

## Empathy in Education: A Critical Review

Ziqian Zhou<elczz@nus.edu.sg>

National University of Singapore

Received: 24 June 2022; Accepted: 29 July 2022

This paper offers a systematic review of the literature on the nature of empathy in educational research. This synthesis of the literature will reveal four salient themes that SoTL authors have used to understand the concept of empathy. The value of empathy, according to SoTL researchers, will also receive a summarized treatment in this paper. Findings from this first part of the paper promote more accurate interpretations and comparisons of publications about empathy. Relatedly, a less ambiguous definition of empathy allows researchers and practitioners to design more precise studies that attempt to measure empathy in tutors or students, and to implement more precise educational policies involving empathy. The second goal of this paper is to raise a sceptical challenge to advocates of empathy in teaching—this will be done by drawing from the disciplines of psychology and social neuroscience. This paper concludes with a sketch of some pedagogical implications for tertiary educators in light of the worry that was raised against empathy in teaching.

### INTRODUCTION

In a speech made in Northwestern University, Barack Obama claimed that what is more urgent than a federal deficit is an “empathy deficit” (2006). According to the former US President, it is empathy that will unite a nation divided by race, class and political ideologies. In the fields of developmental psychology and neuroscience, empathy has been found to correlate positively with cognitive development (Carlozzi, Gaa, and Liberman 1983; Ruby and Decety 2004); there is also research that testifies to the importance of empathy in the development of an individual’s sense of morality, and that a lack of empathy—or a deafness to the plight of others—is indicative of the presence of psychopathy (Blair 1995). Indeed, empathy has also been reported to be displayed by other non-human primates and is thought to be integral to the continued existence of these animal species (de Waal 2009).

In the scholarship of teaching and learning, empathy is roundly praised mainly for being an effective vehicle for promoting student learning. Empathy is a central tenet of education in drama and the arts (Meekin 2013; Bersson 1982; Mayo 2013; Greene 1995; Hesten 1995). There is also evidence showing that empathy is a strong predictor of desirable academic and prosocial character outcomes (Chang, Berger and Chang 1981; Cornelius-White 2007, p. 120). Empathy, according to a powerful advocate of empathy in the classroom,

is the great enabler, serving as the pathway to perceive and accurately express emotion, to better understand context enriched by emotion, and to use emotion to facilitate thought, self-correction, and growth. It facilitates greater pro-social behavior as well as more positive peer and family relationships. (Franzese 2017, p. 699)

Students too have been reported to place much store on empathy. It was found that student perceptions of how empathetic they found their teachers to be positively correlate with perceptions of their own learning success (Meyers et al. 2019, p. 162; Bozkurt and Ozden 2010).

Indeed, the call for a *greater* emphasis on empathy was sounded when some educational researchers espouse a “commodification” of education in which tertiary institutions are run as businesses (Hardy 2015), where “students are viewed as consumers,

and teachers and educational institutions are regarded as educational product providers” (Barton and Garvis 2019, pp. 124–125; for a similar claim, see also Altbach 2002; Fanelli and Evans 2015). These authors believe that the commodification of the education landscape is the dry rot eats into the bonds of the relationship between tutor and student, making irrelevant if not old-fashion aims such as the public good and processes such as moral development (Barton and Garvis 2019; Daviet 2016; Schwartzman 2013; Yang 2006). In a similar vein, empathy has been dispensed as the healing balm that helps soften the “entitlement mindset” of students (Jiang, Tripp and Hong 2017, p. 8; Kopp and Finney 2013, p. 332), students with a “consumerist” disposition (Nordstrom, Bartels, and Bucy 2009, pp. 74–85), and even those seized by narcissism (Nordstrom, Bartels, and Bucy 2009, 74–85; for a contrary position, see Bialystock and Kukar 2018, pp. 34–35).

Clearly, much has been written about the topic of empathy in educational research; but, there has not been a recent attempt to offer a synthesis of the literature and, more importantly, to systematize the many things that have been said about the topic in the SoTL literature.<sup>1</sup> There are several reasons why it is important to engage in this task of offering a systematic review of recent literature. First, in the disciplines of psychology and neuroscience where the study of empathy is a thriving cottage industry, systematic reviews of the concept revealed seven areas of contention or ambiguities (Cuff et al., 2016) and sometimes eight (Batson 2009). The fact that scientists have offered a myriad of inconsistent definitions of the term *empathy* is indicative of the complexity of the concept, and raises the suspicion that those writing in the field of education may be using the same term to be referring to different things. There is, therefore, a need to offer an updated review of what has been traded under the umbrella term of *empathy* by those writing in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This house-keeping task has several benefits. First, it brings to light possible sources of talking at cross purposes among SoTL researchers when they are discussing the topic of empathy. Conversely, an awareness of the fact—that inconsistent definitions are being traded under the same term—promotes more accurate interpretations and comparisons of research findings concerning empathy. Relatedly, a less ambiguous definition of empathy allows researchers and practitioners to design more precise studies that

attempt to measure empathy in tutors or students, and to implement more precise pedagogical policies involving empathy. Second, a systematic review of the concept of empathy allows us to appreciate the salient themes or aspects that educational researchers have attached to the term. This, in turn, allows us to see what it is about empathy that *matters* to educational researchers.

Much of the discussion in educational research attests to the value of empathy or describes ways of *promoting* empathy in teachers and students. I wish to take a contrarian position in this paper. In the second half of this essay, I will be raising a sceptical challenge to supporters of empathy in education: I argue that educational researchers may have under-estimated the possible dangers of incorporating empathy into their pedagogical aims or practices. In this part of my paper I will be drawing from research done mainly in developmental and social psychology that suggests how easily empathy can be derailed as a result of human biases. I then conclude this paper by showing how educators, especially those in tertiary settings, can still reap the goods of empathy without being fully assaulted by its attendant costs.

