

Developed Empathic Capacities as a Condition of Quality Interpersonal Relationships within a School Environment

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ABSTRACT

A quality school atmosphere is based on a human/altruistic approach to students but also on a satisfied teacher, who is characterized by a number of positive qualities and an equally satisfied student, who cultivates positive feelings towards the authority of their teachers, the school and the education process in general. Good quality relations between people are based on empathy which is the ability to relate to the feelings of other people. It is via empathy that a teacher, however briefly, puts on their students' shoes and thereby feels the same emotions, which is what actually allows teachers to truly understand their student's feelings, actions and problems and to respond positively to them. In doing so, they show a full understanding of their needs directed towards the well-being of the students. Empathy includes both cognitive and emotional components and, therefore, in the process of empathizing, knowledge and emotions interact. As most authors consider it to be a regulator of different behaviors, in the context of altruistic behavior specifically, empathy is a very important motivation for altruism, given the degree of emotional unity established, which is a precondition for effective and sincere interaction between people and an initiator of a close understanding of another person's emotional world.

INTRODUCTION

In the course of the multiple social and political developments and other changes that our country and the region in general have seen over recent decades, there has been an absence of a comfortable and safe environment, i.e., a kind of environment in which the quality of human relations operates at a high level. Inevitably, what we need is a more honest orientation towards all people, adequate empathy with their emotions and appropriate responses to others, not only for our own well-being but also for the well-being of the other in what is perhaps a utopian belief, by which we strive to cherish everywhere and at any given moment the concept of a citizen who can bring about changes for the better [1].

The specific issue of the quality of the educational process requires a quality school environment which can be observed at several levels: first of all, through quality interpersonal relationships, then through quality curricula and syllabi and the ecology of the school environment. A quality school atmosphere is based on a human/altruistic approach to students but also on a satisfied teacher, who is characterized by a number of positive qualities and an equally satisfied student, who cultivates positive feelings towards the authority of their teachers, the school and the education process in general. Good quality relations between people are based on empathy which is the ability to relate to the feelings of other people. It is via empathy that a teacher, however briefly, puts on their students' shoes and thereby feels the same emotions, which is what actually allows teachers to truly understand their students' feelings, actions and problems and to respond positively to them. In doing so, they show a full understanding of their needs directed towards the well-being of the students. Empathy includes both cognitive and emotional components and, therefore, in the process of empathizing, knowledge and emotions interact. As most authors consider it to be a regulator of different behaviors, in the context of altruistic behavior specifically, empathy is a very important motivation for altruism, given the degree of emotional unity established, which is a precondition for effective and sincere interaction between people and an initiator of a close understanding of another

person's emotional world. From the aforementioned standpoint, in this paper we will explore once again the need for the educational process to be aimed exclusively at the overall well-being of students, where empathy as a "pure" motivation for the required altruistic actions of teachers (and later for altruistic student actions towards other people) is to some degree innate in all people, but is also formed by a series of social influences (parents, teachers and so on). Empathy initiates and further develops socio-emotional relationships between people and thus fosters their positive personal development, not only in order to achieve a positive school atmosphere, but also a quality atmosphere in all the other macro and micro environments to which they belong. Furthermore, making no claim to formulate new concepts in addition to a series of data which help us understand the ability of empathy better, we will point out what kind of treatment is triggered by (not) feeling empathy in a specific situation where another person is in need of support and assistance [2].

Empathy is Innate-Empathy as Part of Social Neuroscience

One of the most important findings that contributes to understanding the neural dynamics of human relationships and to understanding empathy both as a mental structure, characteristic of every person, and as an important motive for their behavior aimed at the welfare of the other is that:

- Brain cells, mirror neurons feel both the movement that the other person is about to make and their feelings, at the same time preparing us to mimic the movement and to feel at the same time with that person. Therefore, since we can see a person in need of support, care or help, our mirror neurons are activated and empathy occurs. The more a person or a teacher emphasizes, the more they will want to support and help the other/a student, or, in other words, the more active the systems of mirror neurons, the stronger the empathy [3].

