

'MENTALIZATION': A TOOL TO MEASURE TEACHER EMPATHY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

To have empathy with another is to experience the psychological life of that person by projecting one's self into another to understand what they are thinking or feeling. The term "empathy" has definitions marked by ambiguity and discrepancy among philosophers, behavioral, social, and medical scholars. Despite this, the professional responsibilities of teachers to be empathic are defined in the graduate standards. Relatively little research examining teacher empathy on teacher-student relationships exists. This paper seeks to develop a definition of empathy that can be used to catalogue teachers' observation of, and interactions with, students. Firstly, a systematic review of the literature reveals considerable disagreement about what constitutes empathy. Secondly, examining empathy in primary school teachers provides connections with *mentalization* (Fonagy, 1991). Defining empathy in terms of mentalization provides important insights for primary educators about how to create positive and productive classrooms built on strong teacher-student relationships.

Introduction

Human beings spend their lives in the company of others. Understanding the internal states of others and their intentions toward us are critical skills to master in order to adopt appropriate behavioural responses (Baron-Cohen, Knickmeyer, & Belmonte, 2005). How we understand another person's mind and reflect on our own mental states, or "mentalise" (Fonagy, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991) is the basis of empathy. There are two different views on the mechanism that puts us in the shoes (the mind) of another person: (a) thinking or mind reading, and (b) feeling or empathy.

One way to provide empathy is to share another person's feelings in an emotive manner, defined as an "affective response more appropriate to someone else's situation than to one's own" (Hoffman, 1987, p.48). Various alternative forms, each based on cognitive theories, infer the state of another person through *theory of mind*¹ (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), *theory-theory of mind*² (Gopnik & Wellman, 1994; Baron-Cohen, 1995), *simulation theory of mind*³ (Gallese & Goldman, 1998; Gordan, 1986), *mentalizing* (Fonagy et al., 1991), or *mind reading*⁴ (Goldman, 2006).

Empathy is a term that spans social work, medical education, psychotherapy, neuroscience,

¹ The ability of humans and some animals to ascribe unique mental states to others and to use those mental state attributes during social interactions.

² Theory-theorists typically argue we attribute mental states to others on the basis of a theory of mind that is constructed in early infancy and subsequently revised and modified (Gopnik & Wellman, 1994) or else is the result of maturation of innate mind-reading modules (Baron-Cohen, 1995).

³ Simulation theorists deny that our understanding of others is theoretical in nature and maintain that we use our own mind as a model when understanding the mind of others.

⁴ "The state ascribed to the target is ascribed as a result of the attributor's instantiating, undergoing, or experiencing, that very state" (Goldman & Sripada, 2005, p.208). Mind reading involves attributing a mental state to another. It is the ability to detect the intentions and predict the behaviours of other individuals.

developmental psychology, philosophy, literary studies, and anthropology, without an agreed definition. This paper seeks to operationalize a definition of empathy for teachers. The definition will be drawn from the concept of “mentalization”, the reasons for which are outlined below. Using this definition, teacher empathy can be measured and potentially enhanced through the development of interventions to increase mentalizing in teachers. The outcome is targeted toward increasing the strength of teacher-student relationships as a fundamental plank in school improvement.

Literature Review

The research literature describing empathy is considered leading to a discussion of Peter Fonagy’s mentalization model (2004) as an operational definition for primary educators.

What is Empathy?

The term *empathy* was first introduced into the English language by psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909 as a translation from the German word *Einfühlung*, meaning “feeling into”, or projecting oneself into something else. The construct has become entrenched in philosophical and psychological theory as a central component of human relatedness and morality. The use of the term in philosophy started in the second half of the 18th century. Empathy in its original usage was considered to be the tendency of observers to project themselves “into” that which they observe, typically some object of beauty or works of art (Davis 1996, p.5).

The term *empathic* has a special emphasis on picking up another's moods and feelings, and also characterizes people who are especially good at such things. In contrast, the term *empathetic* covers a variety of responses and capacities, unconscious as well as conscious, involved in perceiving other people. The term *empathetic* is commonly used in experimental psychology, social neuroscience and cognitive science. Both words are regularly used interchangeably.