## THEMES FROM THE DEFINITIONS OF EMPATHY

In the scholarship of teaching and learning, authors show an awareness of two broad classes of empathy (Barton and Garvis 2019, p. 43; Franzese 2017, pp. 697–698). The first kind of empathy is often referred to as “cognitive empathy.” As the term suggest, cognitive empathy involves a kind of “knowing” (Barnes and Thargard 1997), a “tuning in” (Bresler 2013, p. 9), an “understanding” (Jeffery 2019, p. 2; Rogers 1975, p. 7), an “imaginative reconstruction” (Peterson 2017, p. 52; Margolin 2013, p. 86), an “identifying with” (Jalongo 2014; Brown 1993, p. 808), a “relating to” (Jiménez 2017) or a “perspective taking” of the subject which allows for the “seeing of the world” through the eyes of the latter (Bouton 2016, pp. 16–17; Jeffery 2019, pp. 34–36; Adler 1963, p. 164). These processual terms suggest the presence of psychological mechanisms that aim at knowledge of a subject’s experiences, beliefs, emotions, concerns, doubts, etc. Such mechanisms or processes are dynamic in the sense that they involve “absorbing and assessing feedback from others and responding to that feedback... [and] learning intensely about others in multiple respects and sharing both their cognitive and emotional responses” (Cooper 2011, pp. 13–14).<sup>2</sup> Finally, these mechanisms or processes related to cognitive empathy are psychologically complex in the sense that the observer tracks or pays attention to the subject as a means of simulating, re-enacting or imagining the latter’s mental states, and all the while maintaining a clear self-other distinction (Coplan 2011, p. 191).

A second kind of empathy found in the literature bears a relation to the etymology of the word itself where it is observed that the Greek word *empathēia* is made up of the suffix *en* (“to be in”) and the noun *pathos*, which is loosely translated as “feeling” (Singer and Klimecki, 2014). This second kind of empathy, or what researchers call “affective” empathy, differs from cognitive empathy in that it involves “experiencing the *feelings* of another person” (Bouton 2016, pp. 16–17), a “*feeling with someone*” (Cooper 2011, p. 7; see also Noddings 1986), “to *feel* what others are feeling” or “the ability to walk in another’s shoes” (Wiggins and McTighe 2005, p. 98; Meyers *et al.* 2019, p. 161; Hesten 1995). Affective empathy, in short, is my experiencing or being affected by what a subject is experiencing in the literal sense, e.g. the grief or loss that you feel

towards the passing of a long-time partner is what I also feel as a result of my affectively empathizing with your situation.

A further group of definitions of empathy from the literature entail the display of care, concern or compassion towards students, where these terms are often associated with a motivation to enhance the welfare or interests of students. For instance, Decety defines empathy as “the natural capacity to share, understand and respond with *care* to the affective state of others” (2011, p. vii, my emphasis). The definitions of empathy offered by Meyers *et al.* (2019, p. 160) and Batson (2009, pp. 3–15) also contain similar implications of care, concern or compassion.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, there are authors who insist on making a distinction between empathy on the one hand and compassion, care or concern on the other (Barton and Garvis 2019, p. 5; Jiménez 2017; Halifax 2012). To be sure, it may be a mere terminological issue whether care, concern and compassion are built into the definition of empathy. But, the fact that the theme of care, concern or compassion figures saliently in definitions of empathy is not inexplicable for the following reasons. First, some practices or disciplinary domains—especially those related to healthcare or social work—see it as their institutional goal that their students be inculcated with both empathy and care, concern or compassion. For, it has been argued that such tutors make for less self-interested students (Franzese 2017, p. 703) or students who are more disposed to care (Barton and Garvis 2019, p. 54). Second, it may be that teaching that is perceived to be “meaningful” or “purposeful” is usually teaching that is perceived to be emphatic and caring or compassionate (Boyer 2010, p. 313).

Further, many authors see empathy—whether of the cognitive or affective kind—to be a kind of “capacity” or “ability” (Decety 2011, p. vii; Brown 1993, p. 808; Jalongo 2014; Peterson 2017; Margolin 2013; Jeffery 2019, p. 2). What this suggests is that if one possesses empathy, one possesses a *trait or disposition of character* (Cuff *et al.* 2016, p. 149). What this means is that if one possesses empathy, one is likely to manifest it across a *diversity* of situations (e.g. a tutor who displays empathy towards student A displays it also towards student B) and *iteratively* (e.g. a tutor who displays empathy in one semester displays it also in another). That empathy is widely understood as a capacity or ability is consistent with two further things. First, just as a golfer can score a hole-in-one (out of luck) without being a skilled golfer, so too a tutor can be behaving empathetically without herself possessing an empathetic character. Second, just as a professional golfer may be underperforming as a result of a number of factors (e.g. tiredness), so too a tutor who is empathetic need not express empathy as a result of numerous factors (e.g. low morale). Let us refer to such factors as “defeaters” of empathy. I will return to this issue in a later section where we discuss how it is that empathy in tutors can go awry.