Many studies on both humans and animals suggest the existence of a common impulse, the impulse to react to someone else's trouble/suffering, which provokes similar feelings in the person who is observing the other (e.g. teacher-student), prompting them to provide assistance. As an exchange of feelings accompanies every encounter between people, feelings "can be transferred" from one person to another, regardless of what kind of relationship they have. The emotional aspect which is perceived is processed below the threshold of consciousness, and this non-conscious feedback signals a particular emotion by preparing the very same feeling. Such a transfer, the transfer of emotions, can affect one person but also more people at the same time and then it are an emotional infection, which spreads fast below the threshold of the conscious, automatically and effortlessly". For example if we see someone who shows fear (even by the way they hold and move their body), our brain will activate the system of the fear "circuit" and so on [4].

Another important finding for understanding empathy is:

- Neural networks for perception and action share a common code in the language of the brain, and that code at the very same moment both prepares a person and spurs them to the appropriate action, i.e., it signals to the motor area in the brain where reactions are prepared to form an appropriate action. Therefore, along with the current emotional contagion there may occur ready-made (instant) reactions, which are valid for every emotion that caused a reaction. It is concluded that in addition to spreading contagious feelings, the state of emotional contagion provokes in the observer the teacher and then later the student, a (more or less intense) emotional state equal to that of the other person, and automatically prepares the brain for the appropriate action. The rapid transition from empathy to action indicates the existence of a system of circuits intended specifically for that purpose.

Empathy is Acquired-Confident Parents Create Confident and Empathic Children, and Confident Teachers Respond Empathetically

As a child's brain is programmed to grow fastest in the first years of life, but is also the last organ that reaches biological maturity, the major figures in the early period of development (particularly parents, educators and teachers, other people from their close environment and so on) through the creation of and participating in the emotional world of the child significantly affect and stimulate the growth of its neurons. British scientist John Bowlby identifies the key ingredient of child empathy and their later overall well-being. If parents treat children in this way (empathetic and benevolent) are provide empathetic and benevolent responses to their needs, they build a basic sense of security, or as Bowlby puts it a secure base conditioned by an adequate bond between parents and their children. To establish this kind of parent child connection, it is important that the mother/father properly recognize the needs of the child and is responsible for them. Since babies from the very birth are active communicators, the functioning of this connection (loop) is necessary and functions equally in both directions (e.g. the baby's emotion direct the mother's actions as much as it applies the other way round), although Bowlby believes that in early childhood the dominance in this relationship should be in the favor of the child. In the first years of life, by means of and within the framework of this relationship, the child will establish one of the patterns of emotional attachment: secure, anxious or avoidant, a pattern which later repeats itself in their relationships with others and indicates the level of their openness and willingness to understand and accept others, to establish relationships with others and which shapes their behavior towards them. The opinion of many scientists is that

the altruistic impulse itself stems from empathy and that the aforementioned attachment patterns strongly influence it (whether they encourage, weaken or suppress it) [5]. Thus, a more general classification is provided which groups people into two categories: people who are altruistic and those who are not, that is, confident and empathic people as opposed to anxious and avoidant people.

Therefore, synchronized parental care is of crucial importance for the establishment of these patterns. What is needed is interactions with which babies will be satisfied and if parents fail in this respect the child is in serious danger of growing up to develop dysfunctional forms of attachment (those children who are treated with empathy will probably become confident and empathetic themselves, while anxious parents bring up anxious children, and avoidant parents bring up children who avoid everything and shy away from both emotions and other people). Moments of synchronized care “strengthen” the secure base and are characterized by intimacy, respect and emotional attachment which depressed mothers do not show; they are often poorly coordinated in terms of time, obtrusive, sad, or angry; some even create a physical gap between themselves and their children (they do not touch them, do not cuddle them and later on they rarely talk to them) and so on. It is important that encouraging such positive behaviors does not mean that a child should be isolated from the world and thus deprived of all the emotions they will inevitably face later in life, starting from the firm belief that a child should be protected. A child should, in fact, be allowed to face the variety of negative emotions that inevitably accompany his or her growing up and for which they need to be emotionally prepared [6].

The form of affective attachment in confident people is the most adequate for empathy, that is these people are able to be rapidly empathize with the internal state of another person, for example with the other person's anxiety, and are immediately ready to provide support and help. For anxious people, diverting focus onto others is difficult, and even if it happens, because of their excessive sensitivity, contagious anxiety and agitation occur. When they empathize with others their feelings are often amplified to what is termed as empathy distress, or the inability of empathy due to the load and fatigue in emotions "compassion fatigue". To avoidant people compassion is very hard, since they protect themselves from painful feelings by suppressing them. They shut themselves off before emotional contagion (the transfer of emotions from one person onto another) and have low empathy, and thus very rarely provide support and assistance to another person. If they do in fact provide that support, it is often due to previous calculations of personal gain [1].

