

Empathy, Interaction and Caring: Teachers' Roles in a Constrained Environment

BRIDGET COOPER, *Leeds Metropolitan University, UK*

This paper describes some of the key findings from a recently completed PhD, which examined the role of empathy in teacher–pupil relationships and its relevance to moral modelling. The project collected data through interviews and classroom observations and used grounded methodology theory for the analysis. The literature considers the latest research in neuroscience and the significance of emotions in moral decision making alongside older psychological research on affect and empathy in learning.

Despite an overwhelming desire to support, care for and relate deeply to pupils, teachers were continually constrained by the conditions in which they worked. Time was stolen from them by the nature of the current education system; the fragmented and rigid curriculum; the time poor nature of their working conditions; the bureaucracy of modern education and the large numbers of pupils and low frequency of contact. The moral model available for students becomes degraded and needs remain unmet. Teachers are obliged to show lack of care towards individuals, the reverse of what they believe to be necessary and what their pupils want and need.

a model of good conduct resulting in students receiving very mixed messages. This process is not deliberate, or conspiratorial, but appears to be a subtle by-product of the current conventions of education which we take for granted at our teachers' and students' expense. The process is hidden and insidious. The student teachers interviewed in this study came to teaching with strong moral values and a deep empathic concern for others. Unfortunately their training and experience in schools teaches them to suppress this natural human concern and to sublimate their feelings to a cognitive and management process which disables their ability to express and enact their feelings of care for individuals.

Before explaining how the system subverts teachers' intentions, we need to examine their deep understanding about their relationships with pupils and how their empathic concern is fundamental to their moral stance. The findings of this research reveal how teachers perceive their empathic relationships with their pupils. The findings also reveal how the system and the constraints under which they work, subvert teachers' natural empathic concern. Though teachers are frustrated by and recognize the constraints of the system in which they work, they are less aware of how these subvert their moral model, and how the messages they transmit to individuals are distorted by the conditions and climate in which they work.

Cooper (2002) presents a detailed exposition and classification of empathy at work in teaching and learning. Empathy is revealed as a highly complex phenomenon, closely associated with moral development, which develops over time and with frequency of interaction and which is highly dependent on the actors and the context of the interaction. The thesis confirms and expands the powerful effects of profound empathy on self-esteem, relationships and learning. Empathic teachers are revealed as highly moral individuals who attach themselves mentally and emotionally to their students and generate similar responses in return. In effect they are modelling and evoking morality in their personal interactions with students and colleagues. Positive personal interaction supports high quality levels of engagement in learning and higher quality behaviour in valuing, sharing relationships. This has significant implications for both face-to-face and computer-based learning.

Keywords: empathy; moral education; class size.

Introduction

As caring teachers concerned with the whole development of individuals we would like to think that we offer a moral model to students through our conduct and our treatment of others. The findings from the research described below, show that empathic teachers do see themselves as moral models and work exhaustingly to treat pupils as individuals, valuing them and moreover expecting them to value others. However, the high moral aims of teachers appear to be subverted by the education system itself which, by a variety of means, undermines their attempts to provide

Theoretical Background

In the British education system the introduction of competence-based teacher training by the government (DFE, 1992) required that teachers be specifically trained to promote personal, social, moral and spiritual values in schools. Values promotion was subsequently assessed by OFSTED inspectors, which provoked an intense debate into the role of schools in moral development and the nature of teacher training and the curriculum in this regard. Numerous violent events associated with schools such as the Dunblane Massacre (13 March 1996), precipitated moral and humanitarian concern and led people to question how we might improve the moral state of the nation. Teachers were often blamed for promoting moral relativism yet anyone who works in the profession understands only too well the commitment teachers make for their students.

When we begin to address the moral climate and relationships in education the significance of empathy becomes clear. There is much well-documented research which reveals the importance of empathy in the formation of moral values in children (Hoffman and Saltzstein, 1967; Rogers, 1975; Straughan, 1988; Bottery, 1990) and more recently Koseki and Berghammer (1992). However, research has not focused on the human qualities of teachers who might model moral values to children in school and has not considered student teachers in this regard. This research chose to consider both these issues and to extend the understanding of the role of empathy in teaching and learning.