Finally, some authors saw it fit to carve a distinction between empathy and compassion. Halifax, for instance, asserts that the object of compassion is the person in need or experiencing suffering; in contrast, the object of empathy need not be a person suffering nor in any desperate situation (Halifax 2012, p. 1751). As a result, this has led to some authors seeing a closer connection between compassion and pity, where the former is associated with a certain saviour mentality or a motivation to improve the well-being of others (Gibbs 2017). Barton and Garvis (2019, pp. 45–46) sum this up nicely by commenting that compassion, unlike empathy, requires a recognition of the “fragility” of the human-

ity of others. This saviour mentality that besets compassion (but not necessarily empathy) has led some authors to construe the emotion as a distinctively *moral* emotion or virtue that triggers “a feeling of recognition and sorrow in response to the suffering of others” (Peterson 2017, p. 44). As a result, compassion is, unlike empathy, more “difficult” to possess insofar as it “is a hard virtue to practice” (Peterson 2017, p. 84). If these authors are right, there are fewer compassionate individuals than empathetic ones. But, it is important to be wary about carving too deep a distinction between empathy and compassion. For one, it could be argued that both are motivated by the same desire to “to better relate and understand others’ experiences” (Jiménez 2017, p. 1; see also MacBeth and Gumley 2012). In addition, some authors think that compassion is a pre-condition for empathy (Singer and Klimecki 2014). Interestingly, there are also commentators who observe that both compassion and empathy may be defeated by so-called “bystander apathy” in which individuals shirk responsibility to help or assist solely on the basis of being but one onlooker amongst a larger group also witnessing individuals in need (Peterson 2017). Finally, it could be argued that compassion and empathy differ not in kind but in degrees, with compassion being the more intensely felt version of empathy.

Our review of the literature reveals at least five distinct themes associated with definitions or conceptions of empathy mostly by educational researchers; these are (cf. Coplan 2011):

1. Coming to know of a student’s mental states or emotions or imagining oneself to be the subject of someone’s mental states or emotions (i.e. “cognitive” empathy);
2. Feeling, experiencing or being affected by a student’s mental states or emotions (i.e. “affective” empathy);
3. Empathy as a trait or disposition of character of the tutor (as opposed to one-off actions that happen to be empathetic);
4. Displaying of care, concern or compassion towards a student.
5. There is a distinction between empathy and compassion, but such a distinction may not be a conceptually deep one.

These five distinct themes offer us insights as to *what* it is about the concept of empathy that *matters* to educational researchers.<sup>4</sup> In the following section, I offer a review of *why* it is that empathy is thought to be valuable to educational researchers.

## THE VALUE OF EMPATHY IN TEACHING

### Empathetic tutors enhance student learning

The strong consensus in the field of educational research for the view that empathy is highly effective in promoting student learning (see e.g. Meyers et al. 2019, p. 162); empathetic tutors are found to enhance student engagement (Cardoso et al., 2011) and foster self-regulated learners (Young, 2005). An early author sums up this view thus:

[A] high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent factor in bringing about change and learning... When the teacher has the ability to understand the student’s reaction from the inside, has the sensitive awareness of the process of how education and learning seems to the student... the likelihood of learning is significantly increased. (Rogers 1969, pp. 157–158)

Rogers can be read as advocating empathy of the cognitive sort. The reasons posited for why empathy is highly effective in promoting student learning are several. I begin with the most widely held reason: empathetic tutors have greater knowledge of the individual needs of their students. Empathy allows tutors to “read” or understand student behavior (Shapiro 2002; Sutherland 1986). Empathetic tutors are, therefore, better at understanding the learning styles and strategies of their students as well as how students interact with each other (Barton and Garvis 2019, pp. 10–12; Stojiljković, et al., 2012). According to Meyers et al. (2019, p. 163), knowledge of the individual needs of students allows tutors to “remove obstacles” that may be undermining effective learning. Further, empathetic tutors understand not just the individual needs of students but also the collective needs that arise from students’ being members of minority or historically subordinated groups (Segal 2011, pp. 276–77; Meyers et al. 2019, p. 161).

### Empathy is integral in medical and healthcare education

Nowhere is empathy more highly valued than in the pedagogical research associated with the undergraduate training for the health-care profession. It has been widely noted that empathy is important in a medical context because empathetic doctors are better able to learn about the conditions of their patients, offer more precise diagnoses and, as a result, offer more targeted treatments (Jeffery 2019, pp. 2–3; Pedersen 2010). Second, empathetic doctors are reportedly better at explaining the treatment necessary for their patients (Jeffery 2019, pp. 2–3), which is important in the building of trust between doctor and patient (Neumann et al. 2012; Stepien and Baernstein, 2006; Derksen, Bensing and Lagro-Janssen 2013; Pedersen 2009; Jeffery 2019, pp. 34–36). Third, the building of a trusting doctor-patient relationship encourages patients to reveal more of their symptoms and concerns, which leads to more accurate diagnoses and for patients to feel “involved” in their own treatment (Roter and Hall 1998; Maguire et al. 1996; Coulehan and Williams 2001; Derksen, Bensing and Lagro-Janssen 2013; Kim, Kaplowitz and Johnston 2004). The building of a trusting doctor-patient relationship also offers patients comfort, hope and a sense of autonomy regardless of the severity of their conditions (Montgomery 2006). Indeed, empathy has resulted in doctors being more sensitive to the moral aspects of their practice (Maxwell 2008); nursing students report that over the course of their training empathetic teachers increased their learning (Mikkonen, Kyngas and Kaariainen 2015, p. 674). In all, empathy in healthcare practice and education results in improved clinical outcomes and increased patient satisfaction (Derksen, Bensing and Lagro-Janssen 2013; Kim, Kaplowitz and Johnston 2004).<sup>5</sup> The foregoing data are consistent with what has been claimed in the previous paragraph: namely, that empathy, especially of the cognitive kind, is a channel for arriving at intimate knowledge of the subject.