Empathy has been described as an elusive concept (Basch, 1983), one that is difficult to define and hard to measure (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989). Stueber (2012) argues the history of empathy is characterised by a “rather shameful disregard for conceptual clarity” (p.55). Eisenberg and Strayer (1987) described empathy as a “slippery concept . . . that has provoked considerable speculation, excitement and confusion” (p.3). Zahavi (2012) argues there is no accepted universal definition of empathy and “still no agreement on what precisely empathy is” (p.81). Consequently, there remains considerable disagreement in the literature about an inclusive definition of empathy (Davis, 1983; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Thornton & Thornton, 1995; Thwaites & Bennett-Levy, 2007).

However, Preston and Hofelich (2012) argue that after almost a century of discourse regarding the nature of empathy, a largely consistent body of research has emerged. Baron-Cohen (2003) defines

empathy as the drive to identify another person's emotions and thoughts, and respond to these with an appropriate emotion. This drive provides a way to make sense of, and predict another person's behaviour. Preston and Hofelich argue that "when someone knows exactly how you feel, they are not just thinking about your need, but experiencing a shared state that makes both of you feel better, increases your bond, and shifts attention away from the suffering and on to the excitement of sharing" (p.30). They report on two broad areas of consensus in the literature: the multiple overlapping but separately distinct empathic phenomena (emotional contagion, sympathy, empathy, and compassion), and the role of relationships, familiarity, and similar past experiences with the target. Disagreements in the field largely relate to the emphasis placed on either side of the "self-other overlap"⁵.

In psychology, empathy is seen as an important human characteristic but there has been little consensus among theorists about a formal definition. To have empathy with another person is to experience the psychological life of that person by projecting one's self into another to understand what the other is thinking or feeling (Zahavi & Overgaard, 2012). It is "the embodied...capacity to feel one's way into others, to take part in the other's affective situation, and to adopt the other's perspective" (Engleson 2012, p.5). Eisenberg and Strayer (1987) considered empathy to be the ability to take the perspective or "feel with" another person. Walter (2012) defines empathy as "the ability to share another's internal world of thoughts and feelings" (p.9). Preston and Hofelich (2012) define empathy as an "umbrella term for states of feeling 'with' or resonating with the other, which can occur at any level - neural to phenomenological, conceptual to affective" (p.71). Despite these definitional differences there is a good deal of similarity. Psychologically, empathy is generally regarded as an ability to understand others' emotions and perspectives or situations and, often, to resonate with or experience the other's emotional state.

A distinction has been made between two components of empathy – cognitive and affective empathy (see Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Walter, 2012). Empathy includes: a cognitive component, or an ability to perceive and decode another's emotional state; an affective component, or an emotional connection to another's emotional state; and, a behavioural component, or an action taken to demonstrate empathy (Decety & Jackson, 2006). Recent definitions of empathy also include an interactive component (Zaki, Bolger, & Oschner, 2008) that moderates the perception and expression of empathy between individuals.

The cognitive component of empathy is the ability to accurately infer what others are thinking or feeling. It is the mental activities involved in acquiring and processing information for better understanding. Walter (2012) argues cognitive empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of

⁵ Defined as "any phenomenon whereby an observer engages a state similar to that of the target via activation of the observer's personal representations for experiencing the observed state, whether through direct perception or simulation" (Preston & Hofelich, 2012., p.24).

others without necessarily implying that the empathizer is in a similar affective state themselves. For example, one can have cognitive understanding that someone is sad, without any personal emotional effect. Cognitive empathy is therefore the ability to accurately perceive and appropriately respond to the thoughts and feelings of another person. This is also sometimes referred to as theory of mind⁶ or perspective taking (Davis 1980; Hogan 1969). It is the ability to accurately imagine another's experience. It is an effortful process involving both the suppression of one's own egocentric perspective on events and the active entertaining of someone else's. Batson (2009) defined "empathic understanding" as a process by which we come to understand another person's unique affective state and develop the capacity to share another person's affective or emotional experience.

Affective empathy is the emotional sharing of another's emotional state (Carkhuff & Truax, 1965; Hodges & Meyers, 2007) and does not require cognitive understanding of why a person is suffering (Rankin, Kramer, & Miller, 2005). Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg et al. 1994; Hoffman 1982, 2000) define affective empathy as a response that stems from recognising another's emotional state similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel. Hence it is "an observer reacting emotionally because he perceives that another is experiencing or is about to experience an emotion" (Stotland 1969, p.272). It is the capacity to perceive, anticipate, and respond with care to the unique affective experiences of another individual (Decety & Batson, 2009).

