

Teachers' Predictive Capacity and Empathy in Relation to Children's Self-Concept

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The decoding ability of thirty-four teachers of moral education was found to correlate highly with their capacity to anticipate pupils' responses on a self-concept test. Empathic teachers tended to overestimate their pupils' self-concept, and less empathic teachers tended to underestimate them. We did not conclude that empathic teachers, as identified by decoding and predictive tests, consistently behave with empathy. Classroom climate does not always encourage empathic behaviours, and we do not know what empathy means in school. Research is needed to find a more satisfactory operational definition of empathy in education.

Dans cette recherche, 34 enseignants en éducation morale, classifiés selon leurs résultats à des tests portant sur l'empathie, ont été observés en classe. Une corrélation positive a été établie entre leur capacité de décoder convenablement les demandes d'aide (selon l'échelle de Carkhuff, Index of Discrimination of Empathy, 1969) et leur aptitude à prévoir les réponses de leurs élèves à un test sur le concept de soi, à savoir le Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969).

Etre capable de décoder les sentiments des élèves et de prévoir leurs réactions (deux facettes de l'empathie) ne semble pas mener automatiquement à l'adoption de conduites empathiques en classe. L'observation d'un processus aussi complexe que celui des conduites empathiques en milieu scolaire suppose des instruments plus précis que ceux dont nous disposons. L'établissement d'une définition opérationnelle de l'empathie en milieu scolaire constitue donc à la fois un objectif et un moyen de mieux comprendre comment s'exprime l'empathie en éducation.

INTRODUCTION

Empathy, broadly speaking, means the ability to identify other persons' feelings from their point of view. As early as 1959, Carl Rogers argued that empathy is possibly the most potent factor in learning. His definition of empathy was then the ability to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person but without ever losing the

“as if” condition (p. 210). By comparison, the psychoanalyst Kohut (1977) considered empathy as a process involving “the unity of observer and observed and the observer’s protracted empathic immersion into the observed” (p. 302). Empathy may also be categorised as a means of communication and nonrational understanding. For Karush (1979), “empathy is a means of communication and of understanding another’s mental processes and mental contents that is very different from our usual relational means of observation and inference (p. 63).” Although many other definitions of empathy have been proposed, empathy remains enigmatic. In 1984, for instance, Lichtenberg, Bornstein, and Silver published two analytic works on empathy without reaching firm consensus. Warner (1986) sees it as “the proverbial elephant being described by the different blind men from what their hands reveal to them” (p. 574). The concept has been explored by different theoreticians and clinicians, mostly humanistic psychologists following Carl Rogers (1959), like Barrett-Lennard (1962), Carkhuff and Berenson (1967), Gladstein (1983, 1984), Hogan (1969), and Truax (1967), and psychoanalysts following Kohut (1959), especially Basch (1983), Beres (1968), Buie (1981), Greenson (1960), and Ornstein (1979).

In education, a field located at the confluence of different psychological theories, empathy is neither well defined nor thoroughly researched, although empathic ability has been recognized as crucial in the student-teacher relationship (Aspy, 1969, 1972; Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967) and the second most important factor (after competency in subject-matter) contributing to efficient pedagogy (Gilly, 1980).

THE PROBLEM

No specific test evaluates the empathic ability of teachers. All the instruments developed so far to measure this construct (such as the Index of Discrimination of Empathy [Carkhuff, 1969]; the Hogan Empathy Scale [Hogan, 1969]; Truax’s Accurate Empathy Scale [Truax, 1967]) were designed to evaluate psychotherapists’ level of empathy. Bergin and Suinn (1975), Charette and Laflèche (1980), and Chlopan, McCain, Carbonell and Hagen (1985) have questioned the validity of these scales. Despite their weaknesses, these instruments have often been used to measure the empathy of teachers in schools. Few studies differentiate either the concept of empathy, or its measure in teaching and in psychotherapy. Findings from psychotherapy have too often been transposed without regard to the specificity of teaching, principally a cognitive task (Brunel, 1988).