### Empathetic tutors are skilled communicators

Third, it was found by numerous studies that empathetic tutors tend to be overall better *communicators*. This has several benefits. First, empathetic tutors who are also adept at communicating are able to get students to feel as though they are subjects in the narratives or stories told by their tutors; by “allowing [for] the technical or factual knowledge to come to life,” empathetic tutors promote student engagement if not the more effective delivery of

lesson content (Franzese 2017, pp. 699, 701–702). Second, empathetic tutors qua better communicators are better at *responding* to the needs of students with the aim of fostering respectful relationships (Franzese 2017, p. 699; Cooper 2011, p. 10; Barton and Garvis 2019, pp. 10–12; Stojiljković et al. 2012). And all these may be possible because empathy—especially of the cognitive kind—allows “one to more accurately read others, gauge the mood of the settings at hand, and better ordain and predict outcomes based on both the verbal and nonverbal cues that are shared” (Franzese, 2017, p. 699).

### Empathetic tutors prepare students for the “world outside”

Fourth, it has been argued that tutors who are empathetic also tend to be those who are knowledgeable of the complexity of the world outside of educational settings and are, therefore, better able to prepare students for their lives after graduation (Barton and Garvis 2019, p. 5; Aronson 2002; Aronson et al. 1978). According to one author, teachers with empathy do more than deliver lesson content:

Empathetic teaching helps our students forge their emerging sense of future professional identity. Our students cannot be what they cannot see... Empathy allows for narrative imagining, which enables one, as problem-solver, to arrive at a fuller view of the matter at hand, how its participants are apt to be feeling, and then how best to arrive at viable solutions. (Franzese 2017, p. 701)

Tutors who are empathetic, so the argument goes, are better at conveying to their students the complexities of context and meaning, and to promote greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to learning (Cooper 2011, p. 37). As such, an empathetic tutor “facilitates the inculcation in the classroom of both hard and soft skills because it allows students to mimic experientially the teacher’s own range of those acuties” (Franzese 2017, pp. 697–698). In other words, tutors who are empathetic do more than forward goals set in the syllabi; they also develop the emotional intelligence and conflict management skills of their students (Franzese 2017, pp. 697–698) and, more generally, support the personal or professional growth of students (Barton and Garvis 2019, pp. 10–12; Stojiljković et al. 2012).

## THE DEVALUATION OF EMPATHY IN TEACHING

We saw from the previous section that there is much in the educational research literature that attests to the goods of empathy. In contrast, it is less common to learn of doubts raised against empathy. Perhaps most familiar amongst these minority voices is the oft-heard objection that unmoderated empathy causes psychological stress or “burnout” in teachers across all levels (Kyriacou 1987), and students and practitioners of social work and the healthcare industry (Bloom 2016; Smajdor, Stöckl and Salter 2011; Barton and Garvis 2019, p. 5). This section of the paper takes a similar contrarian position: it will be argued that an over-emphasis on the good of empathy brings in tow possible dangers that are presently not fully recognized by educational researchers. The worry I have in mind is hinted at by Meyers et al.:

Rather than being a characteristic instructors do or do not have, teacher empathy exists along a continuum. Not only do some instructors show more empathy than others, but instructors find it easier to empathize with some students and at some times than others. (2019, p. 161)

The authors of the quoted passage are gesturing at three important worries the dangers of which they may themselves have not fully appreciated. These are as follow: first, that “teacher empathy exists along a continuum”; second, that some tutors find it easier to empathize with *some students* than other students; third, that some tutors find it easier to empathize with students and at *some times* as opposed other times. In what follows, I will be drawing mostly from the empirical psychology literature to develop these three worries.

First, Meyers et al. are right to claim that teacher empathy exists along a continuum. We saw from a previous section that many authors conceptualize empathy as a character *trait*; and, as with other traits of character (e.g. generosity), the possession of which comes in degrees. Furthermore, just as it is mistaken to infer the presence of the character of, say, generosity from a single act of generosity, so too it will be mistaken to infer that a tutor is empathetic from a single display of empathy. Also, and most importantly, the mere fact that most pedagogical research on the topic of teacher empathy attests to its value does not imply that most tutors are *in fact* empathetic. Indeed, given how loose and contested the definition of *empathy* is, any study that attempts to measure teacher empathy must already be making assumptions about the concept that are themselves not unproblematic.

Second, I also think that Meyers et al. are right to say that some tutors find it easier to empathize with students and at *some times* as opposed other times. That a tutor’s enthusiasm and ability to empathize are high at the start of a teaching semester is no guarantee that such will remain the case at the end of term. As some authors have recognized, engaging in empathic interaction requires *sustained effort* throughout the semester (Inzlicht et al. 2017), which is an observation that should be familiar to most educators. But, what is not as widely appreciated is that there is *extensive* literature from social psychology that shows how fragile one’s standards of behavior can be (Doris 2002; Miller 2013, 2014; Ross and Nisbett 1991). Consider the following widely discussed experiments (from Doris, et al. 2002, Section 4):

*The Good Samaritan Study* (Darley and Batson 1973, p. 105): unhurried passers-by were six times more likely than hurried passers-by to help someone in distress.

*The Obedience Experiment* (Milgram 1974): subjects repeatedly punished a screaming victim with realistic (but simulated) electric shocks at the mere request of an experimenter in a perceived position of authority.