The conclusion is that in order to foster quality relationships between teachers and students within the educational process, providing care and support occurs in the fullest way if the teacher properly understands the emotions involved (both their own and those of others), but also feels safe because they have previously built a stable emotional foundation that will provide them with support, so as not to be overcome and inundated by empathy. The sense that we ourselves are sure of our emotional capacities that we are cared for allows us to freely and fully care for our students/others [7].

Empathy is Encouraged and Learned

Parents are important partners in the structuring of the inner world of the child, important teachers in the framework of their reasoning, while that role is later equally shared with teachers or schools. They will continue with the aforementioned, as well as develop empathic ability in children through learning by participation, cooperative learning, and so on. Induction is, for example, a form of reasoning which significantly affects the overall development of care and support on the basis of explanation and pointing out the consequences of a response, pointing out also the understanding of the internal conditions of the other and further developing the understanding that actions can be taken to achieve someone's well-being. Positive induction points out the positive consequences, those that can contribute to the benefit of another person, which certainly has a positive influence on the quality of interpersonal relationships within the child's school environment [8].

Furthermore, the school, as an important environment in the educational process incorporating a series of interpersonal relationships, features other forms of learning, and, therefore, through individual and group activities and participation in situations that require compassionate and caring behavior, children are best taught to behave in a compassionate way. Models (at the earliest age these are parents and other family members, and later the roles is taken by teachers, peers, friends and others) are important for actions and behavior's, the emphatic/altruistic behavior's included, and learning occurs on the basis of mimicking their activities (learning by identifying, learning by imitation and learning by role), who can also make an important contribution to fostering the understanding of the emotional state of another person, as well as of appropriate behavior? For example, through cooperative learning it is possible to establish positive relationships not only between members of the same group, but also between different groups (be they ethnic racial, and so on.), so one of the possible techniques for the development of empathy, but one that is also important for improving interpersonal relationships and often especially emphasized, is the so-called role-exchange technique, leading to the certain ability to perceive situations and feelings from the perspective of the other [9].

Why Do We Act Towards the Benefit of the Other After Empathy: The Empathy – Altruism Theory?

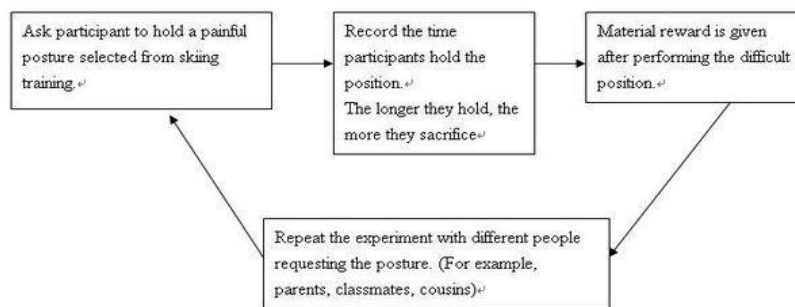


Figure 1. Batson's theory: empathy-altruism-U SLICI: Observing someone who needs help, Feeling empathy, YES, NO, Helping if it is in one's own interest (gains exceed losses), Help which is independent of one's own interest, (losses exceed gains).

According to **Figure 1**, the first step in providing some form of support and assistance is paying attention by observing the person, which is logically followed by the emergence of empathy. Greater attention contributes to a fuller recognition and experiencing of the emotions of others, which enables the building of emotional connections, and thus offers greater opportunities for an adequate response for the benefit of the other [3].

The viewer's empathy with the mental state of the other is the next step. It has also been found that the strongest empathy occurs if there is immediacy between people that is, when there is the immediacy of the emotional contagion, which in addition to causing in the observer the appropriate state similar to that of the person in distress, also softens the boundary between the self and the other. As immediacy is characteristic of essential and high quality relationships between teachers and students, in some situations within the educational process, teachers are, for a number of factors, prevented from experiencing empathy or are able to feel only sympathy a sense of other people's troubles with little or no communion [10].