Aspy’s humanistic research (1969, 1972) saw empathy as one of the core conditions essential to harmonious classroom relationships. Researchers of the last 10 years have finally recognized the cognitive processes of empathic

understanding. Empathic teachers understand their pupils as individuals and, at the same time, as a group (Dupuy-Walker, 1975); they anticipate and decode what these pupils know, how pupils feel about the curriculum and about themselves. Teachers do this in order to encode effectively. A measure of teachers' predictive accuracy in describing pupils' self-concept would thus be useful in evaluating teachers' empathic ability, particularly if correlated with a psychological measure of empathy, and with observations in classrooms. Our research on teachers' predictions of pupils' self-concept allows us to consider variables in the personality of the child. An empathic teacher could detect these, since "empathy is the mode by which one gathers psychological data about other people and imagine their inner experience even though it is not open to direct observation" (Kohut, 1966, p. 262).

BACKGROUND

The relationship between teachers' empathy and their teaching ability is linked to the classical notion that a teacher cannot properly instruct pupils without knowing them well (Gilly, 1980). "Knowing" here is used in the sense of having a more accurate representation of the other and being able to predict certain important facts or traits about the other. Authors who speak of empathy in terms of accuracy of prediction (Bender & Hastorf, 1950; Dymond, 1948, 1949; Harman, 1986) lead us to hypothesize that teachers' empathy influences positively their students' social adjustment and academic success. As Colin Rogers puts it:

If a teacher is quite unable to tell us which of her pupils was currently performing well and which poorly, and if she were quite unable to predict future levels of performance, we could well consider this sufficient ground for casting doubt upon her level of professional competence. (1983, p. 20)

Many studies of teaching assess teachers' capacity to "represent" their students. These studies have emphasized teachers' expectations and perceptions, particularly in the spheres of intellectual and social competence. But studies of self-fulfilling prophecy—for instance, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), following Merton (1949)—especially raise the question of prediction. These two works have in turn inspired considerable research on the roles of expectancies and attributions in the performance of children. Teachers form impressions of particular pupils and on that basis, establish expectations and predictions for their future performances. Pupils' behaviour often conforms to these predictions or to the ones they think have been made for them (Blease, 1986; Gilly, 1980; Good & Brophy, 1973, 1986). Seeing "prediction" as synonymous with expectancy or attribution, their main point was the negative impact of inaccurate predictions rather than the

positive impact of diagnostic competence. They ignored or neglected the links between prediction and empathy identified earlier (Bender & Hastorf, 1950; Dymond, 1948, 1949; Kerr & Speroff, 1951; Steinmetz, 1945).

In 1964, adopting a different perspective, Tyler sought to detect the qualities of an ideal teacher-student relationship. Teachers' commitment to explain ideas clearly to students, and to fit explanations correctly with students' ability and knowledge, come second and third in importance. Lowman (1984) and Roehler and Duffy (1986) confirmed these findings, showing that the capacity of anticipation, clarity of presentation, and the instructor's ability to stimulate students' thinking are the most important variables in teaching. Those goals require a high level of empathic ability and a capacity to predict accurately the cognitive and affective needs of the pupils. However, teachers good at predicting for some children may not be necessarily accurate in predicting for others (for example, predicting for those less liked). Good and Brophy (1973) showed that a teacher's various behaviours depend on the relationship with the pupil. We might conclude that children who are objects of attachment would be perceived and their needs more accurately predicted than children who are objects of indifference or rejection.

According to Colin Rogers (1983), teachers' patterns of coping (the style and defense mechanisms) are significantly linked to their empathic and predictive powers:

Teachers who generally perceive reality accurately and are unthreatened by it, and therefore are relatively free of anxiety and the defense mechanisms that accompany it, would keep their expectations more open and flexible and would be less threatened by failure than more rigid, anxious, or dogmatic teachers. (p. 123)

This flexibility, characteristic of an empathic teacher, implies a capacity for perspective-taking. Thus, we think it legitimate to use two tests to measure empathy: one which identifies teacher ability to predict student responses, the other which measures decoding ability. These tests are used in conjunction with observations of different types of teacher-child interactions in the classroom context.

HYPOTHESES

The first hypothesis was that teachers having a high decoding empathy score will also have a higher predictive ability. The second hypothesis was that teachers high on both these aspects of cognitive empathy would display more empathic behaviour in the classroom. The third hypothesis was that the most empathic teachers would demonstrate empathic behaviour with a greater

number of children, whatever the degree of attachment they had for each individual pupil.