*The Stanford Prison Study* (Zimbardo 2007; Haney, Banks and Zimbardo 1973): college students *role-playing* as “guards” in a simulated prison subjected other students posing as “prisoners” to grotesque forms of abuse.<sup>6</sup>

These experiments aim to show how *ordinary individuals* can be easily induced to engage in moral failures as a result of the situations they happen find themselves in. Whether the so-called “character skeptics” are right in their assessment of the fragility of human behaviour is not a question that can be taken up here. But, what these experiments suggest is that it is unclear how easily

minor tweaks in the situation of a tutor can cause a shut-down of her sense of empathy. Educational researchers do agree that when tutors fail to offer *attention* to their students, empathy is not likely to be displayed. Cooper, for instance, notes that “deeper levels of empathy require individual attention, time, and frequency of interaction” (2011, p. 8; see also Demetriou 2018, pp. 9–11). One obvious reason attention is necessary for empathy is that “[e]mpathy involves paying *close attention* to non-verbal as well as verbal cues... where non-verbal cues constitute more than 90 per cent of communication” (Cooper 2011, p. 14, my emphasis). Whatever it is, then, that competes for an individual’s “attention, time, and frequency of interaction” undermines empathy.<sup>7</sup> As with my earlier remarks, nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in the healthcare industry where emotional “burnout” is a common phenomenon (Gleicherricht and Decety 2013); as Jeffery says, “[t]he context of the encounter [in healthcare] may also contribute to emotional overload rather than fostering empathetic concern; for instance, if time is short or the workload excessive, emotional distress may follow” (2019, pp. 34–36). In sum, if empathy is to be *consistently* relied on by tutors, more investigations are needed to determine what it is about a tutor’s *situation* that explains why some tutors find it easier to empathize with students and at *some times* as opposed other times.

I now come to what I believe to be the most worrisome of the three dangers alerted to us by Meyers *et. al.*—namely, that that some tutors find it easier to empathize with *some students* than other students. Some authors have questioned the effectiveness of empathy in gaining an accurate picture of the mental life of others (Macnaughton 2009; Smajdor *et. al.*, 2011). I wish to add another reason for being sceptical about what empathy can deliver. Cooper mentions in passing the worry I have in mind when she writes:

[T]he “group-think” aspect of empathy, in which group members relate much more closely to their own group than to another, can also have negative effects for outsiders... (Cooper 2011, p. 8)

I think that Cooper as with other authors (e.g. Demetriou 2018, p. 3) may not recognise that the problem of “group-think” is, in fact, more extensive and deeply embedded in human psyche than is commonly assumed. Drawing from numerous psychological research, Prinz (2011, p. 227) describes a set of sobering data. It was found, for instance, that Caucasians respond with lesser empathy to South Asians and those of African descent (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010). In another study, it was reported that Caucasians were more empathetic to the pain of other Caucasians than to ethnic Chinese (Xu *et. al.*, 2009). There is, in other words, some evidence for the general claim that we have a bias to those who are more similar and proximally closer to us (Hoffman 2000). Prinz sums up thus:

If we use empathy as an epistemic guide, we would be more likely to condemn a good friend’s insensitive spouse than to condemn the leader of a murderous regime on the other side of the planet. Of course, this is precisely what happens. We are grotesquely partial to the near and dear... We may attend more to the students with whom we identify rather than to the students who need us most. (2011, pp. 224, 229)<sup>8</sup>

Before concluding this section, I would like to make an important qualification. I have offered evidence in this section showing how it is that tutor empathy can get derailed. The data, to be sure, remain inconclusive. But, what I hope to have achieved is to point out that empathy is not without its rough edges, and that supporters of empathy in education should be sensitive to the data marshalled here. Also, I do not want to deny that empathy plays an integral role in successful teaching.<sup>9</sup> The claim that I wish to make is more modest: namely, that tutor empathy needs to be *supplemented* with a set of pedagogical implications that will be more fully described in the following section.

## SOME PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: THE GOODS OF EMPATHY WITHOUT ITS COSTS?

I now wish to address some elephants in the room. In the earlier sections I pointed to literature that praises the goods of teacher empathy; but, in the immediately preceding section I suggested that empathy may be a vehicle that reproduces human biases or prejudices. So, what then are teachers who perceive themselves as being empathetic to do as a result of the mixed findings I have just described? Indeed, what then are institutions of learning to do about empathetic teachers (who happen to score very highly in student evaluations, say)? These are difficult questions that, I believe, require more careful treatment than what can be accomplished here. But, some responses come to mind. First, teachers and, indeed, university administrators need to recognize what researchers have called “teacher identity” that is the sense that a tutor has of herself, which is a function of numerous factors such as how her students and colleagues perceive her to be, and the recognition she receives for her work (Hockings, *et. al.* 2009; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Izadinia 2014; Van Lankveld *et. al.* 2017). Crucially, teacher identity can be empowering in the sense of being a source of professional meaning and motivation for teachers. And, insofar as a teacher identifies herself as being empathetic, it may do more harm than good for university administrators to “address the defects” of naturally empathetic tutors in a high-handed fashion. But, the literature on teacher identity is also instructive: the mere fact that, say, a male teacher identifies as being “charismatic” is no reason for him to exercise the kind of emotional domination that he often brings into the classroom (even if his students are achieving better grades as a result of this hard-fisted control);<sup>10</sup> in other words, the mere fact that—some naturally empathetic teachers identify with and, hence, find value in this aspect of their identity—should not always be used a trump card especially if there is research that points to the hidden costs of empathy.