Care, Interaction and Learning

Noddings (1986) links morality to empathy and the emotional closeness and understanding of others when she describes caring thus:

Caring is largely reactive and responsive. Perhaps it is even better characterised by receptive. The one caring is sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts. Whatever she does for the cared-for is embedded in a relationship that reveals itself as engrossment and an attitude that warms and comforts the cared-for. (p. 19)

Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's. When we care, we consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves. Our reasons for acting, then, have to do with both the other's wants and desires and with the objective elements of his problematic situation. (p. 24)

Genuine care therefore appears to be an engrossing developmental process, which encompasses affect as

well as cognition. From Noddings (*op. cit.*) we understand care as empathy, as 'receptivity', to be open to someone's feelings and feel 'with' someone, to share a feeling and an understanding. From Murdoch (1970) we gain the concept of 'loving attention'. Vygotsky reminds us of the importance of the united nature of affect and cognition and of the inadequacy of a merely cognitive approach:

When we approach the problem of the interrelation between thought and language and other aspects of mind, the first question that arises is that of intellect and affect. Their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology, since it makes the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of 'thoughts thinking themselves' segregated from the fullness of life, from personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses of the thinker. (E)very idea contains a transmuted affective attitude toward the bit of reality to which it refers. (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 10)

An attitude of care in teaching and learning emerges through profound empathy in one-to-one relationships (Cooper, 2002). Showing that you care profoundly provides precisely the right climate in which students learn most effectively. The learner's achievements consist of both personal and academic development and are continually inter-linked. The degree of empathy shown by the teacher affects the degree of empathy shown by the student and the student's ability to share with and learn from others. Therefore empathic teachers model and facilitate an empathic ambience for learning and development. However, the constraints of the context appear to act as powerful factors in limiting the ability of the teacher to employ their empathy to best effect in meeting the needs of their students (Cooper, *op. cit.*).

Best (1998) argues that emotions have been largely neglected in British mainstream education. The increasingly mechanistic approach of the prescribed and extensive curriculum in recent years has exacerbated this neglect. He also argues that love is at the heart of spirituality in education which is denoted by mutually respectful interaction (Best, 2003). However, it is surprising that rich holistic findings of previous international psychological research into learning (Rogers, 1975; Purkey, 1970; Aspy, 1972) and also recent developments in neuroscience about the significance of affect (Damasio, 1994, 1999; Goleman, 1995) are often ignored when we discuss teaching and learning. Vygotsky's warning about the separation of affect and cognition may be seen to apply to the divide between the pastoral and the academic. The failure of policy makers to recognize the significance of the affective has led to the oppressive examination and testing regimes of recent years. However, the findings from neuroscience reaffirm the emphasis placed on affect by the older psychological literature and suggest

strongly that all learning is affective in nature (Damasio, *op. cit.*).

Damasio (1999) explains the importance of high levels of engagement in learning, emphasizing the role of the human's own sense of body and self in relation to the world he or she perceives and learns about. He explains how the intensity of focus and engagement created by multi-sensory interaction engages the mind deeply and how each interaction reinforces the person's sense of self, because the image of self in the brain has to be recreated at each interaction. Such intense engagement stimulates the whole brain and body. The memory of the interaction is mapped both in the brain at an emotional level and throughout the body and is remembered as a feeling. Hence, all interaction and the learning associated with it is affective in nature.

Provided interaction is mainly of a positive nature the brain will remain curious and open to the environment. A continuing, positive sense of self will produce a constant positive feeling throughout the body, which leads to greater openness and willingness to engage in interaction. Babies' brains grow when they feel cared for (Winkley, 1996). Conversely, negative affect tends to produce a shutting down of self, a withdrawal, stimulating protection and defence. In our learning contexts, therefore, we need to create this frequent positive interaction and subsequent good feeling. This may come from both the learning itself and the learning context, crucially incorporating the affective relationships with the tutor and with peers.

Intense interaction with other humans produces emotional engagement. Leal (2002) explains how the shared interactions between parents and infants produce intense emotion for the young child and this is how our sense of self grows and our learning occurs.

All along it has been clear to educators that the experience of 'selfhood' is not a purely 'instinctual' or 'cognitive' affair but is an early construction, contextualised in a primitive matrix of desires motives and intentions involving 'selves' and 'others' in a continuum of successful instances of social-emotional integration. (Leal, 2002, p. 3)

Our awareness is heightened the more we interact and through this we 'know' and process our environment and the people in it much more intimately. This 'knowing' of a person both emotionally and cognitively begins to sound very much like empathy, 'the power of mentally identifying oneself with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation' (*New Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993 edn). This empathic approach towards others deployed over time results in a moral concern of care for the others (Noddings, 1986; Cooper, 2002).

Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* (1978) must therefore involve not only cognitive support but also

affective assessment and emotional scaffolding. This makes the teacher's task very complex. If they are unable to assess and scaffold emotional as well as cognitive development, the student may flounder around in internal confusion. Direction, support and intervention is vital to move students on at sufficient pace, to help motivate and encourage them in their tasks and thinking. Formative assessment, which is at the very heart of learning, needs to be both emotional and cognitive, both personal and academic.