Empathy processes – cognitive, affective, or both – depend on the situation (Davis, 1996). Hoffman (1982) defined empathy as identifying with and understanding another's situation and/or feelings: including affective and cognitive processes. Here, "affective" means feeling the perceived feelings of the target person while "cognitive" empathy is used to understand the feelings and thoughts of the target person (Hoffman, 1982). Preston and Hofelich (2012) define empathy as "processes by which observers come to understand and/or feel the state of another. . ." (p.25). Hoffman (2000) describes empathy as involving an affective response with a focus on the other person more than one's self. Deutsch and Madle (1975) define empathy as a cognitive process, while Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) define it as an emotional process. Davis (1980, 1983) suggests that empathy is a multidimensional phenomenon with distinctions among its various attributes (e.g., personal distress, empathic concern, perspective-taking). While Hakansson and Montgomery (2003) described empathy as a process, Eisenberg and others have described empathy as an emotional state of arousal, which originates from the understanding of uneasiness of someone else's experience (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991).

Empathy versus Sympathy

Empathy definitions often involve an emotional resonance between the empathizer and the object of

⁶ Theory of mind refers to the ability to represent and understand the mental states of others where mental states include beliefs, desires, or intentions but also emotions and affective states.

empathy. By keeping clear cognitive and experiential boundaries, the empathizer can always distinguish between his or her own thoughts and the feelings and thoughts of the other. For some, this is what distinguishes empathy from related concepts of sympathy, compassion, or emotional contagion⁷ such as reflexive or emotional crying (Martin & Clark, 1982; Sagi & Hoffman, 1976; Simner, 1971).

The terms empathy and sympathy are often misused. Most researchers agree that empathy and sympathy are not interchangeable. Eisenberg and Strayer (1987) refer to empathy as “feeling with” another and sympathy as “feeling for” another. Sympathy involves sorrow or feeling sorry for another. Davis (1996) noted that sympathy often involves feelings of concern and is often the consequence of empathizing. Wispe (1991) refers to sympathy as “the heightened awareness of the suffering of another person as something to be alleviated” (p.318). Katz (1963) found sympathy to be reactive as “it turns our attention back on ourselves” (p.9). Sympathy involves a person sharing with the sufferer and implies the sympathizer feels the pain of the subject. Kohn (1992) found that empathy, on the other hand, involves being sensitive to the situation and communicating care and understanding in a nonjudgmental manner. Rogers (1959) defined this as the “as if” quality:

The state of empathy or being empathic is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the “as if” condition. (p. 210-211)

Neatly bound distinctions between the different categories are problematic as they do not accurately reflect real-life mechanisms at play – empathy and sympathy will often co-occur and can be difficult to distinguish. While the term empathy is routinely used to refer to a distinctly separate phenomenon, the label continues to be popularly applied to both constructs. Batson (2009) found the term empathy applied to, or overlapped with, eight separate phenomena (e.g. sympathy, pity, compassion) rather than being a single item.

Empathy has been described as the cornerstone of effective interpersonal relation skills and a core component in human relationships (Carkhuff & Truax, 1965). It helps us to regulate social interactions (Batson, 2012) and cooperate toward shared goals (de Waal, 2008). Empathy enhances satisfaction in intimate relationships (Long, Angera, & Hakoyama, 2008), helps individuals establish and maintain friendships (Del Barrio, Aluja, & Garcia, 2004) and is negatively correlated with aggression (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Hrdy, 2009). Empathy may also be the key mechanism by which altruistic, pro-social behaviours are produced (Batson, 1991; Hoffman, 1982).

As social interactions are complex, having higher levels of analytical and discriminatory abilities may

⁷ Emotional contagion is where you literally catch the emotion in question (Scheler 1954, p.15). It is transferred to you and becomes your own emotion.

provide an increased capacity to perceive and respond empathically. Social intelligence, popularised by Goleman (2006), is an alternate competency that may explain the variance in interpersonal functioning that is not accounted for by intelligence or other constructs. Goleman argues that social awareness or sensing another's inner state of feeling and thought includes primal empathy, attunement, empathic accuracy and social cognition (p.84). Social facility is the interpersonal skills to recognize and respond appropriately to one's own and others' feelings, the ability to work effectively in teams, and the ability to engage in meaningful interactions. Howe (2008) argued the development of empathy is a key component of emotional intelligence, and to facilitate it we need to provide spaces for emotional thinking and interpersonal skills training.