The probability of providing support and assistance increases with the power of the emotional connection, which is characteristic of empathy due to the immediacy of the emotional contagion. The abovementioned distance (physical distance, reduced alertness, disinterest, other people and so on) still do not completely hamper the teacher from experiencing another person's emotional world and in that case we can talk about the experience of cognitive empathy in which “the observer reaches the felt state from a distance through thinking about the other person's troubles”. Distance certainly weakens the internal impulse of teachers to behave in a caring manner while, due to the immediacy of the emotional contagion, the impulse is reinforced [11].

The subtype of empathy that happens or does not happen quickly and automatically due to a short-term observation of someone's facial expressions or movements is primal empathy and a person who is able to quickly feel the appropriate emotions of another person shows an inclination towards it. Scientists believe that this intuitive empathy, “empathy from the inside” is also activated by mirror neurons and is only possible because of previous observation. The tendency towards this form of empathy is particularly important in a range of interpersonal relationships within the educational process, especially in a series of daily relations between teachers and students, when speaking about events, emotions and so on ceases and apparently only the cessation of the flow of information occurs. An experienced pedagogical expert knows that the sending of information continues via a series of non-verbal codes which are to be identified and the responded to adequately [12].

The next steps in Batson's theory: empathy–altruism indicate the possibility of experiencing or not experiencing empathy, which he further develops in the direction of the theory of social exchange.

Thus, the variation in the ability to empathize (as an essential personality trait) and many situational factors are just some of the reasons that in a certain situation may affect the lack of empathy, but also the lack of attention as its essential requirement in most cases. The action (if there is a lack of attention) would clearly lead to providing support and showing concern only in case of the realization one's own interests. No empathy means any emotional commitment, so in such a case we can speak of a formal relationship with a pronounced interest identified in literature as a relation of social exchange, a characteristic of new acquaintances who fear for equality and are often brutally rational in their losses to gains calculations. Establishing such an attitude is unacceptable and contrary to the very definition of the teaching profession, and opposed to the desire to nurture an effective school atmosphere and quality educational process in general [13].

Contrary to Batson's theory, the following possible steps as a result of experiencing empathy are also based on the theory of social exchange, but have in their core a different relationship between people, followed by acting independently of one's own interests (the act of helping when losses exceed gains). Thus, the relationship between the people who are

the subject and the object of empathy is strengthened by a type of emotional connection and is far from a relationship that is characterized by a concern for equality. Within such a relationship, the sensitivity for others is recognized and such a relationship is known as the relationship of communion that has the following characteristics: people do not want their services to be reciprocated immediately; people do not feel used if their services are not reciprocated; people do not care about how much each person contributes to the relationship; and the possibility of helping produces a good mood in a person, while relations of social exchange are in stark contrast to the above. It is generally known that relations of communion in everyday life are typically found between family member's and close friends, and as such should be a model for the everyday human relations in the school atmosphere ^[14].

CONCLUSION

However, inherited traits are not the only determinants of a person's behaviour; it is necessary to take into account many other factors. Therefore, we cannot talk of empathy and altruistic behaviour as physical traits which depends on the presence of a protein in the body or in the brain which is encoded in a single gene. If we acknowledge the findings that empathic capacities are partly innate and partly acquired in everyday relations with others, first of all we must bear in mind that the atmosphere in which children grow up is crucial for their development and the period of their upbringing should be given the full attention, because if in their primary environment children do not learn appropriate behaviours, inappropriate behaviours can spread easily outside the family environment.

Bowlby pointed out that differences in the quality of early attachments have long-term implications on later intimate relationships, self-understanding and mental health or pathology. Securely attached children describe themselves more positively than insecure children and are at the same time able to recognize their own shortcomings and imperfections. They are also more competent in evaluating emotions and show a better understanding of negative emotions and their consequences. Furthermore, they have a greater capacity for empathy and get better evaluation from adults (teachers, expert advisors) in terms of self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional health and positive effects. The family, therefore, creates and shapes the emotional reality of the child, and the optimistic fact that parents can develop empathy in children is also important, if the parents are from the very first moment devoted to their children in the right way and aware that the adequate bringing up and education of the child is their most important and responsible role, one which lasts a lifetime. Although parental care cannot "change" each gene of a child, it can shape what children experience, which is an indispensable part of their earliest reality, which undoubtedly affects the "shaping" of their neural circuits, which in turn is especially emphasized by the neuroscience.