Noddings argues that time is needed for real caring relationships to develop, not only through the taught curriculum but through the normal conversations and interactions which take place between people. Sometimes these may be lengthy conversations but at other times they may be simple interactions that affirm and recognize students as valued people. Their importance should not be underestimated (Watson and Ashton, 1995). Such 'off-task' interaction is more likely to enhance liking and feeling of community than purely task-related engagement (Klein cited in Clark, 1996). Human relationships are central to a positive learning atmosphere (DoES, 1989) and are the source of the higher levels of intellect (Vygotsky, 1978). They motivate and reassure students (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace, 1996). Hopefully the recent publication of a government policy document, *Excellence and Enjoyment*, (DFES, 2003) which begins to recognize the significance of affect in learning is the first wave in a sea-change in educational thinking and practice.

Methodology

Initially I undertook some exploratory research and conducted a pilot study in a primary school. The main research findings from these were published in a paper 'Teaching Empathy' (Cooper, 1997a) and several subsequent papers have followed (Cooper, 1997b, 2000). The early research led me to an operational definition of empathy and a cluster of research questions.

Operational Definition of Empathy

Empathy is a quality shown by individuals which enables them to accept others for who they are, to feel and perceive situations from their perspective and to take a constructive and long-term attitude towards the advancement of their situation by searching for solutions to meet their needs.

Research Questions

- How do teachers and student teachers understand the concept of empathy and its part in their interactions with pupils?
- How does empathy reveal itself in observed pupil-teacher interaction?
- What factors might enhance or diminish the ability of a teacher to be empathic?

- Does empathy play a part in enabling teachers to act as moral models in schools?

The research was based on grounded theory methodology, which was chosen to provide a rigorous yet flexible method (Hutchinson, 1988). Grounded theory is designed to build theory from open-ended data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It attempts to derive new theory directly from the data and to break the boundaries of preconceived conceptual frameworks. It inherently values the data itself. It attempts to deeply understand the interactional process, aiming systematically to generate new theory or clarify previous theory which is derived from, and illuminates, real world situations (Hutchinson, *op. cit.*). This project sought to enhance the understanding of empathy in teaching and learning and sought to generate new theory on the role of empathy in modelling morality in schools. As in all qualitative research, theory created by this method is open to interpretation and may be qualified and open to negotiation (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory assumes that people share patterns of meaning and experience, which can be understood and explained for the benefit of others and specifically to improve the quality of education.

Sixteen empathic teachers and student teachers were identified, interviewed and observed, in different contexts in both primary and secondary phases, including teachers who support special needs students and students of English as another language. The

interviews were very long and rich in data. They were transcribed and then analysed using WinMax-pro software which was specifically designed for coding long, open-ended interviews. The codings were revised and merged over a long period to develop a theoretical framework. The observations (around 60 lessons) were written up as narrative accounts and these were categorized and examples analysed to show how the teachers' understandings could be seen at work in the classroom. It must be emphasized that though the data were categorized to aid understanding, the teachers understood these categories as interrelated and compounding. The personal, the social, the academic, the cognitive and the affective, the teacher, the child and peers were all interacting together. These were complex 'whole people' functioning together in intense historical, social and emotional contexts.

Findings

Empathy was seen to be a varied and rich phenomenon with shows itself to different degrees and extents in different contexts. Empathy has powerful effects not only on relationships and behaviour but is also fundamental to high quality learning. The context however was very important in affecting the degree of empathy which could be shown by teachers. Figure 1 sums up the findings of the key types of empathy one might expect to see in teaching/learning relationships. These are now discussed and illustrated from the data.