Many social work interventions seek to increase client empathy in an attempt to decrease dysfunctional behaviours and improve social functioning. Lack of empathy has been linked to disrupted attachments, trauma and neglect (Garber, Robinson, & Valentiner, 1997). Individuals who miss the subtle cues or misunderstand messages based on deficits in empathic perception are at risk of pervasive developmental disorders such as autism, psychotic disorders like schizophrenia, psychopathy (Blair, 2008), and even sexual offending (Varker, Devilly, Ward, & Beech, 2008).

The key concern in defining empathy appears to lie in the degree to which various combinations of thinking and feeling constitute knowing what another is feeling. Are mind reading (cognitive) and empathizing (affective) functionally different and completely separable? What are others' intentions? What are their wishes, beliefs or deductions? These questions belong to mind reading. Batson (2009) relates empathy with intentional role-taking abilities, which tap into an individual's cognitive processes. Hoffman (1982) saw empathy as a largely involuntary response to affective emotional cues from another person. Therefore understanding the other's emotional state belongs to affective empathizing. However, concepts such as cognitive empathy, based on understanding the affective states of others, blur this distinction even further. Is empathy a cognitive act of adopting another's perspective or a cognitively based understanding of others? Is it an affective reaction to the emotions of another? The answer to all of these is "yes" and hence the mesh of processes and outcomes results in difficulties with clearly defining the phenomena.

Considering the application of an empathy concept to the field of education, Zahavi & Overgaard's (2012) definition of empathy to "experience the embodied mind of the other, that is, (it) simply refers to our ability to access the life of the mind of others in their bodily and behavioural expressions" (p.10), is most appropriate for the following reasons. It is the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another (Figley 2012, p.264). This accords with Davis' view of empathy (1996) as "a set of constructs having to do with the responses of one individual to the experiences of another" (p.12). The response of the observer may be cognitive, affective, and/or behavioural. A highly empathic person is therefore skilled at decoding and inferring

another's thoughts, feelings or behaviour and this ability can improve with familiarity, learning, and salience. These qualities are essential classroom skills.

Why is Empathy Important for Primary Educators?

The importance of teacher empathy and students' perceptions that they are cared for cannot be overstated (Bostic, 2006; Hallinan, 2008; Kohn, 2005; Noddings 2005). Denis (1999) found that people who are good at making positive relationships are usually the ones that empathize with people more easily. Empathizing includes the ability to listen to feelings beyond that which are evident from the verbal conversations, making empathy a powerful influence in relationship building. When teachers are able to empathize, it forms a bridge between the teacher and the student (Denis, 1999). The student feels comfortable and trusts that the teacher is able to understand him or her. The students who interact with the empathetic teacher feel confident that they will get the support they need and will be able to confide in the teacher without doubt (p.33). Barr (2010) argues that enhancing teacher empathy might also be one way to improve school culture and that "while teacher training programmes currently focus on teacher dispositions, such programmes need to focus more on training future teachers to recognise and exercise their cognitive empathic capacities" (p.367-368).

There is relatively little research investigating teacher empathy in everyday school experiences, even though it is identified as an important disposition for educators; facilitating positive interactions with and among students (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). Empathy has been documented as an important disposition for educators to possess in order to facilitate positive interactions among students (Good & Brophy, 2000; Noddings, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1994). Indeed, the Victorian Institute of Teaching Standard 3 ("Teachers know their students") requires graduating teachers to "demonstrate empathy and positive regard for and rapport with students" (VIT, 2009, p.1). As attending to the academic *and* emotional needs of students is a significant challenge for all teachers, it is puzzling that empathy education is not more widely researched in schools (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Historically, empathy has been assumed to develop in every child or be inherent in every teacher as schools focus on cognitive development. "This makes cognitive and emotional misunderstandings chronic features of many schools and classrooms" (Hargreaves, 1998). Critical reflection by educators about how to teach while modelling empathy seems minimal in the literature (Barr, 2011).