The ability to experience the different emotional states of other people, developed through healthy inter-personal communication and relationships, stems from internal security, that is, from a positive self-image and self-acceptance. Therefore, the teacher, as an emotionally developed person who is able to properly deal with their own emotional experiences, and who is aware of their emotional stability/security and value, will "approach" the student's emotional world in the same way. Since the teacher has a "lot to invest", they will easily spur a positive development in both the teacher and the student, but also significantly affect the quality of their relationship (Kuburić also states Fromm's observation in which he points out the same attitude when perceiving themselves and others, whereby only a person who believes in himself/ herself may be able to understand and support others. The emotional understanding of others is inevitably preceded by the emotional understanding of you, including one's own weaknesses which do not cause self-rejection).

From a wider perspective, it is important to point out that every individual from the very birth becomes part of not only a family but also a wider community that has its own standards of conduct and specific ways of regulating the life of the community in general, i.e., its own culture, which is formed and changed during the life of the group. Of course, it is not good to observe human nature everywhere and at all times as the same and unchanging and the behavior patterns of a society are not universal personality traits, nor are the ways people react universally, but they are important to a certain extent. In addition, each individual is also affected by many specific situational factors, all of which can affect their empathic ability as an important aspect of their interpersonal functioning within a school setting or another environment.

However, when drawing individual conclusions related to the theory: empathy-altruism, we must bear in mind that ever since 1991, when Daniel Batson first presented it, this theory has regularly been subject to a number of reviews and verifications, and the largest number of conflicts and debates has been related to the inability to delineate/distinguish/ extract the "real motivation" that people are guided by when performing altruistic actions, i.e., whether it is empathy, the real concern for another person or one's own personal interest and reducing their own discomfort? This theory has withstood many challenges so far, and therefore has certain validity. Situations in which one thinks of increasing personal gain only and general rough calculations based on the ratio of losses to gains in antihuman relations are a reality, and often the criteria on which modern man relies in his overall actions, but which by no means should be seen as the guiding principles of a competent teacher. A crisis of humanity is certain if life and interpersonal relationships are viewed as an economic market in which a person deliberately seeks and establishes relationships in order to increase their gains

over losses. In such a “life economy” there would be subjects (parents, teachers, students and so on) who would not be altruistic and who would be incapable of experiencing empathy. Such individuals would easily perform calculations even when it comes to their own emotions, they would be able to give them in calculated doses and thus become meaningless “consumers” of life, which is of course unique and unrepeatable, and further, they would be inadequate and incompetent in all their life and professional commitments. More specifically, if teachers were observed from a solely human, humane and professional standpoint, it would be easily seen that emphatic/altruistic behavior is not a material reward (neither for the one who does it, nor for those for whom it is done), but an actual need of all human relationships inside the school environment, and, what is more, an essential value for two (or more) human lives.

On the other hand, some researchers have concluded that the gains due to the provision of care and help are just as important in exchange relations as they are in relations of communion, the only difference being in the nature of that well-being. To be specific, if the parents and/or teachers provide support to children/students, and as “a reward” they get a reality in which the child/student grows up into an empathic, confident and successful person, it is still “a reward”, although of a specific nature. We can say that this is a long-term investment and a special gain, as opposed to a short-term and very fast payback when doing a favor in the context of social exchange. However, we believe that the substantial difference between these two types of relationships is not about the “rewards” that motivate them but about the fundamental direction of one person towards another, while the gains are just a product of the “outcome” of such an attitude. There are clear differences between the relationships of communion, where one person is directed towards achieving the well-being of another person, as opposed to exchange relations in which all acts and feelings come at a “price” and a necessary return path the norms and rules within the two relationships are by no means the same. The goal of community relations (in the case of parent-child or teacher-pupil relations) is a confident and worthy individual, which can be treated here as the full realization of the parent's and the teacher's calling, which is in no case materially measurable, interest-based or can be explained in any other way but within the realm of emotions which every person (whether parent or teacher) has towards others within some form of quality interpersonal relationships. We believe that identification of these two forms of relations cannot bring about any worthy conclusions, because material expectations (rewards, services and so on) have no place either in an altruistic and empathetic response, or in the desire to create and foster a positive school atmosphere and meaningful relationships within it. It is all the less so if we aspire to act in altruistic and emphatic ways with people who share the same views and approaches in order to make changes for the better for everyone.

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