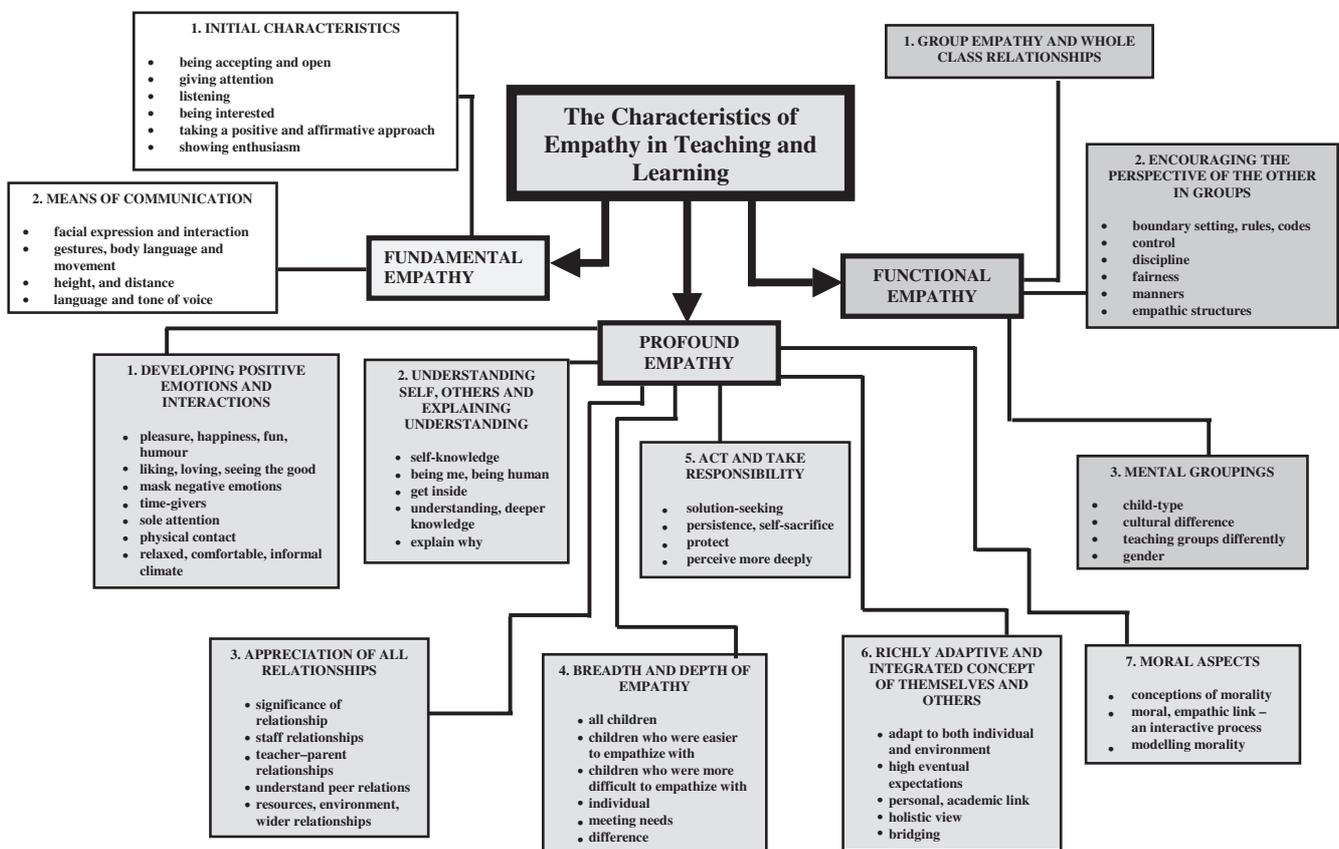


Figure 1. Empathy Classification

Fundamental empathy consists of the basic characteristics and means of communication which are needed to initiate empathic relationships. Over time and with frequency of interaction, fundamental empathy can develop into *profound empathy* which encompasses a rich understanding of others in their social, historical and relational contexts. Hence, one-to-one or small group teaching naturally is more likely to produce profound empathy than large classes. Teachers who show profound empathy create an extremely rich mental model of individuals in their minds which they can relate to closely, both emotionally and cognitively. They draw on all their own experience and experience of other people and the clues emanating from pupils to interpret their feelings and understanding. The following quotations give a flavour of what empathic teachers believe and practise.

it's about being thought about, being cared for – I don't know whether that's too strong, I mean I think it's a basic human factor that we should all be aware of and it's very much a two way thing. If you show that you actually are concerned about that child then the majority of them are going to show some sort of concern and respect for you really. Whereas if you treat them as a blob that's just sat there and you are trying to pump information at them I don't think you can have anywhere near as much success. (Anna)

I'm thinking, largely with young people that you're working with to acknowledge or to have an awareness that they're vulnerable and they're a bit fragile sometimes and that they need their confidence building. (Sara)

I didn't want to sort of cry or anything like that but – when he was crying about (a reading scheme), I remember holding his hand – which is an instinctive response with me. But I understood how he felt, because I've felt like that even as an adult. (Janet)

A key feature of profound empathy in teaching and learning is the development of positive emotions and interactions which create the ambience for learning which enables and fosters open communication:

I think I feel very positive – so whether that's positive mentally and I would like to think that's transferred across. (Anna)