METHODOLOGY

The subjects included thirty-four teachers teaching moral education at the elementary level. Two hundred and three pupils, part of a larger sample of 272 pupils, were included in the research project. They were selected on Silberman's system of categorisation (Good & Brophy, 1973). Four children were chosen by each teacher according to attachment, indifference, concern and rejection categories. Four other children in each classroom were randomly (in the statistical sense) chosen by an educational consultant without teacher involvement so as to obtain a representative sample of various styles of children's interactions. Especially because certain teachers refused to identify children they rejected, we had access to 203 pupils from a potential sample of 272 pupils.

INSTRUMENTS

Index of Discrimination of Empathy

The Index of Discrimination of Empathy (Carkhuff, 1969) is composed of 16 extracts of fictional interviews in which different persons expose a problem to a helper. Four answers are proposed, each embodying a different ability in decoding a message. Each answer is evaluated on a Likert-Thurstone scale of five points slightly modified by us in order to evaluate the teachers' empathic ability. Carkhuff's original test was conceived to discriminate the empathic value of offered responses by helping persons. This instrument has been used for research in human relations training appraisals (Anthony, Gormally, & Miller, 1974; Calia, 1974; Conklin & Hunt, 1975; Lee, Zingle, Patterson, Ivey, & Haase, 1976). In our modified version, the main protagonists were called teachers rather than counselors as in the original, and, while maintaining the same structure, the dialogues were adapted to the school setting. The same method of correction as for the original test was used; the empathy level remains a function of the choices made by the subject. Four experts were asked to evaluate the validity of the modified version: all concluded that the modified and original tests were similar (agreeing 93% of the time).

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale

The test entitled "The Way I Feel about Myself" is an easily completed self-report instrument designed for children over a wide age range (Piers &

Harris, 1969). It is composed of 80 items illustrating children's concerns about themselves and covering six factors: behaviour, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction. According to Hughes (1984), the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale is the most adequate measure of self-esteem for children over eight years old.

Teachers used this test as a predictive instrument to predict the responses of eight of their students. Teachers were to predict pupils' perceptions of their traits of character, behaviours, and attitudes, but not directly to observe directly their pupils or to record immediate perceptions. We were interested in teachers' representations of others in the sense that certain cognitive psychologists (Gilly, 1980) have intended. The index of predictive ability was based upon the gap between the teacher's score for their pupils and the results of the children themselves. We considered a gap of 10 points (i.e., approximately one standard deviation from the mean) or more to be a sign of difficulty in prediction. Piers and Harris (1969, p.5) have pointed out, that an individual change in score of less than 10 points should be ignored.

The scores for each of six factors were calculated both for children's answers and for predictive decisions by teachers. The mean of the gaps across the eight children was computed to provide the predictive ability score.

Classroom Observations

Observers used a scale modeled after the Teacher Dyadic System of Brophy and Good (1974) with the addition of Gordon's listing of obstacles to communication (1974). Teachers' verbal reactions to their students were recorded, yielding categories of helping responses (for example, reformulation and reflection of feelings).

PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the academic year, the Index of Discrimination of Empathy (Carkhuff, 1969) was administered to all the teachers. The teachers three months later selected four children according to four categories (Good & Brophy, 1973). The questions teachers had to answer were:

1. If you could keep one student another year for the sheer joy of it, whom would you pick? (attachment);
2. If a parent were to drop in unannounced for a conference, whose child would you be least prepared to talk about? (indifference);
3. If you could devote all your attention to a child who concerned you a great deal, whom would you pick? (concern);
4. If your class were to be reduced by one child, whom would you be relieved to have removed? (rejection). (Good & Brophy, 1973)

Observers visited the classrooms during moral education courses for a period of one hour twice during the academic year (once in the autumn and once in the spring). Interactions between the teacher and each of the eight selected students were recorded. The teacher did not know which pupils were observed.

RESULTS

Self-Concept Prediction

The mean self-concept score of our sample of children ($x=61.69$) exceeded the expected norms for the Piers-Harris test ($x=51.43$). The mean self-concept predicted by the teachers was 63.36, very close to the actual self-concept mean of our sample. The pupils ($n=74$), whose scores (using our criterion of a deviation of ten points or more) were overestimated by their teachers ($x=67.2$), obtained a score around the normative mean ($x=51$). Children who were underestimated ($x=44.4$) scored themselves very high on the self-concept test ($x=64.3$).