Carl Rogers (1980) defined empathy in teaching as understanding the student's private world, and being able to communicate some of the significant fragments of that understanding. He held that "certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner" yield significant learning (p.106). Empathy is the ability to sense the student's inner world of private, personal meanings *as if* they were your own. Tettegah and Anderson (2007) define teacher

empathy as the ability to express concern and take the perspective of a student, and it involves cognitive and affective domains of empathy. Connell (1993) stresses the relational work of teaching:

The emotional dimension of teaching has not been much researched, but in my view is extremely important. Teachers establish relations with students through their emotions, through sympathy, interest, surprise, boredom, sense of humour, sometimes anger and annoyance. School teaching, indeed, is one of the most emotionally demanding jobs I know. (p.63)

In attempting to understand the role of empathy in teaching practice, it is therefore crucial to identify teacher empathy. In doing so, it is useful to delineate between affective empathy elicited by the perception of children's joy, frustration, curiosity, suffering or distress such as an incident in the yard where a teacher attunes to a child's emotions, and the more complex cognitive forms of empathy associated with perspective taking, mentalizing and self regulation that enable a subjective view point of the other while maintaining a sufficient sense of self to permit cognitive structuring of that experience (Decety & Michalska, 2012).

Few of the studies to examine teacher empathy have looked at the relationship between teacher empathy and student perceptions of care in the classroom (Redman, 1977; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). Arnold (2005, p.12) viewed the use of empathy as a means to sensitize educators to the way in which students "might be thinking and feeling". Thus, an exceptional educator is one who is attuned to their own and others' "thinking and feeling processes" through critical reflection and, who can use empathy or empathic intelligence to "mobilise deep shifts in consciousness" (p.12). Redman (1977) focussed on human relations training for teachers to increase empathy levels and found this to be effective. Conversely, Tettegah and Anderson (2007) examined the empathetic dispositions of pre-service teachers and found the participants expressed little empathy when given simulations. Importantly, there have been no studies dealing with teaching empathy as a factor in the caring process. What are the specific classroom actions demonstrated by teachers with high levels of teacher empathy and strong student perceptions of teacher care?

A number of studies concerning empathy are found in the medical and social work professions. For psychiatrists, Platt and Keller (1994) found that it is important to be aware of the opportunities for empathy when they arise during interviews with patients. Empathetic communication may see patients express emotion verbally or non-verbally, and it provides an opportunity for the physician to respond empathically. Levinson (2004) found that where physicians missed the opportunity for empathy, patients provided the opportunities again, in some cases multiple times. Once an empathy opportunity is found, it is essential for the physician to offer a gesture or statement of empathy. Coulehan, Platt and Enger (2001) found the empathic responses of a physician allowed the patient to clarify his or her feelings. Hardee (2003) found the use of empathy increased the efficiency of information-gathering practices when resolving a patient's problems and builds rapport with the patient. When opportunities

for empathy were missed, the number of medical visits increased due to elevated levels of frustration by the patient and the physician. Empathy in medicine is therefore typically taught in medical training as a set of cognitive and behavioural skills (Winefield & Chur-Hansen, 2000).

The literature on teachers' relationship effectiveness has been well documented. In a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses addressing student achievement, Hattie (2009) found that cultivating teacher-student relationships is a key factor to improving student learning outcomes. Similarly, Cornelius-White (2007) in a meta-analysis of 119 studies found person-centred teacher variables to be positively associated with improved student outcomes.

Australia's Multicultural Classrooms

In Australia, the rise of international migration has led to an increase in multicultural classes and schools. For teachers, the literature focuses on the need for intercultural communication, with the corresponding risk of misunderstanding, conflict and disappointment (van Oord & den Brok, 2004; Hofstede, 1986). Teaching in a multicultural context requires that teachers possess a higher level of communicative competence than is usually found with teachers (Ting-Toomey, 1999). There is a strong link between students' perceptions of their teachers' interpersonal behaviour and their own levels of achievement (Brekelmans, Wubbels, & den Brok, 2002; den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2006). Given the noticeable achievement and attendance gap between multicultural students and their mainstream counterparts, it is important to analyse English as an Additional Language student relationships to the empathy perceptions of teachers. The definition and measurement of empathy therefore has important applications in the area of teacher relational practice.

If the observer does not have any related experience with the situation, s/he cannot empathize through activation of shared representations (Preston & Hofelich, 2012). For English as Additional Language learners, if the teacher was not motivated to understand the student, they would only apprehend higher order abstract representations (e.g., "anger" or "sadness"). Thus, the uninformed observer will not understand or feel the specific state of the target, and cannot experience the shared meaning that helps the target feel understood and comforted. The observer can only abstract a general sense of the context and affect, permitting a minimally appropriate response (e.g., repressing inappropriate laughing).

