



Short Research Report

The empathy of university teachers in education degrees as a key competence for sustainable and humanized education

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Transversal competences are essential for the sustainability of higher education degrees, particularly programmes which prepare students to serve as educators at critical developmental stages. This study aimed to determine the empathic profiles of 206 university teachers in Early Childhood and Primary Education degrees at a Spanish university. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index scale was used to measure empathy whilst data was also collected on sociodemographic and work-related information. The results revealed that the participants showed high empathy values across all dimensions except for empathic stress, indicating signs of healthy empathy. Additionally, differences were observed according to gender. The implications of the results are discussed in terms of the benefits of fostering empathy as a transversal competence in both teachers and students in teacher education programmes

Keywords: Empathy, higher education, teacher education, transversal competencies

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Introduction

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the UN, Goal 4 "Education for Quality" states that it is necessary to redirect teacher education so that teachers become real facilitators of social change. This

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transformation demands that teachers develop key socioemotional competencies to facilitate their students' education (UNESCO, 2017). Empathy is considered as a competence that drives other more advanced competences, such as managing emotions and building and maintaining healthy relationships (Bouton, 2016). In the reality of contemporary educational contexts, it is necessary to provide high levels of empathic concern and positive emotional support in the classroom as sensitive responses to students' emotional, social and academic needs (McGowan et al., 2020). Given the high social and emotional demands inherent in daily interactions with students (Weisz et al., 2020), empathy equals to 'teacher professional efficiency', enabling better understanding identification of students' needs in the teaching-learning process.

The present study aims to explore the empathic profile of teachers in the faculties of Education at University G (not real name) in Spain. Since the teaching-learning process serves as the foundation of a profession in which empathy is crucial (Moya, 2019; Trauernicht et al., 2021), it is expected that the participating teachers will exhibit a high level of empathy. The development of empathy amongst university teaching staff has received relatively little attention in research despite its importance for both learning and the holistic development of students.

Methodology

The following research questions guided this research:

- What is the level of empathy of the teachers in the faculties of education of the University of G
- What is the relationship between the socio-demographic and occupational profile of these teachers and their level of empathy?

A voluntary sample of 206 university teachers (age $M = 46.07$, $SD = 10.24$; 51.5% males, 47.6% females, 0.9% other; 34% non-permanent, 66% permanent) from three campuses of the University of G, Spain, was selected. Participants were administered the Spanish adaptation of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) scale (Mestre-Escrivà et al., 2004), which measures an individual's self-reported empathy through 4 dimensions: Perspective Taking (PT), Fantasy (FS), Empathic Concern (EC) and Personal Distress (PD). The scale consists of 28 items, 7 for each dimension, with a Likert-type scale with 5 options to respond. The Cronbach's alpha values were above .6 for all the dimensions, implying a minimally acceptable reliability level for each (Taber, 2017). Other personal and demographic variables were collected through an ad hoc questionnaire.

Results

Table I shows that the overall mean of empathy is above the corresponding theoretical value, understood as the average of the minimum and the maximum values that can be obtained on the scale. The same occurs with the dimensions EC, PT and, to a lesser degree, FS. On the contrary, teachers show moderate scores in PD. A significantly higher mean score in empathy was observed in female participants, both on the IRI scale as a whole ($p < 0.001$) and on each dimension separately (PT, $p = 0.016$; FS, $p = 0.016$; EC, $p = 0.001$; PD, $p =$

0.035). On the other hand, no significant differences were found in the mean scores of teachers' empathy according to the degree programme taught (Primary, Early Childhood or both), the campus location (G, C or M), the contractual status (non-permanent or permanent) or the teaching experience (< 15 years or 15 years or more). With regards to prior teaching experience at non-university level, no significant differences were found in the teachers' mean scores on the total IRI scale ($p = 0.192$) but there significantly higher mean scores for teachers with prior experience in PT ($p = 0.026$), FS ($p = 0.021$) and EC ($p = 0.044$) and for teachers with only university experience in PD ($p = 0.003$).

Table I

Descriptive statistics for the IRI scale and its dimensions.

	Theoretical range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
IRI	28 - 140	67	126	98.94	99	11.47
PT	7 - 35	16	35	27.92	28	3.78
FS	7 - 35	12	35	23.98	24.50	5.34
EC	7 - 35	19	35	29.41	30	3.53
PD	7 - 35	8	32	17.64	17.50	4.90

Discussion and Conclusion

This study revealed a high level of empathy among the educators, which is consistent with research suggesting individuals with high empathy are often drawn to helping professions (Moya, 2019; Trauernicht et al., 2021). The results demonstrated optimal levels of empathy in the PT, FS and EC subscales and moderate levels in PD, which suggests a protective balance, avoiding emotional overinvolvement that could impact the teachers' effectiveness and well-being (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Fernández-Pinto et al., 2008). The potential use of this subscale in measuring self-regulation warrants further investigation. Female participants scored higher across all empathy dimensions, aligning with studies highlighting gender differences in empathy due to educational and social factors (Galán et al., 2014; Moya, 2019). This underscores the importance of considering gender roles and stereotypes in pedagogical approaches in order to foster equitable learning environments. Finally contractual status, teaching experience, degree taught or teaching location were not related to empathy. The limited sample size and potential for social desirability bias in responses caution against broad generalisations of the findings of the present study.

The present study is aligned with the guidelines for implementing SDG learning through education. Students will develop empathy through mimicry (Fernández-Pinto, 2008), facilitated by observing the teacher as an empathetic model. It underlines the need for university teachers in education themselves to be equipped with the requisite skills so as to be able to engage in empathic interactions with their students.

Disclosure

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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