Enthusiasm I think breeds enthusiasm . . . you know it generates itself. It's having an effect on you because you're enjoying doing it, your colleagues and your friends who you are working with, the students who are coming in and out. (Sara)

Profound empathy incorporates a deep understanding of self and others which appreciates all existing and historical relationships and their impact on learning. It

includes the ability to empathize with *all* students and to take responsibility for their needs. Empathic tutors have a richly adaptive and integrated concept of themselves and others, which creates a strong moral concern. These factors in combination have particular effects. They build a positive learning climate by increasing positive interaction and communication. They build a student's self-esteem and self-worth, create emotional links between tutor and student and build trust and security which leads to an emulation of empathy thus increasing the positive ambience. This emotional closeness enables the tutor to discover hidden factors, which might enhance or inhibit learning and development, including home factors:

I think it's important to be empathic, not so much to understand what these children are learning inside the classroom, but trying to understand why some of these children respond and react in some of the ways they do and see it in the light of some of the experiences that they have that we don't see. [] because things happen behind some of these lace curtains, in these lovely houses, that we don't know about. (Terry)

Pupils grow to like and respect such teachers and emulate their behaviour; thus they become a positive moral model:

By your praise of somebody else you can hear another child trying to mirror what you're doing. (Charlotte)

In addition to features of fundamental and profound empathy which could be seen in the observations, teachers also described in considerable detail *un-empathic* teachers, who were not seen in this sample but whom we would immediately recognize from their descriptions:

quite brassy, hard-faced, very little expression, []-she was very aloof [] I got this impression that if you didn't live in (village name), in suburbia you weren't in with the social niche – really. She didn't tolerate SEN kids – that was obvious. (Martin)

They looked, overbearing – they're the teacher; they're the authority; what they say goes; which is fine – you've got to set discipline in a sense but they were on a kind of power trip [] very stand-offish and very authoritarian. (Sylvia)

[they] make life a lot harder for themselves – they're the teachers who seem to have to be saying the same thing over and over again to their classes. They seem to be the ones that raise their voices more and they don't seem to have [] individual relationships with children. You know they lump children into certain groups, the no-hopers, the troublemakers and the clever ones and that sort of thing. (Mary)

The third type of empathy is *functional empathy* which is in part a product of the working conditions in schools and links closely to the constraints on empathy. Maintaining thirty, rich mental models simultaneously is very difficult, so to cope with the complex interactions in classrooms teachers described a phenomenon I have called 'functional' or 'relative' empathy. For long periods of time with large classes, teachers treat the group as if they were one person for the purposes of interaction. They talked at length about finding common topics that interested a wide mix of individuals in groups, such as fashion, music or football, and using shared humour to create a bond with a group. As teachers became more conscious of making connections to facilitate learning, empathy became a tool. Speaking of topics like football which engaged lots of pupils, Will referred to it as *the universal lever of football* and said *it is a tool that you can use to your advantage*. Sara described her adaptations as 'techniques':

there have got to be techniques because you're dealing with lots of different individuals in lots of different packaged groups, so you throw out certain things or you adapt certain things.

In these situations teachers seem to be showing features of fundamental or profound empathy but because they treat the group as a whole entity, their comments or actions are not always appropriate for everyone. For example, to crack a joke about football might create a bond with 25 out of 30 children but for the remaining five this might be alienating. If the teacher was interacting with individuals and knew their feelings about football they would have deemed this joke inappropriate. In this sense, therefore, the empathy is of a lower order and is being used in a functional way to cope with the demands of the classroom. These empathic teachers understood that they had to use this technique for much of the time and that this helped classes to share and to bond between themselves. Geoff described it as *the ability to touch more than one person at once*. However, they recognized that they had to supplement this functional empathy with more profound empathy with small groups and particularly with individuals if they were to make all children in their classes feel valued.

Teachers also targeted smaller groups, finding common topics to chat about. They targeted work or questions at groups with particular attainment levels and planned lessons with different activities for different sexes in mind. In effect, they often have a series of group mental models in their head and search for common factors to motivate groups or address their needs:

I introduce the topic and then we talk about the Spice girls here, or talking about football over there, and it worked perfectly for the kids because you're empathising with a group in general, you find a

common theme amongst these children and then you refine it down to particular children. (Pete)

The final category which emerged in the interview data I called *feigned empathy*. It is excluded from Figure 1 because it was not seen in classrooms. Here individuals can show overt *signs* of empathy, such as smiling or being pleasant and positive but their motivation is personal and the pleasantness can be short lived. In essence, it lacks sincerity and may serve to conceal the more dubious motivations of the person giving off such signs. Like functional empathy, it may serve a different purpose, but in this case it is to realize the individual's desires at the expense of the other's interests. In talking about pretend empathy, the head teacher gave a particular illustration of this phenomenon:

