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The relationship between empathetic classroom climate and students' success

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Abstract

This is a preliminary study leading to cultural definitions of empathetic behaviours and attitudes of teachers in education settings. Data were collected from among 497 students from the 6th and 11th classes of Kultur Schools and the departments of Psychology, Mathematics-Computer, and Business Administration at Kültür University. An empathy scale was developed based on a qualitative pilot study to explore behaviours and attitudes of teachers perceived as empathetic by reports of 100 students. The most important finding of the study is that empathetic behaviours rather than academic competencies of teachers have impact on self report students' success. The study underlined the importance of empathy as a crucial motivational concept to be taken into consideration in student-centered educational systems.

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1. Introduction

Empathy is a construct, grounded in humanist psychology advocating human needs and interests with the intent of providing some all-round basis for personal growth and development, to go on throughout life in a self-directed manner (Burger, 2006: 423-429).

In this sense the construct involves any conditions of human interaction that tend to assist mental growth and humaneness, which prepare grounds for satisfying experiences of self-realization and/or self actualization in various life situations. From this point of view empathy implies emotional and intellectual connection in service to the other person's needs. More specifically it is defined as the ability or process of placing self in others shoes "as if one was the other person" (Rogers, 1959: 210).

Similar to Rogers', many other definitions of "empathy" refer to a set of efforts and initiatives emphasizing feeling or thinking 'with' the other, rather than feeling 'for' or thinking on behalf of that person (Davis, 1996; Goldman, 1993; Strayer & Robert, 2004; Wiseman, 1996).

In spite of considerable debate regarding the definition and nature of empathy, there is a compromise in the literature that an empathetic response both contains a cognitive and an emotional dimension. Cognitive empathy

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provides a cognitive process to discriminate and label affective states in others as the experience of foreign consciousness in general (Reynolds & Scott, 2000; Stein, 1989; Wiseman, 1996) while emotional empathy refers to sharing the other's feelings and the tendency of forming a deeper relationship with his feelings (Allport, 1961; Feshbach, 1982; Eisenberg, 2005). On the other hand some other theories stress multidimensional nature of empathy involving a combination of both cognitive and affective components; the former considered as the prerequisite for emotional empathy (Davis, 1983).

Empathetic understanding has become a crucial concept in many professions requiring human contact. There is a growing research especially in health services like nursing with positive effects of empathetic attitudes on clients' wellbeing (Norman, 1996; Price & Arcbold, 1997). Education is another area of human contact where the learning conditions should be rigorously delineated. With the changing roles of teachers from strictly defined teaching agents to be facilitators to enhance self-learning, the consideration for empathetic classroom climate have taken more attention of both practitioners and theorists. The amplification of creating empathetic climate in educational settings based on well-known principles of Rogers' client-centered therapy reframing concepts like empathy, congruence, and positive regard. He extended these principles, later to education which then have been put to use in a number of educational settings and proved to be successful on the measured variables; self concept of students, academic performance, altruism, creativity and fewer acts of vandalism (Crenshaw & Mordock, 2005; Hoffman, 2000; O'Ferrall, Green & Hanna, 2010; Rogers, 1983).

Generally empathetic classroom climate refers to a set of attitudinal qualities of teachers which facilitate learning. These attitudinal qualities help to understand the student's phenomenological perspective to each learning condition and to develop sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student through openness attentiveness and positive relationship (Rogers, 1983). This approach distinguishes empathetic attitudes and behaviours from the academic competence of teachers such as teaching skills, curricular planning, or scholarly knowledge of the field. These teaching tools might well be utilized as an important resource in education but are likely to be ineffective unless they are combined with empathetic understanding. In spite of the richness of theoretical background, operational definitions of empathetic attitudes in education have remained quite insufficient or at least lacking of emic/cultural perspective to the problem. To give an example, in many educational settings teachers should act as problem solving agents if they recognize some contextual factors disturb learning process, which can be considered as an important aspect of empathetic understanding. The role of the teacher than to endeavour to reorganize immediate environment that helps to promote learning again. From this point of view, a teacher observing high temperature in class causes listening problems as to impair effective learning, should take initiative to solve this problem against students complaints (e.g.: having the air conditioner fixed, changing the class or suggesting another solution). Evidently there is a wide range of cases where the teacher should take initiatives for the solution of a problem as a part of empathetic understanding. In this study problem solving attitudes and related initiatives are expected to prove an effective quality of empathetic understanding that significantly contributes to the holistic view of empathetic classroom climate.

In sum this study aims at exploring empathetic attitudes and behaviours of teachers which affect on students' self-report performances by utilizing emic / approach. More specifically the study intends to frame empathy as an independent construct from the academic competencies of instructors leading to high performance of students in educational settings.

Within the above framework the hypotheses of the study were formulated as follows:

H1: Problem solving approach will positively contribute to perception of empathetic climate.

H2: Empathetic climate and technical aspects of teaching are perceived as independent constructs.

H3: The elements of empathetic climate will have more explanatory effect on students' self-report performance compares to perceived academic competency of teachers.

H4: Students' evaluation of empathetic climate will moderate the link between the perceived difficulty level and self report performance of the relevant course on which the student report his/her performance utmost.

