. The principal is responsible for choosing the family and ideally, the baby should be from the school community. Children observe the changes and celebrate the baby's milestones over the course of the year. There are nine visits in total and the visit is the catalyst for the program.

The curriculum, written by Mary Gordon, is based on nine themes: meeting the baby; crying; caring and planning; emotions; sleep; safety; communicating; who am I; and goodbye and good wishes. Each theme has three parts; the pre-family visit, the visit, the post-family visit. There are four strands of the ROE program: kindergarten, primary (Grades 1-3), junior (Grades 4-6) and senior (Grades 7-8). The program is also available in French. Each theme has an overview that outlines the main teaching points and the preparation required. Mary stated, "Nothing is done unless there is a reason." The ROE program incorporates many other curriculum areas including art, literature and math. The

program is endorsed by Curriculum Services Canada and as Mary said, “the curriculum sticks with the children.”



Baby Liliana

The Roots of Empathy program is the ultimate in experiential learning. During the pre-visit lesson, students are prepared for the baby’s visit. They develop skills of prediction and listening respectfully to one another, as they develop

questions for the family. Their predictions are often outrageous, but they learn much about a child’s development and themselves through their discussions. What will the baby be able to do? How big will the baby be? Can the baby walk? The mother’s response is often “Not yet.” Mary called this the thesis of *Not Yet*. The children give themselves permission not to have accomplished something yet, to be respectful that we all learn at a different pace, that we all have different needs and strengths, and that we are all unique and different. They develop life-long skills of prediction, respect for others, listening attentively, critical thinking, the art of questioning, respecting differences and celebrating these differences and accomplishments. ROE slows down the normal classroom pace and teaches reflection.

Respect for the humanity of the baby, and one another, happens within the first five minutes of the baby-visit. Many teachers have commented that their class is never as attentive as during the ROE baby-visit. Most importantly, through discussion and observation, they develop empathy. The ROE program reaches across social and cultural boundaries. Mary spoke of an ESL class that she visited during the ROE baby-visit. Although, the children’s vocabulary was limited to mad, sad or happy, they were still able to participate and benefit from the program.

ROE provides students with the metacognitive ability to understand their thinking and interaction with others. When the instructor asks the parent for permission to play with the baby, the unspoken messages provide the biggest lessons for children. When children take part in the ROE program, a trust factor develops through group work. Respect, caring and empathy are keys to positive behaviour. Although not targeted, the program deals with universal issues and helps teachers maintain a supportive environment.

During the post-family visit, the discussion is directed towards a reflection of the concepts learned. The emotions they observed and experienced are labelled and verbalized. A definite sense of solidarity develops in the classroom and teachers have noted that the ecology in the classroom changes; children become kinder. When a child is sick, sad or worried, they do not learn as well. ROE frees children to learn.

The classroom teacher enjoys a unique experience during the ROE program. Mary noted that she would never burden a classroom teacher with the responsibility of teaching the ROE

program; teachers already have far too much on their plate. The classroom teacher is one with the children. He or she is able to observe the children and assess their needs on all levels.

Trained ROE instructors teach the program. The instructors vary from community to community. There is no standard template. They represent a cross-section of public service employees, including public health staff, school board staff with non-regular classroom responsibilities (guidance teachers, educational assistants, child and youth care workers), police officers, social workers and retired teachers. The instructors receive intense four-day training. ROE is a not-for-profit agency. The instructors are all volunteers, but often they are salaried by their agencies. They are a gift to the ROE program. There is 97% integrity of implementation with the ROE program.



Baby-visit at St. Angela, TCDSB

Most of the instructors are female, although there are a few men. Mary mentioned one vice-principal in Niagara that teaches two programs each year. He feels that he is able to keep in touch with the children and the time spent with

ROE, is an investment made to reduce conflict in the schoolyard and thus reduces his time spent in conflict resolution.

Joan Daly-Martin, from the Catholic Teacher Centre in the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB), has been an instructor with the ROE program for 4 years. Joan feels that:

Roots of Empathy has found a welcome place in the culture and ethos of a Catholic school. Our mission of promoting the values of the Gospel connects well with the goals of Roots of Empathy. Our students are taught valuable life lessons by a new baby who they observe growing and developing over the entire school year. They begin to see life from the baby’s perspective. ROE helps them to know that the same care, concern, gentleness and respect that is owed the baby because of his/her fragility is owed to one another. Understanding how another person feels, empathy, goes a long way toward the diminishment of bullying in a school community.

This is the key to the ROE program. Although it is an excellent program on its own, the extrinsic benefits surpass the stated goals of the program. The universal language of the love and care reflected in the relationship of a baby and its parent transcends all social, economic and racial barriers. There are many stories of the ROE program reducing incidents of harassment and bullying. Marita Adams, former principal of Winchester public school and presently the director of community development with ROE had nine classes implementing the ROE program. They knew anecdotally that it improved the atmosphere of the classroom. The entire school was involved in some way with the program through their professional learning community (PLC) created around ROE. There was a sense of belonging in the school and thus reduced

incidents of aggression. Bullying is not discussed in the program, but emotions are explored. The increase in social empathy leads students to be more respectful of others in the class. This results in fewer incidents of bullying and aggressive behaviour.

Some public health nurses have claimed the benefits of ROE as a Grade 7-8 pregnancy prevention program. Although this is never mentioned in the program, children learn how difficult it is to care for a child. The senior curriculum includes math activities where students explore the cost of raising a baby, along with the emotional factors of care. One student commented that he could not be a parent now as, it will "wreck the baby's life".



The ROE program has been implemented across Canada, and is being piloted in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. In Ontario, the program has been endorsed by our minister of education, Kathleen Wynne. Mary Gordon took part in the *Vancouver Dialogues 2006: Educating the Heart* with the Dalai Lama. Mary reported that he loves the ROE program because it teaches compassion from a very early age. Manitoba has shown a real commitment to the program, as it is a budget item, thus ensuring its long-term sustainability in schools. The prime minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark supports the program and its implementation in Grades 4- 6. Youth, at this age are on the cusp of making good and bad decisions. Bullying has been an issue in New Zealand as well and the prime minister sees ROE as an anti-bullying program. She hopes to change this aggressive behaviour in the next generation.

Michael Fullan, professor emeritus, OISE/University of Toronto wrote the forward to the paperback version of Mary's book. He states:


ROE is a simple, brilliant and powerful example of how developing children's empathy can be a priority, and can be accomplished with amazing results. The heart is the way to the mind, but they have to be explicitly linked. Roots of Empathy is a model of social and academic inclusion.

Mary Gordon elaborates that Michael Fullan feels that social/emotional literacy is a foundation literacy. Every child's entitlement is to feel happy and to experience a sense of belonging and social inclusion.

Unity of purpose in our Catholic schools facilitates the implementation of the ROE program. It is very easy to integrate the values taught into the life of the school. There are 14 Catholic school boards across the province teaching the ROE program. This entails 211 programs in 183 schools, reaching 4500 children. This is a 15 per cent increase over last year. Roots of Empathy has been called Canada's olive branch to the world.

*For further information and insight into the Roots of Empathy program, you are encouraged to visit the website at www.rootsofempathy.org or contact Lucy DiCarlo, the Ontario coordinator at 416 849-4690. All royalties from the sale of the book *Roots of Empathy - Changing the World Child by Child* go to the Roots of Empathy program. Visit the website for ordering information.*

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