Parents come in and say, 'You know little Jennifer or Harriet's fallen down the steps yesterday and they've got the bruises all the way down her back – sad – and if they complain about being unwell will you get in touch with me straight away?' And it's very simple. Those bruises have actually been caused by those people who have been in – that's pretend empathy. (Terry)

Constraints on Empathy

The discussion of functional empathy above begins to reveal the constraints in the system which distort the empathic model which teachers can offer and through that weaken the moral model they set and reduce the learning which they bring about. These constraints are created, to a large extent, by economic and competitive considerations and many factors impinge on the teachers' behaviour which prevent them treating children in a profoundly empathic way. Key factors were class size, time, curriculum, policy and management. The environment was also a factor but of less significance. These are summarized in Figure 2 and discussed below.

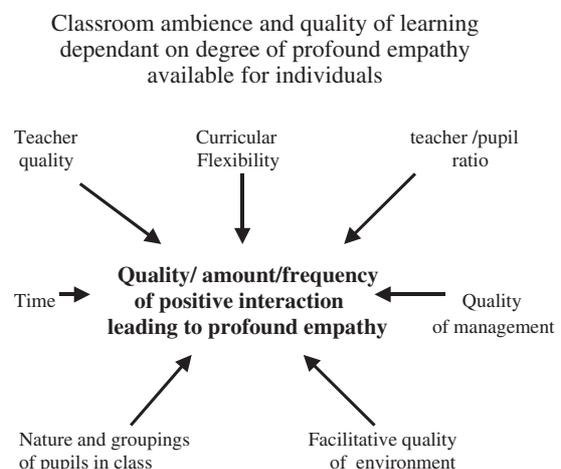


Figure 2

Teacher Quality

In the interviews teachers were aware that not all colleagues were empathic and could be exclusive in regard to whom they directed their attention to. This could be exacerbated by the pressures for achievement within the system:

Well I don't think they are showing that it's important to value different sorts of people, for instance. That the only people that are important are the people that can do well in tests or do well in lessons. And those who are struggling at the bottom, we don't have any sympathy towards them and we don't see any strengths because they can't answer this question and so they must be down there and they must be punished for being down there. And she's not showing any sort of sympathy or understanding of other people's brain patterns. (Anna)

According to the head teacher, formal qualifications were not necessarily related to good teaching. Some low-paid teaching assistants turned out to be highly empathic:

she knows what to do and when best to do it . . . she is magical – I've come across people with damn good degrees who can't teach at all. (Terry)

Curriculum Problems

The rigidity and over-filled nature of the curriculum, however, was also a factor. When teachers had so much to cover in so little time they tended to dominate the delivery and struggled to find time for the personal dialogue and interaction associated with empathy:

The quantity of the National Curriculum plays a part in what you're doing. [] Some lessons there's so much going on . . . there isn't time – it's not that it's going on in a negative way . . . it's very positive what's going on . . . but there isn't the time (to stop and talk to children). (Sara)

it's hard at times to be on an individual level with the children – there's so much to get through in a week, (Frances)

The fragmented nature of the curriculum was also a problem in secondary schools where teachers taught lots of large classes infrequently, especially in years 7–9. Consequently relationships were fragmented along with the curriculum.

Class Size

The sheer number of children in classes was an important factor preventing individual relationships:

over-faced with hundreds of faces who all can look the same on the first sort of appearances. It takes a

long time to get to know them, so then it's harder to break down those inaccessible groups. (Sara)

Teachers were overwhelmed in their attempts to understand so many children in any degree of depth:

I mean working conditions in the winter, for example in here (small mobile classroom), you've got thirty children with a glockenspiel each having to work in a room and you've got individuals who are determined to knock seven bells out of them. Then you're spending all your time dealing with classroom management and behaviour issues, rather than getting to know the children or even help them to get anything from the educational point of view. (Fay)

If empathy requires us to make a mental model of other individuals, this becomes extremely difficult in large classes:

As I say you've got thirty individuals, so therefore you have thirty, almost, lots of empathy for the child . . . which you bring out or you meet that for each child, determined by their backgrounds, their interests or whatever – your own personal thing, personal attitude towards the kids and their response to me. (Pete)

The Time Problem

An over-filled curriculum and poor teacher/pupil ratio was closely linked to lack of time and was frequently mentioned as a problem:

You've got a 45-minute lesson, what am I expected to spend on average – two minutes with a kid. They need more than two minutes. If you take that throughout the day, they've got 6 lessons, we're talking about twelve minutes of teacher contact time and it's no wonder we don't get anything done with them. (Will)

Teachers have endless work beyond the classroom which also eats up their chances to speak to children. Many have little time to exchange understanding with parents, to mark work in as much detail as they would prefer, to share understanding with other staff members, with outside agencies and other similar activities. Though primary staff developed more detailed knowledge of children through frequency of contact in smaller environments, secondary school teachers found it hard just to learn names, let alone develop any substantial understanding about children.