It is crucial for teachers to effectively communicate that empathic understanding to the student (Dautenhahn & Woods, 2003). The degree to which one can empathize with another depends upon a correspondence between how the target and observer express themselves. There is great individual and cultural variation in how students express their needs, from silent withdrawal to public displays. Teachers will also vary in how they interpret and respond to these displays, creating complex interactions. Empathy will be inaccurate where the target and the observer appraise the event differently.

Towards an Operational Measure of Empathy for Primary Educators

One of the tensions in studying a complex human quality such as empathy relates to how it is defined and how to measure it. In the field of education it is difficult to identify the essential elements of successful educational practices and therefore to operationalize empathy as a distinct enough construct. While this is difficult, it is important. As previously discussed, a widely used distinction is made between affective and cognitive empathy. Teacher empathy can be seen to be the ability to express concern and take the perspective of a student, and it involves both cognitive and affective domains of empathy (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). Cognitive empathy is best considered as akin to “mentalizing” about emotions.

“Mentalization”, as pioneered by Fonagy et al. (1991), is the ability to differentiate between the self and other to facilitate affect regulation. Our expectations of the world are governed by implicit mental models. These models are used to organize and give a pattern to our experience (Fonagy, 2004). Holmes (2001) states: “There is always another to whom the Self is telling his or her story, even if in adults this takes the form of an internal dialogue” (p.85). The development of mentalization occurs within a context of secure attachment relationships based on attuned and sensitive care giving (Fonagy et al., 1991). “Empathy is a crucial source and sustainer of altruistic concern or caring about (the wellbeing of) others” (Slote 2007, p.15). That said, there is significant variation in how empathy is expressed or felt. Some individuals (including teachers) seem to have naturally high levels of trait empathy while others may be sorely lacking in empathic understanding and expressiveness.

Predicting the thoughts and internal states of another is part of an increasing ability to differentiate self and others and to adopt another’s perspective. The realisation that others have different thoughts and internal states from ourselves (Mahler, 1968) ultimately allows us to understand another person’s mind and thoughts (Frith & Frith, 2008). Mentalizing is “the ability to explain and predict behaviour by attributing mental states such as desires, intentions, beliefs, and emotions to oneself and others” (Astington & Hughes 2011) and can be seen as an operational form of cognitive empathy.

Behavioural and neuroscience research (Liu et al. 2009; Saxe et al. 2009; Moriguchi et al. 2007; Zaki et al. 2008) indicate that some of the cognitive processes involved in emotion understanding overlap with those in mentalizing and perspective-taking (Decety 2012). Fonagy and associates (2004) developed a method of measuring one’s capacity for mentalization to ascertain the degree of attachment security. Fonagy et al. (2004) argued that security within the caregiver-infant relationship provides the possibility for acquiring an intentional stance, by which one comes to be able to explore the mind of the self and others, improving capacities for self-regulation. Developmentally, the ability to perceive and think beyond our own needs, goals, and desires to include those of others is necessary for the emergence of mental models, schemas, and other forms of working knowledge about others

and ourselves in relationship to others (i.e., social cognition).

Bateman and Fonagy (2004) define mentalization as a process by which an individual “implicitly and explicitly interprets the actions of himself or herself and others as meaningful on the basis of intentional mental states such as personal desires, needs, feelings, beliefs and reasons” (p.215). Empathy and mentalization therefore involve an appreciation of the others’ mental states. Empathy is usually considered to be more other oriented, while mentalization is equally self and other oriented. Choi-Kain and Gunderson (2008) argue mentalization is the intersection point between affect consciousness, mindfulness, empathy and psychological mindfulness.

Fonagy et al. (2004) defined mentalization as a form of imagined mental activity about oneself and others involving perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states (e.g. needs, beliefs, feelings, desires, feelings, goals, purposes and reasons). It is a meta-cognitive ability, the capacity to reflect on one’s own mental world and the mental world of others and to develop an internalised sense that the world of “intentions, feelings and beliefs” is safe to explore. This capacity allows us to collaborate with others, understand feelings, and know who we are as separate from others, and come to know others.