On the institutional level, while it may be intrusive and potentially damaging to discourage the expression of empathy, especially amongst well-meaning teachers, university administrators can encourage faculty to reflect upon the sources of their identities in light of research (such as this!). In addition, while it may be counter-productive to actively discourage the expression of empathy, universities can steer faculty towards other—possibly better studied—hallmarks of teaching excellence, the success of which need not be dependent on a teacher’s being empathetic: e.g. that a tutor places much store on student learning and achievement, that a tutor possesses various pedagogical techniques that incorporate real-world examples that foster discussion (see e.g.

Bledsoe et. al. 2021). As to the question whether empathy has an overall positive or negative value for educators, the following answer suggests itself: empathy—especially of the un-reflected kind—can be likened to that of a motor vehicle. Harm can result if its user is reckless or ignorant of its proper use; but, when used appropriately the benefits are aplenty. In what follows I offer three suggestions for how it is that teachers—especially those who self-identify as empathetic—can derive the goods of empathy while minimizing its potential hazards.

### “Detached Concern” for University Educators

Our review of the literature of why it is that educational researchers see value in tutor empathy highlights a claim that is repeatedly made: namely, that tutors empathize with their students primarily because the *knowledge* reaped from the process of (cognitive) empathy allows tutors to *support the learning of their students* (see also Meyers et. al., 2019, p. 16). But, if empathy is wont to misfire, evidence of which was adduced in the previous section, how then can educators reap the benefits (or at least some benefits) of empathy without its attendant costs? The answer to this, I believe, has been hinted at in a highly influential paper by Gloria Ladson-Billings titled “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” (1995). In this paper, Ladson-Billings studies what it is that successful teachers of African-American students do in classrooms. The author’s data are, at times, heart-rending.<sup>11</sup> In short, tutors need to be acutely aware of the (often implicit) norms, values and biases that are in circulation in an education setting that can profoundly shape the attitudes or beliefs of students. A particular example of such a norm, value or bias is captured in the following case. In a large study that surveyed close to 2000 staff and graduate students of high-profile universities, Leslie (2015) et. al. found that disciplines such as philosophy, economics and classics that place a premium on the (mysterious) quality of “raw brilliance” for academic success face an under-representation of women; further, it was also found that that it is usually men who are perceived to possess such a quality.

The study by Leslie (2015) et. al. throws light on how a norm, value or bias that is endemic to the socializing culture of certain disciplines—i.e. that academic success requires “raw brilliance” as opposed to hard work—has corrosive effects on a female student’s self-perceptions and motivations. For instance, she may form the unjustified belief of herself that she lacks the means of coping with possible academic challenges; this, then, undermines her level of motivation (if not self-worth) which, in the eyes of her male counterparts, confirms their existing assumptions about the competences of female students. Indeed, one can locate the study by Leslie (2015) et. al. alongside numerous other important publications that show how prevailing stereotypes about women (Ceci and Williams 2007, 2011; Ceci, Ginther and Williams 2014) and African Americans (Steele and Aronson 1995) have profound socializing effects that explain why it is that these historically subordinated groups are under-represented in the academic domain of the sciences or appear to be under-performing in standardized tests.

So, the first pedagogical suggestion is this. If a tutor were not to rely *solely* on empathy as a *primary* means of gathering knowledge of her students, she can avail herself of socio-cultural data concerning those norms, values or biases that exert profound effects on her students.<sup>12</sup> This should make it clear that the proposal here is not to jettison empathy from one’s teach-

ing, but to supplement it with an objective focus on those possible norms, values or biases that may be shadowing the lives of some students. To put things differently, one can see the current proposal as an extension of the practice of “detached concern,” familiar to doctors and health-care practitioners, to tutors in higher education. The practice of “detached concern” is roughly this: in order for doctors or health-care practitioners in general to perform their roles effectively, they train their attentions to focus on the biomedical facts at hand (Halpern 2011). This is certainly not to say that when doctors and health-care practitioners engaged in detached concern that they do *not* engage in empathetic interaction; rather, empathy is supplemented with detached concern. An analogous proposal—that substitutes the set of “biomedical facts” for prevailing norms, values or biases that shape a student’s self-perception—is what is being recommended here. Such data, it should be pointed out, are not hard to locate, nor are they abstruse or obscure to the lay reader. Not only are there education journals with a focus on the teaching of historically subordinated groups,<sup>13</sup> there are also those that gather findings from psychological research.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, I believe that the practice of “detached concern” which is by now a cornerstone of medical education is hardly a discipline specific anomaly, and holds much insight for educators in other pockets of a university.

### The Importance of a “Growth Mindset”

What else, then, can be done apart from encouraging and incentivizing awareness of research that seeks to unearth those norms or value systems that exert socializing effects? It can be proposed that educators can also *consciously reframe* low student engagement or academic under-achievement *not* in terms of a deficit model<sup>15</sup> but that of a need to address aspects of a social institution that propagate systematic forms of inequality or under-performance. In an interview with the lead author of the paper I mentioned above, Sarah-Jane Leslie adds that

[t]he study’s findings suggest that academics who wish to address the gender gap in their fields should pay particular attention to the messages they send concerning what’s required for success... For example, they can downplay talk of innate intellectual giftedness and instead highlight the importance of sustained effort for top-level success in their field’ (Saxon, 2015).