Teachers knew the effect of time-giving on attitudes, behaviour and achievement, but because of the system had to struggle to find that time:

He's always causing trouble and at times a very nasty child and not one you could immediately put

your arms round [] but saying that there are times if he's on a one-to-one with you and he wants the attention and he loves that attention and he'll talk and he's a different child. (David)

Quality of Management

Managers and particular policies could support or constrain an empathic approach:

I think a good head's one that's got empathy. It isn't just his or her children, he's got to understand his staff. Yes, it's got to go right across the board. Some of the best heads that I know are very empathetic. (Charlotte)

Unempathic managers who did not interact as equals or show clearly that they cared about their staff made them feel undervalued and were powerfully demotivating:

If you don't know the needs and personalities of your staff, then you can't create a workforce that will gel as a good team really and vice versa. If you're working with a head who's not empathic, she will just do things regardless of your own feelings and you'll feel well – 'why do I bother? What's the point of it all?' Your opinion's not sought and 'no feelings for me. So I'll just do my job and go back home again.' And you'll be the one in the staff room looking at your bloody watch won't you, trying to get out at night because you don't feel, 'Well she doesn't give a toss about me, so she doesn't take my feelings into account, whether knowingly or not'. (Claire)

Lack of interaction with staff alienated managers:

you're removed and you're removed and you're removed a bit further – the further up you go the less contact you have. (Sara)

Policies which negated teachers' attempts to show empathy and meet needs created animal-like conditions:

I mean at one school there was no withdrawal policy, so you'd got to struggle with another support teacher and a class teacher in a room that was too small to begin with, and with the other children saying, 'Want to do that. Can I do that? Can I join in? Can I do that?' And it's like somebody else eating off your plate. I mean this is your dinner and they're licking bits – so no – it wasn't nice. (Claire)

Government policies which stressed standardized assessment and competition created a competitive atmosphere in which some children felt undervalued while other children learned to treat them with disdain.

The Make-up of Individuals and Groups

The nature of individual children and their groupings in classrooms also had an effect on the teacher's ability to show empathy. Some children were simply more difficult to empathize with or needed more teacher time. This meant less time was available for others. In classes where there were many needy children, teachers struggled to meet all their needs whilst simultaneously dealing with other constraints. Children with little empathy themselves were particularly difficult to support yet required the most empathy. They found the social interaction of classrooms difficult:

So if they have a low self-opinion of themselves, saying, 'he's useless', might make them feel better. To criticise somebody else – it might take the pressure off them. I think they have to feel really positive about themselves to be understanding about others. (Anna)

I've got one year seven class with eight children with IEPs, statements – they're all vying for attention and within the course of a lesson if you are going to deliver the facts, try and assess everybody and then check at the end that it's all gone in, the time for actual individual – [] that time is reduced because you're spending time with other stuff. (Fay)

The Environment

The learning environment could be supportive or not. Teachers needed more space, more appropriate rooms and better resources and equipment, all of which affected the way they met pupils' needs:

Some kids in some geography classes never get in a geography classroom. Now if you're talking about the bottom per cent in particular, but also the top per cent of kids, I mean how are you supposed to make a subject interesting when you have not got at your finger tips, maps and resources, no videos and things? (Will)

Classroom Observations

To complement the interview data some sixty hours of lessons were observed and field notes made of other activities and conversations. The observation data correlates well with the interview data and the behaviours and attitudes teachers talked about in the interviews were visible in classrooms. The observations also revealed issues which were less apparent in the interview data including the sheer skill, energy and work rate of these teachers, whom it was a privilege to observe. Three types of interaction related to types of empathy were identified in lesson observations:

- personalized intensive interaction;

- focused group interaction;
- less focused group interaction.

Personalized intensive interaction, was seen when teachers worked one-to-one or with small groups and where high quality relationships and teaching could be seen all through the lesson. In these lessons children received considerable amounts of individual attention and the teacher was closely in tune with the child and their needs and able to scaffold learning very precisely, integrating the personal and social and the academic seamlessly, resulting in high levels of engagement, sharing, dialogue and continued affirmation for the child. Here the positive nature of the interaction is clear and the child has lots of opportunity to take the initiative, succeed and build their sense of self. Over time the teacher is able to demonstrate profound empathy which enriches the learning experience. In these lessons the child scarcely has to be managed or reprimanded because they are interested and focused, their needs are met and they feel good and behave well, emulating the teacher behaviour. Approximately 15 hours of teaching fell into this category.

