The empathy gap is a deficit that most of us suffer from unconsciously. And in education, it is paralyzing the progress of many students.

The empathy gap is an inability to recognize and respond to the feelings of others, especially others we perceive as different from us and, most perniciously, those whose race is different from our own. This gap appears in multiple contexts, from physicians' perception of their patients' suffering to the way in which juries perceive criminal defendants. It mutes our reactions to atrocities in Aleppo and Baghdad, even as we show fellow feeling to the victims of terror in Brussels and Nice.

The recent tragedies across our own country—the bombings in New York and New Jersey; the mass murders in Orlando and Dallas; the police shootings of Keith Lamont Scott, Terence Crutcher, Tyre King, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling, among others—widen this gap. The bias, prejudice, misunderstanding, and hate that mark this presidential campaign widen it more.

The empathy gap is particularly acute for white people, when they try to imagine the feelings of black people. In education, it stops administrators, teachers, staff, and students from fully understanding, acknowledging, and addressing issues that are critical to learning. As a result, the disparities in achievement and preparation within our system are insidious and pervasive. And they are anathema to the American vision of equality and justice.

We don't start out with an empathy gap.

A researcher at the University of Virginia in a 2014 study examined a group of mostly white children's perceptions of the pain experienced by other children.

At the age of 5, children exhibited no differences in their empathic understanding of others' pain. By
age 7, however, the children in the study rated the pain of black children as less severe than the pain felt by their white counterparts. And the differences were even greater in the 10-year-old group.

Early-childhood education is critical to youth development. In the earliest years, children are assembling the portfolio of skills and tools that will support them throughout their lives. These include cognitive skills, such as early literacy and numeracy, and social-emotional skills, such as following directions, working in a group, taking turns, making and carrying out plans, and bouncing back after setbacks.

At this stage, children are also forming the foundational understanding of the world around them, and, most important, of other people. Who has value? Who can be trusted? Who is worthy of love?

It is up to us, as educators—teachers, parents, leaders, citizens—to create the conditions that will foster and support children's empathy. This requires us, first, to take a hard look at ourselves.

When boys of color are expelled from preschool at a far higher rate than their white counterparts, it's time for us to question our own perceptions as teachers and how we treat the children in our classrooms. It's time for us to reflect on our own failures of empathy.

And it's time for us to put together a new toolbox for ourselves and for the children in our classrooms, one that can help us begin to close the empathy gap.

Many of the tools we need already exist. Resources for creating an anti-bias curriculum have been around for more than 20 years. For us to begin using these resources, however, we have to think differently about the purpose of education.

There's been a subtle and dangerous idea undergirding much of our work: that black and brown children have deficits we need to fix. Perhaps it's time to think about the deficits in empathy that we need to "fix" in white children, in particular.

Or, better yet, we can put aside the language of "deficit" and of "less than." Instead, we can recognize that each child comes to us brimming with possibilities and empathy and that we need to support them across the range of their abilities, which must include the ability to see each other as full and complete human beings.

I despair for my own generation. But for the next generation, it's not too late.
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