1.1. Sample group

A convenience sample of 541 students from among 6th to 11th grades of Kultur Schools and 107 students enrolled in departments of Psychology, Mathematics-Computer and Business Administration of Istanbul Kultur University participated in the study. Due to improper responses 44 subjects were eliminated from the study resulting in a response rate of % 87 (N=497). Of the Total sample % 43.6 were females and % 47.6 was males. % 54.8 was from between 6th and 9th grades and % 36.6 was 10th and 11th grade students.

1.2. Instrumentation

An initial item pool of 350 items derived from 80 students' reports about empathetic behaviours and academic competencies of teachers were subjected to expert review consisted of 11 faculty members on two aspects: The first evaluation was about the compatibility of each item with the definition of empathy given to the jury members before their assessments. The second evaluation is made on the perceived correspondence of each item on students' success. Overall evaluation yielded 33 items tapping both empathetic and academic behaviours and regarded as effective on student's performance. Four items from a pool of empathy scales which did not appear in students reports were also included in the last version of the questionnaire.

Students' performance was measured by one item questionnaire whereby students were asked to rank their performance in a course they think they were most successful in the present term on a six-point likert type scale. Following this procedure they were asked to evaluate the teacher of the same course on a six point scale. Six of the items had negative wordings.

2. Analysis and Findings

The 37 items were subjected to a principal component analysis with Varian rotation, yielding three components with Eigen values over 1, explaining % 53 of the total variance. Example items fell in the first component are: "Listens to us", "pays attention to our feelings", "suggests and initiates solutions to our problems". This component was named as affective- problem solving empathetic climate. The highest correlations in factor 1 was between items tapping 'unconditional regard indirectly or directly expressed by teachers and problem solving behaviours' ranking from r .55 to .59. The correlation patterns among the items of factor 1 implied that problem solving approach might have deeper psychological connections with empathy concept crystallized in the notion of "if you value me help solve my problems if you can" and provided support for the first hypothesis.

The second component comprised items as "pays attention to our opinions", "values what we say", "understands our frame of references" addressing to the cognitive aspects of empathy; thus named as cognitive empathetic climate. As expected, items regarding methodological and academic aspects of teaching (examples of items: "suggests additional resources to study", "gives daily examples", "uses visual aids", "has a good mastery of her subjects") formed another component independent from the other two factors and named as academic/teaching competency.

The alpha reliabilities of the subscales were .89, .86 and .68 respectively providing support for the second hypothesis as to distinguish academic and empathetic qualities of teachers as independent constructs.

The screening of data allowed employing multiple linear regression for the testing of the third hypothesis. The components revealed in factor analysis constituted the independent variables of the study. Correlation matrix indicated multi co-linearity between the first and the second components ($r > .70$.) When the second component excluded from the analysis, the exploratory effect of first component on the dependent variable increased. Gender and schooling level were included in the model to control their effects on predicted variable (students' self report performance). Using the enter method a significant model emerged ($F(1,414) = 24.38, p = .000$, adjusted R square = .21); empathetic climate (after the exclusion of the second component from the analysis the first component was named empathetic climate) had the only significant affect on students self-report performances ($B = .23, p = .000$). Schooling level and gender did not have any significant affects on students' self report performance. There was no significant interaction effect between empathetic climate and academic/teaching competencies of teachers on students' performance. Although the exploratory power of empathetic climate on students' performance was not strong enough, the finding was quite an evidence to show the importance of congenial learning climate. This finding was supportive of the third hypothesis.

In order to see the moderating effects of components of classroom climate on the relationship between the perceived difficulty level of a course and students evaluation of their own performance in that course, one way Ancova was carried out. Preliminary checks were conducted to ensure there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances and reliable measurement of the covariates. The correlation coefficient between the covariates was quite high ($r = .65$) violating the assumption that they should not be highly correlated with one another. Therefore academic competency of teachers was excluded from the analysis as it didn't

have any significant effect on dependent variable in the previous analysis either. Perception of difficulty level of the best performed course (by students reports) was split in two categories as low and high over the mean value (as mean and median was almost equal) to be put in the model. The results showed a significant main effect for perceived difficulty level of a course [F (1,158) = 18.84, p=.000]. A follow up analysis revealed students reported higher self performance for a course if they consider it less difficult (Performance means for low difficulty level= 5.43; high difficulty level =4.93; t=5.44; p=.00; Levene=.65). Empathetic climate on the other hand had a main effect [F (1,158) =9.78; p=.002] and increased the exploratory power of the model [F (2,158) =14.3, p=.000; Eta=.35] providing evidence for support of the forth hypothesis.

3. Results and Discussion

This preliminary study underlines the importance of empathetic classroom climate to be conceived as a pedagogical approach with considerable impacts on students' performance. Although no interaction was found between academic and empathetic competencies of teachers the latter seems to overwhelm the effects of the academic competencies when available in educational settings by creating better grounds for learning.

This study suggests problem solving approach be considered as a component of empathetic interaction especially in education as opposed to basic principles of traditional humanist theories advocating that solution should come from inside the person. Obviously empathy will continue to be an intriguing subject for those indulge in education; as such further studies would shed lights to the functions and cultural aspects of this construct.

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