In the second category, *focused group interaction*, the lessons of experienced classroom teachers and of many student teacher lessons showed considerable similarities. These were noticeable for their use of empathy at multiple levels. They used mainly functional empathy, both for whole classes and small groups, but enriched it with moments of fundamental and profound empathy for individuals.

In class lessons the general climate was very positive but the class act and function as a whole unit. The teacher knows the general level of understanding and probes to find it and extend it, but the nature of large classrooms is that the teacher's attention, though appearing to be multi-directional cannot be focused on each individual all of the time. The teacher tends to work with groups and can only take rare opportunities to make individual students feel special and get to grips with their understanding and problems. They make entrances and exits from the room a time for momentary personal interaction. Though the moment in itself may be important symbolically for students, the teacher only gets tiny episodes of interaction with small groups or individuals as they move at pace around the room. Approximately 34 hours of teaching fell into this category.

Less focused group interaction, was seen primarily in student teacher lessons. These were noticeable for the more restricted use of functional empathy, which had implications for the effectiveness of the lesson. Here the teacher takes time with individuals using fundamental and profound empathy. However, they do this at the expense of interacting with the group, which in classroom teaching performs an important part in group cohesion and engagement. Consequently, while

they interact with a particular individual, others drift off task and have to be reprimanded. This tends to make the atmosphere more negative. They do use functional empathy effectively at times but their natural inclination towards profound empathy needs to be restricted to enable groups to function more positively. However, as they do this their moral model will be weakened.

Conclusions

Neuroscience has reaffirmed the significance of the affective in interaction and learning previously advocated by psychologists. Intensive positive interaction generates engagement, rapid processing and emotional attachment. The research described here confirms the significance of affective issues in learning and the role of empathy in the facilitation of personal, social, moral and academic development. Emerging most rapidly in one-to-one interactions, empathy develops over time and is strongly influenced by context. As relationships develop, empathy moves from a fundamental to a profound level. Profound empathy involves the development of a complex mental model of the other which is closely associated with one's mental model of oneself. This rich model of the other is engendered by interactions and enables teachers to scaffold emotional and cognitive development through continuous formative assessment. Profound empathy generates shared positive emotions which develop and enrich the individual sense of self. Profound empathy was most evident in lessons with fewer pupils where everyone was engaged in positive, more equal, mutually respectful and responsive relationships.

In large classes, especially in secondary school, where meetings may be restricted to one lesson per week, the teachers mainly use functional empathy by creating a group model or stereotype. Though necessary for managing and engaging classes, the group model negates the feelings of the individual and teachers cannot model a personal and caring approach. More time is spent on articulating and enforcing rules and managing classes. Teachers cannot understand students or attach to them strongly enough to engender or promote mutual respect. Students can be alienated, neglected, ignored and undervalued. This weakens the moral climate. The size of class and pressure of the curriculum leads to teacher domination. The teacher models telling not listening and shows disinterest in individuals for much of the time. Students compete for the one adult resource and are obliged to ignore the needs and feelings of peers in their attempts to have their own needs met.

Empathic teachers exhaust themselves finding pockets of profound empathy for needy children in corridors and in the entrances and exits to lessons, but it is never enough. Student teachers blame themselves for their failure to meet individual needs. An over-emphasis on

standards and assessment further fragments and devalues relationships, alongside large classes, the over-filled and fragmented curriculum and the competitive atmosphere. Norms are emphasized over individuality and the emphasis on caring for the individual is reduced. Students receive negative messages about how they are valued in such a system and the alienation can reduce motivation and learning. Managers' relationships are similarly affected by system constraints and staff can also feel alienated and uncared for.

These findings are particularly disturbing since the predominant model for children beyond the home, is of a non-valuing, stereotypical nature and must have consequences for their development. The factors identified here which reduce empathy in schools can also be found in universities and in other services. Perhaps we model and perpetuate an uncaring society by the strictures of our systems across many of the so-called 'caring' services. Only by raising awareness and radically altering the contexts in which genuine carers work, can we improve the personal, social, moral and academic development of future generations.

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Correspondence

Dr Bridget Cooper
Leeds Metropolitan University
Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education
Headingley Campus
Beckett Park
Leeds LS6 3QS
UK
E-mail: B.Cooper@leedsmet.ac.uk

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