And, in place of a deficit model, tutors may draw insights from Carol Dweck’s “growth mindset” (Dweck and Sorich 1999; Hohanadel and Finamore 2015) that posits that intelligence is not a fixed trait but one that can be developed or improved on. Verschelden (2017), an advocate of the “growth mindset,” argues that students whose learning has been undermined by structural inequalities such as socio-economic marginalization or racism respond effectively to pedagogical interventions such as when tutors offer feedback that encourages students to continuously overcome academic challenges. Now, there is much secondary literature on Dweck’s growth mindset model. But, here’s two concrete ways of that readers of this article can consider with regards to the developing of it in students. First, educators need to be aware of a distinction between two ways of offering *praise* (either orally or in the written form) when students do well in an assignment or task. The first way is to praise a student for her “intelligence” or “smartness”; the second way is to praise a student for the *effort* or *hard work* invested in the task. Now,

Dweck and her colleagues found that students praised for their intelligence tend to choose easier tasks for fear of jeopardising their future occasions of praise. The fixed or static mindset plays it safe—it fetishizes praise at the cost of engaging in opportunities that allow for intellectual development and growth (Kamins and Dweck 1999; Mueller and Dweck 1998). In contrast, it was found that when students are praised for their effort and hard work, they will more likely choose more challenging subsequent tasks for doing so allows them to exercise and refine their skills in order to showcase their talents. Naturally, such students develop ever more refined and sophisticated learning strategies that allow them to overcome increasingly difficult challenges. The second closely related concrete means for educators to develop the growth mindset is to reward a student who performs well not with scores or grades but with more difficult versions of the same assignment—e.g. students who do well in assignment A are “rewarded” not with a mark or grade but with a more difficult version of assignment A, while students who do not fare as well are tasked to work on less difficult versions of assignment A. This means of assessment lessens the very possible effects of demoralisation faced by lower achieving students in the hopes of motivating such students to persevere to the end of their module or learning journey (Dweck and Diener 1980). Again, this only scratches the surface of the many means that educators can adopt to develop the growth mindset; but I hope to have said enough to entice interested readers.

### Incentivising an “Ethics of Care” Among Students

Finally, tutors wishing to enhance student engagement can consider engaging in practices that aim at countering similarity bias amongst their students in the spirit of a branch of feminist ethics known as the “ethics of care” (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 2005).<sup>16</sup> Nel Noddings, in her influential monograph *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), argues that there is moral value in appreciating the needs of those being cared for and the relational contexts in which caring occurs. At the institutional level, university administrators should see that the fostering of care is an important objective in responsible education; the curriculum in general should promote multicultural understanding and forge connections with communities outside of the institution. Both tutors and university administrators can construct or expand on roles that incentivize and reward the formation of reciprocal relationships between students that emphasize values of care and responsibility, and is sensitive to the existence of vulnerabilities. Such roles (for instance, that of a mentoring system between students of different ethnic-groups) help formalize and reward habits of reciprocity, attachment and fellow-feeling. Also at the level of the curriculum, Noddings reminds educators of the value of “incidental learning” which promotes an appreciation of the *connectedness* of subjects across disciplines:

The use of literature in mathematics classes, of history in science classes, and of art and music in all classes can give students a feeling of the wholeness in the education. After all, why should they seriously study five different subjects if their teachers, who are educated people, only seem to know and appreciate one? (1995, p. 676)

It might be retorted at this point: “Such a general or synoptic form of education may develop habits of lateral thinking at best;

but, what on earth has it got to do with caring for, say, marginalized groups in society?”<sup>17</sup> I think, however, that Noddings is hinting at a deeper point: when students appreciate the coherence of their subjects and are constantly drawing from teachers keen on interdisciplinary scholarship, students begin to form positive evaluations of the value of collaboration, mutual dependence and intellectual or cultural humility—all of which are arguably important precursors for the caring of others. More specifically, Noddings suggests that the introduction of “themes of care” in the syllabus, where, for instance, a unit on caring for intimate others involve a study of concepts such as friendship, parenting and love while that of caring for distant others involve a study of war, poverty and hunger. Indeed, educators themselves, Noddings suggests should be actively encouraged to engage in collaborative teaching or module design with researchers outside of their disciplines—this, according to Noddings, allows for all parties to espy “rich humanistic possibilities.” Although Noddings does not deny that there is value in systematic disciplinary learning, one is inclined to agree with her that an over-emphasis on such a traditional form of learning may result in the fragmentation of the emotions, academia and morality. The fostering of habits of care, it is hoped, will help students derive the goods of empathy without the need for tutor intervention which, as we saw in this paper, may not be as dependable as commonly assumed.<sup>18</sup>

### CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to do two things. First, to offer an updated systematic review of the concept of empathy mostly from the scholarship of teaching and learning. Inconsistent definitions, terminological ambiguity and conflation of meanings may have resulted in authors talking past each other, which hampers research on the topic of empathy in education. In our review of the literature we arrived at the following salient themes associated with the concept of empathy:

1. Coming to know of a student’s mental states or emotions or imagining oneself to be the subject of someone’s mental states or emotions (i.e. “cognitive” empathy);
2. Feeling, experiencing or being affected by a student’s mental states or emotions (i.e. “affective” empathy);
3. Empathy as a trait or disposition of character of the tutor (as opposed to one-off actions that happen to be empathetic);
4. Displaying of care, concern or compassion towards a student.
5. There is a distinction between empathy and compassion, but such a distinction may not be a conceptually deep one.

It is hoped that our synthesis of the literature reveals what it is about empathy that matters to educational researchers, and will promote more accurate interpretations and comparisons of research findings, as well as allow researchers and practitioners to design more precise studies that attempt to measure empathy in tutors or students.

While much of the discussion in educational research attests to the value of empathy or describes ways of promoting empathy in teachers and students, the second aim of this paper takes a contrarian position. By using research from psychology and social neuroscience I suggested how easily it is that empathy can be derailed as a result of arbitrary factors of a situation

and human biases (e.g. we favour the near and the dear). I then conclude this paper by showing how educators, especially those in tertiary settings, can still reap the goods of empathy without being fully laden by its attendant costs. While it isn't obvious that empathy is the panacea that unites a fractured nation, as Obama once proclaimed, at least we know what it is about empathy that threatens to deepen the divide even more.