We found that no child's score was underestimated by the seven most empathic teachers (score of five); all errors were of overestimation (mean deviation: $x=11.8$). The seven least empathic teachers (score of one) both overestimated (mean deviation: $x=16.4$) and underestimated (mean deviation: $x=23.3$). Twice as many children were underestimated for this group.

Piers-Harris and Carkhuff Correlation

Analysis of results on the Index of Discrimination of Empathy (Carkhuff, 1969), and the predictive score obtained from the Piers-Harris, revealed a significant correlation between these two sets of data ($r=.36$; $p<.05$). Having standardized the scores of all the teachers for the two tests on a scale from one to five, we found that teachers whose results were highest on the Carkhuff were also those who best predicted the responses of their students on the Piers-Harris. On the other hand, the teachers who had trouble decoding the messages on the Carkhuff test predicted least well their students' scores on the test of self-concept.

Factor-by-Factor Predictions on the Piers-Harris

The mean deviation for each of the six factors was calculated for each of the teachers. A mean for the eight children was computed using the same procedure as for the global score described above. The predictive gaps between teachers' scores and those of their pupils are summarized factor by factor in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Mean Deviations for Each of the Six Factors of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale in Terms of Prediction By all the Teachers (34)

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Mean deviations</i>
1. Behaviour	2.18
2. Intellectual and school status	2.37
3. Physical appearance and attributes	2.13
4. Anxiety	2.24
5. Popularity	2.17
6. Satisfaction	1.56

Each of the six factors yields about equal levels of predictive difficulty. If, however, the means of the best predictors (scoring five) are compared with the means of the worst predictors (scoring one) there are indications of some differences. These are summarized in Figure 1.

The seven most empathic teachers had difficulty with students' anxiety and intellectual status whereas they easily predicted the behaviour factor. On the other hand, the seven least empathic teachers stumbled over the behaviour factor and had much more difficulty than the good predictors with the popularity factor. A first chi-square [X^2] analysis of the data corrected for small samples (Siegel, 1956) reveals significant differences between the groups in their prediction of behaviour ($X^2=4.5$; $p<.05$). Another chi-square analysis of the data reveals a highly significant difference on anxiety ($X^2=10.18$; $p<.001$), implying that good empathisers, despite their inaccurate perception of anxiety, are still the ones who fail the least in predicting this factor.

Observations

None of the predicted differences between empathic and less empathic teachers was significant, either on the frequency of helping-responses or on the total number of interactions. The only significant result from the observations compared students well predicted as opposed to students badly predicted by their teachers. A chi-square analysis shows that the students whose scores were more accurately predicted experienced significantly more interactions with their teachers than students whose scores were badly predicted ($X^2=17.77$; $p<.001$).

Predictions and Selection

Only 19 of 34 teachers were willing to identify four pupils from their group. Fifteen teachers refused to label a student as rejected. The scores of seven of