The value of mentalization is the realisation that what one thinks is not what everyone thinks. When do students and teachers become cognisant of this and then how do they put themselves in other people’s shoes and consider different perspectives? Applying the work of Fonagy (1997, 2005) and others to school settings, Riley (2011) highlights the importance of a mentalization model for teachers, arguing “the ability to understand one’s internal working model as a separate model from the internal working model of others” is needed. In particular:

Extending shared working models to school relationships increases the complexity considerably. Points of contact and points of departure will be many. A metaphor might be a cascade or perhaps a flow of internal working models to explain the multiple relationships that exist in any complex multi-peoples environment such as a school. When the multiple relationships that are the foundation of any complex organisation are conceptualised in this way the need for mediated flow of internal working models from one secure base to the next becomes apparent. (Riley 2011, p. 52)

Or is the mechanism dulled in teachers due to organisational ontologies that preclude the necessary reflection time for teachers to be able to practice and develop these abilities, particularly when working with children whose life experience is very different to their own? By understanding the development of the individual, a teacher can understand how empathy might apply to a group such as a classroom. Notions of role-taking and perspective-taking require cognitive flexibility—being able to generate and consider ideas and different response possibilities—as well as incorporating changing information into decision making, behavioural response choices, and understanding of others (Eslinger, 1998). Within a social cognitive framework, role-taking, perspective-taking, and cognitive

flexibility, in short “mentalization” appears to be as fundamental to empathy as emotional sensitivity and responsiveness.

Mentalization for teachers involves trying to make sense of the actions of the students as well as their own actions by reference to mental states. This occurs spontaneously, intuitively, often unconsciously. A teacher’s mentalization of a student will be underpinned by a complex set of functions. Teachers need to analyse the circumstances students find themselves in, link these to past patterns of behaviour, and consider these in the light of experiences the students have been exposed to. Teachers and students sometimes act according to mistaken beliefs. Beliefs are unstable, they change over time. Recognizing the inherent uncertainty of mental states offers teachers freedom to speculate about the nature of actions, to consider alternative perspectives, and find a variety of meanings behind behaviour. Adverse emotional states such as fear can restrict the capacity to mentalize, resulting in teacher’s reverting to stereotypical fixed patterns of conceptualization - to assume immediately that the past is repeating in the present. A limited capacity to mentalize means a teacher is not able to see the students’ minds clearly, nor to anticipate their behaviour on the basis of their mental states. Instead, the teacher only reacts on the basis of concrete behaviours and his or her own internal mental state: wanting the fear to subside. In extreme cases, a teacher goes into fight/flight/freeze or tend and befriend (Taylor et al., 2000). The prefrontal cortex shuts down and behaviour is more directed by the sub-cortex, effectively rendering the teacher less intelligent in dealing with the situation than if s/he were able to use the whole of his/her cognitive resources.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the debate regarding definitions and uses of empathy and how these might be applied to a primary education context. Empathy’s most basic precursor is the simple ability to detect what another person is feeling (Jackson, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2005). When communicated through nonverbal cues such as emotional facial expressions or vocalizations, the emotions of others can be detected rapidly, perhaps even automatically (Thomas et al., 2001; Marsh, Kozak & Ambady, 2007). Empathy therefore allows for quick and automatic awareness of other’s internal states and may be crucial for regulating social interactions, coordinating behaviour, and promoting cooperation among individuals (de Waal, 2008).

Why does empathy matter in schools? What is the functional significance of being able (or not being able) to create representations of others’ emotional states in order to recognize them and respond appropriately? Empathy is thought to be essential for moral development (Decety & Meyer, 2008), and is the primary motivation for altruistic behaviour (Hoffman, 1982; Batson, 1991). It is therefore important that teachers understand the importance of providing empathy for students, as it aids their ability to understand, predict and experience student behaviours, feelings, attitudes and intentions.

Empathy is essential for healthy relationships and overall well-being. By better understanding the relationship with students through empathy, students' perceived care will increase, and teachers will be in a better position to address the needs of students. This facilitates their growth as effective practitioners.

It has been argued that empathy be extended to include mentalizing. Mentalization embodies the capacity to make sense of the actions of oneself and other people on the basis of desires, feelings, and beliefs. Embracing mentalization as a pedagogical tool allows teachers to value relationships along with content and information. In this way, mentalization may well be the key to operationalizing levels of teacher empathy in primary schools with a focus on relationships rather than information.

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