

## The Nora Project Program Suite: Three Programs, Infinite Potential

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According to Dr. Michelle Borba in her book *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in our All-About-Me World*, “empathy is a quality that can be taught - in fact, it’s a quality that *must* be taught, by parents, by educators, and by those in a child’s community. And what’s more, it’s a talent that kids can cultivate and improve, like riding a bike or learning a foreign language.”<sup>1</sup> The Nora Project believes that the more rich empathy education we provide to students, the more they’ll be likely to develop their empathy and to practice it in all of the areas of their life.

As we introduce two new programs this year, The Program Team at TNP has constructed an ideal “life-cycle” of programming for students in preschool through twelfth grade, providing multiple opportunities throughout a child’s educational journey to learn about empathy, inclusion, and disability. While each program could stand alone, kids stand to benefit from a layered approach to this learning.

### The Primer Pack: Priming Kids to Think Inclusively

Students in the younger grades are still exploring what it means to develop and maintain relationships with others. As such, teachers have shared with us that they are less likely to exclude simply on the basis of difference, and certainly not with the fervor of their intermediate level classmates. But while students in the primary grades are often more accepting, their innocent curiosity can come off as rude or hurtful. They are still developing their sense of self and learning about the consequences of their actions.

The Primer Pack was designed with these developing students in mind. It helps students connect their experiences to new learning about topics such as empathy, inclusion, disability, and emotional literacy. Within their classrooms, students learn about how to be a good friend, how to recognize and celebrate differences, and how to be an includer. These important lessons prime students for later experiences when social lines are drawn more clearly, and when it can be more challenging to independently chose to include.

### The Flagship Program: Experiential Empathy

When students reach fourth and fifth grade, educators report that groups begin to form. Like-minded individuals find one another and develop strong relationships. As a fourth and fifth grade teacher, I saw

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<sup>1</sup> Borba, M. (2017). *Unselfie: Why empathetic kids succeed in our all-about-me world*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

this very natural division happen first-hand. It's not malicious or even intentional; instead, it's a natural part of development for kids to explore social groups and form new relationships that make them feel accepted and understood. It is at this point in a child's education when, if they are different, they are more likely to be alienated or isolated from their peers. At this critical social juncture, we offer our Flagship Program. Building on the knowledge base that students developed through the Primer Pack, students who participate in our Flagship Program revisit the concept of what it means to be a good friend and how to demonstrate empathy in real-world relationships.

Armed with the understanding of complex concepts like empathy, inclusion, and the fact that our differences are simply a part of who we are, students are presented with experiential learning opportunities in the Flagship Program. They join together with their peers of all abilities to learn about one another's differences and practice empathy in authentic environments. The Flagship Program helps teachers create time and space for kids to interact socially, with minimal intervention, so that they can practice what they've learned about empathy and how to be a good friend. By doing this during the school day, teachers can coach students and seize teachable moments to ensure that students understand what empathetic behavior and language looks, sounds, and feels like in practice.

#### Expansion Pack: Problem-Solving for a More Inclusive Future

When students emerge from the Flagship Program, they have built a lot of momentum. They are eager to continue to learn about their peers and to develop strong relationships. To capitalize on that momentum and to allow students to remain engaged in learning about empathy, inclusion, and disability, we have designed our Expansion Pack. This inclusive extra-curricular club provides a place for students of all abilities to get together and work to achieve two main goals: 1) to continue to develop relationships with their peers of different abilities, and 2) to examine their school through the lens of inclusion in an effort to identify ways to make their school a more inclusive place for all. Students will use the engineering design process to create proposals for ways to improve the inclusivity of their school environments and carry out a project to completion. The Expansion Pack will be piloted at several schools next year, and we are sure that, with students at the helm, real, tangible change will occur.

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Dr. Borba shares, "Empathy can be instilled, and it is composed of teachable habits that can be developed, practiced, and lived. Empathy is what lays the foundation for helping children live one essential truth: *We are all humans who share the same fears and concerns, and deserve to be treated with dignity.*" The Nora Project aims to provide schools with resources that make it easy to help students develop, practice, and live these habits. We can't wait to see their impact in the 2019/2020 school year!