## NOTES

1. Jeffrey's 2019 book-length treatment of empathy in the education of medical students is a notable exception.
2. Indeed, the fact that emotions tend to have a universal character may be the result of the workings of cognitive empathy which allows people across times and cultures to be able to "relate" to each other (Damasio 1999).
3. As Meyers et. al. write, "When a student is anxious, an instructor high in teacher empathy does not feel anxious, but does feel a negative emotion that is then translated to concern and compassion. Whereas compassion focuses only on students' suffering, teacher empathy also includes positive feelings in response to students' positive emotions" (2019, p. 161, my emphasis).
4. Interestingly, the three of the four themes described here mirror the findings of de Waal's study of empathy in non-human primates, which ranges from the matching of psychological states or affect, cognitively complex perspective taking or imagining, and the expression of concern or sympathy (de Waal 2009, p. 208).
5. I set aside the lesser made claim that empathy is related to enhanced spirituality and creativity (Cooper 2011, p.8).
6. Cooper (2011, p.8) also discusses this experiment but only in passing.
7. There have been studies that suggest that the teaching of large class sizes undermines student engagement (Glass and Smith, 1979; Sims, 2008, 2009; Hill et. al., 2008; Jepsen and Rivkin 2009). Relatedly, it has been argued that the reduction of class sizes can increase student achievement (Chingos and Whitehurst 2011). Admittedly, such research is not conclusive, but they do offer advocates of empathy some caution in placing too much pedagogical emphasis on what empathy can deliver.
8. Prinz (2011, pp. 225–226) also describes evidence indicating that empathy is not effective in motivating prosocial action (Neuberg et. al., 1997). On the contrary, emotions that have shown to be more effective in motivating action are guilt, reward, anger and disgust ((Beyerlein and Ward 2007; Inbar et. al., 2009).
9. Now, what of the objection that empathy results in students being "too emotional" or "emotive" or that lessons or modules lacking in sufficient intellectual rigor? I think that this objection can be set aside because it appears to have assumed that all kinds of emotions are corrosive of learning. This is not true. For it has been found, for instance, that high achieving students tend to experience positive emotions—such as hope and enjoyment—as opposed to negative emotions such as shame, boredom, anxiety and hopelessness (Pekrun and Elliot, 2009; Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Villavicencio and Bernardo, 2013). More importantly, it is not clear what the causal relation is between empathy and the positive or negative emotions associated with learning. Next, a lesson or module is too easy, relaxing or a source of instant gratification if it too readily satisfies the pre-existing store of desires that a student has. Again, there is no clear causal relation between empathy and the deliberate design of such modules or lessons. (If anything, there may be a connection between "easy" modules and tutors desiring for high student evaluation scores!)
10. A parallel lesson can be drawn from the fields of politics, business and organizational studies. It has been observed that

high-performing leaders who are perceived as being "charismatic" may engage in highly manipulative and, at times, abusive behaviour (Sankowsky 1995; Collins 2020). Given the research summarized in this paper, those in the field of education should cultivate a similar skepticism towards teachers who are lauded for being highly empathetic (or charismatic).

11. For instance, it was reported by Ladson-Billings that a young student once asked her grade school teacher "How can a princess be Black?"
12. Meyers et. al. (2019), recognising the limitations of tutor empathy, write, "[f]irst, we recommend that instructors develop a deep understanding of students' social contexts so they can generate non-pejorative explanations for undesirable student behaviour. Second, we recommend instructors make time to learn more about their own students' personal contexts. And finally, we recommend instructors design course policies that reflect a deep understanding of students' personal and social situations (p. 162)." But, Meyers et. al. build the above declarations into the concept of empathy. In contrast, I prefer recognising the value and possible dangers of empathy, and to propose what else can be done to complement it.
13. E.g., Race Ethnicity and Education, Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education, Teachers College Record, The Journal of Negro Education.
14. E.g., Journal of Educational Psychology, European Psychology.
15. Indeed, this is consistent with Valencia's (1997) "liberal" or "student oriented" notion of engagement which "focuses on the strengths of students, and hence does not overtly adopt a deficit model which maintains that 'the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies'" (p. 2).
16. In her highly influential study *In a Different Voice* (1982), psychologist Carol Gilligan argues that the experience of girls and women—unlike that of men—gives pride of place to the role of the emotions, personal relationships, the need for intimacy and reciprocity in one's moral thinking. Gilligan's conception of a morality associated with the psychology of women—which attaches value to relations of intimacy, responsibility and caring—is known in the literature as an "ethics of care." Nel Noddings, whose work I summarise more fully in the text, endorses the empirical findings of Gilligan and offers means of concrete implementation.
17. Another objection that could be made concerns the empirical evidence that one has about the success, if any, of such intentional forms of civic education. There are reasons, however, to be optimistic: for, although one cannot deny that the ideologies of race and class exert powerful effects on individuals (Cook 1985) there have been studies that attest to the success of educational practices in acting as a bulwark against socio- or ego-centrism (Sherron et. al. 2010).
18. I should mention in passing that there is some research that suggests how the practice of mindfulness or meditation in the classroom fosters care or compassion and, conversely, a lower focus on one's self (Barton and Garvis 2019, p. 9; Kristeller and Johnson 2005; Fuertes and Wayland 2015; Hartel, Nguyen and Guzik 2017). This is certainly interesting, but a discussion of it will take us too far afield.

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