Mean Deviations

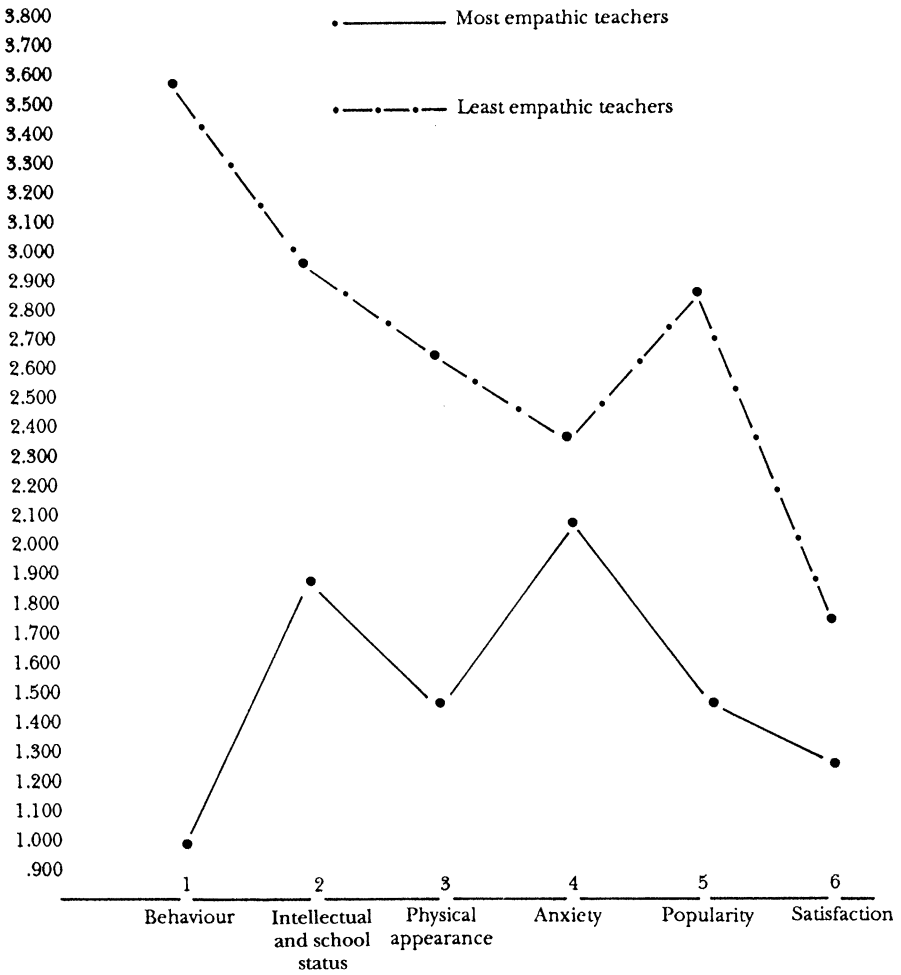


FIGURE 1
Mean Deviations of the Seven Most Empathic and the Seven Least Empathic Teachers [Carkhuff Index] for Each Factor of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale

the "attached" children were very inaccurately predicted (gaps of 15 points and more) and six of these seven were overestimated by the teachers. The scores of five rejected children were also inaccurately predicted. Of this

number, four were underestimated. A chi-square analysis with the correction for small numbers shows this difference to be significant ($X^2=3.84$; $p<.05$).

Explanations for Bad Predictions

Teachers' written explanations, provided at our request after the first analysis of data, were categorised according to whether the children were overestimated or underestimated. Explanations for overestimations mentioned knowing the children too well, even outside school, liking the children, and the influence of good behaviour in class. The underestimators attributed their being misled to bad school performance, difficult family situations, and poor, mainly aggressive social behaviour.

DISCUSSION

First Hypothesis

The first hypothesis of this study was essentially confirmed. Those teachers most empathic on the Carkhuff test were also the best predictors on the student's self-concept test. The judgments of the good empathisers deviated remarkably little from those of most of their pupils. When they did predict badly, they tended to overestimate their pupils' self-concept. This contrasted with less accurate predictors, who underestimated twice as frequently. Our results are consistent with Gilly's view (1980) that teachers' representations may often be framed in terms of general satisfaction. Empathic teachers may more easily be satisfied with (accepting of) their pupils and thus overestimate the latter's self-concept. Even if, for Carl Rogers (1975), empathy is something offered and not simply elicited by some particular type of person, there was a tendency for teachers to overestimate children in the attachment category.

From another perspective, we might consider that students' self-concept ratings may have been inaccurate. Perhaps their real self-concept was much lower than that indicated by the Piers-Harris score. But recall that teachers were asked to predict how students marked themselves and, in principle, empathic teachers should have predicted such inaccuracies. As Combs, Soper, and Courson (1963) recommend, the distinction must be maintained between levels of self-esteem obtained from self-reports and those based on the ratings of others who have inferred self-esteem from behaviour. The teachers may have failed, therefore, to take into account the social desirability factor, i.e., the tendency to appear better to others than one really feels in order to be accepted. In our sample there was, in fact, a tendency to rate self-concept higher than the norms provided by the Piers-Harris scale both for children and more empathic adults. Piers and Harris (1969) mentioned a

variety of experiments obtaining different sample means (many of which showed higher means than the norm). The test's authors encourage users to develop their own local norms. As Pryor (1984) noted, "self-conception should perhaps be understood as a contextual occurrence rather than a causal entity or as any part of the constituents of the self" (p. 16).

While teachers' predictions are not subject to the influence of social desirability in the same way as are self-report measures, the possible role of social desirability in this adult-answered measure remains to be investigated. Hughes (1984) noted that researchers consistently found weak relationships if any between predictive and actual reports of self-esteem gathered from adults and children respectively. These different reports should be treated as independent observations, each valuable (Combs et al., 1963; Shrauber & Osberg, 1981). By comparison the empathic teachers in this project were better able to rate their pupils' self-concept as did the children. This performance could be linked to a definition of empathy as the capacity to put oneself in the shoes of others (Poeydomenge, 1984).

On the different factors of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, all the teachers had difficulty predicting the rating of their students' academic achievement.

Since teachers consider marks as an objective indicator, they fail to take into account that a child's estimation of his academic worth may be far removed from this reality. As Lynch, Norem-Hebeisen, and Gergen (1981) remark

the students tended to rate themselves in a reverse direction from that of their teachers on all of the areas of academic self-esteem. This may indicate that the success/failure subtest is the most sensitive and possibly controversial scale with respect to agreements between teacher and student perceptions of self-esteem. (p. 249)

The other factor creating difficulty for empathic teachers was anxiety (see Figure 1). This factor arose in items such as "I worry a lot," "I am often afraid," or "I get nervous when the teacher calls on me." Despite their ability in decoding messages and behaviours, internal referents are still difficult for teachers to predict. These findings show that it is easier to predict others' answers on items like "I am personally charming" than on items dealing with inner states: for instance, "I am introspective" (Funder, 1980). As Brown (1986) said, there may be little relation between scales for detecting feelings and emotions in others and intellectualized predictions.

Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis was not confirmed. Teachers highly talented both in decoding and predictive abilities did not perform differently than less

empathic ones in the classroom. This lack of congruence between high results on a paper-and-pencil test and empathy-in-process is consistent with the idea that behaviours are not necessarily related to beliefs and values. As Wylie pointed out in 1979, it is hard to predict the way people react or behave notwithstanding what they say or what they understand intellectually. A teacher may be cognitively able to decode a complex written message and be unable to express his understanding in a real-life situation. Also, a teacher may be potentially empathic without necessarily having the opportunity to express this empathy while he was observed. Carl Rogers noticed nearly 50 years ago (1942) that helping functions (empathy being one of them) should be completely separated from authority functions or exercised on separate occasions. For him, concurrent use of these two functions in class is difficult, even hazardous. His followers have forgotten this warning.

Third Hypothesis

The third hypothesis was also rejected. Many teachers (eight) asked to select their pupils according to the four categories refused to do so. This fact weakens the analysis to be made of our results. We observed that the most empathic teachers were among those refusing to categorize. Good and Brophy's studies (1973) did not warn of this possibility. The category of rejected children is in any case a particularly delicate matter.

In our own continuing research, we are contemplating modifying the formulation of the categories so as to avoid the guilt attached to the idea of eliminating a student from the class. Reexamination of our data reveals that the use of these categories could have brought us substantially more data on teachers' perceptions of their pupils. But we are aware that, because we obtained results from 19 of the 34 teachers (who classified 104 pupils in all the categories, instead of the 136 anticipated), we did not get the strong clues we expected.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that empathic teachers on the Index of Discrimination of Empathy (Carkhuff, 1969) are those who best predicted the answers of their pupils on a self-concept scale. Empathic teachers tend to overestimate rather than underestimate their pupils' self-concept whereas less empathic teachers underestimate more frequently.

What distinguishes more empathic teachers from others (apart from their results on the Carkhuff Index) is their ability to predict behaviour. Since empathy is possible if cues are present (Buie, 1981), empathic teachers are more prone than others to interpret adequately behaviours. When cues are not present, as in internal states (anxiety is an example), they perform in a

manner similar to less empathic teachers. The educational context may inhibit intimate contacts with individuals and so allow the teacher easier access to group climate than to individual feelings.

We are concerned by the lack of congruence between high results on paper-and-pencil tests and the low incidence of empathic behaviours observed in class (nearly the same for all the teachers, whatever their empathic potential). We discovered after the fact that the observational system we used could not take into account the complexities of teaching and learning.

Future Research Plans

We presently use a combination of auto-descriptive material about empathic behaviours collected from teachers and their students by more regular and frequent classroom observation. The interactions of teachers (both verbal and non-verbal) with specific pupils will be observed. Finally, the behaviours of some pupils (identified as empathic and non-empathic) will be recorded in order to specify the reciprocity of the interactions in empathic performances. We hope these several approaches will help us to define more operationally empathy in education.

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